

**WHO WERE THE ENGLISH RADICALS?
23 MARCH 2002
ANABAPTIST NETWORK**

**WORKSHOP ON EARLY QUAKERS
(notes)**

**Doug Gwyn
Quaker Studies Tutor
Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre
(doug@woodbrooke.org.uk)**

Two sources of early Quaker radical witness:

1. Spiritualist Reformation -- figures such as Caspar Schwenckfeld, Sebastian Franck, Jacob Boehme, etc. -- a radical internalisation of the Spirit's work -- 'Christ within' -- eg, communion with Christ in the Spirit (outward elements unnecessary); Christ as inward teacher; the need for a 'Stillstand', a suspension of proliferating reformations, to wait for God to reveal something more decisive and uniting.

This tradition filtered in to England in the C16 and was embodied in groups like the Family of Love in Elizabeth's reign, then by Seekers (dropouts from all churches, waiting for a new revelation and new apostles) in the 1640s -- Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, as well as the Ranters, generate from this scene

2. The Anabaptist Reformation -- particularly the resistance politics and willingness to suffer for one's Christian witness -- AnaB tradition filtered into England in early C17 through separatist congregations emigrating to Holland and coming into contact with Mennonite groups (particularly Waterlander stream) -- General Baptists were particularly strong in their countercultural behavioral codes (no pagan day-names, no swearing of oaths, endogamy, open for business on Sundays), many of which were picked up by early Friends -- GBs also engaging in more Spirit-led worship and allowing women's ministry, which also carry over into early Quakerism

George Fox (1624-91) seems to be the key, synthesizing figure who is able to put these and other elements together into a prophetic movement in the 1650s that revitalised radical Christian witness and republican politics -- raised in village in Leicestershire -- left home in 1643 at age 19 -- became a Seeker, drifting from group to group, teacher to teacher, unaffiliated -- 1644, visited with General Bs in London for a few weeks, probably very influenced -- but remained apart

Early 1647, met a group of 'shattered Baptists' a splintered congregation of General Bs near Mansfield, Notts - major connection -- the group now calls itself 'Children of the Light' and Fox is its key figure -- Elizabeth Hooton, a prominent member of the group, becomes an important spiritual ally of Fox in latter 1640s -- Fox builds a network of these groups in Midlands

October 1650 -- Fox arrested and imprisoned at Derby for blasphemy under the new Blasphemy Act designed to round up Ranters -- his preaching of moral perfection in the power of the Spirit sounded to some like Ranter equation of good and evil -- spent one year in prison there -- the Parliamentary army tried to recruit him out of prison but he refused on pacifist grounds -- wrote provocative epistles to town leaders, debated clergy in his cell, was generally radicalised during this period toward a more confrontational ministry

October 1651 -- released -- writes in his Journal that he felt like a lion set loose among the beasts of the field -- now preaching an apocalyptic message -- the day of the Lord -- 'Christ is come to teach his people himself and bring them off all the world's ways and religions' -- a second-coming message, but centered in present experience -- the light within each person's conscience is Christ's presence to

teach them directly, lead them into all righteousness, obviating the need of a professional clergy, gathering people into worship groups to wait upon the Lord's direct teaching in silence, speaking only as spoken through by Christ's own direct revelation in the light/Spirit -- anyone moved by Christ, male or female, rich or poor, has authority to speak and help Christ lead the group in that moment

Moving up into Yorkshire, Fox began to connect quickly with some able Seekers and ex-soldiers -- along with the apocalyptic message came confrontational, conflict-producing methods -- entry into parish churches to argue and denounce the clergy -- denunciations of unfair trading practices in the marketplaces -- preaching repentance and the day of the Lord in the streets -- these polarizing tactics often unleashed mob violence or arrest and imprisonment against early Quaker preachers -- but they also drew sympathetic individuals out and these formed new Quaker worship groups

1652 -- Fox moved across Yorkshire into Westmorland and Lancashire with exponentially increasing effects -- hundreds of Seekers in Westmorland were convinced in two weeks time in June 1652 -- Fox's message was the call northern radicals had been waiting for and they quickly became the vanguard of a movement that grew so rapidly in the north that neither local nor national authorities could see a way to repress them as had been so easily done with Levellers, Diggers and Ranters in the previous decade --

Quaker preaching and tracts restated many of the religious and political ideas already articulated by those groups, but had a way of turning previous ideas and experiments into a concrete and practical programme of radical religious witness and community building

Quaker apocalyptic witness targeted the established church most centrally as the primary obstacle to Christ's reign on earth through the free consciences of men and women willing to turn to his teaching -- but tracts like *The Three-fold Estate of Antichrist* also suggest that the gentry and magistracy were in deep collusion with the established clergy in upholding the power of the Dragon in England

Early Friends called their movement the 'Lamb's War', utilising images from the Book of Revelation -- they viewed themselves as the faithful on Mt Zion following the Lamb into apocalyptic holy war against the forces of the Dragon -- Fox and early Friends read Revelation not as predictions of an imminent future but the description of an unfolding present -- they followed its imageries and understood that the kind of eschatological change they were experiencing and catalyzing around them must be deeply conflictual in nature -- just as they experienced deep-seated deceit and resistance in their own personal transformation in the light of Christ, they understood that they must confront the same dark forces in society around them -- but they understood that their conflict was nonviolent, their weapons spiritual -- mobs and magistrates might deal violently with them, but the tactics of the Lamb's War were consistently nonviolent

Early Friends shifted the focus of political conflict from the political superstructure to the social infrastructure of England -- they learned from the hollow victory of the Civil War and from the defeated republican agenda of the Levellers that the new Puritan powers would maintain control jealously -- the logic of the kingdom was transformation from the grassroots, not an attempt to seize state control -- and as Christ had shown in his own life and death, this transformation involves suffering

Quakers were soon filling up prisons around England like no other group had done in living memory -- they cheerfully accepted this as part of their witness and kept meticulous records of what Friends were suffering across the nation -- I think this martyrological impulse derives partly from the Anabaptist tradition and partly from the Lollard tradition, which was strong around Fox's village in Leicestershire

The Lamb's War can be seen as a nonviolent cultural revolution -- it confronted a variety of social mores and modeled an alternative, more peaceful and egalitarian social order among Friends -- the

behavioural codes of early Friends were aimed to reach to the light, or witness, of Christ within each person -- these included plain speaking, a more simple dress and lifestyle, a respect for the spiritual authority of women, etc. -- these codes could get an individual in trouble quickly in the highly mannered society of C17-England -- eg, not showing verbal and gestural deference to social superiors, employers, parents, judges, clergy, etc. were very unnerving and suggested all sorts of threatening meanings to a Puritan establishment anxious to settle church and state into something viable in the 1650s

Friends threatened the government like no other movement of the period -- their exponentially growing numbers and surprisingly quick communications and coordination inspired fear and repression, particularly from 1656 onwards -- their apocalyptic warnings to Oliver Cromwell, Parliament and others could easily be construed as veiled threats of a Quaker insurrection -- though a few Quakers did get drawn into plots in 1659, they were strongly denounced by the leadership of the movement

FOR FURTHER READING ON EARLY FRIENDS:

Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word: the life and message of George Fox* (Friends United Press, 1986).

Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the rise of capitalism* (Pendle Hill, 1995).

Douglas Gwyn, *Seekers Found: atonement in early Quaker experience* (Pendle Hill, 2000).

Ben Pink Dandelion, Douglas Gwyn, Timothy Peat, *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the second coming* (Woodbrooke/Curlew, 1998).

Rosemary Moore, *the Light in Their Consciences: the early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666* (Penn State University Press, 2000).