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Comments on "Quaker Perspectives on the Nature of Man"

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Comments

A. BURNS CHALMERS

When Reinhold Niebuhr was beginning to write his famous Gifford Lectures on "The Nature and Destiny of Man" he told a small group that he knew what his first sentence (slightly changed in its final form) would be: "Man has always been troubled about himself." It is this simple disquiet and question which has been the persistent background of the most careful analyses of man's nature and destiny. It is the more profound levels of man's relation to God, the "primary relationship," which Wilmer Cooper examines. He has given us a concise, accurate, and well-reasoned statement.

In commenting on this essay it will be convenient to consider in succession the three categories under which he views man: image of God, sinner, and victory over sin and death. Each is thoughtfully related to both the historic and contemporary views of Friends.

I

It is one of the strengths of Wilmer Cooper's discussion of man as made in the image of God that he so clearly states the Hebrew position which regards man as a "history-making creature," in whom the characteristics of decision, will, and freedom take such a prominent part. He takes issue with the Greek tradition and, in effect, rejects it. He inveighs against Friends for misunderstanding the central biblical view of man and succumbing to what we might call "creeping Hellenism." This danger is vividly seen in what is termed the twentieth-century heresy of misusing the phrase "that of God in every man" to develop a rationale for a "Quaker humanism." The result is to veer toward a radical immanence with the pitfall of pantheism too close for comfort.

With the main contention here set forth I agree. Man is not "innately good" in Rousseau's sense or in the sense usually

attributed to the Greek view of man. Wilmer Cooper properly calls in question the concept of the inherent goodness of man. A Christian anthropology could not condone such an optimistic and complacent view of man. And yet I am troubled because it is now so much the fashion to put far from us the Greek estimate of man. *Anthropos*, the Greek word for man, has been translated "the upward-looking creature." Figuratively speaking it is this posture in man to which Hellenism testifies. This idea may be amorphous and unstructured but such a conception of man merits attention rather than dismissal. In his book *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolph Otto identifies "awe" as basic to the experience of worship. The upward-looking capacity of man could be a prelude to awe. And concerning the object of worship, Otto points out in regard to Plato that "no one has enunciated more definitively than this master-thinker that God transcends all reason, in the sense that He is beyond the powers of our conceiving, not merely beyond our powers of comprehension."

It is difficult to articulate the relevance of Greek thought about man to the Quaker view. God's gifts of Christ, the Light, or the Seed certainly are "fresh gifts of God's Holy Spirit to man in every moment of his existence." It is true that man merely as man does not "possess" certain capacities. I am suggesting, however, that the Greek insight deals with a preparation for larger comprehension on the part of man which has been operating through the grace of God "from the foundation of the world."

II

In his section on "Man as Sinner" Wilmer Cooper considers especially the implications of a realistic estimate of man and, also, the social nature and consequences of sin. We must be grateful to Wilmer Cooper for keeping our eyes riveted on the nature of man as a child of God. With all their variations Fox, Penington, Barclay, and early Friends in general regarded sin as "man's wilful disobedience or rebellion against God's will." Holding to the deeply rooted reality of sin in man they nevertheless believed that the Seed and Light within man were there by the grace of God through which man is saved. In contrast to many modern optimistic views of man, including some Friends,

they "took sin seriously" but did not regard it as the final word.

Today there are several kinds of *reductionism* in contemporary views of man. According to one of these, man is reduced to what his genes will permit him to become. This is the nominalist biological position. It makes no point of contact with the biblical affirmation "Now are we the sons of God and it doth not appear what we shall be." In connection with last year's centennial interest in Charles Darwin the nominalist biological position was stated by Dr. Robert S. Morison in his article "Darwinism: Foundation for an Ethical System?" He holds that "there can be no such thing as an ideal man." It is his contention that "the crucial Darwinian question for our time of crisis is whether or not man can broaden his culture, his concept of human brotherhood, and his tolerance of variation so that it becomes coextensive with his gene pool." This is admirable up to a point and there is plenty of work to do in achieving this objective. But for the Christian and the Quaker the goal is not even what is "coextensive with his gene pool." It is beyond that in the realm of what is coextensive with the "new being." It is one of the virtues of Wilmer Cooper's essay that we are confronted with the depths to which man as sinner can go but also we glimpse what through grace he might become.

The social nature and consequences of sin are not clearly seen when we fail to distinguish between personal and social ethics. Friends such as Kenneth Boulding and Douglas Steere do see the problems—in economics with respect to organizations and in theology with respect to the "collectivist theologians." Depth psychology is imaginatively consulted for its light on man. The British historian George Macaulay Trevelyan has said "close your eyes to John Woolman one century and you will get John Brown the next, with Grant to follow." In John Woolman we see personified what the Quaker understands about the possibilities of the individual in personal and social relationships under the "power of the Lord."

III

The doctrine of man is dependent on the doctrine of God. Early Quakers were clear about man's dependence on God. They would have agreed with Schleiermacher's phrase, "dependence,

absolute dependence on God." Wilmer Cooper brings out most helpfully the central place of "holy obedience" and the thoughtful interpretation of these words which Arthur Roberts has recently given. The place of Christ and of the divine-human relationship are set forth.

To my mind the strength of this paper is its careful scholarship, its fairness in interpreting relevant insights and positions from historical and contemporary views, and the affirmative faith which it states. As I have indicated I am troubled by the short shrift apt to be given to Greek thought. But I regard this essay on the Quaker view of man as a living contribution to what Professor Robert L. Calhoun describes in his words: "The Christian understanding of man, with its relentless pessimism and its exultant faith, is no ordinary utopian dream, for it sees man not merely rehoused and re-educated, but remade."

EDNA M. HALL

All who are interested in early Quaker thought will be indebted to Wilmer A. Cooper for this paper. It is a real contribution to the subject, particularly in its recognition of the Biblicism of early Friends and in the conjunction of man, sin, and "the hope of victory," though "grace" would have seemed the more appropriate term. It is also a timely reminder that, whatever the modern interpretation of the condition of man and the light of Christ, there is no doubt that early Friends regarded man as fallen and a sinner, and the light as wholly of God and not a natural endowment of man. Yet the paper states rather than investigates the dividing line between "liberal" and "evangelical" as regards the conception of the nature of man and of the light of Christ. The terms "image relationship" and "holy obedience" do not resolve the problem: the former, indeed, seems to perpetuate an early Quaker confusion of thought, as I wish now to indicate.

Early Quaker Biblicism seems to consist in the antithesis between the "natural" or "carnal" man and the "spiritual" man, a distinction corresponding roughly to the Old Testament *basar-ruach* and the New Testament *sarx-pneuma*, and in the realization that man derives "worth" and "life" only from God. The

interest of early Friends in the fall and the origin of sin reflect the theological pre-occupations of the time rather than the Bible. With fine insight, they rightly use "the image" as a Christological term but they overlook its dependence on other lines of thought. The *image*, the likeness of man to God, may be reflected in man's conformity in holiness, righteousness, and wisdom, not forgetting the last, but man's *relationship with God* is expressed in the Bible in historical and *personal* terms such as election, covenant, and sonship, summed up in the New Testament, of course, in Christ. Within that relationship a man is commanded to "love" the Lord his God. Ethic and relation are inseparable but not identical. Man's response is in a context of law or Gospel: it is not only attention to an inwardly felt principle.

"Liberal" thought which minimizes the gravity of sin seems to take too unrealistic a view of man and the human situation and too low a view of the majesty of God but it does not have to grapple with the difficulty of explaining how the grace of God becomes effective in sinful man. By contrast, the early Friends did see man as bound and dead in sin and Christ as the means of his being given life. But how? Man may not have a separable soul to be saved or lost nor, as the theologians of the Reformation tended to suppose, a bare will to be moved. Since the Quakers were also suspicious of the human mind, they appeared to think of man as a mere vessel to be indwelt by the light or "Christ within" which is something akin to possession rather than transformation. There is a sense in which, apart from God, man has no "life" but he still "is." In Hebrew thought, however, flesh, mind, will, and understanding are unitary: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart" (seat of understanding), "with all thy soul" (*nephesh*), and "with all thy might."

It is the conviction of this writer also that "within the context of historic Quakerism there cannot be developed an adequate doctrine of man without a corresponding doctrine of God's redemptive love through Jesus Christ." It is by no means clear, however, that the historic Quaker terms and categories of thought are adequate to what were certainly the message and intent of the early Friends. "The light of Christ," for instance, though a scriptural and highly significant term is too inclusive

and too ambiguous a concept to be completely acceptable. It can mean the striving of the Spirit "within," or that which shows evil, or Christ, or the Holy Spirit. It is the proximity of the light that mitigates the condition of fallen man. In the light is "power" to cause the act of obedience. The phrase, "that of God in every man" refers not so much to a latent capacity as to the availability of grace, of the possibility of man's becoming *in actu* what he is *in potentia*, since when the light is "attended to" and "obeyed" it can be the indwelling Christ or the Holy Spirit "within."

In so far as the light reveals evil the understanding is involved, but in a vestigial way. In the light a man "sees" Christ his Saviour. How far is the mind, indeed the whole personality, engaged in this apprehension, and what of the Gospel? The regenerate man has knowledge but it is by "revelation," injected in the light. The old antithesis between inner and outer clouds the issue. Again, the work of the light within is that of restoring the image, so making possible the perfection in which Cecil Hinshaw finds the key to early Quaker thought. Is this a man's own light or is it that of Christ within? The source of the early Quaker ethical pre-occupation is the doctrine of the light and the dualistic conception of man.

While I would agree with Wilmer A. Cooper in regarding "fellowship in love" and "holy obedience" as respectively man's true relation to God and its outcome as both biblical and a true interpretation of the message of Quakerism, it seems to me that this message needs to rest on a foundation broader and more secure than the mechanical view of man as image of God and the too-inclusive, frequently too-impersonal, idea of the light. Holy obedience is derivative from and secondary to a right *relation in love* (love in the biblical sense) and the basis for this is *faith*, an attitude of trust and dependence-in-freedom of the whole man which is best summed up in the Pauline text, "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Is not the relationship we seek to define that of *sonship*, that of which the Spirit bears testimony with our spirit, through the Son who is the image of God? It is a relation which implies

conformity and obedience. Further, it will yield that experience of corporateness among the "many brethren" which is so essential a part of early Quakerism.

DUANE MOON

Wilmer Cooper has done a superb piece of work with one of the most delicate theological assignments one could anticipate. There is so much in his statement that is highly commendable that I hesitate to be so presumptuous as to offer a critical review. In fact, he has articulated in an excellent manner a number of things that need to be said in appraising contemporary Quaker thought with respect to this subject.

Some of the things that need to be said on this topic and, in the opinion of this reviewer, were said, may merit the following brief comment. There was an endeavor to maintain the dignity and worth of man without entertaining a naive optimism that fails to note the deep inclinations toward self-centeredness and evil in man. Thus the author rightfully addressed himself to a discussion of the phrase, which has almost become a cliché, "that of God in every man." His discussion of this phrase is one of finest and most concise analyses that I have read for some time. This "realistic view of man" is not one of hopelessness, for it is balanced by showing that man's correction is in equal reality brought about by God's redemption of him in Christ. These important basic conclusions readily fit within the biblical and historical Quaker message.

I would like, however, to mention one or two areas of the paper that might bear further clarification and emphasis. In his outline of the two extremes of religious thought among Quakers, namely, theological liberalism and fundamentalism, the author has not indulged in over-simplification, yet to use the terms "fundamentalist" and "conservative" interchangeably throughout the paper, as if they were synonymous, is not altogether accurate.

There is a distinction between theological fundamentalism and conservatism that needs to be noted, for the implications are applicable to the discussion. On the one hand, I too feel that fundamentalism gives evidence of being the product of

Greek philosophical influence rather than of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. But fundamentalism is not the position held by the wholesome theological conservatism which to a large degree is present in much of contemporary Quaker thought. Indeed, the basic conclusions of Wilmer Cooper's article itself may, if I am permitted to make such a precarious suggestion, be placed in the category of conservative theology, yet one can hardly conceive of his explanation as an example of one of the extremes in Quaker thought.

There are a number of points where it seems that fundamentalism and conservatism are almost identical. Actually, however, there are some basic differences that do differentiate the two approaches. Let me mention one example, this with respect to the Bible. Fundamentalism has little or no appreciation for historical and literary criticism of the Scriptures, whereas conservatism welcomes such scholarship and seeks to understand the biblical message within the framework of such research. The above tendency of fundamentalism is a direct result of its founding religious authority and revelation too largely in the *written* word, which is given such proportion that it overshadows the religious authority and revelation of God in the *living* Word, Jesus Christ, which in the view of conservatism should receive priority.

This means that conservatism, in contrast to fundamentalism, conceives of the ultimate disclosure of God to man in terms of person and history. The self-disclosure of God in Christ was an historical event, the culmination of a series of earlier divine revelations. Such a position is foreign to Greek philosophical thought but is agreeable to the best of the Hebrew-Christian tradition.

We labor this clarification because the majority of Quakers today, like their forefathers, are of the theological conservative persuasion, which happily finds its religious heritage within the Hebrew-Christian tradition rather than within the extreme of Greek philosophical influence.

Let us next give a brief glance to Wilmer Cooper's discussion of "Man as Sinner." His historical insight with regard to Quaker thought on this subject bears commendation when he says that early Friends had a thorough-going doctrine of sin and

evil. It is further observed that in the Hebrew-Christian tradition "sin has always been highly personal." With this kind of historical background and the tragedy of two world wars in our own century, the contemporary scene is thus taking a "more realistic view of man." One appreciates the plea for the social relevancy of the gospel as a correction to the effect of social evil. The point is well taken.

Any serious thinker is faced with the dilemma of personal and social evil and the finding of a proper solution. Harry Emerson Fosdick confesses in his stimulating autobiography, *The Living of These Days*, that he wrestled with this problem. He writes:

As a preacher I found myself constantly on a two-way street. If I started with the social gospel, I ran into the need of better individual men and women who alone could create and sustain a better social order, and so found myself facing the personal gospel; and if I started with the personal gospel, I ran straight into the evils of society that ruin personality, and so found myself facing the social gospel.

However, I am impressed with what appears to this critic to be the somewhat apologetic recognition on the part of the author to Friends' continued emphasis upon approaching the ills of our day through the personal method. Our "premium on the individual" is not to our discredit but certainly to our merit. We hesitate to underestimate the tremendous impact upon the dynamic correction of social ills when individual men, through their personal encounter with God, have found an inner strength that releases them for a genuine ministry of Christian service. The moral and spiritual thrust of such persons within society is amazing and heartening.

The discussion of the final paragraph, which deals with the subject of victory over sin and death, is excellent. A Christian perfection that lends itself primarily to ethical conduct with little insight into religious faith, or one that witnesses to a so-called vital faith with no evidence of exalted ethical conduct, still leaves much to be desired. Such views as these can easily become attached to religious bigotry which may launch its adherents into all kinds of psychological and spiritual frustrations. The use of the term "holy obedience," as borrowed from Thomas Kelly, is adequate and comprehensive. Such an approach finds the

harmonious relationship between faith and works which is an essential for any doctrine of Christian perfection.

I wish to express again personal gratitude for the thoughtful and helpful article that Wilmer Cooper prepared for our study.