

John Smyth and Thomas Helwys:

THE TWO FIRST ENGLISH PREACHERS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.
RESEMBLANCES AND CONTRASTS.

JOHN SMYTH began his career with a devout belief in the efficacy of force for the suppression of error, as is proved by the following passage from his *Pattern of True Prayer*, a treatise which he published in 1605, giving the substance of certain sermons preached by him when he was Puritan "lecturer" to the city of Lincoln: "When there is a toleration of many religions, the kingdom of God is shouldered out of doors by the Devil's kingdom: for without question the Devil is so subtle that he will procure, through the advantage of man's natural inclination to false doctrine and worship, more by thousands to follow strange religions than the truth of God's word: wherefore the magistrates should cause all men to worship the true God, or else punish them with imprisonment, confiscation of goods or death as the quality of the cause requireth."

But such stout words as these against heretics and certain hyper-Calvinist pronouncements¹ were in positively humorous contrast with the extreme kindliness of his nature. From the testimony of friend and foe alike, from his lack of personal bitterness against his opponents, from his actions and from incidental passages in his writings we gain the impression of a singularly loving and lovable disposition.

Helwys, on the other hand, so far as we can judge from the little that we know about him, would appear to have been cast in a far sterner mould than Smyth, capable of great harshness, not only towards "errors," but also towards individuals holding erroneous opinions—in short, just the stuff of which persecutors are made, even though a process of reasoning ultimately brought him to the conviction that religious persecution is a sin.

But, notwithstanding a hidden antagonism between the temperaments of the two men, Helwys was for five years after their first meeting so ardent and adoring a disciple of Smyth that

¹ See the passage in which from the fearful doctrine that God does not will the salvation of all men he draws the conclusion that "if we do discern any man to be a reprobate," it is our duty "directly and particularly to pray for his speedy damnation and all the means effecting the same"!

to tell the story of his leader's development is to tell his story too.²

Smyth did not immediately draw the full logical conclusion from his conversion to the faith of "the Separation" between Church and world. In a letter written near the close of 1607, shortly before his flight to Holland with his little "company" of Separatists from the Vale of Trent, he assured Richard Bernard, a Puritan clergyman in that neighbourhood, who with him had gone to the verge of Separation, but had then drawn back, that he not only ascribed to "magistrates" certain rights of supervision over the Church, but also taught "that it is the Magistrate's office to . . . abolish idolatry and all false ways . . . to command and cause all men within their dominions to walk in the ways of God being fitted and prepared thereunto, and that by the examples of David, Josaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, Nehemiah."

In 1609 he published this letter in Amsterdam, together with a voluminous commentary thereon, under the title *Parallels, Censures, Observations*. By this time he had come into contact with a congregation of Mennonite Baptists, whose pastor Hans de Ries had been profoundly influenced by the writings of Caspar Schwenckfeld, a contemporary and fellow-countryman of Luther who anticipated much of the teaching of George Fox and the Quakers. These new strains of mysticism and pacifism, which were gradually to become predominant in his thinking, were as yet in conflict with the semi-Erastian reverence for "magistrates" which he had brought with him from England. He still held that kings should act as iconoclasts, destroying the very buildings which had been defiled by the Roman worship. But at the same time he taught that the kings of the Old Testament typified "the saints" in the New.

By this allegorical method of interpreting the Old Testament, he soon became convinced that circumcision, which his fellow-Separatists took to be a foreshadowing of the rite of baptism, was a symbol of the sealing by "the Spirit of promise" of "a spiritual infant regenerate by the Spirit and the Word," and that therefore his own baptism as an infant was invalid. But he knew of no Church which he could "join with a good conscience."³ For the Mennonites tolerated a heretical belief, expressly denounced by

² In a heartrending lament over his separation from a leader whom he now held to be an apostate from the true faith, Helwys protested that in past happy days there was no conceivable sacrifice that he and those who adhered to him in the breach with Smyth would not willingly have made to retain him as their pastor, and that they had actually "neglected" themselves and their families "and respected him," adding "and we confess we had good cause to do so in respect of those most excellent gifts and graces of God that then did abound in him: and all our love for him was too little for him and not worthy of him" (Declaration of Faith, 1611).

³ See his *Last Book*.

Smyth in his treatise against infant baptism, that Christ's flesh was not "of the substance of His mother," but was miraculously formed in her womb. Hence in desperation he was driven to the desperate expedient of the se-baptism.

But during the months which followed the publication of his polemic against infant baptism—the *Character* (i.e. Mark) of the *Beast*—he was converted to the theology set forth by the Amsterdam Mennonites in the so-called "Confession of Waterland," a remarkable document, inspired by a simple and childlike faith in the love of God towards all mankind, denying the doctrine of original sin and asserting the unlawfulness of combining Church office with the holding of civil office. Finally he overcame his scruple about the toleration of a heresy concerning the method of the Incarnation by reasoning that "the Christ's natural flesh was made, but that we could search into Christ's spiritual flesh, to be made flesh of that His flesh . . . in the communion of the same spirit."⁴ Not later than March, 1610, he and his tiny "company" of about thirty persons, signed a document expressing their repentance of the se-baptism and their desire to be admitted "to the true Church of Christ as speedily as it can be done"; and in May, Smyth signed the "Confession of Waterland," thereby subscribing to the following declaration:

"This office of the worldly authority the Lord Jesus hath not ordained in his spiritual kingdom of the New Testament."

It seems likely that Smyth's breach with Calvinism and surrender to the gentle influence of his Mennonite friends began the process of liberating the kindly instincts of his nature, so long overlaid by a severe theology and a rigid ecclesiastical creed, and of calming his once feverish zeal. Almost from the time of his arrival in Amsterdam he had started controversy after controversy with the previously exiled Separatist Church there, magnifying molehills of differences into mountains:⁵ and his language about the time of his conversion to Baptist opinions had become vehement and acrimonious, though, as he naively begged Richard Bernard to believe, his rebukes were intended to be "sharp physic" for the restoration of his friends' spiritual health. But now he was to find himself excluded from "true" Church fellowship—on the urgent advice of a sister-Church consulted by the Amsterdam Mennonites—because of his "absurd" error in baptizing himself. Yet at the same time his reputation of the se-baptism exposed him to a furious onslaught from his former

⁴ See his *Last Book*.

⁵ See his *Differences of the Churches of the Separation* (1608), explaining the trivial difference about the conduct of public worship which had caused him to break off communion with them.

chief disciple and bosom friend, Helwys:⁶ while many other former friends whom his contentiousness and his controversial methods had changed into bitter enemies waged war against him in the press. But, by a Divine alchemy, the harshness and hatred of his new foes so wrought upon his chastened spirit as to complete the work which the gentleness of his new friends had begun. From this time of sharp trial and cruel humiliation, he was to emerge to preach his new faith in religious liberty in language suffused with a sweet and passionate love to God and man expressing itself in the tenderest forbearance towards "weak" Christians partially blinded by "ignorance of errors."⁷

It was thus that he summed up—in a short treatise with the long title *The Last Book of John Smyth Called the Retraction of His Errors and the Confirmation of the Truth*, published by his "company" after his death, along with a Confession of Faith and an account of his last days—the great fault of his controversial writings and the moral which he had drawn from his recent bitter experiences: "The contention for outward matters . . . hath broken the rules of love and charity, which is the superior law. . . . My words have been stout and mingled with gall, and therefore hath the Lord repaid me home full measure into my bosom. . . . For my part, the Lord hath taught me thereby."

Being excluded from the only "true" and orderly Church which he knew, Smyth seems to have turned for comfort and help to the mystic who had quietly held aloof from outward communion with any Christian Church, bidding his followers await in patience the time when it should please God to "build a Church out of the world and gather together in one the children of God which are scattered abroad." While refusing to partake of the sacraments till a true Church should be established with a discipline separating believers from unbelievers, Schwenckfeld had nevertheless, on behalf of himself and his disciples, declared: "We separate ourselves in our course of life from no one who loves Christ and lives rightly." His mystical theology, with its emphatic differentiation between "inward" and "outward" helps, and "inward" and "outward" communion, had evidently supplied Smyth, not only with the impulse to a new joy and serenity, but also with (what to a man of his cast of mind was almost a necessity) a logical basis for his new hope and charity.⁸ Moreover, it provided him with an additional ground for the belief that religion—to quote from his *Confession* ought to be left free to

⁶ See especially his *Advertisement* (1611).

⁷ See Article 78 of his *Confession of Faith*.

⁸ For my knowledge of Schwenckfeld's theology I am chiefly indebted to Barclay's *Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*, Dexter's *Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, and Dorner's *History of Protestant Theology*.

every man's conscience." For if—as he says in his *Last Book*—rites and methods of Church government, modes of worship and forms of words are "no part of saving righteousness," then to resort to force in order to suppress certain outward forms or to impose others is obviously an irrational proceeding.

A notable article of the *Confession* runs thus: "All penitent and faithful Christians are brethren in the communion of the outward Church . . . by what name soever they are known . . . though compassed with never so many ignorances and infirmities: and we salute them all with a holy kiss. . . ."⁹

Another actually declares that: "The new creature which is begotten of God needs not the outward scriptures, creatures or ordinances of the Church to support them (sic). Nevertheless, the regenerate, in love to others, can and will do no other than use the outward things of the Church for the gaining and supporting of others."

Christian love, Christian meekness, faith in the loving-kindness of God towards His erring creatures, the realisation that Christianity consists only in the soul's personal relation to Christ, the Mennonite repudiation of resort to force for any purpose, a mysticism imbibed from Schwenckfeld—all these thoughts and dispositions of the heart, gradually formed in Smyth by the experiences of his life in Holland, combined at last with that ideal of an entire "separation" between the kingdoms of this world, and the Kingdom of Christ which he had half grasped before he left England, to produce a many-sided, deeply rooted conviction that no form or degree of physical coercion ought ever in any circumstances to be used as a means of overawing the human spirit. One article of his *Confession of Faith*—the eighty-fifth—sets forth the Mennonite doctrine that the Christian duty of non-resistance to evil cannot possibly be performed by any man who, holding an office of authority in the State, has to draw "the sword" against his enemies and persecutors. The famous eighty-fourth Article declares that:

"The magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion or matters of conscience . . . but to leave Christian religion free to every man's conscience and to handle only civil transgressions, wrongs and injuries of man against man . . . for Christ only is the lawgiver of the Church and conscience."

After a brief illness, Smyth passed away in August, 1612, in the friendly shelter of the "Cake-House of Jan Munter"—a semi-collegiate building where a wealthy Mennonite manufacturer of

⁹ Before his conversion to Mennonite beliefs, Smyth had been a "rigid Separatist," teaching that "false" churches unseparated from the world, were "antichristian," although he had always insisted that some of their members belonged to the Invisible Church.

ship-biscuit had apparently housed him and his company—almost with his last breath joining eagerly with “the brethren” in discourse on Divine truth, ever seeking fresh light, but firmly refusing to discuss any question which “tended to strife” among Christians.

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To turn from Smyth to Helwys is to be startled at once by a violent contrast and by an amazing paradox. The disciple had refused to follow the leader any further along the road to the Mennonite fold than the first step of repudiating the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation. In his case, at all events,¹⁰ the doctrine of religious liberty took its rise not in any liberal opinions, but on the contrary, in the rigid ecclesiasticism of a fanatic, unsoftened and unswayed (though not quite untouched) by the teaching of Continental mystics and Anabaptists. And he actually made his intolerance the basis of his plea for toleration!

His *Mystery of Iniquity*, published in the year of Smyth's death, expressly dooms to everlasting perdition every man who had ever held the name, office or power of a bishop and had died without repenting of his error, every Puritan who remained in the Church of England, every Separatist who defended infant baptism, in short, everyone who in any single particular departed from the Divinely appointed Apostolic government of the Church—“unto which whosoever addeth or taketh away, either by word or action . . . the Lord will add unto them all His judgments and take away all His mercies.”¹¹ “The simple-hearted, being led by

¹⁰ It is impossible to be quite certain whether or not Smyth, and Helwys with him, had fully grasped and clearly stated in their teaching the doctrine of religious liberty before Smyth's surrender to the Mennonite influence caused the breach between the two. By the date of his publication—in 1609—of his treatise against infant baptism, Smyth had already reached the point of regarding the Mennonite doctrine of the unlawfulness of combining Church membership with the tenure of civil office, as an open question to be decided if and when a “magistrate” should be converted to the Separatist faith. (See his preface to the *Character of the Beast*.) Presumably, therefore, he had not long after the se-baptism so far outgrown the state of mind in which the *Parallels* (prescribing to “magistrates” the role of iconoclasts) had been written—although the earlier treatise was published in the same week with the later. But Smyth's development at this time was so extraordinarily rapid and the exact date of the breach between him and Helwys so uncertain, that it is impossible to fix the precise time by which either man finally repudiates the last vestige of a belief in the lawfulness of any use of force for religious purposes.

¹¹ The actual wording of the passage here quoted is “the exact rule of the law of Christ Jesus distinctly and most perfectly set down in the New Testament for a law of election and ordination (i.e. of the ministers of the Church) for ever.” The errors which were to be punished by the loss of the souls of the transgressors were apparently almost exclusively ecclesiastical, not doctrinal, errors. Any refusal to carry out with complete

their teachers . . . if they justify any one error or false way or condemn any one truth" would share their leader's doom.

Moreover, these amazingly harsh sentences were explicitly applied by Helwys to the individual cases of his own former dear friends and fellow-sufferers in the search for truth. He had recently called Smyth "that wicked man" and had accused him of having committed the sin against the Holy Ghost in going back upon the se-baptism¹² and he now denounced John Robinson, the beloved and honoured pastor of the Church which sent out the Pilgrim Fathers, as "a malicious adversary of God's truth" who had never at any time "known Christ." As to the Puritan clergy in the Church of England, many of whom must have been his guides and teachers in the days before his "separation," he told them that "the fire with which you kindle the hearts of men" was the "false enlightening and heat of a false spirit" breathed on them by the bishops at their ordination and warned them that "other spirit have you none."

But this awful bigotry was the outcome of Helwys' profound respect for the conscience of the individual. "Let all take heed," he urged, "and learn to know the truth of God and to love it and to understand His word themselves . . . if they be not able to judge and discern of themselves (by the direction of God's spirit) they can never have faith nor assurance in the way they walk. . . . False prophets or true prophets are all alike to them, they being ignorant of the scriptures whereby they should examine and try their doctrine . . . and yet such would have their ignorance excuse them, although their ignorance be only for want of love of the truth." For the true meaning of the New Testament is only to be discovered by Christians "reading and searching and meditating the Scriptures day and night, and praying without doubt that the Lord would give them the spirit of wisdom to direct them to the true understanding and meaning."

This clear realization that the meaning of the Scriptures is revealed only to the devout and earnest seeker, enabled Helwys to see through the strange fallacy by which "the magistrate" was supposed to be able to discriminate between "false" and

logical consistency the root doctrine of "the Separation" that "two or three gathered together in Christ's Name are a true Church" was regarded by Helwys as damnable. But he showed little or nothing of this bitter, fanatical spirit, in combating what he held to be unscriptural theological opinions. The curious belief that the New Testament contains a precise code of laws for the constitution of the Church had been held by Barrowe, the apostle of the "rigid" Separation, who had actually claimed that the model of the Christian Church had been planned in every detail by Divine care like the model of the Tabernacle under the Mosaic dispensation!

¹² Helwys unjustly insisted that in so doing Smyth had forsaken the true Separatist faith of which he had been a zealous preacher—an accusation against which Smyth defended himself in his *Last Book*.

"true" churches, and so to be commissioned to persecute the former but not the latter.

At the same time, his deep conviction that ignorance of the Scriptures is itself a deadly sin filled him with an intense dread of religious persecution. For he realised with agonizing vividness how impossible it was for ordinary men and women, subject to the threat of persecution, to read the Bible with an unbiassed mind. "There cannot be," he pleaded, "so unjust a thing and of so great cruel tyranny under the sun as to force men's consciences in their religion to God, seeing that if they err they must pay the price of their transgression with the loss of their souls. This hierarchy of Archbishops and lord bishops doth nothing differ from the first Beast: for the first Beast keeps both the spirit and the word from the people: and they keep the spirit of God in bondage, and then is the word of God of no effect."

But he did not confine himself to claiming freedom from coercion for those who sought to base their ecclesiastical practices and their doctrines solely upon Holy Writ. For all acts of obedience to Divine authority performed merely in deference to the authority of men were a kind of sacrilege.¹³ Probably he would have included the negative obedience of refraining from "false worship" from fear or love of man under the same condemnation. At all events, he expressly disclaimed any wish to persecute Roman Catholics, "if they be true and faithful subjects of the King. For we do freely profess that our lord the King hath no more power over their consciences than over ours, and that is none at all. . . . He hath no authority as a king, but in earthly causes." "We could wish that the wholesome word of doctrine with all the cords of love were applied to them for their information and drawing them from their blind errors." Even the open enemies of the Christian faith were not to be coerced or restrained by force. "Men's religion to God," he argued, "is betwixt God and themselves. . . . Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertaineth not to the earthly power to punish them in the least degree."

This strange paradoxical blend of fanaticism with common-sense, of extreme harshness with a remarkable degree of charity, was apparently the spirit of all Helwys's little company, who, after their return to their native land, became "the first Baptist Church in England."¹⁴ In 1615, a member of that Church (identified by

¹³ "they . . . whom the love of God constraineth, their obedience only shall be acceptable to God, and will the King make men . . . bring an unacceptable sacrifice to God? God forbid."

¹⁴ i.e. the first Baptist church on English soil of whose establishment, constitution and doctrine we possess any clear historical record, the first in a long series of churches which came to be recognised as the Baptist denomination in England.

most students of Baptist origins with John Murton, or Morton, who went with Helwys in the secession from "Smyth's company" and subsequently became a pillar of the London Church) published a treatise entitled *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned*, in which he pleased that "blasphemers" should be borne with, in the hope that if their lives are prolonged they may attain to conversion and salvation, and suggested that English Roman Catholics would probably be as peaceable and loyal citizens as their Dutch co-religionists if they were allowed similar freedom of worship. But in this same treatise he almost outdid his leader in the vehemence with which he prophesied the punishment in the next world of any unrepented error in worship.

"As there is but one God, so there is but one way of worshipping Him, out of the which whosoever is and repenteth not thereof shall pay a dear price. They are all without exception, in this fearful estate, to be cast into the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone."

The generosity, the Christian spirit, the "sweet reasonableness," the remarkable degree of enlightenment displayed by Helwys and his company when they pleaded for respect for the consciences of men whose "errors" they held to be damnable, are in the most extraordinary contrast with the fierce fanaticism of their contention that their own form of ecclesiastical organisation was the one true Church out of which no salvation was possible. It was as though men tossing in a hideous nightmare had, in the midst of the shapes of horror, seen some fair vision dawn.

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