



QUAKER PHILADELPHIA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLURALISM

By Alan Tully



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I dined at a tavern with a very mixed company of different nations and religions. There were Scots, English, Dutch, Germans, and Irish; there were Roman Catholics, Church men, Presbyterians, Quakers, Newlightmen, Methodists, Seventh day men, Moravians, Anabaptists, and one Jew. The whole company consisted of 25 planted round an oblong table in a great hall well stoked with flies. The company divided into committees in conversation; the prevailing topic was politics and conjectures of a French war. A knot of Quakers there talked only about selling of flour and the low price it bore. The[y] touched a little upon religion, and high words arose among some of the sectaries, but their blood was not hot enough to quarrel, or, to speak in the canting phrase, their zeal wanted fervency

This vignette from mid-eighteenth century Philadelphia is singular, a distinctive sketch amid the many other scenes that Dr. Alexander Hamilton recorded in his 1744 *Itinerarium*, which traced his travels through the mainland British colonies from his residence in Annapolis, Maryland, north to Maine. He did, of course, pen a succession of other revelatory experiences but none bore witness to a civic culture quite like what he found in Philadelphia – a world that we have subsequently come to describe as pluralistic. Philadelphia, and much of colonial Pennsylvania, constituted a society in which accepted differences, most particularly religious differences had, by 1744, become a distinctive characteristic of a vital, prosperous and largely peaceful New World province.

How did this come about? How did a prominent North American colony instill in its governmental seat and principal commercial center the practice of comity amid diversity? In a larger world still bearing a powerful heritage of bloody religious wars land brimming with related national and ethnic antagonisms, how could an oasis of proclaimed and practiced pluralism come into being? What were its wellsprings?

A cogent answer to these questions must begin, as with many other explanations of diverse British-colonial characteristics with seventeenth century England. During the 1640s the English Civil War fractured the symbiotic relationship between Church and State that had hitherto existed in England and would, for some time to come, exist in many European states. A multitude of charismatic religious figures hove into sight using the increasingly available printing press to publish their views, taking advantage of the war-induced disruption of local order to harangue and pray with crowds, and coalescing and splintering to form and re-form in a multitude of religious sects. One of these fluid, evolving groups was the Society of Friends, or Quakers as they were at first derisively called – the creation of among others, George Fox and Elizabeth Fell.

Quaker voices were among the most radical of those that contributed to the cacophonous religious-centered public clamor that emanated from England and the Low Countries of Europe and echoed through sympathetic enclaves in neighboring lands. Friends put first-principal emphasis on the shard of Christ's essence that they believed to be lodged in every human heart; it was up to Quakers to shoulder the obligation of creating a religious environment that nurtured the promise of a godly life so inhering within and that offered the attendant possibility of a life hereafter. They did so by establishing "meetings" for worship that repudiated church hierarchy, the liturgy and iconography of established churches, and scripturally based creeds and professions; they broke down gender conventions by accepting women "public friends" (religious leaders) and by establishing business meetings for women, run by women; they rejected social conventions in both dress and address that expressed and reinforced social hierarchy; they emphasized simplicity and restrained adornment to affect a "plain" style in dress, possessions, and comportment; they refused to swear oaths because their seed-of-Christ therein demanded truth-telling and honesty in all walks of life; soon, too, and despite some differences about what that meant, they came to advocate pacifism. Finally, they gave primacy, not to scriptural interpretation, but to divine inspiration – the voice of Christ within. Yet, at the same time, Quakers put such emphasis on the unitary nature of this "light within" that they drew vitriolic charges of heresy including that of denying the Trinity.

Religious and social radicalism of this vein invited conflict among the convinced as well as with open antagonists. Quakers, however, were much better than most of their contemporary sectarians at countering centrifugal forces. In addition to their meetings for worship they created business meetings that looked to society finances, guided and oversaw member behavior and supported them through the many persecutions, finings and incarcerations that Friends experienced. They also created a meeting hierarchy that was crucial in developing a "gospel order" and one of the most effective networks of evangelizing itinerants in the early modern period. On a trip to Ireland in 1667, one of those itinerants, Thomas Loe, met up with William Penn. As member of the courtier class, Penn was as unlike other – even leading – Quakers as one could imagine. Nonetheless, at the age of twenty-three, Penn became a member of the Society of Friends and, along with two or three others, became the leading architect of the Quakerism that was soon to flock in numbers to British North America.

William Penn's most important contribution to the Philadelphia-that-was-to-become was his advocacy of liberty of conscience. While post-Restoration England granted toleration to some dissenting churches, Quakers were not among the favored few. They were too far outside the pale of mainline Christianity as expressed by the Church of England and such denominations as Presbyterians or Congregationalist. Under Charles II Friends bore the brunt of persecutory activities both legal and illegal. Arrested and held in Newgate prison for "preaching to the people, and drawing a tumultuous company after them (William Penn and William Mead)", Penn wrote *The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience...*(1670), which while pleading for a royal or legislatively guaranteed toleration for Friends, also made a philosophic case for individual liberty of conscience and the right, as a consequence, to practice religious worship as one chose, in groups of one's choosing. Penn would add that such religious meetings should not be "seditious Assemblies" held "under pretense of religion" [by that he meant Roman Catholic gatherings] but genuine, sincerely religious assemblies with no ulterior motives of any kind.

During the 1670s Penn found that repeating and refining his views brought no significant change in English law, nor did the sometimes haphazard, sometimes concerted persecution of Friends significantly abate. During that decade, however, Penn became involved through his religious connections with infusing both the structure of government and the colonization of West New Jersey with Quaker influence. While so engaged, both the visionary and opportunistic sides of Penn saw the unorganized and invitingly fertile territory west of New Jersey and the Delaware River as an answer to his and his fellow-Quakers needs. The Pennsylvania Charter which Charles II granted to Penn as sole proprietor in 1681 gave him all he could have imagined – a haven for Friends, the possibility of structuring a government reflecting and protecting Quaker principles, and an agricultural/commercial colonial nexus with a portico looking onto the increasingly dynamic Atlantic economy.

The centerpiece of Penn's "Holy Experiment" as it came to be called, was, as he explained in one of his promotional tracts, *A Further Account of Pennsylvania* (1685), a promise of "Liberty to all People to worship Almighty God, according to their Faith and Persuasion." Certainly Penn's main concern was to build firmly into the foundations of Pennsylvania society, through law and social practice, what he hoped would be long-lived protection for sectarians. Although Penn's vision had limitations reflecting the boundaries of Protestant Christianity of the day, his openness to the egalitarian strands of late seventeenth century Quakerism, the comity born of contemporary notions of a Universal Church (unity through difference), his determination to recruit settlers to bolster the engines

of land sales and commerce in Pennsylvania (“though I desire to extend religious freedom, yet I want some recompense for my troubles”) and his prior fostering of good relations with similar minded religious leaders in the Low Countries, led him to promote his colony beyond the meeting-centered networks of the British Isles. One of the most significant figures attracted to Penn’s colonial venture was Francis Daniel Pastorius, the “founder” of Germantown, whose acolytes and acquaintances were instrumental in generating an initially intermittent, but eventually riverine flow of German-speaking migrants to Pennsylvania. Central to Pastorius’s commitment to Pennsylvania was this observation: “Notwithstanding the aforesaid William Penn belongs to the sect of the Tremblers, or Quakers, yet he constrains no one to any religion, but leaves to each nation freedom of belief.”

Pastorius’s use of the term “nation” reminds us of another dimension of the breadth Penn’s welcome entailed. Adherents to Quakerism alone included numerous families from Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and England, as well as a sprinkling from the Low Countries and a motley array of new world converts. Among German pietists religious identities included Mennonites, Brethren, Amish, Dunkers, Schwenkfelders, Moravians and Waladensians. These and the very much larger stream of Lutheran and Reformed Germans that broadened substantially in the second quarter of the eighteenth century were fed by a multiplicity of well-springs located in highly differentiated and quite distinctive states, towns, cities and regions in Europe. Their counterparts from the English speaking world were the Scotch-Irish who differed not so much in their localisms but fractured sharply at times over conflicting views of Presbyterian orthodoxy. Settlement patterns in outlying areas created segmentation among these various ethnic and religious groups but, unlike New York, in which distinctive ethno/religious identities barricaded themselves in local governmental units that long antedated the royalization of that province in the late seventeenth century, broad county units built on Pennsylvania’s provincial premises of shared civic interest, worked to some degree against rather than to enhance Balkanization. There was fluidity in Pennsylvania society at the myriad interstices of ethno/religious groups in the counties but also in most pronounced fashion in Philadelphia.

While Penn’s commitment to religious liberty and his invitation to various nations to immigrate to his province were critical in the creation of a pluralistic society in Pennsylvania, a third requisite was the establishment a political order that would undergird rather than undermine that development. Penn’s intent and expectation was that Pennsylvania, as it grew and prospered would continue to be a Quaker-run province, led by Friends who internalized and would foster the kind of values essential to the creation of a tolerant and peaceful society. The flow of non-Quakers to Pennsylvania, however, rendered that goal problematic. Two decades after first settlement, Friends were a minority in Philadelphia and soon to be so in the province-at -large. Yet Quakers dominated provincial politics from 1700 through the Revolutionary crisis. They were able to do so for three main reasons. One is that the principle of religious liberty as practiced in Pennsylvania was a very popular one and when coupled with other Quaker policies, such as the establishment and protection of a powerful unicameral legislature, the cultivation of peaceful relations with Native Americans, low taxation, and the absence of a militia law made the case for continued Quaker custodianship of provincial affairs. Second, for the first half-century of Pennsylvania history, the power of Friends’ place and influence and the tenor of their principles encouraged many of other denominations to work out accommodations with Friends and to defer to Quaker practices in a process that contemporaries designated as “Quakerization.” Finally, Friends built political networks and ultimately a “Quaker Party” that included representatives of various denominations as a regional spokespersons and foci for the mobilization of voters who, although non-Quakers, turned out to support continuation of the policies and practices that distinguished the peaceful pluralism of their colonial world.

The pluralism that Quaker Pennsylvania created was, not surprisingly, criticized and contested. Proprietary opponents who allied themselves with William Penn’s apostate sons, German Lutheran and Reformed church leaders, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and ultimately Revolutionaries took issue most markedly with the principle of pacifism that was an integral part of the “civil Quakerism” that Friends created. That issue, more than any, undid Quakerism as a potent political force during the later years of the eighteenth century. But the broader heritage of pluralism, built on Quaker sensitivities to the intersection of religious, ethnic and political self-determination and so evident in provincial Philadelphia, was one of the great bequests of the colonial years. It simply remained for those who gathered in Philadelphia during the Revolutionary and Constitutional years – and beyond – to think through the place of that legacy in the new world of American Republicanism.