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Edited by Alfred Edward Pease

Excerpt

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## QUAKERISM.

AS the following pages deal with the lives of men and women belonging to a peculiar religious body, who passed through this world with a standard of spiritual perfection ever before them, Religion must claim a large share of the attention of the reader.

It seems necessary, at the outset, to give some general idea of the principles upon which the Quakers based not only their religion and worship, but regulated their conduct. Besides, the object, in all the labour my task has imposed, has not been merely to interest posterity in the lives of those who have gone, and preserve family records from oblivion, but through those lives to discover, to any who are in need of it, a foundation of rock upon which their forefathers built, against and around which the storms of doubt and the tempests of theological controversies beat and rage in vain.

The ultimate destiny of our individualities—our spirits, our souls—must ever be the most vital, however secret, concern of our existence. Any contribution from the experience of others that may tend to save the hearts of men from the torments of wondering fears and doubts, or of losing themselves in the labyrinths of contending creeds, and which can encourage in mankind a faith and hope that no Bible criticism, no philosophies, no human logic, and no scientific discoveries impair, is of some service to humanity.

It is because I believe the central principles of the Society of Friends contain the touchstone in contact

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with which all turns to gold, and that, with all their mistakes and eccentricities, the early Quakers proclaimed a secret known to, or guessed by, others beside themselves in many ages of the world, that I have devoted my time to give an account\* of bygone generations of my family, which is also something of an Apology.

Such fragments of family history as are here put together I hope may contain evidence of how pure Christianity can be practised, and of the truth and fruits of Friends' principles. If they indicate, at the same time, the mistaken limits set up in applying these principles, and where the conception of their meaning was at fault, this part of my object will be equally served.

From a mere hereditary point of view, few have a superior title to speak of Quakerism: my ancestry for 200 years, at least, being on male and female sides purely Quaker;† but few within the Society have less of right and authority to put forward an exposition of its Doctrines and Practice, and I here warn the reader that I alone am responsible for this attempt at one, and that the statements are my own views and impressions, however authoritative some of the sources may be from which they are derived.

I claim for the Truth, as the Quakers term their creed, that it gives the answer to those who dare in unflinching self-examination, and to those who dare not, "Prove all things," and ask the questions of their souls: Is there a God? What is God? What is His will? Can my reason, my intelligence, my whole being truly believe in Christianity? Is the Bible true? Have we immortal souls? What

\* This volume is one of a projected series.

† Pease and Coldwell, Pease and Coates, Pease and Richardson, Pease and Whitwell, Pease and Gurney, Pease and Fox, are the last six generations.

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must I and mine and the world do to be saved? Is there a Hereafter, and what is it?

To me it appears that, in general, professors of Christianity have no realisation of the religion they profess. The religion in vogue in most Christian Churches is one that fills the soul with doubts and superstitions, false fears, false hopes, and, reduced to its naked meaning, is so terrible that no one who really believed it and realised its meaning could spend a happy hour upon this earth. To me it seems that this kind of Christianity is losing its hold on England. To *truly* believe what intelligence and heart cannot respond to is an impossibility. I must have a religion, if I have any, that does not contradict what I know are the deepest, purest, and best sentiments of justice, mercy and love I find within me, and which I reverently believe are part of the Divine Spirit. I find that rather than search for the truth, or fearlessly examine the humanly devised and painted picture of Christianity, the back is turned and the soul commanded to accept what it can only pretend to believe. This pretence is often misnamed "faith."

Quakerism at least divests religion from all outward and material phenomena, from all anthropomorphising of the Deity, and brings forth something more than a theory, which philosophers or ecclesiastics may gainsay, but cannot disprove, and which commends itself to the open soul as to the open mind.

First, then, Quakerism does not unequivocally demand that the Christian must believe that God is a Being in the likeness of man, a gigantic Creator sitting in the skies, who once upon a time in space called into existence infinite numbers of celestial bodies just to light this infinitely little world, and then proceeded with this world's making and history as told in the Bible at His dictation and out of His "mouth."

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It is not imperative on the Quaker to believe that God has a "mouth" or spoke with a "voice," or that He showed His "body" to Moses, or that He planned and fixed our individual destinies. The Quaker can, without any loosening of his faith, refuse to say "I believe the Bible to be the Word of God," though he could never say "The Bible does not contain the Word of God."\* He may believe it to be written with poor human hands and by fallible men, but he will believe that his own share of the Divine Spirit within him can testify as to what is declared by the Spirit of God in the Scriptures, and that in Divine ordering the Scriptures were written for our guidance and edification, and that they contain evidence of inspiration. Quakers, however, do not limit inspiration to the writers of the Bible. I think they would claim all good words, thoughts and deeds as inspired.

The Quaker rejects man-made doctrines. The creeds of churches, theories about the Trinity and Sacraments and apostolic succession are little to him, and he need not trouble himself with attempts to understand the mystery of the Incarnation or vex himself by debating whether when God became man, there were two gods, or about the puzzle of three Persons in the Godhead. He cannot or need not think that an all-powerful and omniscient Being who sees the future, allowed man to fall when He could have prevented it, permitted countless millions to go to eternal suffering, and then to assuage His own anger with the creatures whom, by a mere exercise of volition, He might have at any moment in His omnipotence, have rendered free from sin, suffering or sorrow, voluntarily sent His Son and permitted

\* According to the Quaker profession, Christ is the Word of God, and "The Father, The Word, and the Holy Spirit are one, in divine being inseparable."

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Him to be murdered with every circumstance of cruelty and torture in order that He might be less angry with the wretched beings He had called into existence.

The miraculous does not strain the Quaker faith, for we live in a universe of miracles, from the incomprehensible mystery of the miracles of small things such as the springing of the seed in the earth to a plant or a tree and the life histories of all creatures, to the vast systems of the heavenly bodies. But new miracles are not required to prove the existence of a Power that he feels within himself and perceives without himself.

It is true that at various times the leaders of the Society of Friends have attempted to reduce their faith to writing. As early as 1693 (*vide* Sewel's *History*) this was attempted, and again as late as the last century—but no credo of this sort has been exacted as a religious test of members of the Society. To deny and to assert the contrary of the doctrines laid down in such declarations of faith would probably unfit an individual for membership. Among the men most honest with themselves there may, I believe must be, doubts where beliefs are expressed in words and reduced to writing. The Quaker creed or rather its basis can be put very simply:—God is a *Spirit*, His Kingdom is *spiritual*, God (a spirit) is omnipresent, this spirit embraces every quality of goodness, to every man is given the spirit of God, and that the communication between the Spirit in man and God is a reality, that His Spirit is a witness in the hearts of men, and to hear this witness we must turn within and need to be still. When once the full meaning of this is grasped there is no difficulty in conceiving the Perfect Man, incarnate spirit of God, and our spirits, if we listen, will tell us surely the teaching and the life of Christ to be

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Divine—and that in Him God has revealed Himself to man. I know the difficulty of accepting absolutely the New Testament accounts of the Conception, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. The last perhaps is the highest trial of faith, being from a human point of view the most stupendous event, and yet supported by so brief a Scriptural notice and by no evidence outside. The man who can say he truly and honestly believes in the bodily and material Resurrection and Ascension of Christ is saved from the trembling wonder and speculation in regard to the rising of the dead and ultimate destiny. But on the evidence producible no impartial court could bring in “proved.”

The attitude of Friends to the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult to define. It probably will not be unfair to them to say it is in their opinion a human device to express what is as inexpressible as it is incomprehensible.\* The following note which I found among Edward Pease’s papers, possibly states generally the feeling of Friends on the subject :—

“Whilst I love to contemplate the Deity under the three-fold character in which, for the benefit of poor lost and sinful man, he has condescended to reveal Himself in the Holy Scriptures, I seem in the secret of my heart the most profoundly to adore Him, as an infinite and incomprehensible *Unity*—an ineffable and unapproachable *glory*—an unutterable and incommunicable *name*—‘I *am* that I *am*,’ said the Lord to His servant Moses—nor can we ‘by searching, find out the Almighty to perfection.’

“JONATHAN HUTCHINSON.†

“*London*, 5th mo., 26th, 1831.”

I shall now try to show, in very light outline, how Friends have presented their case and defended their

\* “He that goes about to speak of and to understand the Trinity and does it by words and names of man’s invention, he will talk he knows not what.”—*Jeremy Taylor*.

† Jonathan Hutchinson, of Gedney.

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principles as Christians : and then how their religion and principles affected their conduct.

The reader must bear in mind that the religion of Quakers is based on what they accept as Truth, that no man knoweth the things of God but through the Spirit of God that is in him, just as no man knoweth the things of man save through the spirit of man. This leads us to their doctrine of Universal Light.

When Christ said " If ye were blind ye should have no sin," He said what our pure conception of justice assents to. In the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans the Gentiles were condemned on the ground that some knowledge of Divine Truth was theirs—the whole reasoning of the Apostle rests on the assumption that they were guilty because they sinned against the *inward* and *universal light*,—God " had showed it unto them," partly by imprinting this knowledge of Himself on the hearts of all men, and partly by His open book of all creation. That the light is universal is the consequent argument of " *all* have sinned," for " where no law is there is no transgression," and it must follow if " all have sinned " all have some knowledge of the law. The so called heathen by this law feels condemned when he lies, cheats, steals, and murders. The perceptions of right and wrong come neither from reason nor education, but are native and immediate, and as Plutarch said, never permit the soul to be destitute of an interior guide. Socrates describes it as the voice which " has followed him ever since he was a child." This conscience may become dim and degraded and dislodged from supremacy or deluded by superstition and imaginations, and so may decide good actions as bad and bad actions to be good. The voice of conscience neglected grows fainter and fainter. A Quaker believes that Christ gave Himself " a ransom for *all*," and that the spirit of God " lighteth *every*

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*man* that cometh into the world,” and that “in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of Him.”\*

For the promotion of union and brotherhood among Christians the Quaker holds that all men should abstain from harsh judgments, and that all classes influenced by the Holy Spirit more than by the traditions and opinions of men must be in fundamental unity. Whilst abstaining from accusing and condemning others, the true Quaker desires to “prove all things,” and then to “hold fast to that which is good.”

The Quaker believes that God can be acceptably and profitably worshipped without the intervention of a single typical ceremony, and without the aid of any human ministry; that the work of the Holy Spirit is direct and perceptible in the soul, and if the inward guide is faithfully obeyed and closely followed it will conduct us into true virtue and happiness; that there is no condemnation for those “who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit”; and that “as many as are led by the Spirit of God they are the sons of God.” Many other passages of Scripture support the theory of the perceptible guidance, and that the inward light reveals man’s iniquities and his proneness to evil, and must render him humble, lead him to self-denial, and to taking up his Cross. The truth is perceptible to those who retain their mind in calmness, and who are still and wait for the leading of the Spirit of God, and keep themselves abstracted from the world.

The Quakers claim to found their faith on Gospel principles and their discipline on Gospel rules—as the best and surest outward guide provided. Quakers also reject terms such as “original sin,” “the Trinity,”

\* See “Observations on the Distinguishing Views and Practices of the Society of Friends,” by Joseph John Gurney.



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“Sacrament,” and many other expressions adopted by other Christians not found in the Scriptures. Man is born with proclivities to sin, but he is not regarded as chargeable with uncommitted sin. Man sins and nothing he can do can undo the past; the sacrifice of Christ proves what the love of God can do, and the possibility of redemption and forgiveness. The Spirit of God can purify and make man in future able to resist sin. One of the peculiarities of this Quaker theory of the Redemption is that it is given purely from the love of God, and His forbearance, and not as a sacrifice or murder to appease an angry Divinity; and that any such theory is at variance with the voluntary nature of Christ’s sacrifice, who *made Himself* of no reputation, who *humbled Himself* and became obedient unto death. Friends believe in spiritual perfection and that “whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin,” and rather oppose the idea of sudden conversion, and favour the view of the new birth being a progress and growth. As to Predestination, the Friends’ view, I take it, is that if predestination were conceivable, the mission of Christ was useless and ineffectual, and He certainly gave no colour of countenance to such a theory, which offends against such feelings of justice and mercy as we are endowed with.

As to Immortality the Quaker, I think, would claim that the Light within him points most surely to it, and as to what the future life may be, no heart can conceive it; speculation is therefore vain and idle. To see the rule and the daily illustration that death is the door to life, that unless the dead grain of seed fall into the ground it is alone, but that buried it springs into a larger and fuller existence, is sufficient. To believe that following the Guide, man is on the only path to eternal bliss is enough. What gifts limitless Love and infinite Compassion may have in store, or

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what the requirements of perfect justice may be, we cannot know. But those who trust the Spirit of God in Life can trust Him in the hour of Death, and such die in peace and often in a sure and certain hope. Through all the trials of time, in the mysteries of pain, in the apparent inequalities of suffering and the anguish of innocent and helpless creatures, we have to believe in some way or other perfection can only be attained through suffering, and that in the end there is a glory so sublime that all this is nothing, and the sufferer would oft repeat the experience rather than lose the reward.

Whilst the world outside may find it impossible to prove scientifically or philosophically the fact of immortality, and is driven either to agnosticism or to a blind faith, and a blind acceptance of Authority, in this, and all else, the Quaker looks for the proof within himself by the Light within, and believes that the things of God knoweth no man but by the Spirit of God within him. On the earth, in the universe, man may grope outside in vain to find the Kingdom of Heaven, for it is within him.

As for the rules of life, sufficient is revealed: they are summed up in love toward God and love to our neighbour. The 5th chapter of Matthew, when understood, learnt, and its lessons put into practice, will turn men into Christians. The blessings are for the poor in spirit, the afflicted, the meek, the hungry souls, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. The danger is for unreasonable anger, for the unforgiving, the implacable. Sins are of the heart as well as in deed. Swearing is forbidden and resistance and vengeance, and the refusal of charity. Enemies are to be loved, those who hate you are to be served, and the standard of perfection is the perfection of God.