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Transactions

of the

Baptist Historical Society.

The General Baptists and the Friends.

A Note by Sir William J. Collins,
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IN essays on the "Memorials of the Treacher family,"¹ and in "Dutch Dissenters and English General Baptists,"² which have appeared in earlier numbers of these *Transactions*, I have drawn attention to the relationship which subsisted between the General Baptists and the Friends and remarked upon the fact that it was largely among the "tender folk" of the former that George Fox found his earliest recruits and his most ardent adherents. Not a little misapprehension appears to exist as to this relationship and as to the chronological sequence of these religious movements. It is a problem worthy of fuller investigation than it has yet received and involves a tracing of the genesis of the separate movements of the xvi. and xvii. centuries from the residue of Lollardy that remained, despite bitter persecution, among the masses

¹ *Baptist Historical Transactions*, Vol. II., No. 4.

² *Ibid*, Sept., 1914.

of the people as well as among some scholarly adherents of Wycliffism.

Braithwaite in sketching the origin of Quakerism³ truly observes that "the points of contact between early Baptists and the early Friends are indeed numerous," and allows that "it was a 'shattered' Baptist Society at Mansfield in 1648 which first supplied George Fox with congenial religious fellowship and under his leadership it developed into the earliest Quaker congregation." It was in truth among the Separatist Baptists that Fox formed his "tender" people.

Rufus Jones⁴ in speaking of Anabaptism says, "It is an interesting fact that it found its strongholds in the very districts where Lollardry had most flourished and where the people were familiar with anti-clerical sentiment." He rightly admits that there were in England, and in Holland even earlier, long before the time of George Fox (1624-1690) those who held views which have usually been associated with the Society of Friends. Such men were found among the General Baptists from 1610 onwards and among the literal Mennonites in the Netherlands and Westphalia during the previous half-century. Thus Fox was consciously or unconsciously the exponent of an existing faith rather than the originator of a new one.

In order to justify these statements it may be worth while to cite some of the chief writers on this aspect of Separatist movements in pre- and post-Reformation times and to consider the question from historical, geographical, doctrinal and personal points⁵ of view.

³ "The Beginnings of Quakerism," Wm. C. Braithwaite, 1915, p. 12.

⁴ "Studies in Mystical Religion," 1909, p. 365.

⁵ In mental attitude and conduct, alike in public and private life, or even in smaller questions of habit and dress, there was often a close resemblance between typical General Baptists and the Friends. My great grandfather,

Barclay, in his "Inner Life of the religious societies of the Commonwealth" says, "It has been remarked by those who have studied the early history of the Society of Friends, that there were religionists in England who held views similar to those of 'the Friends' prior to the preaching of George Fox. These were the General or Arminian Baptist (originally non-immersionist) Churches, which were founded by Thomas Helwys, John Morton and their companions."⁶ These churches were substantially Mennonites and "so closely do their views correspond with those of George Fox, that we are compelled to view him as the unconscious exponent of the doctrine, practice and discipline of the ancient and stricter party of the Dutch Mennonites, at a period when, under the pressure of the times, some deviation took place among the General Baptists from their original principles."⁷ The allusion is apparently to the period when the latter were according to some critics too much "Amsterdammified." Again Barclay says "the General Baptists and Friends were to a very large extent united in matters of doctrine, practice and discipline. Even in minute particulars the correspondence is very striking."⁸ Indeed the *differentia* distinguishing the two was found among some of the Waterlander Mennonites

John Treacher, of Stamford Hill (1755-1838), whose nomination is before me, who was himself the son and grandson of General Baptist ministers and for years the mainstay of Worship Street Chapel, according to all accounts and representations, might easily have been taken for a Quaker. He is depicted as wearing a russet-brown, double-breasted "Spencer" coat, with a white neck-cloth; and affected a pig-tail *coiffure*. Mr. A. Hall's account of Mr. Treacher, in his "Three Generations of a Godly House," 1886, suggests that in public and private life his conduct was in accord with that associated with the Friends.

⁶ Barclay, p. 76.

⁷ Ibid, p. 77.

⁸ Ibid, p. 223.

such as Hans de Ries and others who set store on "the inner light" more than on the written word. "There can be little doubt," says Barclay, "that the first Churches founded by Fox and the early preachers were either constituted upon the principles of the earliest English General Baptist or Mennonite Church, or had a common origin in the scheme of Church government and discipline originally received by Menno from the Swiss Baptists and developed by him."⁹ The Quakers like some of their prototypes laid aside the Lord's Supper and baptism and in some instances had love-feasts.

Fox and Barclay were also in touch with the Collegiants or Rijnsbergers (whose affinity I have traced in a previous article¹⁰) as their correspondence discloses and "some of the Collegianters were the first Converts of the Friends."¹¹ Fox, Barclay, Penn and Keith had interviews with the Collegiants at Amsterdam and Harlingen in 1677 and again in 1684. A memorable discussion took place between Galenus Abrahams, a leader of the Socinian Mennonites, and Fox, in the course of which Abrahams who was "very high and very shy," requested Fox to remove his gaze from him as Fox's eyes, he said, pierced him. Sewell, the historian of the Friends, was a Mennonite and the son of the learned and eloquent Judith Zinspenning, who was herself indoctrinated by Galenus Abrahams' teaching. Fox, according to Barclay, got his views in regard to war from John Smyth and he asserts "there is a striking coincidence between the principal points which were insisted on by the early Friends in their bold and fearless itinerant preaching:

⁹ Ibid, p. 352.

¹⁰ "Dutch Dissenters and English General Baptists," *Transactions*, Sept., 1914.

¹¹ Barclay, p. 251.

and the teaching of John Smyth of Amsterdam."¹² The practice of fixed prices for commodities, the the initiation of which is attributed to the Quakers, appears to have originated with the early Baptists.¹³

Fox moreover had an uncle, by name Pickering, who was a London General Baptist with whom he worked in 1644, associated with Baptists at Brighton, Leicestershire in 1647, and in 1649 was in touch with Samuel Oates, who served Baptist communities in Surrey, Kent and Sussex.¹⁴

G. P. Gooch, in his "History of English Democratic Ideas in the xvii. Century," (1898)¹⁵ speaking of Quakerism says, "to calm observers it is obvious that the new movement most nearly resembled the Mennonist Church whence the Baptists had already sprung. So close is the connexion indeed between these sister bodies that it is sometimes said that Fox was rather the organiser than the founder of the new society." With rather less historical accuracy, he asserts that "the General Baptists went over almost in a body, to the Friends taking many of their own ideas and practices with them," while in rare cases Quakers deserted their own community for the Baptists.

W. C. Bickley, in his work on "George Fox and the Early Quakers" (1884) says, "in all the Puritan sects the Baptists came nearest in doctrine and practice to the Quakers, especially in matters of toleration and opposition to a paid ministry,"¹⁶ and that the "Ranters or Seekers, among whom Fox found his readiest followers, were an offshoot of this body,"¹⁷ and allows

¹² Barclay, p. 261.

¹³ Ibid, p. 319.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 254-256.

¹⁵ Loc. cit., p. 271.

¹⁶ Loc. cit., p. 38.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 39.

that "there was little that was entirely new in Quakerism."¹⁸

According to Braithwaite the name Quaker was first used in 1647 for a sect in Southwark who permitted women to preach and whose delivery of the word was accompanied by convulsive tremulations.¹⁹ This sect was of Continental origin, and in 1657 insidious comparison was drawn between the Quakers and the Anabaptists of Münster. The same author, speaking of the growth of Quakerism says, "on the Surrey side there were at first a great many meetings in private houses. Towards the end of August 1654, about six weeks after arriving in the City, Howgill and Burrough had held a meeting in Southwark in a large room where the Baptists met on Sunday; several of them were there and many hundreds of people. It is likely enough that some of these Baptists formed the nucleus of the Quaker Church in the borough."²⁰ Braithwaite also tells how Ames who had been a Baptist found favour with the Dutch Baptists, but that Stubbs another Baptist was

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 40.

¹⁹ "The Beginnings of Quakerism," p. 57. Mosheim asserts (vol. iii, p. 433) that the name was first employed by Gervas Bennet, a J.P. in Derbyshire in 1650.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 379. Braithwaite suggests that this was the earliest congregation of Particular Baptists; but at this time the church of 1616 was under Henry Jessey, and met in Swan Alley, Coleman Street, as is shown by a letter printed at page 345 of the *Fenstanton Records*. Braithwaite's case is stronger than he knew, for the kinship of the Quakers was with the General Baptists. In 1644 Featley, of Southwark, said that these had existed near to him for twenty years; evidently the group originally under Elias Tookey. In 1652 this General Baptist church of Southwark divided, a small group hiving off under William Rider and meeting weekly from house to house. The main body is apparently that which Howgill and Burrough visited; in 1665 it was under John Clayton; by 1674 it had again become two bands, meeting at Shad Thames and at the Park. These churches are known to-day as Church Street, Deptford, and Borough Road.

less to their liking. He confirms the statement of Barclay that Mennonites and Collegiants supplied most of the recruits to Quakerism and that the General Baptists, being of Mennonite origin offered a promising field for men like Ames and Stubbs who had been Baptists themselves.²¹

Clark, in his "History of English Nonconformity," does full justice to the little nest of Separatists that met in Southwark during "the Laudian decade," as he calls the years from 1630 to 1640. Besides Tookey's Church there was a second in Deadman's Place,²² where John Canne for a while officiated and where Baptists and Congregationalists foregathered. In 1641 members of this church were arrested, when the more open worship of this little community of advanced Separatists began to attract the attention of the Lords of the Council. They were indeed censured by many Lords and ordered to repair to the parish church, but "instead of inflicting any penalty they treated them with a great deal of respect and civility." More surprising still, on the following Sunday morning three or four of the peers attended worship at Deadman's Place and "at their departure signified their satisfaction in what they had heard and seen, and their inclination to come again."²³

This Southwark community kept alive the spirit of unfettered liberty of conscience which John Smyth had imbibed from the Waterlander Mennonites and Collegiants which Helwys' Church in the City had imported into London, and which had earned the well-known encomium of Masson. The greater tolerance of the Commonwealth permitted more intense and even eccentric developments of this

²¹ Braithwaite, p. 409.

²² Loc. cit., pp. 295-299.

²³ Crosby's "History of the Baptists," vol. i., pp. 162, 163.

unfettered investigation of the word, witness the Fifth Monarchy men, the Seventh-day Baptists, the Familists, the Millenarians, and other groups, who about the time of Barebones' parliament looked for the coming of the reign of the saints on earth. Cromwell's broad policy of toleration was prepared to wink alike at the Socinianism of Biddle, and the eccentricities of the Seekers, whom he wittily observed were only second to the finders in their new-born zeal. Thus while Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Independents and Puritans were to be included within the fold of Cromwell's State Church, the Arminian Baptists and Mennonites, with their Quaker offshoot representing the extremest Separatists—the very “dissidence of dissent”—elected to remain outside, fearing lest the organization vouchsafed would tend to destroy the spirit and quench the working of “the inner light.” Thus according to Clark these latter represented the true spirit of Nonconformity, which is not however anything negative but the recognition that the life of the spirit is superior to and makes the organization, and that consequently the establishment of religion by a state is affecting to create the consequences without the initiative. This was the true spirit of Lollardry which stood for a simple and genuine piety, against an elaborated superstition clad in religious robes. Indeed “a large proportion of those who suffered martyrdom under Mary came from districts where Lollardry had been strong. And perhaps (though it can be no more than a vague guess) the isolated congregations with which we meet later on in the time of Edward VI. and Mary, and which are the first definitely ‘separated’ religious bodies that appear in our history—these, perhaps, though not calling themselves Lollards, or Wycliffites, may have been connected in some real way with the Lollardry of earlier years, and may have represented the new

uprising of some Lollard tradition which had never wholly died, and which was ready, on occasion, to embody itself once more."²⁴

Thus long before George Fox began his propagandism (1648) there had been, especially in the Netherlands and in England, more particularly in the southern and eastern counties and in old Lollard districts of the midlands, communities whose faith and principles approximated closely to those often regarded as characteristic of the Society of Friends.

Apart from pre-historic and traditional links with primitive and apostolic Christianity there is evidence of close affinity between the views of the Waterlander, a more liberal branch of the Mennonites, and those advocated in the latter half of the xvii. century by the Quakers. The aversion to war and oaths, the rejection of creeds, sacerdotalism and formal worship, the devotion to mystic guidance by the inner light and immediate conversion, an anti-trinitarian tendency, the emphasis laid upon practical piety, the limitation of the sphere of the magistrate and the respect for conscience, private judgment, and free-will are all to be found among the tenets of the Waterlander Mennonites and the Collegiant group of Arminians who fused with them in the xvii. century. The same mental attitude towards things of the spirit was represented in John Smith and the early General Baptist church which his co-adjutors, Helwys and Murton, brought back from Holland to London, and from which offshoots appeared in the City, across the Thames in Southwark, as well as in the home counties around the metropolis.

²⁴ See Clark, H. N., "History of English Nonconformity," p. 74, *et passim*.