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978-0-521-07282-3 - The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England,
1793-1815

J. E. Cookson

Excerpt

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I

The Friends of Peace

Self-description is perhaps the best way to begin definition. Throughout the twenty years of war lasting from 1793 until 1815, the opponents of the war outside parliament usually called themselves the 'Friends of Peace'. The title immediately warns us that we are not looking at a formally constituted body with an authority structure, with a declared programme and with a definite membership. 'Friends', indeed, well depicted the nature of the association. It was in the eighteenth century a common appellation for the groups gathered round a few leading politicians which struggled for parliamentary power and within which there was a large degree of voluntary commitment and ample scope for independent action. The same usage was found in electoral politics where a 'popular' candidate was sometimes supported from a common purse and by an extensive *ad hoc* organisation. As public opinion came into play at the national level, causes as well as individuals became the focal point of activity. The four great public issues at the end of the eighteenth century were the abolition of the slave trade, civil rights for non-Anglicans, parliamentary reform and peace, and each was seen to be supported by a body of 'Friends' irrespective of the societies and committees that existed. The expression, 'Friends of Peace', was obviously useful for declaring that a unity of opinion and sentiment was present whatever the limitations and difficulties of organisation. It evinced a common commitment, though no peace society existed and though formal organisation was carried no further than a few temporary local committees for the purposes of petitioning.

But 'Friends' is also not a word to describe anonymous and amorphous masses of public opinion or the relationships usually emerging within a protest movement when the scale is national. Its constant use points to just how close a group these opponents of the war felt themselves to be and, in fact, were. Undoubtedly part of the satisfaction it gave came from the sense of comradeship it conveyed, comradeship which the Friends of Peace, in common with other reforming groups, understood and valued in running against the

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normative order or dominant values of society. We have to remember that the massive conservative reaction after 1790 was not only an ideological offensive but a police operation aimed at hunting down and silencing individual reformers. Something beyond the ordinary solidarity of participation in a cause was created by the feeling that great risks had been taken and real danger shared. Nevertheless, the impact of the crisis must not be exaggerated. The truth is that the closeness of the Friends of Peace was mainly derived from long-standing religious and political associations. As we shall see, they represented a body of liberal opinion which had been shaped and hardened since about 1770 by opposition to clerical subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, the American war and the slave trade, and support of moderate parliamentary reform and the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. All these campaigns over the years had added to their ideological agreement and political commitment by building personal connections and networks which greatly facilitated common action on their part. Just as a parliamentary group like 'Mr Fox's Friends' was not bonded by politics alone, so the Friends of Peace in many respects constituted a fellowship criss-crossed by the ties of family, religion, intellect, profession and business. They were a group, as the name they gave themselves suggested, in which the association was voluntary, informal and, to a very great degree, personal. Perhaps the point is made best by mentioning the Society for the Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace, the organisation which after 1815 took over from them the leadership of anti-war opinion. Its title announced a social ideal, a long-term object, the realisation of which depended on the formal commitment of generations and had little to do with the predicaments of the present.

A name the Friends of Peace did not adopt for themselves, when they might easily have done so, was 'liberals'. Like 'radicals' and 'radicalism', 'liberals' and 'liberalism' as substantive nouns belong to a later period. There was an interesting anticipation of the change that would take place in 1812 when John Douglas of Glasgow referred to himself as the leader of 'the liberal party' in the town;¹ this, significantly, was after the Friends of Peace had largely directed the campaign in the country against the Orders in Council and were at their most potent as a political force. But while the noun was in its long gestation, 'liberal', the adjective, was given full employment. It was a favourite word of the Friends of Peace, readily used to state what they stood for not only in politics but in religion, education, scholarship, economics and the general development of society. They

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spoke frequently of 'liberal inquiry', 'liberal views', 'liberal principles'. These were phrases that had a definite meaning, in spite of their wide application. Belsham, the Unitarian leader, on hearing of William Rathbone's death, described him in his diary as a man of 'the most liberal principles'. The *Cabinet*, an anti-war, anti-loyalist essay paper established in 1795, declared that one of its first objects would be 'a liberal investigation into the nature and objects of civil government'; 'the paths of science and liberal investigation' had been 'choked up' by 'a ferocious and unrelenting despotism'. Richard Phillips in starting his *Monthly Magazine* dedicated it 'to the propagation of those liberal principles...deserted or virulently opposed by other Periodical Miscellanies'. By inviting comparison, he was announcing with all possible confidence that he would strike a particular line.²

These examples as they stand, however, do little to explain what the Friends of Peace understood by the word 'liberal'. In the context in which it most frequently appears, 'liberal principles' are continually seen to be opposed to 'bigotry', 'superstition', and 'despotism'. It soon emerges that to be 'liberal' in religious belief is to place great importance on the individual's free and honest inquiry into matters of faith. Similarly, to be 'liberal' in politics is to promote the employment of power for the 'general good' and to resist its employment for narrower considerations. In each case, the ideal situation is held to be one in which the judgment of individuals is perverted by neither ignorance nor interest. This ideal set the terms of a 'liberal education', which was an education complementary to the vocational in that it was concerned with developing the intellectual, moral and social capacities of the individual to the full to make him a useful and virtuous member of society. The same ideal too lay behind 'liberal inquiry', in which the first concern was the truth and not the presentation of a convenient or received version: 'no one has a right to say to another, "You ought to believe what I believe": for belief should proceed from conviction, and conviction is not at any man's command'.³ 'Liberal principles' forced the imagination towards a society in which the only restraints on thought and behaviour were those necessary for the good of the whole, and at this point they link up with the great eighteenth-century debate about the amount of liberty man as a social being was entitled to claim. English liberalism was predominantly concerned with religious and political liberty. Whether religious belief should be determined by conscience alone and how the power of government in the hands of a few could be

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prevented from becoming oppressive on the many were two questions in which were framed a large number of issues – clerical subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, parliamentary reform, the handling of rebellion in America, the freedom of the press and many others.

Clearly, the belief that they held ‘liberal views’ and supported ‘liberal principles’ was an important part of the group consciousness of the Friends of Peace. It cannot be wrong to call them liberals when their liberalism may be directly related to their political attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, we might go further and say that to call them radicals, while it draws attention to their reformism, does not state nearly so well the distinctive views that lay behind it. Nevertheless, ‘liberal principles’ and the concept of liberty formed but part of their ideological unity. To understand this larger thought-system we have to examine the set of ideas and beliefs which it seems convenient to refer to as ‘rational Christianity’, a phrase they themselves were very free in using. It has to be admitted that categorisation becomes perhaps excessively brutal to individuality at this point. Not all Friends of Peace denoted themselves ‘rational Christians’ or, for that matter, professed to be Christian in any sense of the word. Scepticism, ‘infidelity’ in the language of the time, became more perceptible in the period of the French Revolution than it had ever been, and in political expression it was almost always pro-French, anti-loyalist, reformist. The most common passage from Christianity was through Unitarianism, and in the 1790s the progress of unbelief continually exercised the Unitarian leadership; it was one of the greatest afflictions that Hackney College had to endure and contributed much to its eventual closing down. Another impression of the inroads infidelity was making is provided by the Tusculanum Society, a debating club in Norwich which some young liberals founded in 1793 in the best traditions of free thinking and free discussion; the minute book records that on 27 September 1793 the question ‘Are the evidences of Christianity, external and internal, sufficiently strong to support its authority and truth?’ was carried in the affirmative by only seven to six.⁴

Yet in many respects the Tusculanum Society settles the issue. While its membership shows that liberal politics were indeed separable from Christian ideology, these opponents of the war, like the others in Norwich, collected around the Unitarian congregation of the Octagon Chapel and the Quaker banking family, the Gurneys. In other words, whatever gains infidelity was making in intellectual

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respectability, it still did not have much social consequence, and anti-war protest remained predominantly Christian. This was the situation everywhere. As time went on, in fact, the Christian sources of the protest tended to become more explicit, culminating in the petitions of 1812–13 raised in the name of ‘The Friends of Peace and Christianity’. The overwhelming dominance of the values and beliefs of rational Christianity gave the peace movement of the war years a fundamental unity. It is worth adding that these very values and beliefs militated against ideological tension and division. The liberal principles of the Friends of Peace directed them to admire free inquiry, respect private judgment and avoid dogmatism, and when the intellectual foundations of faith were so emphasised, the fault of the agnostic was seen to arise rather from wrong reasoning than from interest or prejudice. Moreover, the rational Christian was able to feel that he and the infidel had travelled the same path, for the difference between them was intellectual acceptance of Christian belief and intellectual rejection. His was a faith that had often been won by question, often was being amended by question, sometimes was in danger of being lost by question, and he could not therefore easily condemn one who had also made the trial.⁵ The fellowship of the Tusculanum Society shows this tolerance at its best.

Since individual solutions to problems of faith were so highly valued, there was within rational Christianity an immense variety of belief and experience. Usually quoted are Richard Price’s Arianism and Joseph Priestley’s Socinianism, but the differences could also descend to lower levels of doctrine, as when Gilbert Wakefield argued against the public worship of God. Not surprisingly, changes of chapel or denominational allegiance were unexceptional. Thereby hangs a warning not to exaggerate the growth of denominational loyalties in this period or, generally, institutional influence on the religious practice and belief of individuals. But in spite of this individualism, it is still possible to put briefly the premises of rational Christianity which made it a recognisable thought-system alongside evangelical and what we might call establishment Christianity.

Rational Christianity began with the idea of an ordered universe in which God had complete government of cause and effect. Obviously the nearer one could come to appreciating the order behind the apparent chaos of the world, the closer one’s understanding of God who devised it; the Creation provided sure evidence of the existence and nature of God, and such evidence could be expected to substantiate the truths given elsewhere by biblical

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revelation. By the end of the eighteenth century it was admitted on all sides that the case for natural religion had been made out most convincingly by discoveries in the physical universe. Priestley pointed out that nature was subject to 'the successive observations of some ages of mankind' and 'every observation and experiment may be repeated as often as we please, and to as much advantage as we can possibly devise'.⁶ In contrast, a science of ethics and morality or of human nature seemed far away. Psychology had saved the day for the rational Christian by presenting a theory of knowledge which made it possible to argue that man would inevitably advance in virtue and happiness. As a rational being, man was able to judge the effects of his actions and by experience learn which actions in which circumstances have which effects. Since he preferred happiness to unhappiness, he would regulate his conduct accordingly. Social improvement was a further consequence because man as a social being found satisfaction in benevolence, freedom and justice. With this view of human nature and human capacity, it was easier than ever to acclaim the wisdom and goodness of God revealed in the created world. The Christian ethic could be seen to accord with the natural propensities of man, and the biblical prophecy of an ultimate state of felicity with his intellectual and moral progressiveness. The cosmology was completed by emphasising the providential government of events, by which means a beneficent God actively promoted good and resisted evil. In this theological scheme any evil was progressively eliminated by the operations of human reason and the 'divine counsel'.

The anti-war protest of the Friends of Peace thus had great religious and intellectual depth. Believing in human perfectibility, indeed in the inevitability of social progress, they were able to regard war as an eradicable evil and to believe that any attack they made on it could be a significant step towards a better world. Since the satisfactions of war were not equal to its pains, it was only a matter of time before mankind came to reject it altogether as a means of settling disputes. In the mean time what could be imagined was a decline in the frequency and brutality of war from the restraints imposed on governments by public opinion and the increasing authority of a body of international law. The immediate practical task of the anti-war reformer was to argue the inutility of war in the hope of bringing public pressure to bear on the state, because governments, disposed to put their own interest before the 'general good', found war a useful way of consolidating and extending their power.

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There was always a tacit connection at least between peace and political reform with the Friends of Peace, for effective representation was seen to be the control needed to check bellicosity. Of course, according to rational Christianity, war was not only the product of moral imperfection as it especially affected social and political systems. War could also be related to the concept of divine government to become a providential punishment and instruction, or carry the threat of such a 'visitation' in the amount of evil it laid up to the account of a nation. Somewhat paradoxically, the reformism of the Friends of Peace was most pronounced when this interpretation of war was preferred. The idea of a 'guilty nation' which could expect to be punished for its 'sins' allowed them to present a wide-ranging critique of their society and point to the social and political reforms they considered desirable. In this way they were not only given the opportunity to show the full sweep of liberal opinion, but put themselves as reformers on the high and difficult-to-assail ground of religion and morality.

Rational Christianity, it has been suggested, existed alongside establishment Christianity and evangelical Christianity. The distinctions were certainly ones that the Friends of Peace and other liberals commonly accepted. Establishment Christianity, as the name implies, was reprehensible to them because it was religious belief tied to the interests of the state and therefore was not consonant with full freedom to judge privately in matters of faith.⁷ One great bane of rational Christians was the compulsory subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles required of the clergy of the Church of England; this applied doctrinal conformity with a very heavy hand inasmuch as the definition of belief in the Articles was so extensive and in places patently unsatisfactory. Another was the continuation of the Test and Corporation Acts, for these, by denying non-Anglicans full civil rights, made conformity socially convenient and blighted religious convictions. The onset of war, if it did anything, added to the liberals' disgust and resentment. It, they said, revealed the church to be in the service of the state, for the clergy blatantly discarded their Christian benevolence to castigate the French and rejected the mystery of providential operation to declare that God's cause was Britain's. There was in its attitude a contempt for rational theology and a universal ethic. Wars as evil, the place of evil in the divine purpose, the Christian cosmology as a whole which presumed the abolition of war and the existence of 'general laws' of morality, were all subjects which establishment Christianity preferred to avoid in

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order to comply with the need of the state to have its selfish and worldly concerns sanctioned morally and religiously.

Establishment Christianity debased the intellectualisation of faith out of political convenience. Evangelical Christianity did the same in its appeal to religious emotion. When Wilberforce published his *Practical View* in 1797, Thomas Belsham, Gilbert Wakefield and Joshua Toulmin, three leading Unitarian divines, were quick to make a reply on behalf of 'rational religion'.⁸ This was indicative of the tension that existed between these two varieties of belief, though they had more in common than is sometimes supposed, particularly in the attention they gave to the millennium, providential government and the New Testament ethic. The fundamental difference was that, where rational Christianity presented a cosmology, evangelical Christianity concentrated on faith as a personal experience. Insofar as the evangelicals would not hedge belief round with an elaborate body of doctrine and emphasised that religious satisfaction came out of the predicament of the individual, they could be, and were, called 'liberals'.⁹ But they were not 'rational' in their apprehension of religious truth. They found and sustained their faith in marvelling at the mystical processes of the Holy Spirit, in intense devotion to Jesus Christ and in acceptance of the bible as an authority which needed piety rather than intellect to be understood. The rational Christian found it impossible to agree that the God-given intellectual capacity of man could be of so little account in the contemplation of the divine. He could not accept, if an all-wise, all-powerful deity was to be known by his works, that the feeling of an individual that he had been redeemed from sin provided the same certainty as the realisation that the Creation was a universe of harmony and perfection.¹⁰ Moreover, the rational Christian, in possession of this teleology, was able to hold fast to the potential of human nature, where the evangelical, beginning with his own depravity, was impressed by its corruption.

It is true to say that the other-worldliness and introspection of evangelical Christianity had some effect in keeping its congregations silent on the issue of the war. Yet the fact also remains that whenever peace petitions were floated, they attracted an increasing amount of evangelical support, and after 1815 evangelicals took over public leadership of the peace movement. Their religious ideology did not make it difficult for them to take an anti-war position; they felt the force of the millennial expectation of 'universal peace' and invoked the example and teaching of Christ and the early church to stand

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for the 'abolition of war'; they also favoured the doctrine of providential government and freely used the concept of 'national sins'. However, during the war period, their pacifism was very largely drawn forth by the activities of rational Christians and their independent efforts were insignificant. Evangelical peace agitation was stimulated by concerns that were different from those that inspired the protest of the Friends of Peace. The latter were impressed by a government's capacity for evil when its power was not checked by representation; the evangelicals by the reprobate condition of mankind. Each group was basically disposed to act with different urgency, the Friends of Peace addressing themselves to immediate abuse and the evangelicals to long-distant amendment. Each too chose the instrument that seemed appropriate for the task; petitions might be expected to coerce a wicked government, but tracts were needed to enlighten a wicked people.

Rational Christianity as the ideological identity of the Friends of Peace also does much to establish their social and political identity, for it had its strongest presence in the chapel communities of the Unitarians, Baptists and Congregationalists, among the remnants of the Old Dissent. Within the church there was invariably resistance at some point to liberalism that required 'free inquiry' into doctrine and belief. Nor could an establishment be anything but hostile towards political constructions of the idea of liberty which focussed on the corruption of governments. The church accepted the natural religion of rational Christianity but disliked greatly the social and political prescriptions that liberals were developing out of it. On the other side, rational Christianity was blocked off even more abruptly by the progress of evangelical religion through the revival of Calvinistic belief among Baptists and Congregationalists.¹¹ This formation of a New Dissent, as it is called, in the late eighteenth century, was of course part of a much broader evangelical sweep that took in Methodism and a small but increasing number of churchmen.

As Dissenters, the Friends of Peace were no strangers to the role of an unpopular minority. The Dissenters could feel little affection for the political and religious establishment that oppressed them, and, whenever the pressure against them became particularly severe, they were remarkably adept at closing their ranks. These were psychological strengths and habits of co-operation that existed in spite of the fact that the chapels were separate organisations and constitutionally independent. Unitarianism, for example, was not an

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institutionalised movement or denomination in the accepted sense. There were no formal inter-congregational bodies. The association mainly depended on the personal connections of ministers and a small number of prominent laymen, though sometimes a few of these leaders came together in book societies or college trusts. Yet in the absence of a denominational structure, it was the easier for links to be developed and maintained across the denominational boundaries that were only slowly being shaped. The intercourse and co-operation within Dissent generally became very visible at the local level after 1790, in the establishment of Sunday and later Lancasterian schools and in the promotion of petitions against Anglican privilege, the slave trade and the war. Tolerance and an acceptance of fragmentation was inbuilt in the Dissenting tradition of congregational independence. Rational Christianity had its own contribution to make in this respect, for it admired rather than deplored doctrinal diversity. The fine distinctions which congregations and individuals often insisted upon could point to the importance they gave to 'liberal investigation', and, instead of being divisive, their 'liberality' became a source of common pride.

Over and above these brakes on exclusiveness, there was the status of Dissent in English society. The attempts to remove the civil penalties for non-membership of the established church necessarily brought the congregations together, either, as happened in the great campaign of 1787-90, at 'district' meetings or through the correspondence conducted with the Dissenting Deputies in London. But these were the moments of action, behind which subsisted the bitterness, frustration and anxieties of a deviant minority. If the Dissenters had nothing else in common, they did have the resistance they put up to the pressure to conform. The rational Dissenters tended to find their strength in claiming intellectual vitality and superiority, in comparing their 'liberality' with the 'bigotry' of churchmen and in generally arguing the case for religious and political liberty. They were ready enough too to unroll the heritage of Old Dissent and present themselves as the latest generation of a long line whose devotion to liberty and whose moral probity and religious seriousness had lasted throughout.¹² Perhaps the mores of the Dissenting tradition and rational Christianity are best caught by looking at a single congregation acting in a single situation. At Exeter the leading Presbyterian congregation, itself a union of an orthodox and a Unitarian meeting, contained the *odium theologicum* so far as to support three ministers, one orthodox and the others Arian and