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July 2022

## Box 07, Folder 19 - "The Climbing of Mt. Olympus (The Quaker Way)" (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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### Recommended Citation

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## THE CLIMBING OF MOUNT OLYMPUS.

The Greeks, as everyone knows, maintained that the cloud-girt summit of Mt. Olympus was the abode of the Gods. It is said that no person was allowed by the Priests to ascend Mount Olympus, the avowed reason being the irreverance of such an intrusion into such a sacred precinct. The real reason however was quite different; it was the fear of the officiating priests (in the various temples) that it would be discovered by the intrepid explorer that there were no Gods on Mount Olympus at all!

Now to Mount Olympus in Quakerism is the doctrine of the Moving of the Spirit. The whole basis of the Quaker Way of Worship depends upon it. The Moving of the Spirit is the axis round which everything revolves: it is the rock bottom on which the whole foundation of Quakerism rests, for, on it, depends the 'validity' of the Quaker Ministry.

To any reader unacquainted with the Quaker mode of worship it ought to be explained at this point how it proceeds. The Quakers assemble at a stated hour in a Meeting House (not a church; their founder spoke of churches, as such, with contempt, and nick-named them 'steeplehouses'). The Meeting House is usually a bare unadorned room, furnished with the benches for sitting on, and with nothing else. There is no altar, no pulpit, no organ, no religious pictures or symbols of any kind on wall or window. One or two rows of seats face the main body; these are occupied by the Elders or Overseers.

The worshippers come in ones, twos, or threes, or in families, and take their seats in silence. As the bustle caused by the entrance of any late comers dies away this silence deepens. It is strange, impressive silence which some persons find rather eerie if it is new to them. Here you have anything from 'two or three' up to a hundred persons of all ages and sexes sitting together motionless. The silence deepens as the long minutes pass - until you can nearly hear the clock ticking or your heart beating. Distant sounds are borne in from without - 'faint and far off as from an infinitely distant land'. These sounds only serve to make this strange silence which has enveloped the worshippers, even more strange, more mysterious, more impressive.

Anyone with a long experience of Quaker meetings learns how to sense a certain variable quality in this silence. Sometimes it seems a dead silence, sometimes very much alive, vibrant with the promise of things to come. This collective silence broods for five, ten, fifteen, or even more minutes, flowing over and around that community like a vast river. The deeper it becomes, the more it seems to seize and subdue the individual; the more difficult would it be to break through it thoughtlessly. Who, in fact, would dare break that solemn spell?

This silence is charged with strange potentialities. The noisy bustle of the work-a-day world has retreated; the flesh is stilled; 'creaturely activities' almost suspended; the body reduced almost to a negligible shadow, while the liberated soul becomes luminously self-conscious. In that silence it would seem that the Spirit world has drawn nearer as depths of human personality are sounded.

Then - in a 'good meeting' - silence grows even more intense,

more acute, more full of suspense. It is 'silence implying sound' - and then - quite suddenly - the sound comes. It is a human voice. Someone, it may be a man or a woman, and it may come from any point of the meeting house, is speaking. Perhaps the speaker is on his, or her, knees, praying extempore. In this case the rest of the congregation stand up (why I have never discovered). Or it may be that the speaker is standing on his feet; in which case the rest remain seated. The self-appointed minister is giving a sermon - which may last anything from one minute to half an hour or even longer.

'SELF-APPOINTED' MINISTER did I say? Ah, there's the rub! For, according to the Quaker doctrine, he is not self-appointed. Why not? Because he (or she) is supposed to be speaking, not as a mere man or woman, but as an oracle of the Holy Spirit just as in ancient times it was not the sybil herself who spoke at the Delphic shrine. She was just the mouthpiece. It was Apollo, the God of the Sun, who spoke through her human lips. A pagan simile you will say, and not equal to the occasion. Very well, let us baptize it (an awkward metaphor in a book about Quakers, but let that pass!) Speaking then theologically, we may say that the theory of Quakerism is just this: No one has a right to kneel down to pray or stand up to speak (or sing, as very occasionally happens) unless he or she is 'moved by the spirit'. In fact the whole meaning and purpose of the silence which we have been describing is that it is a silence of 'waiting' on the Spirit, or expectation of His advent. As in the Pool of Silaam those invalids around it waited for the angel to come and stir the waters to move them with an invisible touch, so do the Quakers wait for the Spirit to touch

some would into speech. Or, to change the metaphor, the members of the Quaker Meeting may be compared to the strings of an Aeolian harp, waiting for the winds of the spirit to touch them into a celestial harmony. For - to use a text often quoted by the Quakers - 'The spirit bloweth where it listeth and you hear the sound thereof but no one knows whence it comes or whither it goes like the wind.'

This is the fundamental theory of Quaker worship, and I trust I have described it fairly. The whole Quaker position really stands or falls with the validity of the claim by its ministers to be moved by the Holy Spirit. Is the Quaker really moved by the Spirit? And if so, who, or what, is that spirit? Whence comes it? How does it come? And with what authority does it speak?

Before we start our metaphorical journey up the Quaker Mount Olympus, it is worth while pausing to notice one important point. The Quakers usually take this claim to the moving of the Spirit for granted. I have been to scores of Quaker conferences and discussions on all sorts of subjects, but I cannot recall any occasion when a group of responsible Quakers even seriously questioned this fundamental belief.

They accept it on tradition - and unquestioned tradition - coming down from the time of George Fox. It is interesting by the way to notice here that Quakers themselves often accuse Catholics of blindly accepting a tradition, a traditional system externally handed down from generation to generation. But this is exactly what they do themselves. Not that there is necessarily anything wrong in tradition itself: the important thing is to find out the origin of any tradition.

Who started it? Where did it come from? How has it been passed on? Whence comes its authority? It is the blind following of a tradition which is dangerous - ie., following it unquestioningly, without letting the intellect enquire as to its origin, nature and authority.

What we are about to do then is critically to examine this traditional Quaker doctrine of the moving of the Spirit, in an atmosphere of open and candid enquiry. In Chapter ( ) we shall deal more fully with the historical origins of the Quaker tradition; here we are concerned more with its spiritual claims.

So let us gird up the loins of our minds, and, assisted by the staff of human reason, let us begin our ascent into this cloud-girt realm of mystery where the God is supposed to reside.

'Human Reason!' I can at once imagine the reactions that would arise in an average Quaker's mind on reading this. 'Human Reason!' "How can one expect with such a weak and fallible instrument to sound the depths of the human soul?"

We readily grant that human reason is limited in its scope. But nevertheless it has its scope - it has its god-given function. As Shakespeare says:- 'God gave us not that capable and God-like reason - to fust in us unused.'

Indeed the more we let human reason 'fust in us unused' the weaker and more fallible it becomes as an instrument of truth.

#### "CREATURELY ACTIVITY"

Even as a child my 'reason' brought to light a difficulty  
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to which I never found a satisfactory solution. It was this. It not infrequently happens in a Quaker meeting, especially if it is a large one, that two, or sometimes three, persons will get up to speak at the same time.

Now it is impossible, without blasphemy, to think of God, the Holy Spirit, as being the source of confusion. For it certainly brings confusion when two or three persons get up to address the same assembly simultaneously.

I remember asking various 'Weighty Friends' about this point; and the answer was always the same viz. - that the confusion was not about the Holy Spirit but to 'creaturely activity' on the part of (presumably) one out of the two who stood up together; or two out of the three (or three out of the four and so on).

But I do not remember getting any light as to the nature of this 'creaturely activity,' which was thus supposed to interfere with the divine promptings, not how it could be guarded against. So the answer given, instead of clearing up the problem in my mind, made confusion more confounded.

For once you make this tremendous admission - that creaturely activity can, and does, interfere with the promptings of the Holy Spirit in any particular case, how are you to be sure that this 'creaturely activity' is not obstructing the divine inspiration in a hundred other ways - ways in which there does not happen to be such an obvious 'control of error' (1) as there is in the particular case we are discussing.

\* (1) A Montessori principle.

Furthermore, even in the case of two or three persons getting up to speak at the same time, what guarantee have we (assuming one of the three is inspired) that the particular one who goes on speaking is the inspired one? Actually what usually happens in such cases is that the more temperamentally timid person sits down, whilst the more aggressive or dominant one goes on drowning the voice of the other (generally, let us hope, unconsciously, because he has neither seen him rise or heard his voice).

It is quite clear that to get to the heart of the problem one must follow up more fully this question of 'creaturely activity'. So far, then, we have established the fact that the Quakers admit the presence of a human fallible element which may interfere with the right operation of the Holy Spirit. Have they any definite and clear teaching, on this point, as to how this human element may impede the moving of the Holy Spirit either wholly or in part? Is there any way of recognising and so distinguishing the human element - the creaturely activity - from the divine? Is it always present?

These are vital questions and must be tackled by any Quaker who is willing - like Plato - 'to follow the argument wherever it leads'.

The first thing to observe, in seeking an answer to these 'Quaker Queries' is that the Quakers themselves have no clear and unified teaching on these points; and others are actually at variance among themselves.

When I was a boy there was a school of thought amongst Quakers which was quite definite in condemning all 'creaturely activity' in the ministry. To explain just what I mean I will relate a couple



of incidents. The first was told by Prof. Rufus Jones at a dinner party at a Quaker Summer School years ago. This well-known American Quaker said that, on his first visit to Europe, he attended a Quaker meeting at Liverpool the first Sunday after his arrival. He began his address with the words - 'I have been thinking this morning while sitting at the meeting .....

At the end of the meeting one of the Elders came up to him and admonished him for his 'creaturely activity' adding: 'Thou shouldst not have been thinking in meeting - thy mind should have been a perfect blank.' What the good Elder intended to convey was that because he had been actively thinking in meetin he must have prevented the unimpeded flow of the Holy Spirit. He should have reduced his mind to complete vacuity so as to make room for the Spirit.

This is the essence of Quietism, and it is based upon an essential dualism. The natural man must cease to function before the supernatural can come in. It is a theory which reminds one of that quaint device used for foretelling the weather. It contains two little figures and when one goes in the other comes out. How different from the Catholic doctrine of the relation between the natural and the supernatural orders! St. Thomas and the Schoolmen stood squarely on the maxim that 'nature precedes grace', or to put it more accurately 'the best foundation for the supernatural is the fullest development of the natural'. Instead of the supernatural ousting out the natural what happens in the Catholic view is that though the 'natural' without ceasing to be what it is, is raised to the supernatural level, just as a glass prism, without ceasing to be itself, may become suffused with rainbow colours by the influence of light.

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One begins now to understand this dread of 'creaturely activity' that haunted, and still haunts, Quaker doctrine. For, once you begin to admit the presence of creaturely activity in the minister there is no telling where it may stop. It raises in fact the fear that you may, upon examination, be obliged to recognize more and more 'creaturely activity' in the Quaker ministry, until the confines of the divine element becomes even smaller until it vanishes wholly, leaving behind a purely natural and human activity. In short, Olympus would have been climbed and found empty of its imagined divinity.

Before proceeding further with the thread of our argument I cannot resist relating another incident told me by an equally eminent Quaker in his day, John Wilhelm Rowntree, friend and collaborator with Rufus Jones. He told to a group of students, including the writer, in the smoke-room at Woodbroke within a few weeks of the opening of that institution.

'Two Friends, 'said J. W. R.,' father and son, had been 'released' by their Meeting to travel in the ministry in one of the states of America. One Sunday morning they were both present at a certain meeting and both sat in the ministers' gallery facing the meeting, the father as it happened, sitting just behind his son. The local 'big guns' of the meeting were (presumably) holding back their spiritual fire to give the visitors an innings (if you will pardon the mixed metaphor). The visiting son also, on his part, was 'holding back' his potential contribution to the ministry out of respect for the greater experience and 'weight' of his father. The latter however, as it happened, had nothing on his mind that day and had in fact no message

to deliver. The time went by - fifteen minutes, twenty, twenty-five, and the meeting began to get a bit restless. Suddenly it dawned upon the father what was happening. He realised that his son was waiting for him to speak, as the local ministers were waiting on both of them. So, very unobtrusively, he gave his son a tiny dig with his toe from behind. Whereupon the son, rightly interpreting the signal, got up and delivered an excellent sermon.

But alas! This reliance on 'creaturely activity' had not escaped the lynx eyes of one of the olocal Elders. The meeting over, the self-same Elder severely reproved his visiting friend for his interference with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Unabashed, however, the father replied in his drawling tone: 'Well, my friend, I reckon if-you-can-kick-as-good-a-sermon-out-of-your-son-the-Lord-will-forgive-you.'

This disparagement of 'creaturely activity' especially of the human intellect and its chief instrument, human reason, is something erradically bound up with the Quaker point of view. It comes down from the time of George Fox who said 'it was not necessary to go to Oxford or Cambridge to become a minister of the gospel.'

It is true that there are always some Quakers who, by education and psychological make-up, are disposed to appreciate the value of intellectual study as a preparation for the ministry. The two Friends from whom we have just quoted were good examples of the 'intellectual' side of Quakerism. In fact it was J. W. Rowntree, more than anyone else, who was instrumental in the establishment of the Woodbroke Settlement - an institution avowedly created to enable young friends to prepare themselves for the 'ministry' by courses of study, although one often wonders what George Fox would have said if he had attended some

the lectures.

A CONSTANT TENSION OF OPPOSITION.

When I was a Quaker (and it is just the same now I hear) there were two opposing groups, representing two tendencies of thought and action. On the one hand there were those known as the Evangelists. These believed in the literal interpretation of the Scripture; in the importance of being 'converted'; and in the danger of intellectual study in the realm of religion. On the other hand there were the 'intellectuals' who were distrustful of emotionalism; they studied the Higher Critics like Hainach & Co. and often pushed their scepticism almost into Unitarianism, not to mention Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Between these two extremes there are many varying grades of thought. There is in fact no unity or intellectual stand-point amongst the Quakers, not even in any one given meeting. In fact one of my friends in the Scarborough meeting facetiously suggested that the Meeting House should be subdivided into smaller rooms, and the particular type of quality of the subdivision should be written over the door, e.g., The Higher Critics; the Broad-minded; the Emotional; the Missioners, and so on - so that each person would be sure of getting into atmosphere most congenial to his way of thinking.

The curious fact is that even the intellectuals never seemed to turn the light of reason on the foundations of Quakerism as a whole - especially on this doctrine of the Moving of the Spirit. It is indeed an odd circumstance that many Quakers who would not hesitate to question the authority of the writers of a Gospel, or of an apostle like St. Paul, never seem to question the right of any Tom, Dick or Harry (or Harriet) to stand up and speak in meeting as the direct mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit.