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GEORGE FOX AS ENTHUSIAST: AN UNPUBLISHED EPISTLE

Early Quakers were enthusiasts, a fact that helps explain their success but demonstrates also why they provoked such vigorous opposition from contemporaries.¹ Being possessed by God – the literal meaning of enthusiasm – likewise got seventeenth-century Friends into difficulties with the authorities. Two of their central teachings, that Christ was present to teach and lead his people and that every person possessed the Inward Teacher, easily shaded over into the view that Christ was within each individual. Hence the Quaker assertion that the divine Christ lived in them seemed an obvious attempt to identify with the messiah, perhaps even to claim divinity. Many people who heard their statements interpreted them precisely in those ways.

The experience of James Nayler was the best known example. As early as 1653, he was asked at Appleby in Westmorland whether Christ was in him, and he asserted that Christ's spiritual body filled all places,² not exactly a straight forward denial or an example of letting one's "no" be "no". Nayler's most dramatic demonstration of his views came three years later. Permitting a tiny band of his followers to mimic Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem in their October 1656 parade in Bristol caused him to be charged and tried for blasphemy. His trial and

conviction marked a constitutional milestone in the history of the second Protectorate Parliament.³ The entire incident profoundly shocked other Quakers and deepened a major difference over the locus of authority among the top leadership of the young movement, a dispute that was never totally healed even after Nayler's brutal punishment, subsequent submission, and early death in the fall of 1660.

George Fox, the Quaker leader who outlived Nayler and won the struggle for control of the movement, confronted similar questions. In 1650, having hardly begun his evangelistic forays, he was jailed in Derby for blasphemy. Among other things the charge resulted from his response to a question as to how he knew Christ abided in him; he enthusiastically responded, 'he has given us his spirit'. His interrogators immediately inferred that he meant he was Christ.⁴ On another occasion, when rumours circulated in the vicinity of Gainsborough that he had been calling himself Christ, he denied the charge but subtly confused the issue by labelling his accuser a 'Judas'.⁵ A bit later, he straight out informed an inn keeper that he was 'the son of God';⁶ he answered a question about whether he was the 'son of God' affirmatively at Carlisle in 1653⁷ and he made the same comment in a letter to Oliver Cromwell, head of the English government in 1654.⁸ It is significant that Thomas Ellwood, the editor of the first edition of Fox's *Journal* in 1694, omitted any reference to these explicit statements, probably because by that time he wanted to make his subject appear as respectable as possible.

His most candid exploration of the implications of his belief of God-possession appears in an heretofore unpublished 1653 epistle in the Swarthmore Manuscripts (II, 55). It is printed in full below. Designed for 'Margaret Fell and every other friend who is raised to discerning',⁹ it represents his most explicit statement of the assumptions underlying his enthusiastic views and his belief that he was the son of God. There is no way to know how extensively it was circulated or why it was never published. Its theological presuppositions are based on a selected reading of the Bible and are hardly orthodox and seem close to the 'Familists' or 'Family of Love', the heretics respectable people of the seventeenth century loved to hate.¹⁰ Hence it is likely that early Friends regarded Fox's epistle as simply too inflammatory ever to see the light of day, and after the Nayler incident he himself would have had little interest in reminding outsiders just how widespread his disgraced co-worker's views were within the movement.

The document is typical of Fox's writing style, reading much like a rough draft, with incomplete and run-on sentences that occasionally

belie efforts at understanding. Still its repetitive and almost biblical cadence builds to a logical climax that grows naturally out of its presuppositions – one may not agree with the premises but, once accepted, it is difficult to deny the conclusions. The epistle is not in his handwriting; it is a text of a text, perhaps of a text: it is simply impossible to know how far it is removed from the original. Based on editor Norman Penney's assignment of a document in a similar hand (Swarthmore Mss. II, 2), it was copied by Thomas Aldam of Warmsworth, one of Fox's earliest converts.¹¹ On the reverse side is written, 'A testimony gff: 1653'.

Another copy, slightly different but a bit improved as far as punctuation and grammar are concerned, exists in the probable handwriting of William Caton, Margaret Fell's young secretary and also an early convert. It appears in the Caton Mss. (II, 48–49), like the Swarthmore Manuscripts housed in the Library of the Society of Friends, London; fortunately both have been microfilmed. For purposes of comparison, I have meshed the two, using the Swarthmore Mss. as the standard and retaining its capitalization and punctuation. Words and letters within square brackets [---] appear in the Caton Mss. but not in the Swarthmore copy, while those in angle brackets <---> are not in the Caton Mss.

Accordeing to the spirit I am the sonne of God¹² and accordeing to the flesh I am the seed of Abraham, [and David] which seed is Christ,¹³ which seed is but one in all his saints, and the promise is to the seed, which seed is not many but one, which seed is Christ and Christ in ye. The mistery which hath beene hid from ages, but now is made manifest, which seed though there be ten thousand, <yett> are all one,¹⁴ which seed bruises the serpents head;¹⁵ & the serpent speakes in all in the first nature¹⁶ & [the serpent] is <the> head; [where the head of the serpent is bruised with the head of the woman] <upon the seed if the serpent is cursed with the seed of the Woman> the seed of the woman is head & speakes,¹⁷ & male & female come to the beginning, & Christ is all & in all, & the promise of god here is fullfilled; Accordeing to the spirit I am the sonne of god before Abraham was, befor Jerusalem was, the same which doth descend, the same doth ascend & all the promises of god are yea come[d] out of time from god, into time to that which is captivated in the earth in time, & to it the seed which is Christ, they are all yea & a man fetcheth up out of him, where there is noe time; [&] all that can perceive [it let him]. [All that can perceive] this <ye> are happy &

<blest> [blessed] who have eares to heare,¹⁸ blessed are <the> [your] eares, who have eyes to see blessed are your eyes,¹⁹ & blessed is he that receives the truth, in the love of god & walks in it[t] <upp> to god; The blessing is upon Abraham & his seed, [in] blessing I will bless thee & [in] Multiplieing I will multiply thy seed,²⁰ & blessed is he that blesseth thee & cursed is he that curseth thee, To the <seed> [head] all Nations shall bow where it is carryed up[p] into power, & it will not bow to the devill, if he would give it all the glory of the world, but tramples upon all, & worships noe god but the living god, though there be many gods in the world, Every for me & Nation hath a god, but it will worshipping none of these godds, but tramples upon them all Every carnall heart who loves the wages of unrighteousnesse who hath a god as Balaam had, but was slaine with the seed, [& to] the seed of god where it is raised upp by the same spirit that raised up[p] Jesus Christ who are brought from the dead, raigne over all the world, & comprehend[s] all the world have the same minde that was in Christ Jesus,²¹ the same spirit that raised <Christ Jesus> [Jesus Christ] & he that hath not is none of his, but he that hath <comprehends> [apprehends] all Nations, languages, kinreds & tongues, and all Babilons wayes, & all the Mistery of Iniquity, & the master of harlots, & all manner of coloures which <no> [the] beast hath, this seed where it is redeemed, it comes out of kinreds & they be all one if ten thousand, out of all Nations [all Languages & Countreyes & to it apprehends all Nations all Languages & Countreyes] God is pure who hath spoken it[t], & as many as received the word, I say unto ye: yee are gods, as it is written in your law,²² & the scriptures cannot be broken, & he that denyes the word of God breakes [the] scripture[s], [And] Now waite all to have these thinges fullfilled in ye, if it be never so little a measure waite in it[t], that ye may grow <upp> to a perfect man in Christ Jesus,²³ there is a feedeing upon the milke of the word,²⁴ before ye come to the word.

[George Fox]

<Lett a copy of this be sent to Margt ffell
& every other freinds that are raised to a discerneing>

H: Larry Ingle

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ One learned critic even penned a book whose very title underscored this opposition. See Thomas Comber, *Christianity No Enthusiasm: or, The Several Kinds of Inspirations and Revelations pretended to by the Quakers, Tried and found Destructive to the Holy Scripture and true Religion*. London, T.D., 1678.
- ² The most accessible source for this examination is Hugh Barbour and Arthur Roberts, eds., *Early Quaker Writings, 1650–1700*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI., 1973, 260–62.
- ³ The most recent study of Nayler is William G. Bittle, *James Nayler, 1618–1660: The Quaker Indicted by Parliament*. William Sessions, York, 1986, which is strongest on the parliamentary manoeuvring. See also the insightful study of Emilia Fogelklou Norlind, *James Nayler: The Rebel Saint, 1618–1660*. Ernest Benn Ltd, London, 1931.
- ⁴ *Journal of George Fox*, ed. Thomas Ellwood. London; no publ. 1694, 31–32 (hereinafter cited as *Journal*). I have transposed the object in the sentence to its modern place. Fox made a similar statement in 1660 in responding to charges that brought him to Lancaster prison. *Journal of George Fox*, ed. Norman Penney, Octagon Books, New York; 1973, I, 381 (hereinafter cited as *Penney Journal*).
- ⁵ *Journal*, 67.
- ⁶ *Short Journal and Itinerary Journals of George Fox*, ed. Norman Penney. Cambridge, 1925, 17.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁸ See *Penney Journal*, I, 161–2 and 425–6.
- ⁹ I have modernized spelling and punctuation here. The fact that the essay's circulation was limited to those who had been 'raised to discerning' suggests, however unintentionally, a two tier level among early Friends; presumably those not considered acute enough to appreciate Fox's words were unable to discern the higher truths to which the master had already arrived and now revealed to a select group.
- ¹⁰ On the Family of Love, see Felicity Heal, 'The Family of Love and the Diocese of Ely', *Studies in Church History*, 9 (1972), 213–22, Jean D. Moss, 'The Family of Love and English Critics', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 6 (1975), 35–52, and Alastair Hamilton, *The Family of Love*. James Clarke & Co., Cambridge: 1981, esp. 112–41. The fact that Fox's theology shared this tenet with the Familists should not be taken to mean that he owed his thought to this group or drew direct inspiration from them, for as Hamilton shows it is almost impossible to tie the Family of Love directly to any English group in the seventeenth century.
- ¹¹ See the note in Penney, *Journal*, I, 425.
- ¹² See John 1:12. Quaker embarrassment with the epistle was also revealed by the first line given it by the anonymous seventeenth-century compiler of the 'Annual Catalogue of George Fox's Papers'. Rather than reading 'I am the son of God', the compiler gives two alternative readings: 'I am chosen' – and, more significant still, for this wording completely undercuts the force, power, and meaning of the epistle – 'Christ is.' See *Annual Catalogue of George Fox's Papers*, ed. Henry J. Cadbury, Friends Book Store, Philadelphia, 1939, 42 (item 19,67A). The location of the epistle is incorrectly given as Swarthmore Mss, II, 56.
- ¹³ Reference to Galatians 3:16 and Hebrews 2:16.

¹⁴ An interesting, if implicit, solution to the problem of authority, it suggests that unity can be found even if there be 10,000 individuals.

¹⁵ Reference to Genesis 3:15.

¹⁶ Not an explicit reference to Ephesians 2:1–3 but likely related, particularly as it makes clear that Fox shared the common Christian belief that human beings in their natural state ‘walked according to the course of this world’ and were gripped by evil.

¹⁷ See Revelation 12.

¹⁸ Reference to Matthew 11:15.

¹⁹ Reference to Matthew 13:16.

²⁰ See Genesis 17.

²¹ Reference to Philippians 2:5.

²² Psalm 82:6.

²³ Reference to Colossians 1:28.

²⁴ Reference to I Peter 2:2.