

## EARLY FRIENDS AND THE ALCHEMY OF PERFECTION

It is given in current Quaker scholarship that the early Friends were not a “*creatio ex nihilo*”, but rather a product of various religious, economic, and social forces, winnowed and sifted on the threshing floor of their own experience. Some Quaker “distinctives” can easily be traced to progenitors, while others cannot. One that is somewhat baffling, given the preponderance of then current emphases on human sin and depravity, is the Quaker conviction of human perfectibility. Might there have been thinking and writing that influenced this Quaker distinctive?

In 1660, George Fox records in the *Journal* an occasion of meeting a German in London. Based on the scant information about him that Fox shares, the individual may have been Franz Mercurius van Helmont.<sup>1</sup> Certainly in the 1670s van Helmont had settled in England as personal physician to the Quaker associate Lady Anne Conway. From 1677, van Helmont himself affiliated with Friends, finally breaking with them in the 1690s after he published a tract outlining his belief in the transmigration of souls.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from his rather unorthodox belief in reincarnation and his relationship with Anne Conway, herself a confidante of Henry More and admired by Leibnitz, this might not appear all that remarkable, and less relevant to the question raised in the opening paragraph! But van Helmont is a rather distinctive sort to have become a Friend: he was the son of the leading continental exponent of the Paracelsian-chemical tradition, Johan Baptiste van Helmont. Only twelve years before his purported meeting with Fox in London, the younger van Helmont had published his father’s writings on medicine and Paracelsian philosophy, *Ortus Medicae*, a book that was influential in the attempted reforms in medical education in England during the 1650s.

J.B. van Helmont and his “Helmontian” followers emphasised direct, personal observation and experiment, and led an attack on the authority of the ancients, such as the Galenic medical canon.<sup>3</sup> F.M. van Helmont carried on the Paracelsian philosophy of medicine, displayed an interest in the esoteric Jewish writings in the *Kabbalah*, and expressed admiration for Friends’ “experiences of all mystical writers verified in themselves though they be such as can neither read nor write”.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there have been many “unique” and “eccentric” people who have joined Friends, and not only in the early years! The association of a noted Paracelsian, however, raises the question of whether there might have been something in the early Quaker message that appealed to alchemists – and more importantly, whether Friends themselves may have been the beneficiaries of alchemical insights. Was Paracelsian philosophy (to be outlined later in this essay) part of the ground out of which Quakerism emerged? Could the Paracelsians have influenced the Quaker understanding of the possibility of perfection, the power of the Light, the “work” of separating the pure from the base, dependence on direct experience, and the suspicion of “ancient authorities”?

These queries make no sense, however, apart from an understanding of what Paracelsian philosophy and alchemy meant in seventeenth century England. It is to that task that we now turn.

### **Alchemy and the Hermetic Tradition**

One of the major influences in the Renaissance, and thus on the intellectual and spiritual landscape of seventeenth century England, was a restorationist impulse, a desire to rediscover the truths of an ancient golden age. Progress was seen as a return. According to Frances Yates, some of the roots of this inclination are to be found in the Hermetic tradition, which resurfaced around 1460 C.E. and grew in importance in the 1500s and 1600s.<sup>5</sup>

This tradition of gnosticism, magic and mysticism derived its name from the mythical Hermes Trismegistus (“Thrice Great Hermes”), supposedly an Egyptian Magus who lived before Moses and was associated with the Egyptian god Thoth. At a time when Greek philosophy was suffering from decay, what has become known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of treatises attributed to the Egyptian (but also associated with the Greek god Hermes), began circulating in the early centuries of the Common Era. Probably written by Greeks at the time the writings began to circulate, they claimed to offer insight into the Egyptian mysteries and a religious philosophy more profound than the Greek culture’s own traditions. Yates sees influences of Platonic thought, Jewish Kabbalism, and perhaps Zoroastrianism in them.<sup>6</sup>

Offering an occult understanding of the universe and the insight and illumination of Egyptian knowledge, Hermetism was closely allied with the science of alchemy, which had a life of its own but

flourished during the Hermetic revival in the Renaissance. Alchemy has only recently, however, begun to receive attention as a Hermetic science whose profoundest goal was spiritual and moral transformation rather than the pecuniary interest of changing base metal into gold. The latter emphasis resulted from the decline of alchemy when its secrets and initiation rites were lost and the technical procedure became detached from its esoteric frame of reference.<sup>7</sup>

Citing Sherwood Taylor, Mircea Eliade states that the ancient alchemists "were not really interested in making gold and were not in fact talking about real gold at all."<sup>8</sup> What they sought, rather, was an inward gold, a transformation of base human nature into perfection. The "True" alchemical work, tools, and knowledge were within, the external chemical procedures serving as outward supports or symbols.

Eliade explains that alchemy originally was an experimental discovery of the living Substance in the life of the alchemist. It was a discovery in the contents of one's own soul.<sup>9</sup> Alchemy maintained that there is a Universal Intellect wholly present in each creature and in all of creation; the end of alchemy was to know this and understand that the soul has a divine Centre, and to create life's circumference around it.<sup>10</sup> Operating from the belief that "as it is above, so it is below", the alchemist applied what was learned by experiment in the objective world to the inward life of the soul. The alchemist's "chemical dream" was to regain the original nobility of human nature, to transform inward nature into the "Adamic" state in which "everything in him is 'original', in the sense that his being fully awakened and united with its origin".<sup>11</sup>

It was the alchemist's conviction that all of nature was, in fact, developing toward the restoration of its original purity. Metals, for example, were believed to gestate in the earth's womb and, in time, be transmuted into perfect gold. By discovering the secrets of nature's hierophony and translating them into the Philosopher's Stone – the agent of cosmic change – the alchemical adept could help nature develop toward perfection more rapidly. Alchemists expected a radical and general reform of all religious, social, and cultural institutions. In the predominantly Christian framework of European alchemy in the Renaissance, Christ was seen as the Philosopher's Stone who had redeemed humans through his death and resurrection, even as the alchemical process would redeem nature.

### Paracelsus and the Revival of Alchemy

The man who served as “high priest” to all those during the Renaissance who viewed the cosmos chemically was a Swiss-German doctor and scholar, Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, a.k.a. “Paracelsus” (1493–1541). Headstrong and “bombastic”, Paracelsus alienated most of his fellow scholars by his claim to a higher knowledge through Hermetism. For most of his life he was an inveterate wanderer and iconoclast, but he published profusely on topics ranging from syphilis to alchemy.

Paracelsus’ works on alchemy came to exert a great influence on those who were searching for alternatives to what they perceived as the age’s dead scholasticism. Rufus Jones gave Paracelsus brief mention as one of the spiritual reformers of the sixteenth century and points out his contribution to re-establishing the teaching of a harmony between the outer and inner worlds; Jones also mentions his emphasis on restoring the “paradisiacal man” and his belief in an inward light that “surprises” nature’s secrets.<sup>12</sup>

Paracelsus’ thought included a severe rejection of many of the standard authorities in favour of the Bible, the Hermetic corpus, the writings of dedicated alchemists, and especially personal observation and experience. Not unlike other reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Paracelsians sought to restore the true knowledge of an earlier age. They were primitivists calling for individual exegesis of scripture and reliance on direct and immediate experience of truth.

### Paracelsian Influence in England

There was little Paracelsian influence in England until the late 1500s, and even then it was the minimal use of some of Paracelsus’ medical cures by physicians who, otherwise, showed no interest in the more esoteric aspects of his thought. A few English Paracelsians such as Thomas Tymme and John Dee were encouraging physicians to pursue direct chemical experimentation, and the Italian scholar Giordano Bruno visited England and published there in 1584 his *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, in which he wrote, “one simple divinity which is in all things, one fecund nature, mother and preserver of the universe, shines forth in diverse subjects, and takes diverse names, according as it communicates itself diversely”.<sup>13</sup> A Copernican, Bruno saw the new cosmology as heralding a new age, a time when



the darkness of Christian apostasy would be dispelled by the return of the light of true philosophy, which he identified with the Hermetic tradition.

The most noted English Paracelsian of this time was Robert Fludd (1574-1673). An Oxford-educated Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, Fludd imbibed alchemical philosophy while spending six years on the continent before completing his Oxford medical studies. A devout Christian, Fludd's alchemical understanding was grounded in his belief that all things originated in the chemical separation of the primal chaos as divine light acted on it. The secret to knowledge for Fludd was the alchemical process of discovering the true Philosopher's Stone, which for him was none other than the power of God present in the act of Creation and still present as a light in all things, particularly as Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> He attacked blind acceptance of the authority of the ancients, emphasising rather this divine light and experiential wisdom, maintaining that the true alchemist is interested in transformation in the human soul.

Although Fludd admitted to only one limited alchemical experiment, he nonetheless opposed the attack of Patrick Scot in 1623 on alchemy as mere allegory. Scot, a follower of James I, published *Tillage of Light* in that year, to which Fludd responded with *Truth's Golden Harrow*. For Scot, there is, indeed, a divine light "...incorporate in the Sunne, whose vertue and essence cherisheth the essence of every creature: but the full knowledge of the tillage of light, ariseth from the true notice of the first and last end of things... to shine as the Sunne".<sup>15</sup> But this light, Scot insists, is not to be confused with the light of nature. Nor is the true aim of the alchemical philosophy to try to turn metal into gold but rather to "extract light or a true summum bonum".<sup>16</sup>

In his response to Scot, defending alchemy against the charge that it is mere allegory, Fludd gives an articulation of the Paracelsian philosophy: the essence of God fills the heavens and earth; we are the temple of the Holy Ghost, and the "main aim of every creature is the perfection of that beginning from which it first did spring."<sup>17</sup>

The "art" of the alchemist is required to help nature in her fervent endeavours toward perfection and overcoming the darkness into which our pure, spiritual light has become mingled. As Jesus used a manual operation to make the blind see, the alchemist uses his/her "art" to separate the pure from the impure. As nature and the "artist" cooperate, and the Eternal Elixir, the Light, the Philosopher's Stone, the Christ is applied, the person may come to conform to "the true pattern of the perfect and spiritualised body of Adam in his innocency".<sup>18</sup>

Gold is not the chief aim of the “wise man”, Fludd admits – although he maintains that it is in his/her power to attain. To interpret alchemy, however, as merely a “type” is to deny the reality of transformation. Citing the gospel stories, he notes Jesus’ accomplishments of real, physical transformation of sickness into health, impurity into purity, of overcoming the power of darkness, death and evil.

Fludd was also an important figure in the introduction of the neo-Paracelsian Rosicrucian philosophy to England. In 1617, he wrote a book which served as a Rosicrucian apology. In it he stressed that the “Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross” 1) promoted educational reform so the divine light of Christian teachings could flourish; 2) trained in the “occult sciences” to attain knowledge of natural philosophy; 3) recognised that knowledge of inward nature leads to knowledge of outward nature; and 4) accepted the truth that true alchemy is not miracles but the work of nature.<sup>19</sup>

The mysterious and secretive Rosicrucian Brotherhood began on the continent with the publication of the *Fama et Confessio Fraternitatis* in 1614 and soon gave rise to the powerful freemasonry movement that took such deep root in Scotland (Quaker discipline, incidentally, discourages membership in such “secret” societies as freemasonry).

Fludd eventually indicated significant variance with Rosicrucian philosophy, but others in England embraced its proclamation of a new age of enlightenment soon to come, an enlightenment that would come,

in the form of...a world in which enlightened beings...go about doing good, shedding healing influences, disseminating knowledge in the natural sciences and the arts, and bringing mankind to its Paradisal state before the Fall.<sup>20</sup>

After a time of eclipse in England, Rosicrucianism surfaced again amid considerable interest in 1652 with Elias Ashmole’s *Theatricum Chemicum Britannicum* and an English translation of the *Fama*. In an introduction to the English language edition, Thomas Vaughan explains Rosicrucian belief: 1) They see Truth as the highest excellence; 2) The “Great Work” of alchemy is the transmutation of “dead stones” into “Living Stones”; 3) The Philosopher’s Stone, Christ, is knocking at our consciences; 4) The Stone is a light in all persons; 5) What we seek is within us; 6) The Philosopher’s “gold” is the transformation of inward nature; and 7) There is an impregnable tower we can attain where the “sun” of righteousness shine.<sup>21</sup>

Allen Debus, Charles Webster and P.M. Rattansi have argued that Paracelsian thought enjoyed a significant revival during the English Civil War and the Interregnum. It was at the heart of theological debate in the 1650s and informed the agitation for educational and medical reform, with Robert Fludd's, Jakob Boehme's and J.B. van Helmont's ideas especially influential.<sup>22</sup>

Rattansi demonstrates that many of Paracelsus' works were translated into English for the first time during the Puritan Revolution, with interest in his writings not limited only to medical theories, but focused also on his ideas of humanity, nature and God. The features of his thought that evoked the most interest seemed to be the emphasis on supernatural illumination and his call for a thorough reform of education in favour of experimental learning.<sup>23</sup>

At the height of the reform sentiment in 1653, dissatisfaction in England with the existing social and religious order was expressed in vigorous parliamentary debate. Terms of the reform included a call for testing all theories by diligent observation, synthesising rational and scriptural knowledge, learning from "chemistry's" example by turning from dispute to experience, and replacing the Galenic system of medicine with insights from J.B.van Helmont and Paracelsus.<sup>24</sup>

Not only in Parliament but also in the parliamentary forces of the 1640s and 50s, such ideas were readily accessible. In her research into the faith of the first Friends, Rosemary Moore has found that materials such as Boehme, Sebastian Franck, and the *Theologica Germanica* were disseminated and discussed in the armies of the 1640s, out of which many later Quaker converts came.<sup>25</sup>

### Language and Sensitivity among Early Friends

Few materials survive from the first stirrings of the Quaker movement in the English Midlands during the mid 1640s. Later reflections by George Fox in his *Journal* bear the mark of mature reflection, interpretation, and heavy editorial revision. It is known that much of the earlier "enthusiastic" assertions and activities of Friends was suppressed by later Friends as the movement came to enjoy a measure of toleration and respectability.

What was the understanding of the first Quakers when they asserted that "the power of the Lord" was coming over the people, that sin was being overcome, and fallen character was being perfected, that "miracles" were attempted and sometimes accomplished? The claim of the sufficiency of personal experience and the hesitancy with which Fox and others spoke of spiritual

antecedents limit our knowledge of possible influences. Similarity of language and attitude, however, may indicate some of the influences that "came over" into Quaker lives from the broad spiritual and intellectual environment of the time.

Rosemary Moore, analysing some 700 Quaker publications from the early 1650s, finds evidence of a number who had virtually arrived at a Quaker position before meeting Fox - some, like William Dewsbury, by way of openings while in the army. Richard Farnsworth, James Nayler (another army veteran), Margaret Fell, Elizabeth Hooten, Sarah Jones - many from the Midlands (where the Paracelsians would be at their most influential) - give witness to similar "sifting and winnowing" before their eventual conviction to the Quaker cause.<sup>26</sup> A sampling of some of these early Quakers' writings will be compared with sentiments in the Paracelsian philosophy, but first, it would be helpful to review George Fox's own spiritual journey.

As a boy, George Fox (1624-1691) experienced a yearning for a deeper spiritual life and was given to fasting, spending time walking alone, reading the Bible, and travelling widely - inquiring after religious "professors" for an answer that might speak to his spiritual condition. By his late teens, he began to have a number of "openings", revelations that addressed his strong desire for a saving knowledge.

The general thrust of these openings was that the knowledge he sought was not to be found outside himself in other people, places or things. It opened to him, for example, that "to be bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to make a man fit to be a minister of Christ", and on another occasion that "there was an anointing within man to teach him, and the Lord would teach His people Himself".<sup>27</sup>

Finally, in the mid-1640s Fox received his pivotal opening. He heard a voice inwardly say to him, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition".<sup>28</sup> This, Fox claimed, he knew "experimentally", the intimate knowledge of God and Christ coming, not through the help of any person or book, but through direct revelation, a revelation available to all, regardless of race or creed. As Fox shared his experience in the Midlands and eventually in the fertile spiritual region of the Northwest of England, thousands eventually joined the Quaker movement from among "left-wing" Puritans, Separatists, and Seekers.

The language of many of these early Friends is reminiscent of some of the themes explored earlier in the alchemical philosophy. Closer examination of some of those themes follows:



### Restoration and Returning to Eden

A conviction of the Paracelsian philosophers was that the mysteries of nature's processes could be discovered and the adept could learn to be an agent in the renewal of nature, part of which work would be the return to an "Adamic state". This confidence is echoed in the Quaker literature, as well. In his *The Discovery of the Great Enmity of the Serpent against the Seed of the Woman* (1655), William Dewsbury writes, "Jesus Christ purged away the filthy nature...so...I was made free from the body of sin and death...I witness I am regenerate and born again of the immortal seed."<sup>29</sup>

The most vivid expression of such a transformation occurs in Fox's own writing. He records a mystical experience in 1648 when,

I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword, into the paradise of God. All things were newe, and all the creation gave unto me another smell than before, beyond what words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness, and innocency, and righteousness; being renewed into the image of God by Christ Jesus, to the state of Adam, which he was in before he fell. The creation was opened to me; and it was showed me how all things had their names given them according to their nature and virtue.<sup>30</sup>

Fox goes on to describe how this vision led him initially to consider practising "physic" (medicine) and describes an experience of power that opened up to him the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.

Rufus Jones has noted that Fox's account is nearly identical to a vision in 1600 of Jakob Boehme, the German Christian mystic and alchemist. Indeed, several elements of this vision parallel alchemical imagery. The "flaming sword", while clearly a direct biblical allusion, is also a representative of the "Hermetically sealed" secrets of the cosmos. Through direct experience, the adept is able to "open the seals", even as Fox, following years of spiritual searching was brought through the sword guarding paradise.<sup>31</sup>

Fox's experience of a transformed, perfected world, the unity of all things, a personal transmutation, and a knowledge of the nature and virtue of all things also echo themes in the alchemical literature. Even Fox's comment about an initial inclination to practice medicine relates to the Paracelsian interest in a reformed medical practice. In his own words, Fox claims that,

physicians might be reformed and brought into the wisdom of God, by which all things were made and created; that they might

receive a right knowledge of the creatures, and understand their virtues ... All things, visible and invisible, are seen, by the Light of Christ... by whom all things were created.<sup>32</sup>

### Perfection

Closely connected with the experience of returning to "the state in which Adam was before the Fall" is a confidence in the possibility of perfecting nature and human character. Fox and other early Quakers were convinced that they possessed the power to overcome sin and darkness; this lay behind their commitment to the "Lamb's War", a spiritual battle against sin and evil, within and without, commitment to the "Lamb's War", a spiritual battle against sin and evil, within and without.

Margaret Fell wrote in 1653 to a member of Parliament, Colonel West, "Let your high Formalists and great Professors consider now, who is persecuted for the Truth, and who it is that persecutes them. They have long stood in their Forms; but never was there any Perfection till now, that the Power of Truth is made manifest..."<sup>33</sup>

In 1650, Sarah Jones described her own experience: "Except the Creature sink down into that manifest and revealed, and so be wrought into its natures, and so all things of God's power and authority, ye also shall fall short...not as though I myself have altogether attained to that degree of perfection; but... I am one that presseth hard after it..."<sup>34</sup>

George Fox was convinced that one could become perfect in this life; he took seriously Jesus' admonition, recorded in Matthew 5:48, "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect". He constantly disputed with those who, as he put it, "pleaded for sin" and claimed that a person cannot achieve perfection on this side of death.

Without knowing Greek, Fox displayed an intuitive understanding of the word "teleios" - ultimate design and purpose - which stands behind the Matthean sense of perfection. For Fox, perfection meant submitting fully to God's original design for creation, a creation made perfect but corrupted by the Fall. When one is renewed into God's original image by Christ, one is perfect again.<sup>35</sup> Hugh Barbour points out that perfection for Fox and the early Quakers was not a matter of individual infallibility, but of a transformation through personal experience into perfect conformity to God's purposes, a transformation of one's inner nature as well as of the physical world through obedience to the Light.<sup>36</sup>

“Oh, wait all in that which is pure”, Fox wrote, “to be fed alone of God with the eternal living food...And be famous in his Light, and hold in his Strength...as you dwell in that which is of God, it guides you up out of the elementary life, out of the mortal into the immortal...”<sup>37</sup> elsewhere, he writes, “There is your Teacher, the Light, obey it. There is your condemnation, disobeying it. If you hearken to the Light in you, it will not suffer you to conform to the evil ways... of the world [but] lead you to purity, to holiness, to uprightness, even up to the Lord”.<sup>38</sup>

The belief of the seventeenth century alchemist, too, Eliade writes, was that “If there were no exterior obstacles to the execution of her designs, Nature would always complete what she wishes to produce...God and only gold is the child of her desires...”<sup>38</sup> The alchemical dream was a vision of restoring the inner soul and the outer world to their intended form, to re-establish the teleological design for all forms. But to restore that primordial state, the soul must be dissolved by the Spirit, even as the “artist” in the laboratory dissolved substances with mercury to reform them.

An inward experience of reducing the “metal” of the soul to its primary substance results from separation from base material through combat with the conflicting tendencies of the soul. Similar to the apocalyptic hope of Friends who, having experienced the transforming Light within themselves, expected the transformation of the world, the Paracelsians also expected a “solve et coagula” (dissolution and reformation) of the world. Writing in a book published in 1591 in England, Bruno says,

... the dawn of a new day invites us. And let us place ourselves in such a manner that the rising sun does not disclose our uncleanness... If we thus purge our habitations, O ye gods, if we thus renew our heaven, the constellations and influences shall be new, the impressions and fortunes shall be new, for all things depend on this upper world...<sup>40</sup>

### **Direct and Immediate Experience of the Light and Power**

For the Paracelsians, the Copernican sun was a powerful symbol, and the golden sun, light, and darkness were important terms. The imagery of light, darkness, and illumination was central to Friends, as well. Richard Farnsworth, writing in 1654 in *The Heart Opened by Christ*, states, “Mind the Light of God in you, that shows you sin and

evil... and so lead you into the pure wisdom...and Righteousness and Purity shine forth in you...; Thy Light within, obey it, is your teacher, and will show you the way that leads to Salvation..."<sup>40</sup> James Nayler, in his *Lamentation over the Ruins of this Oppressed Nation* (1653), writes, "The Kingdom of God is within you...the way to the Kingdom is within you, and the Light that guides unto the way... is within".<sup>42</sup>

By "waiting and meeting" in this Light, Friends experienced a joining together with each other and with Christ. By experiencing this Light, Friends came into the covenant with God, into true knowledge, and were separated from the vain world.<sup>43</sup>

The Light was associated with God's power to unify, bring illumination and wisdom, make humble and judge, effect perfection, and give dominion over all things. In the following epistle, Fox gives expression to the close relationship of Light and the power of God, evincing, too, the familiar alchemical theme of "separation" and the mechanical "working" of base material to purify it:

Friends,

In the power of the Lord God dwell and live, that over all the world ye may stand, that ye may handle the word of God aright, which is as a hammer, and as a sword to divide the precious from the vile, and as a fire to burn up that which is hammered down, and divided from the precious. And in the wisdom of God wait, that ye may answer that of God in everyone; which Light will bring them off those things which they have set up in that nature which is gone from the Light...for such as are come to the Light feel Christ and his Cross, which is the power of God.<sup>44</sup>

Fox testified that this Light and power had led him to overcome the "ocean of darkness and death" and that it had sometimes worked miracles through him. In 1648 he wrote that "many great and wonderful things were wrought by the heavenly power in those days; for the Lord made bare His omnipotent arm, and manifested His power...whereby many have been delivered from great infirmities".<sup>45</sup>

Light and power receive similar treatment in alchemical texts. Elémire Zolla writes that alchemists identified divine energy with the essence of light and attempted to release the life-enhancing soul of light from all substances, to extract the particle of light that works each body into its pure form.<sup>46</sup> The alchemical literature mentions the "Inner Light" as the "invisible supreme Alchemist",<sup>47</sup> which effects the dissolution of the base, inward metal in preparation for transformation into a purer metal.



True wisdom, the alchemists believed, brought with it a power to make the adept a handmaid of the natural processes of creation and the Creator. Until the Hermetic philosophy degenerated into magic with the advent of a scientific, mechanistic world-view, the power of transformation the alchemist sought was the power to perfect the soul and the cosmos.

### Quakers Alchemists?

In spite of the seemingly similar vocabulary and purpose, there is virtually no evidence of an organic connection between early Friends and the Paracelsians who peopled the same Midlands landscape of Cromwellian England. The only mention of alchemy given by Fox himself is in his response once to a priest who maintained that Fox wore silver buttons. "They were but alchemy", he replied.<sup>48</sup> Fox did not use any of the tell-tale symbolism of alchemy and astrology used by Paracelsian contemporaries such as Elias Ashmole. Neither he nor other Quakers mentions meeting alchemists or reading the English Paracelsians. In his own writings, Ashmole makes no mention of Fox or the Quakers. John Heydon, a seventeenth century astrologer and writer on the Rosicrucian mysteries, states in a letter from 1666 that there was no association between the Rosicrucians and Quakers.<sup>49</sup>

Most of the first Friends were not the sort who would have been reading Paracelsian medical texts or joining in debates at Oxford over the Galenic canon and educational reform. Many could not read at all! They resented their opponents' connecting them with "the occult sciences", and in general claimed their insights came directly as revelation from God.

Some opponents of the Quakers, however, made claims about their relation to the German Paracelsian Jakob Boehme. As has been mentioned earlier, Boehme's own "flaming sword" vision predated Fox's; he described the presence of a "hidden" inner light in all persons and even cited the "vanity" of the outward sacraments when salvation comes from the indwelling presence of Christ alone. A book by Boehme was listed among Fox's holdings upon his death, but that is no proof he had read it!

In a letter in 1655 to an Anabaptist, trying to dissuade him from joining the despised sect of Quakers, Richard Baxter associates Friends with "Behmenists" (followers of Boehme), especially in their attack on externalism and their "crying up" the light within, revelation, and perfection in this life.<sup>50</sup> This may be as close as one

may come to an "organic link" between the Paracelsians and early Quakers.

Still, F.M. van Helmont's Quaker conviction without, evidently, giving up his Paracelsian leanings, the numbers of early Quaker converts who came out of parliamentary forces where Paracelsian writings were widely discussed; and the clear parallels between emphases within the Quaker movement and in the Paracelsian revival beg for further study to find more definite links.

Current research by Douglas Gwyn into the apocalyptic nature of early Quakers and Rex Ambler's "discovery" of the process by which the first Friends centred down into the Light and allowed it to transform their lives offer intriguing possibilities for seeing further connections between the world renewing optimism and transformational "alchemy" of the Paracelsians and the initial generation of Quakers.

## Conclusion

Does it make a difference? Wouldn't it even harm the cause of Quakerism to associate it with the misunderstood and highly caricatured "pseudo-science" of alchemy? One response is simply that it is a valid field of enquiry, to seek for Quakerism's progenitors, no matter where the search might take us.

Deeper, however, is the potential for a rediscovery of the real power that early Friends believed (and experienced!) as being available to us for transformation of ourselves and the world. To associate that power and Light with the primordial power of Creation might embolden present day Friends to be more courageous in attempting personal and corporate renewal.

And if it does nothing else, perhaps this flawed essay will encourage a future Ph.D. candidate to pursue the research necessary to examine this question more fully.

If that should be the case, may they "come through the flaming sword" into a state of research perfection!

*Max L. Carter*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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