

Orthodoxy and the Teachings of the Early Quakers: Some Common Ground

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This subject is currently of great importance as small groups of Quakers are now forming in Moscow, St Petersburg and other Russian cities. Effective contact between these groups and the Russian Orthodox Church needs to proceed on the basis of real mutual knowledge. It is always easier to find differences than similarities. This article will, however, concentrate on the similarities between the teachings of the early Quakers and Orthodoxy. At first it is difficult to see any similarities between the two, but if we look more closely and base our observations on the fact that they share the same origins in the teachings of Christ, it is possible to identify several areas where they emphasise the importance of characteristics that are less important or even absent in the western churches. It is of course clear that in its origin the 'Friends' (Quaker) movement had no relation to the eastern church and was in no way influenced by it. Established in the seventeenth century, it was, if not a radically new doctrine, then sufficiently new for the England of its day. Eastern Christianity was probably completely unaware of the existence of the movement. Yet as early as the eighteenth century many Quakers lived in Orthodox countries, travelled about and helped the poor, and in this way drew attention to themselves. Consequently many religious and non-religious writers in nineteenth-century Russia wrote about them and described their lives. The memoirs of Friends themselves about their travels in these countries have also been preserved.

One of the difficulties in studying the relationship between the Quakers and the Orthodox is that present-day Quakers have no established written teaching, nor do they have a creed in the normal sense of the word, and from the early twentieth century they have declined to adhere closely to Biblical traditions and have instead opened their society up to new and sometimes radically opposed attitudes. For this reason I intend to concentrate on the 'classical' Quaker teachings of George Fox, Robert Barclay, William Penn and others mainly from the seventeenth century. A second difficulty is that a number of similarities turn out to be relative only, or else similarities in form rather than in content. Here I will try to be objective and to ignore much that would only appear to be similar.

One of the earliest features of Christianity, to some extent inherited from the Jewish tradition of communion with God, was direct contact with God through prayer. A constant refrain in the Torah is that 'God spoke' to whomever it might be. It seems that by the beginning of the Christian era the Jews had lost this direct contact with God and had transformed it into a purely nominal activity. This is why Christ challenged the Pharisees, who at that time represented the law of Moses in Israel. The early Christians returned to the sources of monotheism and began to pray

once again to the Living God, to 'stand before the face' of God and to be conscious of the presence of God in everyday life. No amount of persecution could kill the Christians' powerful impulse to commune with God. The eastern church preserved this practice from the earliest times. However, the western church, after it became the state church of the Roman Empire, showed a growing tendency to 'distance itself' from God, who appeared in church on Sundays, and to place more emphasis on duty than on the desire for communion with God. This tendency was particularly evident during the Reformation, when Protestantism sanctioned churchgoing and personal contact with God as social and secular activities. In consequence there was a widespread desire to return to the roots of Christianity. All kinds of alternatives to the traditional 'western' understanding of communion with God made their appearance. People were trying to get back to a basic understanding of the Scriptures, the direct guide to establishing contact with the Living God. Some of these people were Quakers. Their protest against the official Church was not political but spiritual. 'The most important thing in Quaker doctrine is that God is located in the inner world of the Believer, and stress is laid on each person's capacity to commune with God individually, in his soul, without any intermediary.'¹

We can see the same phenomenon in the Russian Orthodox Church. Almost every prayer said by an individual is addressed directly to God. If you ask any Orthodox believer he will say that he has 'spoken with God' directly, that his contact was personal: he stood before God face to face. The priest in the Orthodox Church is not a leader, as in western churches, but rather a servant of the people who are praying in church. This is what one Quaker wrote about direct contact with God:

and when all my belief in them [the priests] and in all men was gone, so, that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell me what to do, then, oh then, I heard a voice, which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that could speak to thy condition', and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.²

'Each Christian', writes Nicholas Zernov, 'hears the voice of the Spirit ...'.³ Here we have a common feature linking the Quakers and the Orthodox. If each person can relate directly to God and can listen to the Holy Spirit within him or her then each Christian acknowledges the direct leadership of Christ and follows Him alone. 'And therefore it is good to confess Christ before men, to be your Priest, Prophet, your Shepherd, your Bishop, your way, your mediator, that makes your peace betwixt God and you, and be valiant for his glorious name and truth upon the earth.'⁴ Orthodox prayers, whether they are said by each person individually or in the course of a church service, address Christ directly: each person is under the leadership of Christ himself. He is called 'the king of the earth and the saviour of our souls', and 'the true and living way'. Jesus is addressed not only as God but also as a personal priest, a king, a prophet – a real living person who is not far away from us.

The early Quakers believed that God is within one, and that nothing can be a substitute for the spiritual experience of knowing God within oneself. In the West the Quakers were perhaps the first not only to bring God close to themselves, showing him to be real and accessible, but also to assert that he is alive and active in each individual person: that is, each individual is able to receive an internal mystical revelation from God, to be illuminated by divine light; any individual can be a prophet and a priest. Hence we see the pattern of Quaker meetings for worship, when communal silent prayer can be interrupted by any of the worshippers who feel the 'voice of the Holy Spirit' within them. This phenomenon is also present in the Orthodox

faith. God called us into the world and gave us each a particular task. He lives in us, and so anyone who recognises God's calling must listen to the voice of God in him and obey it. 'Oh God', pray the Orthodox, 'do not take your Holy Spirit from us, but renew us who pray to you.' These words, from the Prayer for the Third Hour, do not refer to the fact that God gave us the Holy Spirit, but more significantly to the fact that he did not take it away from us, which means that each person has the Holy Spirit within him or her. On the basis of Gospel texts both the Quakers and the Orthodox have reached the same understanding of the action of God in each individual. Both faiths lack the concept of predestination, of being chosen or not being chosen, which characterises some varieties of Protestantism. Each person is capable of being saved if he or she only desires to be so.

In this context arises another concept: that life itself is a mystical sacrifice, a sacrament. Consciousness of the Holy Spirit within means of course that the whole of one's life must be dedicated to God, that for a Christian there can be no distinction between the 'spiritual' and the 'secular' life. The early Quakers taught that in all things it is essential to follow Christ alone and that all human activities must be directed solely towards developing the 'divine seed' within each individual. This can be done only if one's life is totally dedicated to God. Church sacraments have never had particular significance for Quakers because they strive to make their entire lives mystical. Recent Quaker memoirs speak of their movement as 'one of the most mystical'. A mystical element often appears in their business meetings. They do not recognise a hierarchy, but on the other hand do not accept the democratic authority of the majority either. Only the agreement of the entire community, having discerned the will of God, can achieve results. This is also the case in Orthodoxy. In church, the Orthodox believer is merely preparing for life outside the church. As Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh has pointed out, real life in God begins only after the church service has finished. Many Orthodox writers have noted that it is only through 'constant dedication in prayer' that one can remain permanently in the presence of God and consistently do his will, fulfilling the mission he gave when he sent us out into the world. This is the true life of a Christian. Orthodox services are different from those in western churches. Services are not separated: worship goes on unceasingly, demonstrating that the whole of life is dedicated to God. This complete dedication is not possible without mystical unification with him.

In the early years of their existence the Quakers experienced a great number of revelations and their sermons attracted many people in spite of the fact that they had done away with all the usual church rituals and sacraments. Their whole life was to become a sacrament. The members of a Christian community like this identify themselves not simply as individual participants in a movement or even as people involved in one task, but rather as living parts of a whole organism, the 'common body' as it is called in Orthodoxy. The Friends have had remarkable experiences confirming their sense of being part of a common body, their sense of communal participation in a very important mission. In April 1659, 164 Quakers came to parliament with a petition in which they asked to be put in prison instead of their 'brothers in faith'.

So we in love to our brethren, do offer up our bodies and ourselves to you for to put us as lambs into the same dungeons and houses of correction, and their straw, and nasty holes and prisons, and do stand ready a sacrifice, for to go into their places, in love to our brethren that they may go forth and they may not die in prison, as many of the brethren dead already,

for we can not but lay down our lives for our brethren and to take their sufferings upon us ...⁵

This statement not only demonstrates their devotion to one another and their mutual supportiveness but is indirect evidence of their sense of belonging to a common body. These Friends were not concerned that they were submitting their own bodies to suffering; what was important for them was that part of their common body was suffering too much. The early Quakers, then, developed a feeling of participation in one divine mystery. A similar feeling of community has always existed in Orthodoxy, and especially in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Orthodox 'give the impression of a united family'.⁶ A 'community' is not just a group of people who go to the same church, but a group of people living together in one village, or one particular area of a town, working together, praying together, and making decisions together. The whole of the Orthodox Church is called '*sobornaya*': 'communal'. This tradition dates from early apostolic times, when the authority of each individual, be he bishop, priest or parishioner, was subordinated to the authority of the assembled community.

Another feature that the early Quakers and the Orthodox share is silence. For the Quakers silence is the basic form of prayer which they practise at all times, at meetings for worship, before meals, before important events. 'They are waiting upon the Lord, to meet in the silence of flesh, and to watch for the strings of his life, and the breaking forth of his power amongst them.'⁷ Waiting on God in silence certainly bears fruit. Sometimes during silent prayer Friends begin to speak. Anyone who feels that the Holy Spirit has come to him or her can do so. This form of meditation can be more or less profound, but each speaker is expected to contribute according to his or her ability. The main thing is to concentrate and wait to know what precisely God is saying to you. From the very earliest times in the seventeenth century, many Friends constantly experienced the activity of the Holy Spirit during prayer meetings; sometimes while preaching they would, literally, quake. Orthodox services are of course completely different from the Quakers' silent meetings. The whole service is built around the voices of the priests and deacons and readers and the singing of the choir. The prayers are said by specified people; but most of the congregation, on whose behalf the service is taking place, do not sing or pray as they do in the western churches: they remain silent. The Orthodox Church also has a well-developed tradition of monastics who have taken the vow of silence – indeed, this is considered to be one of the highest forms of monasticism. The Holy Fathers of the church always advised the faithful to be economical with words and to remain silent most of the time. This tendency is still very strong.

There are times when we do not need any words of prayer, neither our own or anyone else's, and then we pray in perfect silence. This perfect silence is the ideal prayer, provided, however, that the silence is real and not day-dreaming ... we stand upon God, completely open in the act of adoration.⁸

Although silence is not the main form of Orthodox prayer, then, it is one of the forms it takes, and is regarded as important for the achievement of spiritual perfection.

In the seventeenth century, George Fox and the Friends were attempting to return to the basic roots of Christianity: they believed that the western churches had taken the wrong path. The Orthodox Church too believes it is faithful to the traditions of the early church. There are of course major differences between the Quaker move-

ment and the Orthodox Church: just one obvious example is the fact that the Quakers have never accepted the Scriptures as the ultimate authority. Yet in their styles of spirituality the two are surprisingly close. This gives us grounds for hope that on the important level of the practising individual believer mutually fruitful contact will continue and increase.

Notes and References

- ¹ T. A. Pavlova, *Dzhon Bellers i angliiskaya sotsial'noekonomicheskaya mysl' vtoroi poloviny XVII v.* (Nauka, Moscow, 1979), p. 70.
- ² *The Journal of George Fox* (London, 1975), p. 11.
- ³ Nicholas Zernov, *The Church of the Eastern Christians* (London, 1942), p. 12.
- ⁴ George Fox, epistle 385, 1683.
- ⁵ Thomas Burton, *The Parliamentary Diary from 1656 to 1659*, vol. IV (London, 1928), p. 440.
- ⁶ Zernov, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- ⁷ Isaac Pennington, *The Light Within and Selected Writings* (Philadelphia), p. 24.
- ⁸ Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer* (London, 1966), p. 109.

(Translated from the Russian by Alice Vessey.)