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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Christian Conduct in Bunyan and Baxter

THE seventeenth-century rule of the spirit held sway over a wide territory, extending its ground far into the realm of social obligation and household morality. To develop these claims, there existed a large library of tracts and booklets which defined the importance of holy living. The instruction offered was eminently practical and kept an eye on rewards both here and hereafter, having in addition the virtue of constancy in its opinions. This strength of conviction was of greater worth in the face of shifting social values than it had been in a period ruled by Catholic authoritarianism and justification by works. From the accession of the Tudors until the time of their Stuart successors, the advice of popular handbooks of moral theology was almost without change. Robert Bonyonn who as late as 1579 commended his soul in his will to God and "our blessed Ladie St. Mary and to all the holy company of heaven"¹ would have respected the advice tendered by the Brother of Sion Monastery, Richard Whitford, who published his *Werke for Housholders* (1532) during Bonyonn's lifetime. His great descendant John Bunyan needed to depart but little from these ideals when he composed his own *Christian Behaviour* (1663). Robert's failure to advance theologically with the times, as shown by his retention of idolatrous views, is a symbol of a general failure to evade the prepotent influence of the Roman Church in practical matters.

Turning to the seventeenth century we experience little surprise in finding by comparison how closely related Bunyan is to William Perkins, the "apostle of practical divinity." This great theologian's *Christian Oeconomie* (1609) was the inspiration of many younger ministers who lacked the qualifications of a Cambridge Lecturer. The extent of all Perkins' writings may have prevented Bunyan and the poorer men from possessing them, but this could not prevent his emphatic dogmatism from being the most satisfactory exposition of Calvinism in England. As Louis B. Wright has put it: "He was one of an extraordinary group of preachers who helped make more articulate

¹ John Brown, *John Bunyan*, p. 2.

the feelings of multitudes of Englishmen who were thinking vaguely about their relations to God and to their fellows."²

The order in which these relations are taken in this quotation is deliberate because the preacher was occupied primarily with the spiritual life of his people. He was able to speak of social duties which stem from them afterwards but would not entertain discussion with any other than the elect. If difficulties arose, a man like Perkins was well equipped with examples of case-divinity to apply to each man, and in his advice he was asserting the peaceful life of the Tudor Puritan who must labour diligently to fulfil his part in the pre-ordained plan. The peace of antiquity was about these words, and among the Puritans, the works of Perkins and a few others came to possess the authority formerly ascribed by the Catholic Church to Tradition.

Bunyan's own contribution to this genre seems indeed meagre beside those of Perkins, William Gouge and Richard Baxter. Gouge's manual, a volume of 700 pages entitled *Of Domesticall Duties*, is most comprehensive³ and Baxter's is divided into two parts. The first of these *Christian Directory* (1673) is the last complete Medieval *summa*,⁴ and its sequel, *The Poor Man's Family Book* (1674), designed as a Modernisation of *Plain Man's Pathway*, was written in simpler terms. Its simplicity was in a way its own undoing. Baxter was always a copious author, and in the interests of clarity he took so much space over his task that the resultant book was too long for sale at a cheap price. He therefore begged the rich to buy copies for the poor, so that his labour might not be wasted. These writers, and many more, show once more the immediacy of pastoral advice to the problems of the flock and the implicit faith in the theologian's advice in quotidian affairs which animates the life and society of the century.

Bunyan prepared a simple catechism *Instructions for the Ignorant*, in a "plain and easy dialogue", which dealt with the elements of faith. It was a preparatory course to his *Christian Behaviour* and is handled in a non-denominational manner. It may be debated whether such general principles are advisable in a catechism or whether a pervasive specialist tone should not be introduced at this early stage. However, its application to Bunyan's major writing is of more concern to us at present. Its most noteworthy questions concern fatal procrastination and

² Louis B. Wright, "William Perkins," *Huntington Library Quarterly*. (Vol. iv., 196.)

³ Cf. C. L. Powell, *English Domestic Relations, 1487-1653* (New York) 1917, esp. App.D. for an analysis of the scope of Gouge's book.

⁴ Vide quotations from Baxter in R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Selections of interest to the economic historian were made by Jeannette Tawney and published in 1925.

spiritual laziness or, in allegorical terms, remaining at home in the City of Destruction :

- Q. But if I follow my play and sports a little longer, may I not come time enough?
- A. I cannot promise thee that, for there be little graves in the church-yard; and who can tell that thy young life is short?⁵

The catechism grows away from this note (reminiscent of *Everyman*) towards a preliminary sketch of Christian's dialogue on conversion with Hopeful, which represents the spiritual summit of *Pilgrim's Progress* :

- Q. Pray tell me now the manner of (faith's) coming.
- A. It comes through difficulty . . . a sense of unworthiness, guilt of conscience, natural reason, unbelief, and arguments forged in hell and thence suggested by the devil into the heart against it.
- Q. How doth faith come gradually?
- A. Perhaps at first it is but like a grain of mustard seed, small and weak.⁶

Christian Behaviour itself expounds Works in a rule of Faith. Its social compass is the patriarchal society, ruled over by a Christian Rich Man, whose family and servants are viewed as a microcosm of the order of the universe and whose community is treated as a private Church. Bunyan accepts social graduation without hesitating and without leaning towards democratic ideology. He shows an unchanging acceptance of the church and of good rich men⁷ attacking in *A Few Sighs from Hell* only those whose riches are outweighing their power for goodness. Such inequalities had always been noticed and justified; they were not grievances but natural acceptances to be met with prayer lest privileges should be abused.⁸ Otherwise, the medieval distribution of wealth was acceptable to the lower classes of Bunyan's day.

The duty of the master of the household comes first into Bunyan's world-view. He is taught the reason for his eminence in the world and shown the restraints of his office. Perkins, with a wider philosophical experience and vocabulary discusses the illegality of polygamy :

⁵ Bunyan, *Works*, (ed. George Offor) ii. 680.

⁶ *Ibid.* ii. 685.

⁷ Cf. "The church is above all as the lady is above the servant, the queen above the steward or the wife above her husband's officers." *Solomon's Temple Spiritualised*, *Works* iii, 473.

⁸ Cf. Wilhelm Schenk, *Social Justice in the Puritan Revolution*, "the central and dominant tradition of Christianity has always accepted social as well as natural inequality, but it has demanded the permeation of all social relationships by the Christian spirit". I am deeply indebted to this book in the present article.

That two and not three or four shall be noe flesh. And for this cause, the fathers, who had many wives and concubines, it may bee through customs they sinned of ignorance, yet they are not in any wise to be excused.⁹

The correct approach is established in all conduct books; it is in this concept that the pressure of change was being felt in the seventeenth century. The original approach to matrimony: *melius est nubere quam urere*, was passing into an *affaire de coeur*. From an exploitation of the young couple for economic ends the age passed to a consideration of their own views. Restoration preachers permitted greater latitude than their predecessors (cf. Baxter's words: "If it is *necessary* to marry, an ungodly partner might do"—a distinctly novel adaptation of apostolic doctrine!) Whatever freedom was allowed to the participants in their choice of partner, the Church retains its right to direct their private lives. It sought to regulate their indulgence in the sensualities of matrimony and proclaimed fiercely against anything that resembled sanctified lust and whoredom. Baxter and Perkins have a wealth of observation behind their utterances and blame the natural *imbecillitas* of the female sex for many marriages that need ministerial direction. The Puritan preacher had only his pulpit: there he had to deal in general with matters of delicate privacy formerly the province of the confessional.¹⁰ Bunyan's chapters appear, by comparison, simple but sound.

It is known with what indulgence Bunyan treated his own children; in print he testifies to it by discouraging the excessive use of the rod and, positively, by symbolising in Badman Senior the duty of Christian Fatherhood. He exalts a large family in all his works, hoping thus in his own mind to refute Catholic and Quaker asceticism. With all his concern for the welfare of the child Bunyan omits all mention of schooling. Nor does he offer an explanation of this surprising lapse, which is all the more strange when it is considered how much Nonconformists have always believed in the provision of worthily educated ministers. John Dury, himself a preacher, was in contact with Hartlib and Comenius, offering as a result of his discussion with them plans for a school of vocational practice. He put forward in his *Reformed School* (1640) a place for commerce, agriculture and administration in the education of the young. This was not mere technical training, for its syllabus was formed with the aid of Discretion, Prudence, and Rationality and included ample allowance of curricular time for Prayer and religious exercises. The

⁹ William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie*, in *Works*, 111 (1613) p. 670.

¹⁰ However there seems to be nothing in these writers which compares with the Persoun's prohibition of contraception and abortion in *The Canterbury Tales*.

movement hereby inaugurated for reformed education reached its pitch in the practice of the Dissenting Academies, which became rivals of the universities in the provision of scientific and modern subjects.¹¹

Servants are treated next as subject to ministerial direction. Their status makes them dependant upon the good-will of their master, and the first concern is that they shall be well treated spiritually and never left hungry, thirsty and cold. Bunyan feared (or as he put it impersonally, "it stinketh") that godly men were not always ahead of the profane in providing for their subjects. Although he offers no example of this in *Mr. Badman*, Bunyan was clearly well-apprised of servant behaviour, for he alone of our three authors voices his protest against their malicious habit of caluminating their masters. From his words the reader can imagine preachers who protested vainly against the practices of domestics, their demand for "vails" which made attendance at a rich man's table as expensive as buying the meal at an inn, and the interminable indiscretions of the Comic Servant in eighteenth century novels.¹² Bunyan and Baxter were trying still to see the servant as a "soul" who must be protected from alehouses and that complex tangle of sin arising from drunkenness.

The female members of the family have their own place in the firmament of the domestic handbook. The divine was asked to intervene in disputes of wife and husband and Bunyan laid it down frequently that the woman has an inferior place in the household. Casuistic divinity took its interventions a long way.¹³ Should a wife, it asked, have jurisdiction over common property? The reply was affirmative only if it could be proved that she was trying to perform charitable actions which her husband was not in a position to assist in. Bunyan took his belief in feminine *imbecillitas* to its logical conclusion. He allowed no escape for the wife: with a bad husband she was permitted to seem cool in her behaviour, but she had to remain loyal. Mrs. Badman herself, clinging to a reprobate husband and family is the symbol of a Calvinist Griselda who had no release until death. There

¹¹ Cf. R. B. Schlatter, *Social Ideas of the Religious Leaders, 1660-1688*, pp. 31-59 for a mass of contemporary education theory; and Irene Parker, *Dissenting Academies of England* for the syllabuses of these establishments, of which Daniel Defoe is a typical product.

¹² Cf. Dorothy Marshall, "Domestic Servants of the 18th Century" in *Economica*, April, 1929.

¹³ Cf. Edward Dering, *Godly Private Prayers* advised the man never to discuss his affairs with his wife. Many women would have sided with that wife who added to the copy now in Huntington Library, the words, "if thy wife be a foolish woman or a whorish woman". (L. B. Wright, *Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, p. 246n.)

were no seventeenth century suffragettes or deaconesses to rewrite these instructions, although divorce was being discussed in academic circles. Perkins, in his same *Christian Oeconomie* gave expression to theological gropings. His provisions included divorce in cases of desertion, "malicious dealing" and adultery, and it was to his *Oeconomie* that another great Christ's graduate, John Milton, turned when re-opening a subject which Bunyan himself felt no need to discuss.

Bunyan's social philosophy penetrated little further in 1663, but we hardly read his work for these views. They find acceptance in the context of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Mr. Badman* where practical divinity is freed from its theoretical fetters. Bunyan's virtue as a writer lies rather in the creation of characters and symbols than in the proposition of concepts. He was, I am sure, aware that the domestic guidebooks were counsels of perfection, for in his *Holy Life, the Beauty of Christianity* he regrets how difficult his standards are to follow. What these guiding principles are, he explained near the end of *Christian Behaviour* as Christian Brotherhood and Civil Neighbourhood. He appends thereafter a number of sins which prevent orderly social living: covetousness, pride and adultery, signs of the false backslider. He shows that to deify gain is to disallow of "God's way of disposing with his creatures," and touches upon the punishments prepared for those who seek to disrupt divine providence:

I have observed that sometimes God . . . doth snatch away souls in the very nick of their backsliding, as he served Lot's wife, when she . . . was looking over her shoulder to Sodom. An example that every backslider should remember with astonishment.¹⁴

Such a belief in God's providence was essential to Puritan theology. Writers were assured that to heed the world too greatly was to court disaster in eternity.¹⁵ The rich, particularly, had to guard their souls from a pre-occupation with Civil Neighbourhood. Large estates depended upon amicable relations with tenants and the rest of the countryside, but to surrender one's whole attention to the provision of feasts was to create a debit in more than one balance-sheet:

they have so many fine cloaths and ornaments to get and use; and so any rooms to beautifie and adorn, and so many servants to talk with and that attend them, and so many flowers to plant and dress, and walks and places of pleasure to mind, and so many Visitors to entertain . . . and so many hours to sleep, that the day, that year, their lives are gone, before they could have while to know what they lived for.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Works*, ii, p. 574.

¹⁵ Cf. cases of conscience regarding those who flee before the plague, and deliberations in 18th century of the morality of joining sick-clubs. (See *Trans. Bapt. Hist. Soc.* v, pp. 121-2.)

¹⁶ *Christian Directory*, p. 632.

It was commonplace that the poor were fortunate in their lack of worldly temptations, but their poverty did not totally exculpate them. Like Bunyan dwelling upon Lot's wife, Baxter wrote:

think on these things, think of them once a day at least . . . Heaven is not a May game and Hell is not a fleabiting. Make not a jeast of Salvation or Damnation.¹⁷

With such forthright language, Baxter and Bunyan deal with the temptations of The World and warn their readers of the virtues of Christian Behaviour.

At this point Baxter turns to *Christian Politicks*, a field into which Bunyan was not equipped to follow. Some of his brief statements in *Antichrist and his Ruin* were issued¹⁸ as an anthology to discourage Nonconformist opposition to George III. Political statements in Bunyan's work are rare; when they are found, their tone is one of acceptance or partial rejection in favour of divine providence. Where he mentions the provision of social justice in England, one may detect a satirical note, but it does not proceed from a spirit of Republicanism, as some modern accounts might have us believe, or from a desire for the Millenium:

We have seen a great deal of [trouble] in our days . . . especially since the discovery of the Popish plot, for then we began to fear cutting of throats, of being burned in our beds, and of seeing our children dashed in pieces before our faces. But looking about us, we found we had a gracious king, brave parliaments, a stout city, good lord-mayors, honest sherrifs, substantial laws against them, and these we made the object of our hope, quite forgetting the direction in this exhortation, "Let Israel hope in the Lord".¹⁹

Dr. Schenk has shown (we would add, conclusively) that most recent critics have been vitiated by their *parti pris* in their estimates of political thought during the Interregnum. Winstanley the Digger, and Bunyan the Baptist, share a common view of Nature and of God's disposition of its fruits, but Bunyan, nourished in the peaceful tradition of Tudor Puritanism, would never have supported him in revolt. He was as reactionary as the Surrey parson who figures as villain in the story of the Digger adventure on St. George's Hill. Nor can one accept the current academic view, most memorably stated in Mr. Eliot's phrase from *Little Gidding*, "united in the strife that divided them," which errs too much in the opposite direction. Dr. Schenk's conclusion that the undertakings of Winstanley and other republican leaders most closely resemble the Fraticelli, Lollard and Hussite revolts, is, we are sure, justified. By reading the history of the revolutionary period, not as a modern but as a contemporary, Schenk foregoes

¹⁷ *Poor Man's Family Book*, p. 266.

¹⁸ John Martin, ed., *Political Sentiments of John Bunyan* (1798).

¹⁹ *Israel's Hope Encouraged, Works* i, p. 585.

the advantage of working from a dialectic in historical thought. He is able the more readily to expose modern falsification, both in interpretation and in quotation of original documents²⁰ and also to discard those of our contemporaries who have been deceived by their own enthusiasm. To express history as a series of revolutionary cycles which approach through the era of 1789 the maturity of 1917 is to have failed entirely to ask what motives led to any of these revolutionary precedents and to sweep into one receptacle the anticlericals Langland, Chaucer and More, agricultural reformers like the Diggers,²¹ pseudochrists, anti-sectarians, Bunyan, Baxter, George Fox and many others: to unite in the strife that divided them and with a vengeance. Only those who appropriate to their own scholarship a monopoly in critical analysis of men and history, could demand so many past adherents to justify them.

Bunyan's conception of unity, Christian Brotherhood, sought to return prodigal children to an ever-loving Father, of whom Badman's father was a convenient prototype in his writing. It had no intention of socialising or of rejecting individuality in favour of a stereotype. All mankind should be brothers but should continue to accept their different positions in the body politic, where their proper gifts were needed. Those ministers who proposed theories of equality²² were seeking to answer moral questions and to create an ideal. Their practical sense told them that sinful expressions of personality could not be always removed: they had the technique of reprobation to meet these emergencies, and their conduct-books applied only to the elect. All of them employed the book of domestic guidance to encourage householders to establish under their roof a family as pleasing to God as the church itself. Their advice was not new for the tradition extends from the Medieval *Summa* to Baxter and Bunyan. When we study *Christian Behaviour* or *Christian Directory*, models for social deportment in Restoration England, we should remember that they owe their form not only to William Perkins' *Christian Oeconomie* but to the earliest English version of all, the Lollard *Of Weddid Men and Wifis and of Here Children*, and beyond that to Thomas Aquinas, whose dogma

²⁰ Cf. Schenk's comments upon Petegorsky's version of *Tyrannocrat* in *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War* and upon Leonard Hamilton's edition of Winstanley, with introduction by Christopher Hill.

²¹ Schenk underestimates the importance of agricultural motives in Winstanley's revolt. Cf. R. C. Latham, "English Revolutionary Thought, 1640-1660," *History*, March, 1945.

²² Cf. I. Grubb, *Quakerism and Industry before 1800* (Chap. v.), which shows how the equality of the Quakers in worship was reflected in their common simplicity of dress and their prohibition of luxury articles was in the interest of Christian Brotherhood.

found its most satisfying literary analogue in Dante's description of *l'amor che muove le sol e l'altri stelle*.

Bunyan's pattern of behaviour, his Brotherhood and Neighbourhood, depends upon a tradition which could reconcile a Church with its Lollards, and Hussites. Therefore although his Calvinism forced him to dismiss many weak brothers, Bunyan surveyed all estates and callings and rejoiced when they conformed to his order. Then, Brotherhood and Neighbourliness led, step by step, logically along the plain pathway to God. He concludes his theoretical discussion in *Christian Behaviour* with the magnificent analogy of garden flowers :

Christians are like the several flowers in a garden, that have upon them the dew of heaven, which being shaken with the wind, they let fall their dew at each other's roots, whereby they are jointly nourished, and become nourishers of one another. For Christians to commune savourily of God's matters one with another, it is as if they opened to each other's nostrils boxes of perfume.²³

This will perhaps explain why Christian was provided with a companion for his journey to the next world.

The ethical propositions in Bunyan's work come to life most in the dramatisation and character of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Mr. Badman*. In the latter most strongly, we are given his rule of life from a negative position, in the sections devoted to lying, swearing, drunkenness, concupiscence, and extortion; positively, too, we have (in the careers of Mrs. Badman and her father-in-law) the duty of good parents. In *Badman's* own life the correct behaviour of the appreciative, the theory of the just price and the ethics of bankruptcy are all implied; these are some of the fruits of Bunyan's widening experience.

In allegories and in this one superb novel Bunyan gave concrete embodiment to his theories. Setting them forth thus, *sub specie eternitatis*, Bunyan is capable of commanding greater respect from modern readers. To appreciate his precise control over his symbols we should occasionally look into his lesser booklets. There, in simple terms, and in his novel less directly, the universal importance of Bunyan's writings is made explicit, for the literary student and Nonconformist reader alike.

MAURICE HUSSEY.

²³ *Works* ii, 570. Cf. also Henri Takon, *John Bunyan, L'Homme et l'Oeuvre*. (Paris, 1948), pp. 352-3.

REMINDER.

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