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The "Other" Civil Religion and the Tradition of Radical Quaker Politics

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In 1981, an Arizona Quaker named Jim Corbett established the Sanctuary Movement,1 and used his church's involvement in the Underground Railroad as precedent. In defending his illegal aid to Central American refugees entering the United States, Corbett articulated a vision of American society that differed profoundly from the traditional civil religion identified by Robert Bellah two decades ago.2 Rather than seeing the U.S. as a divinely destined nation whose institutions and leaders were acting out God's plan on earth, Corbett saw the American government as perpetrating evil. Its institutions and leaders, he argued, were acting against God's desire for peace. In Corbett's own words:

When the government itself sponsors the torture of entire peoples then makes it a felony to shelter those seeking refuge, law-abiding protest merely trains us to live with atrocity... The presence of undocumented refugees here among us makes

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the definitive nature of our choice particularly clear. Where oppression rules, the way to peace is necessarily insurgent. In this vision, government is immoral when it stifles freedom and justice anywhere in the world. If its laws contribute to oppression, then they are to be disobeyed. Under such circumstances righteousness lies in rebellion, not obedience.

Perhaps without meaning to do so, Corbett put forward a civil religion quite at odds with the one dominant in American life—and every bit as comprehensive. Both emphasize "a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth." Only the dominant view, however, sees American institutions as providentially guided. Only it sees the American experience as somehow paradigmatic for the rest of the world. Corbett's vision is more universal: all people are called to work for peace and justice. When political institutions do not further these ends, then those institutions must be opposed.

Recently several scholars have noted the existence of two American civil religions. Their ways, however, of distinguishing the two differ widely. Robert Wuthnow, for example, calls them "conservative" and "liberal," noting that only the former sees American institutions as divinely inspired. The latter "challenges Americans to act on behalf of all humanity rather than their interests alone." Liberal civil religion focuses less on the nation as such, and more on humanity in general. According to this interpretation, America has a role to play in world affairs, not because it is a chosen people, but because it has vast resources at its disposal, because it has caused many of the problems currently facing the world, and because it is, simply, part of the community of nations and, therefore, has a responsibility to do what it can to alleviate the world's problems.

He calls the conservative version "priestly" and the liberal one "prophetic." This designation focuses on the styles of their respective leaders and the nature of their message.

Dividing things somewhat differently, Martin Marty distinguishes between a vision of "the nation 'under God'" and a vision of "national self-transcendence." The former sees "a transcendent deity as the pusher or puller of the social process;" the latter sees the nation itself as transcendent, with a vital role to play in the world. Each of these "religions" can assume priestly or prophetic modes. Thus for Marty:

Civil religion "under God," in its priestly form, normally appears as a fusion, then, of historic faith (as in Jewish or Christian traditions) with autochthonous national sentiments. Usually it will have as its main priest the president... Dwight D. Eisenhower was a particularly gifted priest.

As an example of civil religion in its nationally self-transcendent and prophetic form, Marty cites the end of Bellah's 1967 essay. Bellah calls for "an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality." For Bellah, "world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion." America still is special, but only as part of a universal human project rather than as an end in itself.

Both Wuthnow's and Marty's schemes capture aspects of Corbett's vision. That vision, however, is not based either on liberal politics or on a universalization of the American experience. Most apropos is the lead taken by Roger Betsworth, who borrows Ernst Troeltsch's church/sect typology to distinguish between the "established type" and the "sectarian type" of civil religion. The established form of civil religion "believes that the present American order is good and ought to be universal, and cover the whole of humanity, dominating the world for the sake of its own salvation." In contrast:

the sect type of civil religion rejects the pretensions of the present to universal goodness and rightful empire. It seeks to replace the social order by a new, purer, more just one. It sees in its own band of faithful the hope of a new society.

This classification draws attention to the ideas of each civil religion's supporters. It also focuses on the institutional implications of each vision. As shall be seen below, these implications are crucial for understanding the various embodiments of each vision in American history.

Betsworth describes the established and the sectarian civil religions in depth, drawing upon examples from the Cold War (1944-1960), the civil rights movement (1960-1970), and the Vietnam War era. His analysis would have been strengthened, however, had he been able to identify the theological origins of each of these competing worldviews. This article undertakes that task. Following E. Digby Baltzell, we argue

3. Quoted in Golden and McConnell, Sanctuary, 37.
5. Ibid., 17-18.
10. Ibid., 146.
that the basic split between these civil religions stems from differing theological assumptions about the nature of humanity.

**Two Theologies, Two Traditions**

Baltzell’s *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia* compares the upper classes in those two cities “in order to show how and why Boston Brahmins produced a long tradition of class authority, whereas Proper Philadelphiaans did not.”14 As the author remarks, “Boston was the home of the most influential upper class in American history. Philadelphia, on the other hand, has never produced a man or woman of such preeminence.”15 The contrast, he argues:

lies in the very different roles played by religious and class authority in the two cities. From its founding, the Puritan culture of New England produced an extremely authoritative upper class that provided leadership in a whole homogeneous society for over two centuries, . . . Not only did this class possess the confidence born of the Calvinist theory of election, but Calvinism also produced a strong sense of anxiety and sin, which drove generations of men like the Winthrop and Mather to take the lead in community building, education, and government. In [Quaker-dominated] Philadelphia, however, a series of atomized members of the elite . . . tended to take the lead while all too many members of the upper class were satisfied to sit back and rest on their privileges, often in the name of preserving their perfectionist virtues.16

In sum, “Bostonians and Philadelphians were and still are motivated by the hierarchical and authoritarian ethic of Puritanism, on the one hand, and the egalitarian and anti-authoritarian ethic of Quakerism, on the other.”17

At the risk of oversimplifying, we can summarize Puritan/Quaker theological differences in a series of dichotomies18—the classic dichotomies from which so much Christian thought has sprung. First, while both claimed to follow the Old Testament as well as the New, Puritans more often spoke the language of the former, especially in their notions of a political (or later a national) covenant. “Over and above His contracts with persons,” Puritan specialist Perry Miller summarized, “God settles the social terms with a band of men, which thereupon becomes committed, as a political entity, to a specifically enunciated political program.” This notion of a political or national covenant was borrowed directly from the Old Testament.19 Puritans also allegorized the Old Testament’s Song of Songs in many of their more mystical writings.20 Although Quakers used some Old Testament narrative themes in their writing,21 “the Johannine writings, the Gospel, the Revelation and the Epistles alike, were the very heart of the Scriptures for the seventeenth-century Quaker.”22 Moreover, their writers “allegorized[d] the story of Jesus in the Gospels.”23

Second, while neither religious group cared to relinquish Law or Gospel, Puritans more often affirmed the Law (in the forms of the Ten Commandments and the use of biblically-justified “reason”).24 Quakers, in contrast, emphasized the Gospel (in the forms of the Sermon on the Mount and an emphasis on feelings of love).25

Third, while both sought God in Bible and in prayer, Puritans emphasized the Bible as the source of religious authority. For them, “the Bible is flat, it cannot be questioned, it alone is authority.”26 Quakers, in contrast, emphasized prayer and the “Inner Light” of which they so often spoke.27 Indeed, one analyst of Puritan and Quaker autobiographies concluded that Quakers’ “inner light seems to have performed the function of both the Law and Grace of Puritan theology.”28

These differences, of course, are not overtly civil religious, nor are they arguments about the role of America in world history. They create, however, different visions of the relationship between God and the civil order. To see the different visions, we must examine three key isues that capture the opposition between the two groups: their views of the relationship between God and the world, their views of human nature, and their views of the role of human action in the world.

**GOD AND THE WORLD**

As Baltzell points out, for both Puritans and Quakers all life was God-centered. Civil society was, or should be, ordered according to God’s will. Despite their differences, both groups assumed the transcendental sovereignty of God and His—they were sure of the pronoun—authority over the world.29

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14. Ibid., x.
15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 49-50.
17. Ibid., x.
18. Ibid., 94.
27. See Baltzell, *Puritan Boston*, 94.
Within this framework, however, the two groups saw God's sovereignty quite differently. For the Puritans, God was transcendent and historical. They were convinced that God acts in history, and that they themselves were the means of His action in their time. They saw themselves as literally His servants, hewing civilization out of the rough American landscape and taming it to His glory. As one Puritan historian interpreted the migration from England to the colonies, "God sifted a whole nation to bring choice grain into the wilderness."30

For Quakers, in contrast, God lived in the human heart. In theological terms they saw God speaking from within, and they believed that the Inward Word guided them in a way that outward words and institutions could not.31 As the Quaker itinerant preacher, Edward Burrough, admonished in 1656, "to the light in your conscience take heed, it is your teacher to God if you love it."32 Again using theological terms, Quaker worship attempted to unite the Meeting with God's will. It attempted to do so entering into deep personal and collective silence, out of which individuals occasionally were moved to speak. Authority rested in the human soul rather than in professional preachers or paid ministers. These points were appropriately summarized in the classic book on Quakerism written by a convert to the faith:

The intention [in Meeting for Worship] is to wait in patient quietness, knowing ourselves to be ever in the presence of God, but by our quietness making ourselves open to him, so that we can know his will. Thus, in spoken ministry we do not speak ourselves, but from the guidance of God within us.33

From the vantage point of these theological underpinnings, Quakers viewed the Puritan effort to legislate morality as an activity undertaken in vain. God saved His people, they thought, by an inward movement of conscience rather than by any outward control.

Puritanism was outward oriented, Quakerism was inward. So too are America's two civil religions divided. The establishment version believes the hand of God is at work in American institutions. The sectarian version believes in the superiority of God's work in the individual conscience.

work hard in it was a first premise of Puritanism.\textsuperscript{38} Both traditions held that one must follow God wherever He leads. Where the Puritans raised calling to an art, however, and saw their professional lives as an arena in which to fulfill their duty to God, Quakers maintained a more Thomistic view.\textsuperscript{39} They felt called to be good Quakers first, and professionals and businesspeople only second. When business and profession violated Quakers' Inner Voice, they felt bound to follow that voice rather than their civically defined duty. So in 1925 when the London Yearly Meeting (the world's most prestigious Quaker gathering) contemplated Quakers' activities in labor unions and federations, it advised that a "Christian is right in combining with others to obtain justice for himself and his fellows, but he should set his face against oppression and violence as being inconsistent with the example and teaching of our Lord."\textsuperscript{40}

Quaker perfectionism, more than any other quality, separated the two denominations. While Puritans believed that they should not kill, they also believed that their God-given duty as magistrates outweighed their personal qualms about killing. They therefore stayed in power during wars and civil strife, believing it their duty to make the best of trying situations. Quakers, however, left the colonial Pennsylvania legislature rather than vote for war taxes.\textsuperscript{41} Faced with a choice between outward duty and inward conviction, they chose the latter.

Baltzell argues that the key explanatory concept regarding Quaker social ethics is the tradition's sense of equality: If God lives in us all, and speaks to us all in the center of our hearts, then by what right do we, as mere mortals, impose death and destruction—or even control—on others? On this basis, "the Friends rejected all earthly authority." Quaker scorn of hierarchically-imposed secular authority grew directly out of the doctrines of perfectionism and the Inner Light and long antedated the testimony of pacifism and conscientious objection.\textsuperscript{42}

The result of this theologically presumed egalitarianism was an unwillingness to rule or to tolerate rulers. Where the most famous Puritan journal—that of John Winthrop—displays a person concerned with his performance as a magistrate, the equally famous journal of Quaker John Woolman recounts the efforts of a man to know God and to be a truly good person.\textsuperscript{43} Where Winthrop worried about social order and how to structure institutions to maintain it, Woolman worried about the evil that all such institutions do. He spent his life working for the equal treatment of the downtrodden, Indians, and slaves. In Baltzell's words, "while Woolman and the Quakers were quietly concerned with the mysterious workings of divine love in the world, Winthrop and the Puritans were worried about divine authority and how best to carry out their duty to lead the damned."\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{SUMMARY}

In Baltzell's view, Calvinistic Puritanism's teachings about the duty of the elect became a civil religious vision of a nation and its leaders doing God's will in public life. Puritanism encouraged learning and erudition, plus an ethic of citizenship ideally carried out through public office. Non-predeterminist Quakerism, in contrast, fostered a civil religion that questioned the role of educational, social, and political institutions and their leaders in carrying out God's purposes. Its civic calling emphasized spontaneous charity and a gloom about any lasting good that institutions by themselves can bring.

These two ideologies have dramatically different effects upon the production of nationally prominent political, judicial, and social leaders, which is the point of Baltzell's book. Where Puritanism produced civic leaders eager to serve God by building social institutions, Quakers distrusted the institutions that these Puritans built. To demonstrate this insight, Baltzell charted the effects of these attitudes on the secularized upper classes of the two American cities that each influenced most. Boston was the source of great wealth and great leaders, Philadelphia only of great wealth. Phrasing this argument in civil religious terms, Puritan Boston produced leaders who believed in the divine role of civic institutions and felt duty-bound to staff those institutions for the greater good. Quaker Philadelphia did not share this civil religious vision, and so did not produce leaders of similar type.

\textsuperscript{38} Miller, \textit{From Colony to Province}, 40.
\textsuperscript{42} Baltzell, \textit{Puritan Boston}, 102.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 100-01.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 101.
Baltzell, however, only notes a lack in Quaker life; he focuses on what Quakers did not do, to the exclusion of their accomplishments. He fails to draw out the different vision Quakers have of society, a vision that has startling implications for the role of individuals in civic life. Their theology, he notes, led Quakers to distrust civil institutions, and thus to abstain from public office. This distrust, however, fused with strict Quaker principles and a sense of calling to spark a tradition of creative and radical protest—an anti-establishment spirit that Baltzell simply fails to note. It is to that protest tradition that we now turn.

History of Quaker Civil Actions

No religious group has been more involved in sectarian civil religious action than the Quakers, and this insight holds as true for Britain as it does for the United States. As one scholar observed, “Friends, in fulfillment of their peace testimony, have remained at the core of nearly every important twentieth-century peace organization and, indeed, in every movement that defends and insists upon the sanctity of human life.” What makes Quaker radicalism worthy of sociological scrutiny is its religious basis. In the three and a half centuries since its founding, Quakerism has possessed an array of governmentally sanctioned policies on religious grounds.

In Cromwellian England, for example, Quakerism harbored those who opposed paying tithes to ministers and gentry. During the bloody persecution that followed the return of the Stuart monarch, fifteen thousand Quakers were imprisoned for their refusal to conform to the established church. At least 450 died in jail, making their group the most persecuted religious faith in England during the Restoration era.

45. The scholar, an American, was writing about the impact of British Quakerism on pacifist and related social movements. He could just as easily have been speaking about the United States.

49. The Quakers made the first explicit formulation of their Peace Testimony—“We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or

Tradition of Radical Quaker Politics

A few generations later, prominent Friends began a trans-Atlantic movement to oppose slavery. By the end of the century, even George Washington knew of the Quaker-run “underground railroad” (as it later came to be called) for slaves who were trying to escape their bondage. In this effort, “the Friends were undoubtedly the most persistent Anglo-American lawbreakers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” By the early nineteenth century, of course, the anti-slavery cause had been taken up by other groups. But in reaction to these groups’ exclusion of activist women, a Quaker, Lucretia Mott, issued a call for the full rights of women in society.

The Equal Rights Amendment, a celebrated cause for American feminists in the 1970s, got its name from Mott’s early efforts.

Quakers have continued their interest in civil rights into the current century. Prominent civil rights organizer and pacifist Bayard Rustin—the person most responsible for the success of the 1963 “March on Washington”—was raised by his Quaker grandmother, and “through the Quakers, Rustin was introduced early to the idea of pacifism, of service, and of racial equality.”

Historical figures in the United States and abroad, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, have pointed to the Quaker tradition as a source of inspiration. This tradition is not limited to the United States, as Quakers in other parts of the world have also made contributions to the struggle for civil rights.

Under any pretense whatsoever—in response to government accusations of treason, Quakers took pains to distinguish themselves from religious groups (such as the Fifth Monarchy Men) that advocated armed rebellion to speed the expected Second Coming of Christ.

TRADITION OF RADICAL QUAKER POLITICS

year-old Quaker named Alice Herz. Quakers later sustained a ten-
month peace vigil in front of the White House, and frequently were
arrested for their anti-war activities. To keep the anti-war movement
peaceful, they set up programs to train demonstration marshals in non-
violence techniques, a tactic that has been used in demonstrations ever
since. Perhaps the most famous Quaker antiwar protestor from the
1960s was Joan Baez, the protest singer who assimilated the tradition
from an early age under the influence of her father.

The fundamental right to dissent in American society is guaranteed
by the Constitution and a Bill of Rights whose very foundations early
Quakers helped to lay. When the first-generation Quaker, Edward
Byllyngy, acquired land in the trans-Atlantic colonies, he (perhaps
working with another Quaker, William Penn) enacted into law “what
has been termed one of the most remarkable documents in American
history: ‘The Concessions and Agreements of the Proprietors, Free-
holders, and Inhabitants of the Province of West New Jersey’.” These
Concessions of 1677 guaranteed religious liberty (even more broadly
than did the liberal Rhode Island Charter of the period), “trial by jury,
fair public trials, and freedom from imprisonment for debt.” These
ideas mark “an important step in the development which culminated in
the federal Bill of Rights.” Moreover, its provisions about “the com-
mon law or fundamental rights and privileges . . . agreed upon . . . to be
the foundation of the government,” against which no contradictory laws
were to be passed, represent an early form of “a binding Constitution
and the doctrine of unconstitutional legislation” that serve as pillars of
American governmental protections.

Byllyngy’s contemporary Quaker, William Penn, instituted two doc-
uments for his colony of Pennsylvania that were, “in many ways, the
most influential of the Colonial documents protecting individual
rights.” Arguably the most significant of the two was the Penn-
sylvania Frame of Government of 1682. It established “for the first
time the fully representative type of government that has come to char-
acterize the American polity,” and it even contained an amending

55. Maurice Isserman, If I Had a Hammer . . . The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of
56. Baltzell, Puritan Boston, 196.
57. Allan Kohrman, “Respectable Pacifists: Quaker Response to World War I,” Quaker
History 75 (Spring 1986): 41.
58. Baltzell, Puritan Boston, 448-49.
59. Eitan Tschich, “Philanthrophy from Friendly Persuaders,” New York Times, 6 Sep-
tember 1981, 15E.
60. David Weber, ed., Civil Disobedience in America: A Documentary History (Ithaca,
62. Ibid., 350.
63. Ibid., 287.
64. See Joan Baez, Daybreak (New York: Avon, 1966), 32-33; Joan Baez, A Voice to Sing
67. Ibid., 126.
68. Ibid., 130.
clause—"the first in any written Constitution." 69 Penn drew directly upon "his own experience as a persecuted Quaker" by conceiving "of a government limited in its powers by the rights possessed by the governed." The Frame of Government's most direct influence on the American Bill of Rights had to do with judicial procedure, whereby citizens were guaranteed trial by a jury whose members had the freedom to decide guilt or innocence of accused parties. 70

With the changing decades have come changing issues, but the tradition of protest has remained. In the 1980s, Quakers formed a major part of the Sanctuary Movement. Recently the AFSC challenged the legality of a law directed against illegal aliens. 71 (The challenge failed.) The organization continues to counsel victims of political torture, 72 and remains active in international efforts to provide food and material to underprivileged nations. 73 Demonstrations against war and nuclear weapons, of course, continue as well.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, Quaker social activism represents a primary model of the sectarian civil religious vision of America. It embodies what Betsworth described as "a persistent tradition in America of those who . . . opposed the direction which the ruling group has chosen." 74 Firmly embedded in this tradition of opposition, Quakers have been unwilling to participate in the more established forms of civil religious life. Unlike the Puritan-influenced Bostonians Balzcell studied, Quakers—not merely Philadelphia ones—seem averse to elitist political hierarchies. Quaker public service takes anti-establishment forms.

The Calvinistically-inspired tradition of elitist political obligation, however, also seems most likely to embody established civil religious assumptions that "the present American order is good and ought to be universal, and cover the whole of humanity, dominating the world for the sake of its own salvation." 75 Against this attitude, and against the social policies that go along with it, Quakerism and other sectarian civil religionists remain indefatigable foes.

69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., 131-32; see 144-58.
75. Ibid., 10.
77. Ibid.