

Religionless Christianity of George Fox

By

Lewis Benson



SHREWSBURY LECTURE

“Now was I come up in spirit through the flaming
sword into the paradise of God.” GEORGE FOX

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THE SHREWSBURY LECTURES

Shrewsbury Meeting was already established in 1672, when George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, visited America. He says in his Journal, published by Cambridge University Press: "And soe wee came to Shrewsberry & on the first day of the weeke wee had a pretious meettinge... & friends & other people came farr to this Meettinge; & on ye 2d of the 7th month wee had a mens (& weomens) Meettinge, out of the most parts of ye new Country Jarsie, which will be of great service in keepinge ye Gospell order & Government of Christ Jesus...and there is a Monthly & A Generall Meettinge sett up and they are buildinge A Meettinge place in the midst of them."

In preparation for the tercentenary, in 1972, of George Fox's visit to America, an annual Shrewsbury Lecture is given on some basic aspect of Quakerism. A particular phase of the special emphasis which Quakerism gives to the Christian message is presented. The community and Monmouth County in particular are invited on this occasion, known as Old Shrewsbury Day, to join with Friends who "came farr to this Meettinge" to learn together from him who is the Light of the World.

Number 1 - **Jesus and Judaism and The Emphasis of Jesus** by Henry J. Cadbury, member of the committee who prepared the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Number 2 - **The Religion of the Quaker Journalist**, as disclosed in the literature of spiritual autobiography, by Howard H. Brinton, Director Emeritus of Pendle Hill, an adult center for religious and social study.

Number 3 - **The Christian Mission**, the heart of evangelical faith and its relevance for those of other points of view, by Everett L. Cattell, President, World Evangelical Fellowship.

Number 4 - **Religionless Christianity of George Fox**, by Lewis Benson, Sometime Lecturer, Woodbrooke, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England.

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SHREWSBURY LECTURE

given at

Shrewsbury Friends Meeting

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PREFACE

“Religion,” or the living God? That is the question posed by the concept of “religionless Christianity.” Although the term is variously defined by modern theologians, all would agree that it contrasts the things which stultify and make for a lifeless man-made religion with those which constitute obedience to the living God.

Lewis Benson presents Fox’s vision of Christianity as a step beyond the partial glimpses of the master-disciple relationship to the risen Christ which modern theologians see only imperfectly. Where they see what is wrong with contemporary Christianity, Fox offers a fully developed alternative.

Stated succinctly and in modern phrasing, Fox would say that God wants obedience and righteousness. His call is to those who are ready not only for a personal encounter with the living Christ, but a corporate one as well. Christ determines the way in which this new band of apostles would be ordered. He is also the living prophet who furnishes the words they will speak and tells them what they must do to obey the will of God.

There is a fundamental antipathy between the formality of “religion,” and the spirit of prophecy. Religion is not only opposed to prophecy, but it tends to detract from it and lead away from revelation. Fox puts forth the “positive claim that the Christian revelation proclaims a new way to God apart from religion.” The prophets foresaw “that law and cultus could only be transcended by God himself, through the gift of a new covenant in which a new way to God would be provided. Jesus Christ is that new covenant and he is that new way.”

D. F. [Dean Freiday]

Lewis Benson

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He studied Quakerism at Pendle Hill in Pennsylvania, and Woodbrooke in England, and later returned to Woodbrooke as a Research Fellow to study the unpublished writings of George Fox. He has lectured at Pendle Hill and Woodbrooke from time to time. For four years he served as Monthly Meeting Secretary of the Friends Meeting at Evanston, Illinois, and later became custodian of the John Woolman Memorial at Mount Holly, New Jersey.

He is the author of the pamphlets, "Prophetic Quakerism" and "The Message of George Fox for Today," and more recently has been a contributor to the new Quaker Journal of Theology, "Quaker Religious Thought."

The Religionless Christianity of George Fox

Presuppositions

God who made and created all things created man to live a life of dialogue with his creator. God speaks and man hears and obeys. The word that God speaks to man is not any word that he could discover for himself by the ordinary process of observation, research and thought. This word comes in the form of a call to right action, a call to holy community and a call to use God's creation as stewards responsible to the Creator. Apart from God's word to us we do not know how to answer Him with a clear conscience or how to relate to our fellows, or how to live in peace and harmony with the rest of God's creation.

The Creator does not speak to us in abstractions: He speaks to particular men in particular historical situations and calls them to do things in response to His command. He has been calling men into a community that is obedient to His holy law, and His call to this community can be traced in a series of historical events: the calling of Abraham, and God's promises to Abraham, the Passover, the miraculous deliverance from Egypt, and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai,

When Disraeli was asked what assurance there is that there is a God who speaks and reveals His will to men his reply was, "The Jews."

There is a life in God which consists in hearing and obeying Him and answering His call when it comes to us in each particular historical situation. God has a purpose for history and this purpose is revealed through the acts of particular men and women who have heard God's call and responded to it. These acts of obedience bear a relation to one another from one generation to another and from one age to another. The dealings of God with men are a continued story. This is what the theologians call holy history.

What relation then, does this revelation of God to men in history bear to the human quest for God which we understand by the term religion? The Bible does not have much to say in favor of religion in general. Religion is not commended to us as something which is good in itself. Edmund Perry says that from the viewpoint of Biblical faith religion is "the generic term comprehending the universal phenomenon of men individually and collectively being led away from God in manifold ways by divers claims and systems."¹

George Fox says that the God of the Bible "is the condemner of all the Gods"² and by this he means all those human constructions that men call "God" and toward which they direct their loyalty and devotion instead of worshipping the Creator who visits them and comes to them in love and mercy and seeks to gather them to Himself.

Hendrik Kraemer says, "The character of revelation being what it is, it cannot be subsumed under a general concept of religion. Revelation...is God acting and speaking. That is not religion at all and never could be; for religion signifies: the various ways which men have of believing, together with their consequent activities."³

George Fox regarded as highly significant the story of Abraham's response to the call of God to leave Ur of the Chaldees and seek for the city whose architect and builder is God.⁴ Fox saw in this act of obedience a definite break with all natural religion and the beginning of a new thing. There is a way to God through hearing and obeying His word. God comes to us through the word that He speaks to us and we come to Him by hearing and obeying His word. God said, "obey my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people⁵," and Israel became the people of God by pledging to obey Him. But the Hebrew people did not always make obedience their first concern. There were times when their primary obligation to obey came close to total eclipse as they began to think of their obligation to God in terms of the demands of a cultic system consisting of a great multitude of religious laws and religious observances.

The prophets of Israel were sent by God to remind God's people of their promise to obey. They used strong language to convey the message that God will not accept the most elaborate religiousness in lieu of obedience. They said that the meticulous performance of a religious cultus can create the illusion that we are appearing before God properly dressed when in fact we are naked if we fail to obey God's call to righteousness. They saw that preoccupation with the religious cultus was draining off the spiritual vitality of the nation and they directed the full strength of their prophetic witness against this religious activity that leads away from God. Hendrik Kraemer says of the Hebrew prophets, "Theirs is the most trenchant criticism of religion ever given."⁶

The prophets foresaw that, in some future time, God would show men a new way to Himself which would not contain the cultic elements of the Mosaic covenant and which would open a way to obedience without legalism and to the service of God without a religious cultus. The new covenant was not to have the character of a system of religion but would come to men in the form of a person and would be experienced through a personal relationship to him.

The early church associated the coming of Jesus with this new religionless covenant. Peter,⁷ Stephen⁸ and the author of Hebrews⁹ all proclaimed the risen Christ to be the prophet foretold in Deuteronomy whom God would send and who was to be obeyed in all things. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that he is the prophet who speaks from Heaven. He is a teacher of righteousness to his people. He teaches them directly and not through a written moral code. He gives himself as the new and living way to God in the place of the old way of law and cultus. It is worth remembering that the first Christian to lose his life because of his faith was one who laid special emphasis on the newness of this way of Christ.

But not all the first century Christians saw the way as a new and living way. Some could not resist the temptation to see Jesus as the founder of a new religion and to use his life and teaching as the raw material for the construction of a new system of religion. By the beginning of the fifth

century the religion - makers had prevailed and had given the Christian community the character of a religious institution. And so the fellowship that produced Stephen found no difficulty in accepting the role of an imperial state religion with compulsory infant baptism.

Church Versus Sect

The story of the Christian church has been mostly the story of this religious institution but the religion-makers have not always had everything their own way. As Christianity became more and more a religious institution favored by imperial patronage and decree it lost the character of a fellowship of the obedient who have shared the cup of Jesus' suffering and know the way of his cross.

Paul said, "Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, walk as children of the light"¹⁰ and by this he surely intended that those who live by His light should walk differently from those who choose their own way. It was inevitable that groups would arise to protest the transformation of the Christian community into a cultural religion serving as the religious component within a larger cultural complex. These groups emphasized the call of Christ for righteousness and holiness, for a greater dependence upon the spirit of God and less dependence on the spirit of man and for visible evidence that the spirit dwells in the church through a prophetic ministry. They sought a leadership chosen and empowered by God's spirit, the power to heal, and such extraordinary manifestations of the spirit as glossolalia, handling poisonous snakes, etc. They also insist on certain standards of morality and a style of life for the whole community that is different from that of the surrounding culture. These groups, like the Montanists, first appeared in a historical situation already dominated by the institutionalized church and they made their witness in the form of a protest against the establishment. This caused them sometimes to overvalue certain things simply because they were undervalued by the establishment. Thus a tension arose between the ecclesiastical institution and the sectarian protest group. The great ecclesiastical institutions usually write the church histories and the smaller groups have not always been presented in the best light by the larger ones. The protest groups are often portrayed in highly critical language and sometimes even caricatured. The great church likes to give nicknames of ridicule and opprobrium to such groups. In his book The Protestant Tradition, J. S. Whale states that these protest groups are a minor irritation that must somehow be endured by the great ecclesiastical institutions. These groups are ephemeral; they come and they go.

But these groups do not simply represent the lunatic fringe of another wise sane and stable Christian community. They bear witness to the fact that there is something more to Christian community than can be found in the life of the great institutional churches. Wherever there is a great ecclesiastical institution there will be smaller bodies nourishing a warm and close fellowship and building a distinctive style of life through the cultivation of greater moral earnestness and deeper piety. The sects are a constant reminder that Christianity has its roots in the soil that produced the prophets and apostles. They are a reminder that God's call is still a call to righteousness and to community.

But does the reforming sect offer a real alternative to the ancient churchly ecclesia? Is not the sect but another species of the genus religion? Does it not rest its plea on the authority of sacred scriptures and primitivistic imitation of first century Christian practices? It is unfortunate that when we try to envision a real alternative to the ecclesiastical institution the first picture that comes to our minds is the sect, because it is the sect that has self-consciously opposed itself to ecclesiasticism all through the ages. If we then identify ourselves with some sectarian vision of Christianity we become involved in the ancient controversy of sect versus church and all the arguments of this controversy have been worn paper thin by generations of protagonists on both sides. Is there any way of cutting through this thick jungle of controversy for a fresh look at the gospel of Jesus Christ and the nature of the Christian fellowship? Christian history seems to present us with two patterns of Christian community - the sect and the church. Is there a third pattern?

I wish to maintain that George Fox and the early Quakers represent a third kind of Christianity which is neither that of the sectarian tradition nor that of the ancient churchly ecclesia.

Some Modern Exponents of Religionless Christianity

But before we examine what Fox has to say on these issues I will first take note of some exponents of religionless Christianity in modern times beginning with Kierkegaard and F. D. Maurice in the early 19th century as well as Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Robinson and others who have thrown the spotlight on this subject in our day.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a foe of the official Christianity of the established institutional church of his native Denmark. He saw men living and dying in the bosom of the church without ever feeling the weight of God's judgment on their consciences or knowing themselves to be separated from God by disobedience. He was shocked by the comfortable security found among Christians in an age whose moral standards and moral performance were far from answering the demands of Christ. He focused attention on the individual's inward response to God in an age of religious formalism. Kierkegaard looked upon his message and his word as "a corrective to things as they are" and his view of Christianity is certainly a lopsided one. In stressing the inward and personal aspect of the Christian life he understressed the social and historical side. But he stands at the beginning of an impressive list of modern Christian thinkers who have attacked religion in the interest of faith.

Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) was another seminal thinker of the 19th century. He says that "the worst cant of our days comes from those who wish by all means to uphold a Religion, and have no faith in a God who upholds justice and truth"¹¹ and he asks, "Are the Gospels the announcement of a religion? Is that what they profess to be? Is that the conception which would be formed of them by anyone who simply read them as they are written? Does the word 'religion' or anything which answers to that word even occur in them?"¹² He points out that we connect the word 'religion' with "the study and treatment of the Bible, though the Bible itself gives us no help in ascertaining the force of the word, apparently sets no great store by it or any

similar one.”¹³ In 1844 he wrote, “We have been dosing our people with religion when what they want is not this but the living God.”¹⁴

In our own day this attack on religion in the interest of faith has found a number of outstanding exponents. Among these one of the most illustrious names is that of Karl Barth. Thomas F. Torrance describes Barth as “incontestably the greatest figure in modern theology since Schleiermacher, occupying an honored position among the great elite of the church - Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin.”¹⁵ Barth headed a chapter of the first volume of his Church Dogmatics with the words, “The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion.”

In Barth’s view the Christians sold their birthright for a mess of religion.

Barth begins with the proposition that revelation and religion are not interchangeable terms and that, in fact, religion is that which is constantly leading us away from revelation. “God,” he says, “is always the One who has made Himself known to man in His own revelation, and not the one man thinks out for himself and describes as God.”¹⁶ He says that “revelation does not link up with...human religion” and that revelation contradicts and displaces religion just as religion contradicts and displaces revelation.¹⁷ Does this negation of all religion, then, include the Christian religion? Yes, says Barth, “this religion, too, stands under the judgment that religion is unbelief, ...it is not acquitted by any inward worthiness, but only by the grace of God, proclaimed and effectual in His revelation. This judgment means that all this Christianity of ours, and all the details of it, are not as such what they ought to be and pretend to be, a work of faith, and therefore of obedience to the divine revelation. What we have here is in its own way a different way from other religions, but no less seriously unbelief, i.e., opposition to the divine revelation.”¹⁸

This would seem to be leading us away from all man-made religion and paving the way for proclaiming a new vision of Christian community life. But Barth is content, to solve this whole problem by what seems to me to be a purely theological device. He says, that, in spite of all, the Christian religion is the true religion. It is the true religion because God has chosen to make it so. If God can justify sinners he can justify the Christian religion which is no more worthy of justification than a sinner is worthy. For those who stand in the Protestant tradition this solution must appear to have some theological consistency. But it surely cannot be the last word on this important question.

Many regard Emil Brunner as a theologian hardly less important than Barth; and his views on the relation of Christian faith to religion in general are hardly less radical than Barth’s. “The Christian faith,” he says, “cannot admit that its faith is one species of the genus religion.”¹⁹ “The Christian revelation stands related to all religion, not as an individual to other individuals of the same species, but as another genus.”²⁰ “All religion,” he says, “creates a gulf between the sacred and the secular; it is religion in contrast to the secular. In Jesus this contrast is explicitly denied; nothing is secular, all is sacred, for all belongs to God. Jesus rejects holy seasons, holy persons, holy places, specially holy acts, and indeed too the holy gods; for what the religions know of ‘gods’ are not truly holy, not truly divine...Jesus Christ is not only the Fulfillment: He is also the

Judgment on all religion. Viewed in His light, all religious systems appear untrue, unbelieving, and indeed godless.”²¹

In two important books Brunner tries to envisage what the church of a religionless Christianity would be like. He maintains that in the generation following Pentecost there was a Christian community that was unique and which he calls the “ekklesia.” The term “church” he reserves for the religious institution that soon began to appear and still exists in many forms. The institutional form, he says, “does not belong to the essence of the Ekklesia”²² although it does properly belong to the church.

This unique fellowship is unintelligible to the religious sociologist because it is only intelligible from the standpoint of the Christ who dwells within it and determines its life.²³ “...because the fellowship is nothing else than this people of God dwelling in the Spirit, it is in no sense an institution, but the living body of the living head.”²⁴ “This community, though it is not an institution is not an anarchy but an ordered corporate life based on the supremacy of the Head and the loving obedience of the members...it has an articulate living order without being legally organized.”²⁵ In this unique community all minister and “nowhere is to be perceived a separation or even merely a distinction made between those who do and those who do not minister.”²⁶ The different ministries in the church are of “equal value.” This charismatic leadership “creates no rank.”²⁷ In this unique fellowship the concept of sacrament is unknown. That is to say the Lord’s supper is never brought together with water baptism under the coordinating conception of sacraments.²⁸

But for Brunner this unique Ekklesia is no longer possible because its existence was dependent on the presence of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit has mysteriously departed.²⁹ He says, “We have got to accept the decline of spiritual power simply as a fact for which there is no explanation.”³⁰ Under these circumstances we must accept the “coarser character of an organizational legalistic structure” in place of the “fine suppleness proper to a spiritual structure.”³¹

The non-institutional Ekklesia of New Testament times is not only unique, it is “inimitable.”³² Brunner calls the problem of forming a church after the model of the New Testament Ekklesia “unsolvable.”³³

Brunner thus makes it clear, that whether we like it or not, we are stuck with the institutional church. The model of the church that belongs to the religionless Christianity once existed and we can learn about it through theological analysis and description but we can no longer experience it.

The phrase ‘religionless Christianity’ has become associated chiefly with the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). It is through interest in his book Prisoner for God that most people have become acquainted with this conception. This book was written in a Nazi prison during the last months of his life and it is here, for the first time, that he puts forward his thoughts on the possibility of Christianity without religion. This book is a collection of letters and fragments and evidently shows us the beginnings of his thinking along these lines. His interest in “religionless

Christianity” seems to have begun in prison and constitutes a radical departure from his thinking up to that time.

In Bonhoeffer’s approach, the thing that stands out is his belief that religion has ceased to have any reality or validity for modern man. Therefore, if Christianity is to have any part in shaping the life of contemporary man it must cease to confront the world as a religion and offer itself as something that men will find relevant to their own experience. Taking this starting point he points out some of the features of Christian faith that set it apart from religion. “Our relationship to God,” he says, is “not a religious relationship to a supreme being...but a new life for others.”³⁴ “To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) but to be a man.”³⁵ This same note was struck by George Fox nearly three hundred years earlier when he declared “the gospel brings man to be a man.”³⁶

Bonhoeffer sees Paul’s struggle to free the Christian community from the obligation to perform the rite of circumcision as illuminating the whole question of the relation of Christianity to religion. “Freedom from circumcision,” he states “is at the same time freedom from religion.”³⁷

We do not know how he would have developed his challenging concept of religionless Christianity. Unlike Fox this vision came to him at the end of his life instead of the beginning. He only throws out hints and questions in the form of fragments that were smuggled out of prison, whereas Fox took a lifetime to spell out in theory and practice a total conception of religionless Christianity.

Bonhoeffer throws out some interesting questions such as; “How do we speak of God without religion?”³⁸ To this question Alexander Miller has written a whole book endeavoring to explain Bonhoeffer’s meaning in terms of Luther’s doctrine of salvation by faith alone.³⁹ To Bonhoeffer’s question “What is the place of worship and prayer in an entire absence of religion?” J. A. T. Robinson has tried to point to the direction in which we should look for an answer. But he seems to see the problem entirely in terms of liberalizing priestly functions and liturgical forms.⁴⁰

Daniel Jenkins in his book “Beyond Religion” tries to assess the positive values that may be extracted from the interest in religionless Christianity especially as interpreted by Barth, Bonhoeffer and Tillich. He takes the view of an elder statesman representing a conservative Protestant tradition. “On the one hand,” he says, ministers “must honestly reckon with the possibility that the churches we know may frequently have to be by-passed, or even to die, to make room for the renewal of the real Church. On the other, they must recognize their responsibility to, and their solidarity with, those who belong to the existing churches.”⁴¹ He says that “religionless Christianity may strictly be impossible,”⁴² and he recommends a balanced outlook in which the priestly and prophetic elements in the church are not presented as a “false antithesis.”⁴³

The name of Bultmann has also been linked to ‘religionless Christianity.’ But those who have been already named are far from exhausting the sources of those who have contributed in one way or another to the literature on this subject.

Not all these writers understand the same thing-by 'religionless Christianity.' To some it means loosening the restrictions imposed by church tradition and orthodox theology and letting Christian faith find its own level in the present historical and cultural situation. And this simply means a reapplication of all the old liberal principles. For others it means the relaxing of formalism and hierarchical domination and reviving interest in the laity and in a closer more democratic Christian fellowship and church order. This is the perennial spirit of reform that found expression in Puritanism and many of the sects. To others it means letting the idea of religionless Christianity stand as a reminder that religion apart from the grace of God is lacking in power. This view accepts Christianity as a religion and the church as a religious institution but warns against religiosity and institutionalism.

To still others 'religionless Christianity' is a necessary presupposition of the church as its missionaries confront the religions of the world in this age in which all cultures and religions have been brought in close proximity to each other.

Of those who have been here named as exponents of the principles of religionless Christianity there is not one who represents a church fellowship that is particularly distinguished by its application of these principles. Nor does the extensive literature on this subject help us to see what a religionless church would be like or give us a clear call to come out of the Christianity that is a religion and into the Christianity which is not a religion.

The Religionless Christianity of George Fox

George Fox (1624-1691) is the notable exception here for he was not only inspired by a comprehensive vision of religionless Christianity but he was dedicated to the work of gathering a religionless church. He penetrated deeper into this unmapped region than anyone before or since and there is no better source, outside the Bible, to which we can turn for knowledge of this little known territory.

Contrary to popular belief, George Fox is not one of the many heroes of sectarianism who have challenged institutional Christianity and attempted to reform it. He did not confront the establishment of his day with the demand for certain reforms and then, when his plea for reformation was ignored, start a splinter group in which these particular reforms became the distinguishing principles which justify the existence of the new sect.

In his whole life Fox never claimed membership in any religious fellowship but that of the Quakers.

In his early teens he studied the Bible alone and sought help and wisdom in prayer. Fox's study of the Bible led him to the conclusion that God's purpose for man does not include the development of a special religiousness. But what is God calling for instead of religiousness? To this question which seems so puzzling to some modern exponents of religionless Christianity Fox found an answer that can be stated in a few words: God wants obedience in righteousness and he wants a righteous holy community to live under his rule.

Did Jesus come to found the Christian religion and establish the Christian church as a divine institution? Fox says, No, Jesus came to gather a people to himself who would keep his commandments and nurture a fellowship of the obedient apart from legalism and apart from cultus. The gospel is a new thing.

The gospel is a proclamation about a new and living way to God - something that the most ingenious religious inventiveness of man could never have produced. It is a new way to learn the principles of God's righteousness through a master-disciple relationship to the risen Christ. And it is a new way to experience the holy community through fellowship in corporate obedience to Christ its head. The continuing active presence of Christ in this community gives it order and discipline. But this is not the order and discipline of an ecclesiastical institution but a new thing made possible only through God's act in sending Christ into the world.

Fox was no fadist. He staked everything on his vision of religionless Christianity. His aim was to follow the new way and to gather men into this new community, and not only this, but to gather a new band of apostles who would proclaim this new way and new community throughout the whole world and call all men into it.

Fox came to his conclusions about the religionless character of Christianity through a study of the whole Bible. From this study he learned that the basic law of man's being is to listen to God, the Creator, to be taught what is right by Him and to obey Him. Man has broken this basic law of his being. He does not listen to his Creator and he does not obey Him. He has therefore lost the only true ground for moral judgment and action. He cannot find his right place in history, or in society, or in relation to the created universe.

The Bible tells us that God is calling for a restoration of this life of dialogue between Himself and man, and a restoration of community that has its fellowship in hearing and obeying His voice. The Kingdom of God is the community where God's voice is heard and His commands obeyed.

God said, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people."⁴⁴ But in the course of time God's covenanted people began to lose touch with God's voice. Obedience began to mean conformity to a moral code instead of a living response to the voice of the living God. Serving God came to mean fulfilling the cultic requirements of a system of religion.

The prophets looked forward to a day when God would reveal a new way to Himself apart from the written moral code and apart from any cultic system.

Fox believed that God sent Christ into the world, not to found a new religion, but to show men a new way to God apart from religion.

Fox doesn't use the terminology that we find in the modern literature of religionless Christianity. It is clear however that he does not see Christianity as a species of the genus religion. He says that Christ has come to bring people off from all the world's religions to the religion that he

set up in the apostles' days.⁴⁵ Christianity is the new and living way to the Father. Fox calls it the religion that "is pure from above"⁴⁶ and he means by this that it is not a human invention but a new and living way to God made possible by the coming of Christ. He says "there is but one pure religion from above"⁴⁷ and he contrasts this one true religion which is pure from above with the religions of the world which are of man's making. He says the religion which is from above differs from the Religion which is below.⁴⁸ What is this difference? It is the difference between the one God-made religion and the many man-made religions. The Christian faith is not just another religion, it is a new thing.

Fox understood that his God-given task was to "bring people off from all the world's religions, which are vain, that they might know the pure religion."⁴⁹ Among what he called "the world's invented seats of religion"⁵⁰ he included the Christian religion. Fox believed that historical Christianity had become transformed from a religionless way to God into a system of religion. Because of this transformation God's call for obedience in righteousness and for an obedient community was not being heard or answered. By being transformed into a system of religion, Christianity becomes simply "one of the religions of the world" and ceases to offer to men a new and living way to God.

The tension between obedience and religion in the Christian era is parallel to this same kind of tension as it was experienced and dealt with by the Hebrew prophets. But there is an important difference between the prophets' problem and the Christian problem. The prophets were trying to keep two things in balance. They were trying to keep obedience to Yahweh from being lost and submerged by an overemphasis on law and cultus. They saw a conflict between real obedience and the demands of legalism and religionism, but they saw also that law and cultus could only be transcended by God Himself through the gift of a new covenant in which a new way to God would be provided. Jesus Christ is that new covenant and he is that new way. Therefore, the problem of the conflict between obedience to God's voice and the demands of merely religious obligations is not an unavoidable problem that the Christians have inherited from the Jews. It is the problem which the coming of Christ is supposed to have disposed of once and for all.

Christian faith and community is not simply another type of religiousness. It is the answer to the problem of religiousness. Therefore the problem of the tension between the demands of religion and the demand of God for obedience is a man-made problem and it is the consequence of taking the new religionless way to God proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and transforming it into a system of religion.

As Fox sees it the gospel is the proclamation that God has given us Christ in place of religion. Again and again he uses the phrase "not of man or by man," and when he uses this phrase he is either referring to the gospel or the gospel fellowship. For Fox, the preaching of the gospel means bringing people off all their own ways to Christ, the new and living way. "Your gathering together," he says, "hath been by the Lord, to Christ his Son, . . . and not by man."⁵¹

After a continuous preaching campaign lasting nearly thirty years Fox summarized his aim as a preacher in these words; "I turned you to him, that is able to save you, I left you to him."⁵²

How then can we find obedience in righteousness and community in obedience through Christ alone without any religious apparatus whatever? All of Fox's preaching, teaching and writing is aimed to answer these questions. In his first burst of evangelical fervor Fox returned again and again to one theme which is expressed in the proclamation "Christ was come to teach his people himself!"⁵³ For Fox, Christ is primarily a teacher and a speaker. When he says, "I turned you to him who is able to save you," he means that he has turned people to the sound of a voice, a voice which is not a human voice, whose commands must be obeyed. Fox says of one of the early Quaker preachers, Thomas Taylor, he "turned many to the Lord Jesus Christ, that they became hearers and followers of him who speaks from heaven."⁵⁴ Obedience, for the Christian, is to be experienced as a personal encounter with the living Christ. Fox says, "The ground of man's belief and obedience is Christ, who doth enlighten him to the intent that he might believe and obey..."⁵⁵ The light of Christ leads us to "know Christ's voice and when it doth command."⁵⁶ All are to "hear and obey him that God hath sent,"⁵⁷ he says, because "this is the true Christian's exercise, to follow day and night, with the divine light and spirit of Christ, in obedience to the requiring of God and Christ."⁵⁸

"Christ has come" and this means that obedience in righteousness is now to be experienced through a master-disciple relationship to him.

If, then, obedience in its deepest Christian sense is experienced through personal encounter with the living Christ does it then follow that the Christian church is simply an association of all who have had this experience? Although it can truly be said that the Christian fellowship is a community of those who follow Christ and keep his commandments yet this simple statement is not enough to describe the fellowship of those who have answered Christ's call to community in obedience. The Christian church is not merely a collective consisting of those persons who have had an individual encounter with Christ. Christ not only speaks to each individual disciple - he also speaks to "his people," his church.

Fox believed that Christ not only speaks to the individual disciple but he speaks to the church which is a community of disciples. He says that God "who was the speaker by his Son to the apostles and the church in their days was the first speaker to us whom the world in scorn call Quakers."⁵⁹ God's Son is God's speaker to God's people. The people of God must also answer God in obedience and Fox says that by the power of Christ all God's people are made a willing people to serve and worship him in righteousness and holiness.

The church is a community to whom Christ speaks. Its fellowship is a fellowship in hearing His voice and obeying His commands. In this connection Fox finds the Bible's reference to the church as Christ's bride and spouse especially illuminating. He says the church and Christ "are as nigh together as husband and wife"⁶⁰ and "the church must be subject to her husband in all things; Jesus Christ is the husband, in everything she must be subject to him."⁶¹ "Christ," he says, "is the speaker again unto his church, and who should speak unto his wife, his church, but himself?"⁶² What appears to puzzle him is that the various Christian groups (he names Papists, Protestants, Independents, Baptists "and other sects") feel free to use the Biblical husband-wife terminology and call themselves the spouse of Christ while at the same time disclaiming that

Christ speaks to them and addresses them as a church. He asks, "How then were you married to Christ that never heard his voice and Christ thy husband never spoke to thee? Strange kind of marriage."⁶³

Fox frequently cited the opening words of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "God, who at sundry times, and in divers manners, spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets' hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." Commenting on this passage he says, "mark that, God hath spoken unto us (his apostles, disciples, church) by his Son. And whereas some have objected that although Christ did speak both to his disciples and to the Jews, in the days of his flesh, yet since his resurrection and ascension he doth not speak now; the answer is, that 'as God did then speak by his Son in the days of his flesh, so the Son, Christ Jesus, doth now speak by his spirit'"⁶⁴ And so he says, "hear the voice of the bridegroom,"⁶⁵ "hear his voice, who is risen from the dead,"⁶⁶ "hear and obey him that God hath sent."⁶⁷

Christ teaches righteousness and holiness⁶⁸ and gives his church power to get the victory over all righteousness. By the power that comes through faith the people of God can "walk in unity over the enmity,"⁶⁹ "In the holiness," says Fox, "is the unity."⁷⁰ Where the church knows Christ to be present in its midst as its teacher its members are able, through him, to admonish one another and to experience unity in corporate obedience. For, says Fox, "the word is but one, which sanctifies all,...And the light is but one; and all being guided by it, all are subject to one, and are one in the unity of the spirit."⁷¹

Hearing and obeying Christ's voice leads to unity in righteousness but it also leads to an ordered community - the church or people of God. Fox says that they that obey the voice of Christ Jesus "they know the order of Christ."⁷² Just as there is a religion which is from above and a religion that is below so also, is there a church which is from below. Fox says, "the church of Christ's communion is not in that which proceeds from men below; but in that which proceeds from God and his Son..."⁷³ There is an order and government for God's new covenant people but this order and government is not to be understood in terms of institutional structure; it must be understood in terms of Jesus Christ who is present in the midst of his people as their head and orderer. Fox says, "the head is in the midst of the church ordering the body, ordering the church, ordering his saints, his spouse, his bride, his wife."⁷⁴ "So here is the foundation of our meetings ...the foundation of them is Christ..."⁷⁵ "And we are come to hear our own prophet, which God hath raised up, Christ Jesus...him we do hear in all things in our meetings."⁷⁶

Christ calls men and women to be ministers, counselors, evangelists, elders, keepers of minutes and records and many other offices that are good and useful in his church. Those whom he calls he prepares and qualifies and strengthens to perform His work. He is the president of every congregation when it gathers for worship. He is the guiding prophetic voice in every meeting for the business of the church. He is the one high priest who is able to present his people spotless to his father. He gives his people a "heavenly unity and order" which "is not of man, nor by man; so man has no glory but God and Christ alone."⁷⁷

It is worth remembering that this series of Shrewsbury Lectures is in preparation for the commemoration of the first beginnings of Shrewsbury Monthly Meeting in 1672. George Fox himself was visiting the meeting on this occasion and he writes in his Journal that this new meeting “will be of great service in keeping the gospel order and government of Christ Jesus” and will help them to see that “all do live in the pure religion.” As Fox saw this new community of Quakers coming to birth in 1672 it was, to his mind, a new appearance of that “one pure religion which is from above” and another community to join the growing family of communities being gathered in accordance with the “gospel order and government of Christ.”

Conclusion

In this brief outline of George Fox’s conception of ‘religionless Christianity’ I have tried to show that he was not merely protesting against religiosity, institutionalism, authoritarianism, clericalism, sacerdotalism, creedalism and the like, but rather that he taught that there is a fundamental antipathy between the spirit of prophecy and the spirit of religion. He is not protesting against an overdose of religion but he is putting forth the positive claim that the Christian revelation proclaims a new way to God apart from religion.

He envisioned the church as a fellowship of disciples. Obedience and suffering are the marks of this church. If we are to be Jesus’ friends and disciples we must obey him and bear his cross. It is not an easy, broad way that he offers us but a costly and narrow one.

In the recent history of the United States we have seen how the prosperity and popularity of “religion in general” has not moved the nation to greater moral endeavor nor does it lead to the gathering of a people whose faith in and loyalty to its Lord gives it the power to obey the heavenly vision and resist social pressures of all kinds to conform to some other vision. There must be a way that is beyond religion.

In the recent wave of interest in religionless Christianity George Fox’s ideas have not received much notice. Perhaps this is not so strange when we consider that in most theological circles Fox is usually classified as one of the sectarian leaders who opposed “authoritarian dogma, formal worship, and clericalism.”⁷⁸

It may be as men become familiar with the idea of religionless Christianity, and as its more radical implications are quietly explained away, it will gradually recede from the public eye and take its place among countless other theological fads and fancies.

But, on the other hand, it may be that all this discussion will move on to a deeper level in which men will begin to see that the choice before us is, in very truth, Christ or religion. When this time comes the writings of Fox will again be studied with a seriousness such as they have not received since the seventeenth century.

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