

WILLIAM PENN'S "HOLY EXPERIMENT"

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The rootage of Quaker NonViolence in the radicalization of the Puritan Reformation has been reviewed in a previous "Chapter" in this series. Now we turn to the remarkable further development of that set of ideas within the special opportunities of the American colonial enterprise.

William Penn was heir to aristocratic privilege in Restoration England. King Charles, who returned to the throne in 1660, after the collapse of the Cromwellian revolution, was indebted to Penn's family, because of support which Penn's father Admiral Sir William Penn, had provided Charles when he was Duke of York. The admiral died 1670, leaving a debt of L 16,000.

William was converted to Quakerism while traveling in Ireland in 1667.⁽¹⁾ He returned to England, and took up an enormously prolific mission of writing controversial pamphlets about religious renewal.⁽²⁾ By 1675 he had 36 published titles and 4,500 pages to his credit, all of this before beginning to devote his life to the challenge posed to England, and to puritanism in particular, by the opening of the New World.⁽³⁾

Quakers had already begun preparing to colonize. Already in 1765-67 a group of Friends, with Penn among them, had taken the charter for West New Jersey. His major mission, Pennsylvania, was chartered 1681, but he was also involved with East New Jersey and Delaware, so that four colonies, precursors of three modern states, look back to him as founder.⁽⁴⁾ It was thus in line with developments that were already en route when he accepted the assignment to him of the ownership of Pennsylvania as discharging the Crown's debt to him.

The image of Penn as a lone creative genius should be corrected by more respect for the fact that Quakerism was already a transatlantic culture. Quakers in Penn's four colonies, in Rhode Island and North Carolina and the West Indies, did not think of themselves as starting from scratch but as part of a worldwide movement. Intensive communication with the British base, by letter and by means of many emissaries and missionaries, sustained that self-understanding well into and through the time of the Revolution.

I) Treating the Original Americans as Humans of Equal Dignity

The vision of peaceful colonisation, although different from the examples given by the larger of the older colonies, was not without precedent. Swedes had already been friendly to the Delaware Indians. The Dutch in New York and on the Delaware coasts had been respectful toward the native peoples they met. Roger Williams' 1647 federation of the towns of Rhode Island provided that the European immigrants should recognize the rights of Indians within the territories they acquired. Yet the degree to which Penn made a point of considering colonization to be a peacemaking mission was new.

A considerable shortcoming of Penn's colonizing effort was that he was not in America most of the time, and needed to work via intermediaries and by letter. The archives have two letters which he sent to the Delaware Indians:

London, 18th of 8th Month, 1681

My Friends,⁽⁵⁾ There is one great God and power that hath made the world and all things therein, to whom you and I, and all people owe their being and well-being, and to whom you and I must one day give an account for all that we do in the world; this great God hath written his law in our hearts, by which we are taught and commanded to love and help, and do good to one another, and not to do harm and mischief one to another. Now this great God hath been pleased to make me concerned in your parts of the world, and the king of the country where I live hath given me a great province, but I desire to enjoy it with your love and consent, tht we may always live together as neighbors and friends, else what would the great God say to us, who hath made us not to devour and destroy one another, but live soberly and kindly together in the world? Now I would have you well observe, that I am very sensible of the unkindness and injustice that hath been too much exercised toward you by the people of these parts of thw world, who sought themselves, and to make great advantage by you, rather than be examples of justice and goodness unto you, which I hear hath been matter of trouble to you, and caused great grudgings and animosities⁽⁶⁾, sometimes to the shedding of blood, which hath made the great God angry; but I am not such a man, as is well known in my own country; I have great love and regard towards you, and I desire to win and gain your love and friendship, by a kind, just, and peaceable life, and the people I send are of the same mind,⁽⁷⁾ and shall in all things behave themselves accordingly; and if in any thing any shall offend you or your people, you shall have a full and speedy satisfaction for the same, by an equally number of just men on both sides, that by no means you may have just occasion of being offended against them.⁽⁸⁾ I shall shortly come to you myself, at what time we may more largely and freely confer and discourse of thes matters. In the mean time, I have sent my commissioners to treat with you about land, and a firm league of peace. Let me desire you to be kind to them and the people, and receive these presents and toekesna which I have sent to you, as a testimony of my good will to you, and my resolution to live justly, peaceable, and friendly with you.

I am your loving friend,

William Penn⁽⁹⁾

The five Iroquois peoples had just defined among themselves a stable "Great Peace," so that by implication this arrangement initiated by Penn⁽¹⁰⁾ could reach beyond the Delawares to the rest of the Iroquois.

As long as Penn's successors were responsible for Pennsylvania the commitments to the Delawares were respected.⁽¹¹⁾

II) Religious liberty and free immigration.

Whereas the colonies in New England (except for Rhode Island⁽¹²⁾) assumed the "established" status of the Congregationalist "denomination," and the southern colonies were automatically Anglican, Penn was committed on spiritual or theological grounds to freedom of religious faith and practice.⁽¹³⁾ Not only were dissenters free to come to settle; Penn in fact traveled to the Netherlands and Germany to recruit colonists from the religious minorities.⁽¹⁴⁾ Mennonites heir to the "anabaptist" reform of the 16th century, as well as Dutch Quakers of Mennonite origin, soon to be followed by "Moravians" and several kinds of "Brethren" heir to the "pietist" renewal of the late 17th and early 18th, accepted the offer gratefully and planted their Germanic culture from the Delaware to Harrisburg, an area which to this day is called "Pennsylvania German." As democratic procedures developed, these "German Sects" largely voted for Quaker assemblymen, to the displeasure of leaders like Benjamin Franklin.⁽¹⁵⁾ The first organized opposition to slavery arose in these groups.⁽¹⁶⁾

The popular understanding by Americans, including legal and political historians, concerning the rootage of religious liberty in the 1789 Bill of Rights, undervalues the extent to which the pioneering of Williams and Penn, followed up by a century's experience of the middle colonies, was indispensable to make that commitment possible.

III) The renunciation of war.

The Charter given to Penn and the other founders of Delaware and Jersey by the Crown gave the colony the right to arm and make war against pirates, savages, and other enemies. Penn and his successors consciously made no use of this authorisation. This was of course a natural prolongation of their peace with the Indians, but it went beyond that, since it raised issues

concerning both the security of shipping on the Atlantic and freedom of movement in the West where the French were represented. This renunciation of war was of course what became a problem in the 1750's.

IV) The rejection of the Oath.

It is insufficient to consider these merely as one of the simple life style oddities already identified in Friends' history as "testimonies." Nor is it merely a matter of literally obeying two verses in the New Testament, or merely a radicalization of the abstract moral duty always to tell the truth. What the Oath means is the sacralization of the civil order. It celebrates the claim that the State and God are especially linked, so that each favors and fosters the other. To refuse to take the name of God as a part of one's civil loyalty is to desacralize, to humanize, the institution of government.⁽¹⁷⁾

V) One man one vote

It took time to work out the patterns of denocratic consultation with the entire population of Philadelphia and then of the colony. Yet the commitment in principle to the people's having a say in government, by right, was theologically rooted and the colony evolved more rapidly in that direction, for reasons of spiritual and theological commitment, than did the others. This worked against the interests of Quakers, since it ultimately led to their being outvoted by the more recent nonpacifist immigrants (mostly German Reformed and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians). In the Quaker meetings women also had a voice; in order to facilitate their being heard there were separate meetings of women.

VI) Corrections

Back in England Quakers had themselves been in prison; in fact the first overall organisation of the "denomination" was its "meetings for sufferings" which sought to support and free Friends in the prisons. The Quaker perspective on prisons and prison reform was not dependent on their controlling the government. It continued for centuries. Instead of punishment or debt collection (or extortion), the purpose of detention should be prevention of crime and giving the offender an opportunity to learn to be a good citizen.⁽¹⁸⁾

VII) Visions of International Peace

His interest in America did not distract Penn from continuing to consider himself as a full participant in Enlightenment Europe, as that continent struggled its way out of the heritage of the

Wars of Religion and into the age of Sovereign nations. His 1693 Essay towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe by the Establishment of an European Dyet, Parliament or Estates joined the stream of visions projected by all kinds of thinkers for a stable peacemaking order among the states of Europe, in which he wanted to include even Russia and Turkey. It is a strong specimen of the capacity of persons holding a personal pacifist commitment to address the wider secular order in non-utopian ways.⁽¹⁹⁾ He also wrote a plan for a union of the American colonies in 1697 and a "frame" for peace with Canada in 1709.

VIII) general/public schools

From Quaker beginnings in England there had been a special emphasis on the value of literacy and on educating all children. This worked itself out both in advocating publicly supported basic education for everyone and in developing Quaker-managed elite schools, especially institutions of secondary and higher education.

IX) Open courts.

Penn's vision of a stable society provided for mediators ("public peacemakers") in every community. It was self-evident that the highest visions of due process of law just then being developed in England should apply also in the colonies.

X) Shadows, Limits:

The above listing of ideals and achievements is not without its gaps and flaws. Not everything in the civil realm was dealt with decisively and conclusively in a way of which later centuries would be proud. The major limitations were the following:

a) The Crown charter imposed on Penn provisions for the possibility of the death penalty. Penn did not personally believe that that penalty was absolutely wrong **for the state**. Yet its application in the colonial period was very rare. One report says that by 1700 there had been only one execution in Pennsylvania, for murder.

b) The charter also limited access to office to Christians. This was not a real issue, since there were in the 1680's no atheists, Jews, Muslims or Indians wanting citizen status;⁽²⁰⁾ but of course it is an issue in principle which the seventeenth-century advocates of religious liberty had not yet got around to.⁽²¹⁾

c) Penn seems never to have questioned in principle whether colonisation as such was morally acceptable.⁽²²⁾ He assumed the reciprocal compatibility of the native and European populations, and their two cultures, which would have continued to be possible only if immigration had been very limited, and if the peacemaking arrangement proposed in the first letters had been institutionalized.

d) Some consider it as a weakness, others as an index of creative flexibility, that Penn and his successors were willing to honor the conscience (and the self-interest) of their nonpacifist neighbors by not imposing defencelessness on them. Instead they were ready to deputize nonpacifists for voluntary (non-lethal) police services.⁽²³⁾

e) The proprietary structure itself is of course anti-democratic. It was also a tactical weakness. It hastened the loss of Quaker character in the colony, when in 1718 Penn's heirs converted to the Church of England.

f) The entire "Crown Charter" structure was a major handicap. When James was replaced in 1689 by the "glorious revolution," Penn could be seen as guilty by association with the old Stuart regime. In 1692 his charter was suspended for awhile because of the accusation that he was linked to the Jesuits. It was suspended again later when he went bankrupt because of business losses (unrelated to his nonviolence, but perhaps related to his paying the Indians for land the King had already given him).

g) Penn himself was not a good manager, was not in America often or for long, and did not choose the best people to entrust with his affairs.

XI) The end of formal Quaker control of the Assembly.

By the 1740's, perhaps even earlier, Friends were down to less than 40% of the population of the colony. They continued to dominate the Assembly thanks to the fact that Philadelphia was more strongly represented than the countryside, and thanks to the support of "the German sects," but dissent was rising, pushed by Anglicans, by secularists like Franklin, and by the Scotch-Irish frontiersmen.

The "French and Indian War" was the occasion for the intrinsically tense compromise to fall apart. London continued to assume that on the grounds of the Charter military support had to be provided to the British army on demand by all the colonial governments. Quakers had to come to terms with their being outvoted. Some of them argued that they should generally choose to avoid involvement on either side of contested issues, and to avoid participation in the state as a part of such withdrawal.⁽²⁴⁾ Others still considered it valid to accept office, but to expect being outvoted,

so that then not being in control is no surprise.

XII) Evaluation

Was the "Holy Experiment" a success or a failure? That depends on the criteria we assume are fitting. In a democratic setting, it does not constitute a failure when people who are outvoted leave office. Nor should we consider as a moral mistake the hospitality which had affirmed free immigration and religious liberty, thereby admitting into the colony the Reformed and Lutheran settlers (plus the Yankee skeptics and deists like Paine and Franklin) who finally took over.

The three generations from 1682 to 1756 represent a longer stretch of time, in the face of unprecedented surprises and challenges, than most dynasties and most party regimes, in most orderly societies, have stayed in control. The unique commitments listed above, each of which was implemented with at least some degree of success, contrast powerfully with what was going on in Georgia or Massachusetts, and most of those "testimonies" did not die completely when non-Quakers took over the Assembly.⁽²⁵⁾ As Tolles writes:

"...they had created in the American wilderness a commonwealth in which civil and religious liberty, social and political equality, domestic and external peace had reigned to a degree and for a length of time unexampled in the history of the western world."⁽²⁶⁾

Bibliography (s. also items cited in footnotes) on Quakerism in America before the Revolution

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Staughton Lynd (ed) Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History, Indianapolis Bobbs-Merrill 1966

Robert K. MacMaster et al. (eds) Conscience in Crisis; Mennonites and other Peace Churches in America 1739-1789, Scottdale, Herald Press, 1979

Arthur J. Mekeel The Relation of the Quakers to the American Revolution University Press of America 1979

Frederick B. Tolles Quakers and the Atlantic Culture New York Macmillan 1960

1. He had been expelled from Oxford in 1662 for resisting compulsory chapel attendance; i.e. he was already a puritan within Anglicanism. For this his father threw him out.

2. He was imprisoned between 1669 and 1671 for unauthorized preaching.

3. Much later he wrote that while at Oxford he had had some kind of understanding of the future importance of America (Comfort p. 64); in the 1660's as we shall see, he was part of a corporation formed to colonize West New Jersey, but without yet seeing the later vision for a "holy experiment." Other Quakers were involved in the colonies already in the 1650's.
4. Initially, Quakers also dominated economically and numerically the colonies of Rhode Island, North Carolina, and the West Indies, although without being proprietors.
5. The form of address "Friends" is not mere politeness. "Friend" is the religious term which Quakers use for each other.
6. It is noteworthy that this early, before beginning his own colonial project, Penn is this fully informed, and this critical, about the Indian policies of the earlier colonists. The second letter names "the Marylanders," who called the Indians "children" or "brothers" but not "Friends."
7. Practically all of Penn's communication with the Indians was through emissaries. He was seldom in America.
8. The provision of a conflict reconciliation mechanism in which the two parties would have equal representation is the formal sign of the Indians' equal dignity.
9. This letter is in Albert Marrin 199f and Styaughton Lind 3ff. A second, similar but briefer letter of November 1682 is reproduced in Peter Mayer 93.
10. The "great peace" both provided means for conflict resolution among the Iroquois nations, and forbade their engaging in war with the settlers. Roland Bainton, "The Quakers and the Indians" in his Christian Attitudes to War and Peace Nashville 1961 Abingdon Press 170ff.
11. Penn had two kinds of successors. His biological descendants and legal heirs, the "proprietors" soon became Anglicans and abandoned their Quaker pacifism, but even they had some respect for the treaty commitments. His spiritual descendants were the convinced Friends, who by due electoral process (supported by the "German sects") dominated the Assembly until the 1750's.
12. Roger Williams' 1644 Bloody Tenent of Persecution was the colonies' first loud programmatic statement in favor of religious liberty.
13. Religious liberty had already been assured in the 1676 Charter for New Jersey. The other contiguous "middle colonies," New York and Maryland, turned out also to have relatively more tolerant religious policies, Maryland because its proprietor was Catholic and New York because of the original Dutch settlers, but only the Quaker colonies (like Rhode Island, with an older, theologically similar basis) made it a matter of principle on religious grounds.
14. In 1683 the first German immigrants came from Crefeld, a group of Mennonites, some of them already converted to Quakerism and some not. Penn was acquainted with the free churches of the continent since a visit to the Netherlands in 1677.

15. Later many German-speaking immigrants of Reformed and Lutheran background came as well, so that by the 1750's the "German sects" were no longer mostly pacifist.

16. Four men in Germantown signed on April 18, 1688 a statement: "These are the reasons why we are against the traffik of menbody..." We cannot list the rejection of slavery as a part of Penn's constitution, though its acceptance by some Quakers was an embarrassment from the start and when it was abolished Quakers led the movement.

17. The oath has two distinct civil meanings; the affirmation of loyalty to a particular government, and the promise to tell the truth in court. In 1722 English law authorized both to be replaced by a simple affirmation.

18. John Popiden, Christians and Punishment by the State: Ethical Reflection Upon the Contribution of Some Pennsylvania Quakers PhD Thesis, University of Notre Dame Department of Theology, February 1980

19. Cf. the review of the many such plans developed by religious, philosophical and political figures in European history, chapter.... in this series, entitled.....

20. It did not occur to people to apply it against freethinkers like Thomas Paine.

21. Likewise John Milton, the great theologian of religious liberty in England, did not expect it to benefit people who themselves did not believe in it, like Catholics.

22. cf above in his letter how he credited God with his having to do with "your part of the world." That the global course of Western history coincides with Providence is an assumption which even the radicals did not question. Cf. Bainton: "...he saw no reason to renounce the colonial enterprise, since he assumed that it could be pursued peaceably through the exercise of justice and friendliness toward the natives." op. cit. 170.

23. When they got closer to hostilities the idea was even entertained that a nonpacifist volunteer militia might be authorized (McMaster p. 115); yet before that idea could be developed, the Quakers left the government.

24. These "quietists" repeatedly quoted a letter of 1685 from George Fox, who had written that Friends should keep out of "whatever bustling and Troubles or Tumults or outrages Should rise in the world" (Arthur J. McKeel, The Relation of the Quakers to the American Revolution University Press of America 1979 pp. 22, 43, 69.

25. The solution which was found in the Bill of Rights to the problem of the establishment of religion would hardly have arisen if it had not been for the successful example of a century of religious liberty in the middle colonies, or the centrality of Philadelphia in the process of writing the constitution.

26. op.cit.p. 39

