THE SECT PEOPLE IN COLONIAL PENNSYLVANIA

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THE word sect used in connection with religion is usually accepted as being etymologically derived from secare, meaning to cut, and so connotes a group cut from the established churches. More properly the term sect is regarded as being derived from sequi, meaning to follow, and thus sectarian are those who follow leaders usually along new—or at least newly emphasized—lines of religious thought and life. While it is true that such a group really does separate from the main body of the church, the latter definition is more subjective than the former and permits a better understanding of the spirit of the sects. Although one such group in England was called the Separatists, its spirit is best comprehended not as that of people who cut themselves from catholicity but rather as that of people who became enthusiastic followers of new ideals and leaders which in turn became the causes of separation.

The term sect is frequently used also with the sense of disapproval and disparagement; a churchman may imply criticism by calling an individual or a group sectarian. Historically and theologically, however, the word has a valid meaning and is either favorably or unfavorably received only as dissent itself is so considered. The leader who is followed in the formation of a sect is generally one who differs from the doctrine or polity of an established church. If creative thinking, even to the point of permitting overt dissent, is welcomed in any group, there is no opprobrium connected with the term. But usually in established churches a dissenter is considered little less than a heretic and so brings upon himself and his followers, the sectarian, the ill will and the criticism of the church people.

In Pennsylvania many of the groups which began as sects in the colonial era have attained respectability in churchly circles through their years of independent existence. As time went on
their peculiar points of emphasis became less and less important in their total program, and the more universal characteristics of the churches seeped into their organizations. With the recognition of these similarities the established churches freely accepted both the ministry and the laity of the sects as belonging to the churches. There does remain the problem, however, of drawing a sharp line of distinction in determining just when a sect becomes a church. In general terms it may be said that the transition takes place when a formerly unorganized and undeveloped dissenting group which once championed only a few (or even one) major religious emphases exclusively and had few creeds and ordinances matures to the point where more fixed forms of thought and polity lend it stability and when the more universal mission of the church overshadows and envelops the narrower unique mission of its earlier days.

The roots of sectarianism in colonial Pennsylvania lie both outside and within the colony itself. The Protestant Reformation established the principle of the universal priesthood of the believer, which logically leads to a pure religious democracy in which a universal church is both unnecessary and impossible. Luther undoubtedly did not have this concept in mind. However, when radicals like the Munsterites and the Zwickau prophets rejected and destroyed everything held dear in the Catholic church, they carried this democratic principle to its radical conclusion and, as Schleiermacher put it, "threw out the child with the bath." In so doing they paid the price which sectarians always pay in their early years: they lost the accumulated values of the church in their zeal to rid themselves of the accumulated evils.

It is quite interesting to note the reaction of the accepted churches to these groups. When Charles V closed the Augsburg Diet in 1530, the Lutherans were spoken of as secta. The religious peace of Augsburg in 1555 openly recognized them as a church, but the Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Socinians were not included. By the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648 the Calvinists had attained sufficient strength and respectability to be considered a church; the other groups, however, were still outside the pale of religious acceptance. It was this general attitude toward the minor protestant bodies in Germany which prompted their departure for Pennsylvania when opportunity arrived. Similarly, the failure of the church and the government of France to accept freely the protestants provided the basis for the emigration of the
Huguenots to America. English dissenters and Quakers too fled their homeland because of unpleasant conditions.

Not all religious migration, however, was provoked by persecutions. In Germany in particular and in lesser degree in other European countries there was a reactionary protest known by the general term pietism. This was in reality merely a reform movement; many of the adherents never left the established churches but stressed their unusual zeal for personal piety while professing loyalty to their accepted organizations. Nevertheless some of the Pietists eventually sought refuge in America, especially in Pennsylvania. These more or less direct followers of Böhme, Spener, and Francke stressed the failure of the organized churches to provide the occasion and opportunity for their personal religious development. In their new groups they emphasized a strong personal piety as the result of true Christianity and also showed a great concern for the salvation of others through evangelism.

Colonial conditions encouraged the immigration of religious dissenters. William Penn was apparently happiest when providing for those who like himself had been persecuted elsewhere because of their religious convictions. Numerous sects accepted his invitation to come to his province, where they might find not only a refuge from persecution but also sufficient lands and privacy to carry on their holy experiments without interference of any sort. Among them were the Wissahickon hermits, the scholarly mystics, the millennialists, and the Ephrata cloister group, all of which disappeared when the peculiar circumstances that had created their unique existence no longer attracted converts. The Ephrata community is the best example of colonial Christian communism.

The wave of migration that swept westward from Europe during colonial days brought to Pennsylvania many adherents of the established protestant churches of Germany, Switzerland, France, and Great Britain, but the members of these churches were too poorly organized and too widely scattered to maintain effectively their denominations or to influence greatly the religious life of their communities. Even in Philadelphia the Lutheran and the Reformed churches were not very potent factors until the arrival of Mühlenberg and Schlatter near the middle of the eighteenth century. Conditions were especially favorable to the growth of sects. The church people came as individuals, regard-
ing religion as only an incidental aspect of their lives; the sects, on the other hand, came as well-organized groups determined to maintain their religious ideals. Moreover, the sects, possessing zealous leaders and emphasizing stern Christian discipline, were able to win a goodly number of church people to their doctrines. This was particularly true of the Methodists, who during the latter half of the eighteenth century won many English- and German-speaking church people to their group. Native-born sects such as the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical flourished in Pennsylvania. Practically all have since been accepted as churches.

Some European sects, such as the Moravians and the Schwenkfelders, came to Pennsylvania primarily to work out their Utopias; they had no particular desire to win members from already established churches. The Moravians confined their work to the region around Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Lititz, while the Schwenkfelders settled almost exclusively in Bucks county and its environs. Similar to the Moravians and the Schwenkfelders, except that they were more marked in their differences from the regular church habits, were the Anabaptists, who dressed in plain clothes, emphasized adult baptism by immersion, and stressed the sacramental significance of the common meal and foot washing. These groups came to Pennsylvania in large numbers in the first half of the eighteenth century, and because the colony was sparsely settled they scattered well over the entire southeastern part of the province. Differences of opinion soon developed among them and produced the rather unique phenomenon of a division of a sect into other sects—breaches that have not yet entirely healed. Although the Moravians and the Schwenkfelders have long since attained churchly status, they are still regarded by most people as sects.

Comparatively few of the sectarianists in colonial Pennsylvania are known to have been theological dissenters. In fact, most of the sects placed little emphasis on theological matters at all save that in a very general way they desired orthodoxy. One of the most outstanding theological differences existed between Wesley, who was an Arminian, and Whitefield, who was a Calvinist, but the controversy never caused an actual break in Methodism. Many disagreements arose, however, over matters of conduct, personal piety, church practices, and moral standards. Usually
the sects opposed worldliness outside and inside the established churches and pleaded for a return to true religion, with emphasis on personal piety and a heart-changing conversion experience. Peculiar opinions about church organization, standards and methods of admission to membership, religious revivals, personal holiness, baptism, foot washing, Sabbath observances, and Adventism differentiated them from their neighbors. Many of the Anabaptists in particular would not participate in government or resort to legal procedures, consistently refusing to take oaths or to bear arms. The degree of conservatism in conduct and theology was frequently reflected in the clothing of sectarians; at Ephrata, for instance, regular monastic garb was worn.

While the sects have been disparaged and criticized through the years, it should be pointed out that their members had great determination and perseverance. It was not an easy matter either in Europe or in the colonies for an individual to leave his established church and thereby separate himself from the accepted and approved religious body of his friends and neighbors; to do so inevitably brought personal abuse. On the whole, the leaders of the sects were men of high principles, but not all their influences were good. Some were far too radical, while others, had they exercised patience, might have led successful reform movements within the churches to which they belonged. Frequently their insistence upon strange tenets provoked dissensions that were not healed for generations; yet in one of the most scathing attacks made upon them the Reverend Joel L. Reber in his *Ein Ernsthaftes Wort über den Sektengeist und das Sektenwesen* says, "True Christianity is not learning, works, opinions or feelings—not prayers, faith or good deeds; true Christianity is life—the life of Jesus Christ."

This is the very point on which most of the sectarians differed from the church people. Just as Luther found the Catholic church formal, lifeless, and impotent to help the individual find the Christian way of life, the sect leaders found the regular protestant churches so institutionalized that they could not inspire in them piety and reverence. The sectarians preferred to sacrifice conformity in order to preserve individual freedom in their everyday religious life. In contrast to the homilies and expositions presented in the established pulpits, their preaching became exhortations to holiness and denunciations of worldly pleasures.
In advocating religious freedom the sects nurtured also a theological independence that among the newly converted laity often led to confusion. Moreover, their meager cultural background and their insufficient educational training made for instability. Only their tremendous religious zeal, perhaps, prevented their abusing the liberties which they demanded and obtained. One may say that the greatest weaknesses of the sects were overemphasis of one or a few tenets, curious customs of life and dress, lack of patience and tolerance, and refusal to recognize the good points of the churches which they criticized. On the other hand, there was much to be commended in their advocacy of the basic Reformation religious principles, emphasis on an intimate relation between religion and life, insistence upon a warm personal religious experience, and demands that every member be deeply concerned with the religious welfare and salvation of his neighbor. In addition, the sects as an active and vocal minority prodded the established churches into service to their communities. They are in part responsible for the gratifying church and Sunday-school attendance in the southeastern counties of Pennsylvania.

The religious and cultural inheritance of Pennsylvania has been greatly enriched by the presence of sects in the state. The leaders of these aggressive groups, insisting that peaceful uniformity secured by silent conformity was not good for religion, have been, on the whole, an asset to their communities. Throughout the centuries, in Europe as well as in America, many of them have, despite their lack of the balance and perspective derived from association with the traditions of churchly institutions, clung quite as close to the basic Christian truths as have learned scholars in the sessions of their church councils.