



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Quaker Art and the Feminine Principle

There are two main schools of thought about where Quakerism came from. Rufus Jones saw Quakerism as essentially mystical, and tried to link it to the Continental mystics. His followers see us as being closer to the Catholics than to the Protestants. Hugh Barbour challenged this view, and tried to show that Quakerism is essentially an outgrowth of English Puritanism, and basically Protestant.

This question may shed valuable light on Friends' historic antipathy to the arts. I am challenged by a quotation from art historian Kenneth Clark's survey of Western civilization. Reflecting on the Reformation's attack on Catholic religious imagery in general and the cult of the Virgin in particular, he says:

The stabilising, comprehensive religions of the world, the religions which penetrate to every part of a man's being—in Egypt, India or China— gave the female principle of creation at least as much importance as the male, and wouldn't have taken seriously a philosophy that failed to include them both.

These were all what H. G. Wells called communities of obedience. The aggressive, nomadic societies—what he called communities of will— Israel, Islam, the Protestant North—conceived of their gods as male.

It's a curious fact that the all-male religions have produced no religious imagery—in most cases have positively forbidden it. The great religious art of the world is deeply involved with the female principle.

It should be noted that H. G. Wells, writing in an age which could still believe in “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever”, regarded the community of will as superior to the community of obedience. He saw the latter as static, passively submissive to tradition-bound human authority, whereas the community of will was dynamic, intent on changing the world.

In the context of the Clark quote, Puritanism is clearly a community of will. Its God was patriarchal, it rejected religious imagery, and its ethic of works radically changed society. Quakerism arose in Puritan England, and most of its converts had been Puritans. In their preaching early Friends were certainly aggressive, and their itinerant ministry may qualify them as nomadic. They outdid the Puritans in their rejection of religious imagery.

On the other hand, Quakerism had a strong feminine bent from the beginning. Early Friends tended to speak of God in male terms, but their conception of “God, Word, and Spirit” was

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Protean in its fluidity. Quakerism was essentially an inward religion, stressing the primacy of inward experience over outward forms. It embraced nonviolent, nurturing ways of being, and affirmed that women could be gifted as preachers and prophets—that “in Christ there is neither male nor female”.

Here the Clark-Wells model breaks down. Quakerism was, and is, a “community of obedience”—but in a very different sense from that envisioned by Wells. We speak of Holy Obedience—not to external human authority, but to the Light, the Inward Teacher. Holy Obedience is anything but “stabilizing;” it produces a radical inner transformation as a result of which one can no longer be conformed to this world. There is a sense in which stability indicates a *failure* of Holy Obedience.

It is paradoxical that a spirituality so deeply imbued with the feminine principle as Quakerism, far from producing great religious art, not only rejected the arts in a more extreme fashion than the Puritans, but maintained the taboo much longer.

Why should this be so? Perhaps it is due in part to the very *inwardness* of Quaker spirituality; the image is that of womb-darkness, gestation, waiting.

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