

Friends and the Inquisition at Venice, 1658

THE period of maximum missionary effort by the early Quakers to European and Mediterranean territory falls within the decade 1655-65.¹ This was also the period of special exposure to the hostility of non-Protestants and non-Christians, including the Papal authorities in several areas, and particularly to the Inquisition. Of this last encounter the best-known instances were the experience of John Perrot and John Luffe in 1658 in Rome where Luffe soon died but Perrot remained a prisoner until released in 1661, and of the two married women, Sarah Chevers and Katharine Evans, prisoners in 1659-62 of the Inquisition at Malta.

Since the Papal Inquisition kept very careful records it would be of great interest if we could compare them with the Quaker version. But they are not easily accessible. I once thought an account of John Perrot in Rome by a Jesuit author might supply such information, but I concluded that it was based on Quaker printed books.²

Shortly afterwards my friend, Cecil Roth, announced that while searching principally for source information about the Marranos he had found in the muniments of the Holy Office at Venice some references to persons from England belonging to the sect of the *Tremolanti*.³ Twenty years later I secured photostats of these items. They occupy a fascicle of twelve foolscap pages in envelope 108 (5). But they are written in a script which is not very legible, with its abbreviations and blots, at least in the facsimile, and in places are completely obscure. The language is part Latin but mostly Italian. In June, 1963, Edward F. Oddis of

¹ Cf. W. C. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, Chap. XVI; Joseph Besse, *Sufferings*, 1753, Vol. II, Chapters XII-XV; and the unpublished paper by Bettina Laycock, *Quaker Missions to Europe and the Near East, 1655-1665*, 1950.

² Theodore Rhay, *Confusa Confessio Tremantium seu Quackerorum*, etc., Köln, 1666. See *Journal F.H.S.*, xxxi, 1934, pp. 37f. Cf. *ibid.* xxviii, 92, xxix, 84.

³ "The Inquisitional Archives as a Source of English History" in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fourth Series, Vol. xviii, 1935, pp. 115f.

Haddonfield, New Jersey, a master of both languages, offered to attempt to make for me an interlinear translation and in due course sent it to me. That was in February, 1964, and it is not an evidence of the gratitude I feel to him for a difficult undertaking that I have waited so long to use it.

The title on the envelope is "the Quakers' sect 1658" and it includes, with elaborate listing of the persons present and conducting the inquiries, transcripts of questions and answers on six dates from 18th June to 22nd August, 1658. For the modern reader this form of report may be a little tedious. I will therefore summarize the information of the three first occasions and, to illustrate the character of the originals, present thereafter the questions and answers of the three last occasions. These last have to do with the same witness, one George of Ravenna.

It will be seen that the Quakers themselves were not confronted. Some pamphlets which they had distributed in Venice had alerted the Holy Office. The witnesses were called and testified that they did not know their names, nor their exact whereabouts at the time of the inquiry, but I think the Friends can be identified as John Stubbs and Samuel Fisher. We know from Quaker sources that these Friends spent about two months in Venice, having reached it overland on 15th April before John Luffe and John Perrot left Venice for Rome.¹ By the time Stubbs and Fisher left the city for Rome they had heard of the intention of the Inquisition to arrest them in Venice. The two unnamed Quakers who were reported as having been in Venice but now in prison in Rome must be John Luffe and John Perrot. Other Quakers, including a man and a woman who set out for Constantinople, and the woman who had returned being sent back by the British consul, cannot be identified. They may include Mary Fisher, who interviewed the Sultan at Adrianople earlier this year.

The hearings reported begin on the 18th June, 1658, with a reference to one a week earlier and followed by one on the 27th. The rector of the Somasca Congregation, a

¹ W. C. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, pp. 426-28. The original letters in Portfolio 17 at Friends Library, London, have not yet been published, though they were read by Braithwaite and by Roth. See Braithwaite, *op. cit.*, p. 420, note 5.

Catholic Seminary in Venice, tells how he had a few weeks before conversed with two English gentlemen who reported the arrival in Venice of two Englishmen of a certain modern sect called Quakers, who had increased in London in three or four years to 40,000, and now were spreading here and there throughout the courts of Europe.

During this conversation the two English sectarians themselves appeared and were challenged by the Catholic Rector, not for their moral exhortation, but concerning belief in a visible head of the Church. The Quaker spokesman said that Christ had been visible as the head of Church and was still visible since he (the Quaker) has Him in himself, while the Catholic asserted that upon his ascension to Heaven, Christ had left us a vicar and visible head of the church.

Later the Rector reported that one of the English Catholics mentioned that he had had given him some pamphlets sent to him by the Quakers and since delivered to the officers of the Inquisition. The respondent replying to questions said he did not know either the names or last names of the said English sectarians but the one of them who spoke better was of middle stature, about 40 years old, of ruddy complexion, gaunt face, dark hair, or somewhat hanging hair, beard and moustache shaven, of modest bearing, with a dark suit of woollen cloth, French style. The other was of somewhat shorter stature but as old as the other, of white and pink complexion, narrow little face, very modest bearing, with a grey suit of French style. To judge from the respect that he showed towards his associate he was a person of inferior position.

The witness said that a few days later he saw the former of these two English sectarians walking in the palace court in a mood of thought. He had also met on a later occasion the two English Catholics who ridiculed the madness of those who claim to be perfect. They said the English Quakers sometimes preached in Italian, of which they know a little. They had gone to preach in the Jewish Ghetto. Members of their sect were travelling two by two to Frankfurt, Rome, Modena, and some to Constantinople, where a man and woman of the said sect had gone.

The witness when asked said he did not know of other copies of the printed leaflets distributed to other persons, nor did he know whether the said sectarians were the

authors of the said leaflets, nor did he know who might inform the Holy Office on this matter. Also he did not know where they lived.

The next witness is an innkeeper at the sign of the White Lion at the Piazza of the Holy Apostles who replies that he has now no English lodgers. He mentions another place where Englishmen often lodge, and he had heard of two Englishmen who had arrived there recently from Rome, but he had not seen them and does not know them.

The next witness (on 4th July) is a Londoner, Thomas Harp . . . [name obscured], 25 years old, who has been living about four years in Venice. He is himself a Catholic priest, living abroad in the house of the Englishman George Ravenna. He knows that there are English Quakers in Venice, because two of them had come a few times to the house of the aforesaid George for bread and beer, and sometimes he has met them in the street at the piazza [or bridge] of SS. Giovanni e Paolo at the house of an English tailor called Raphael who works at home. He reports that nine members of the sect had come and that two had been detained at Rome. He was given some pamphlets printed in English which dealt with the dreadful day of judgement, of the light we have in us, of the faith we ought to have, and similar things. But he knows nothing of similar pamphlets in Latin distributed by them.

As for a description of them, he said the one must be about 50 years old, of ordinary size, dressed in a dark grey woollen suit. The other must be 25 or 26 years old, of shorter stature, dressed almost as the other.¹

Hereafter is given a less condensed transcript of the official hearings, omitting the listing of the members of the inquisitional staff present on each occasion, and the usually obscure concluding formula.

9th July, 1658

Mr. George of Ravenna [son] of Mr. James, an Englishman, 22 years of age, living in Venice for four years, dwelling in S. Marina, merchant.

¹ The discrepancy about the conjectured ages of the two Quakers is natural. See above p. 41. If properly identified as Samuel Fisher (born 1605) and John Stubbs (born 1618) they would have been about 53 and 40 respectively.

Q. If he knows or can imagine the reason for this investigation.

A. I do not know it nor can I imagine it.

Q. If about a month ago toward the end of May or the beginning of June he has given to any person printed leaflets . . .

A. On the occasion that aboard my ship Alessio Svanc, an Englishwoman came who had decided to go to Constantinople, saying that she was inspired by the Lord God to speak in the matter of religion to the Turkish Sultan (Divan), although later she was sent back by the Consul of our nation on the same ship and dwells on Malamocco and comes sometimes on land, as far as I understand. And as I went to the ship, I saw the same (woman) giving some printed sheets to two Englishmen; one with the last name of the Bishop Fissero [Fisher?] a noble family in England, and another companion of his whom I do not know whom he is. So I had one [sheet] given to me in Latin, as the greater part of the leaflets were in English and I gave it to a Somascan Father.

Q. Tell the time and what and how many were present when he had one of the said sheets from the said woman.

A. It was a month and a half [ago], three days after the arrival of said ship, Mr. Thomas Alarpoon [*sic*] and other Englishmen being present.

Q. How many sheets did the said woman give to those Englishmen and what for?

A. She gave about 20 leaflets to the said Englishmen; I do not know what for.

Q. When and why did the witness give those printed sheets to the said Somascan Father.

A. Because I have familiarity with the Somascan Fathers, and Father Cosmo helped me in the translation of the book entitled "End of Controversies"¹ printed in Ferrara. I gave to one of the Somascan (Fathers) said sheets to let them see the novelties of the new countries on matters of religion.

Q. If he knows whether the said two Englishmen have distributed the sheets described to anyone in this city.

¹ *An End to Controversy Between the Roman Catholique and Protestant Religions* by Thomas Bayly, Douai, 1654 [Wing, *Short-title catalogue* . . . 1641-1700, B1510].

A. I know well that there were in this city about two months ago two other Englishmen who distributed similar sheets and leaflets to several persons, even to the Jews, who left, and we heard that they are imprisoned in Rome. But of these two who are at the Bridge in Venice I do not know whether they have distributed any.

Q. If he heard the said two Englishmen discuss with any religious person about the visible head of the Church, may he tell what they were asserting.

A. I have seen the said two Englishmen discussing with several persons several times. I have never heard them discuss religion but "about good customs. Stay away from evil and do good" [*de bonis moribus. Declina a malo et fac bonum*].¹ The older man is a wise person, who conversing with me about religion shows the errors and advises to be circumspect with others in similar matters and not to go to jail as the other two in Rome. The other, his companion, does not talk about this and had no other language than his native one.

Q. If he knows that the said Englishmen have distributed or brought to the gates [of the College] similar printed sheets.

A. I heard that about two or three months ago similar sheets have been brought to the gates of the Most Excellent College and the two said Englishmen told me they have done so, and added that they were sent by God to preach and to present them.

Q. If he knows who are the authors of said sheets.

A. There is a note on the sheets themselves; I leave it to them.

Q. If he knows whether any of these four Englishmen, that is the two in Rome, and the two here in Venice, have the same name as on these sheets.

A. I do not know that any of these is one of those on the sheets. I know that Fox went to Holland and afterward to England, so far as I know . . .

30 July, 1658. George of Ravenna

A. Those two sectarian Englishmen, noted in my investigation left, as I heard, Saturday the 8th by sea, toward Ancona. Before leaving they came to my house, and not

¹ Psalm 36, 27 in the Latin Vulgate.

finding me at home they left two or three sheets handwritten in Latin, with the signatures of them both. These sheets I promise to bring to this Holy Office, since I have forgotten to bring them.

Q. May he tell the contents of these sheets?

A. I have read only the first lines, and as to what I was able to understand they deal with moral matters, similarly to the printed sheets that I have identified which are in this Holy Office.

Q. If he knows to what parts these two sectarians are going.

A. The tailor already mentioned by me, at whose house the two sectarians were lodging, told me that they embarked for Ancona with the purpose of going to Rome.

Q. If he knows whether the said sectarians have left sheets with other persons.

A. I think they have left some and especially to three other Englishmen and to Jews, and I shall have better information about this and I shall report when I bring the sheets I have received.

22 August, 1658. George of Ravenna

Of his own accord Mr. George Ravenna appeared, who brought, in accord with promises made, a sheet in four pages [quarto] which he said that he had received from two Englishmen who finally left this city.

Q. If he knows where these two Englishmen are at present.

A. I have heard it said that they are now in Loreto and they say they are going towards Rome.

Q. If he knows the name of those Jews and others to whom the sheets were distributed by the same said sectarians as [told] in other investigations.

A. They are Jewish Rabbis, whose names I do not know. I have seen one of these sheets in the hands of the young Almeda, but I do not know whether it was his or from whom he had received it.

Signed: George Ravenna

HENRY J. CADBURY