Thomas Paine and the Attitude of the Quakers to the American Revolution

In estimating the relative influences of two of the most widespread currents of thought in the early years of the American Revolution, Deism and Quakerism, one is led inevitably to reckon with the virulent Tom Paine whose contribution to the rise of liberal thought in America cannot be questioned. While recent investigation has clearly shown that Paine was essentially a representative of the Deist school, his connections with the Society of Friends, especially in Philadelphia during the war years, cannot be overlooked. By examining closely this relationship between Paine and the Quakers at so critical a period in American history, we may perhaps throw light on the comparative political and social consequences of these two faiths and measure to a certain extent their effects on the spread of democratic ideas throughout the colonies.

It is clear from Paine's own statements that much of his revolutionary activity and his radical thought may be traced to his deistical beliefs. His worldliness, his iconoclasm, his faith in man's natural goodness, his desire to eradicate evil through a reformation of outward institutions, his war activities—most of the characteristics of Tom Paine the revolutionary pamphleteer—may be found latent in the deistic arguments. "When I turned my thoughts towards matters of government," Paine writes, "I had to form a system for myself, that accorded with the moral and philosophic principles in which I had been educated." And again in the introduction to his Age of Reason


2 Writings, IV, 64. References are to the Conway edition (4 Vols.).
in which he was to show himself in “his self-chosen role of the prophet of deism,”

Paine writes:

The circumstance that has now taken place in France, of the total abolition of the whole national order of priesthood, and of everything appertaining to compulsive systems of religion, and compulsive articles of faith, has not only precipitated my intention, but rendered a work of this kind exceedingly necessary, lest, in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true.

“Soon after I had published the pamphlet Common Sense, in America,” he adds to this, “I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion.” So Paine proceeds with his “apologia for deism” as a panacea for the social chaos which he fears will result. He perceived clearly the perils of antinomianism inherent in the collapse of the established Churches, and desired to prevent their realization by allying republican democracy with an individualist deism, which in its turn could inculcate the complementary truths of individual freedom and personal responsibility. “The Age of Reason was therefore un livre de circonstance, and was designed as a constructive and steadying force.”

It must be admitted, on the other hand, that many of the Quaker ideals parallel those of the deist, and one could substitute the word “Quakerism” in the following statement of Norman Sykes with little fear of misrepresentation. “Deism was the true religion of Democracy, making every man his own divine.” In this respect “the deistic movement allied itself naturally with the republican and revolutionary strand in political speculation.” Yet it is the extreme to which Paine pushed his thought in the spheres of politics and society which distinguishes him from the true Quaker. When the Quakers found their reform measures carrying them so far that they began to tread on their other beliefs, such as their feeling toward war, they hastily withdrew and looked inward for guidance. This love of peace and

4 Writings, IV. 21.
5 Ibid., 22.
6 Sykes, op. cit., 129. See also on this point V. F. Calverton, “Thomas Paine: God-Intoxicated Revolutionary,” Scribner’s (Jan. 1934), 16–17. Mr. Calverton writes: “Paine’s early opposition to established religion had been political and not ‘intellectual.’”
7 Ibid., 128.
basic quietism of the Quakers may be seen in their attitude toward the Revolution; and the contrasting attitude of the deist, Paine, will bring out the primary difference in the two faiths. Let us first look back a bit.

Bernard Faÿ has graphically described the enthusiasm with which the French *philosophes* seized upon what they took to be the Quaker mode of life and held it up as a living example of all the theories they professed regarding man in his natural state unafflicted by tyranny of church or state. "As early as 1734, Voltaire in his *Lettres sur les Anglais* had given a brilliant picture of the Quakers. He portrays them as primitive men who . . . did not baptize, did not partake of communion, and condemned luxury and war."8 Voltaire first saw in Quakerism a weapon to use against Catholicism, but with the gradually increasing revolutionary thought in France the Quaker ideals were warped to fit radical social and political philosophy. In his *Essai sur les Moeurs* (1763) Voltaire praises Pennsylvania "which stands for Quaker idealism and which is given as the model of tolerance and good government."9 One of the most extreme of the enthusiasts was Abbé Raynal whose *History of the Two Indies* attempted to give the authority of historical importance to the revolutionary doctrines.10 Near the end of this voluminous work Raynal soared to ecstatic heights in his praise of the Quakers. "Go, ye warrior peoples, ye peoples of slaves and of tyrants, go to Pennsylvania! There you will find every door open, all possessions unguarded, not a soldier, and many merchants and labourers. But if you torment them or afflict them, they will take flight and leave you their fallow fields . . . they will push on to cultivate and people a new land . . . "11

This enthusiasm for the Quakers reached "its height in the ten years preceding the revolution."12 Washington and William Penn and Franklin served as prototypes for the French primitivistic philosophers who lauded the Quakers as a people "pious without priests or

10 M. Scherer, prominent French scholar and historian wrote: "I am convinced that the *History of the Two Indies* had more influence on the French Revolution than the *Social Contract* itself." (Quoted in Philips, *loc. cit.*, 6.)
11 Quoted in B. Faÿ, *op. cit.*, 15.
12 E. Philips, *op. cit.*, 1.
churches” and “virtuous without dogmas.” There were, on the other hand, some Frenchmen who recognized the absurdity of belief in the Quaker Utopia and worked to disprove the popular theory, but their voices were almost lost in the general hysteria of acclaim. Finally Vergennes, acting for Louis XVI, became enthusiastic enough to send to America Gérard de Rayneval to stir up American revolutionary thought and to act as intermediary “between Congress and the Quakers.” This was in 1778 after the war in America had been two years under way.

We must at this point retrace our steps to follow the political fortunes of the Quakers up to the war. It will be recalled that the Friends controlled the Pennsylvania Assembly following the death of William Penn. They remained in power until 1737 when Thomas Penn, who had not inherited his father’s fairness in dealing with the Indians, violated a land agreement with the Delawares. “In 1754 the quarrel, egged on by the French, came to a head, war was declared... and the Quakers on the legislature resigned.” The Quaker position is well summed up in the words of Catherine Payton, an English visitor, who wrote in 1755:

\[\text{[T]he conduct of us who were concerned to labour for the support of our Christian testimony, was harshly censured by the unthinking multitude; and by such of our own society as were one with them in spirit; who insinuated that we intruded into matters foreign to our proper business, and were in part the cause of the continuation of the calamities which attended the provinces, through our testifying against the spirit of war, and advising Friends to support our Christian testimony faithfully.}\]

Despite the fact that the Quakers removed themselves from this political crisis, they remained influential in the Pennsylvania Assembly until the Revolutionary War. They approached the war “shorn of some of their political power, but still a strong factor in public affairs.” As rumblings of war and revolution increased in the 1770’s the Friends drew more and more into their earlier position of passive resistance. By 1776 they had become thoroughly alarmed at the now

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13 Fay, op. cit., 144.
14 The most prominent of these were Mazzei and Chastellux.
15 Fay, op. cit., 131.
16 W. T. Shore, John Woolman, His Life and Our Times (London, 1913), 114.
17 It must not be thought that all Quakers were as steadfast in their principles as their leaders. In fact, a great many, through their alleged position of neutrality, were easily seduced or bribed to one or the other side.
warlike atmosphere of the colonies, and on January 20 of that year issued from a general meeting of the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quakers *The Ancient Testimony and Principles of the people called Quakers.*\(^{18}\) This testimony framed as it was “with respect to the King and Government, and touching the Commotion now prevailing in these and other parts of America"\(^{19}\) put the Quakers (in the minds of most of the extremists) squarely on the Tory side. Among other things this testimony proclaimed:

> It hath ever been our judgement and principle, since we were called to profess the light of Christ Jesus, manifested in our consciences unto this day, that the setting up and putting down kings and governments, is God’s peculiar prerogative . . . And it is not our business to plot and contrive the ruin, or overturn of any of them, but to pray for the king and safety of our nation, and good of all men: That we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty; under the government which God is pleased to set over us.\(^{20}\)

It was against this that Tom Paine wrote his *Epistle to the Quakers* in which he accused that “fractional and fractional part” of “the whole body of Quakers,”\(^{21}\) which had been responsible for the publication of the testimony, of being traitors to their own principles.

> O ye partial ministers of your own acknowledged principles he writes . . . if ye really preach from conscience, and mean not to make a political hobby-horse of your religion, convince the world thereof, by proclaiming your doctrine to our enemies, for they likewise bear arms.\(^{22}\)

Paine stresses the fact that his “epistle is not so properly addressed to the Quakers as a religious body, but as a political body, dabbling in matters which the professed Quietude of their Principles intrust [ed] them not to meddle with.”\(^{23}\)

Further Quaker “meddling” occurred in the elections of representatives to the Pennsylvania Assembly on May 1, 1776. Although the province was technically “at war” with England, “the whole Whig ticket . . . was defeated in the exciting Philadelphia election.”\(^{24}\) It was a time of great agitation. Articles appeared in the papers, and the Quakers were generally acknowledged to have been one of the moving forces behind the Tory victory.\(^{25}\) Paine wrote a letter de-

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\(^{18}\) Conway, *Life*, I, 76.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Quoted in Paine’s *Writings* (ed. Conway), I, 124.

\(^{21}\) *Writings*, I, 126. It should be noted that Paine did not give a blanket condemnation to all Quakers. He recognized that many were sympathetic to the American cause.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 121.


\(^{25}\) J. P. Selsam, *op. cit.*, 102–03.
nouncing the sect for treachery to its own cause, signing it "The Fores-
ter." "Did ever national hypocrisy arise to such a pitch as this!" he
exclaimed. The Quakers were accused of holding to the established
order because of proprietary interests. All of the hubbub, however,
was unnecessary, for the day after Paine's letter appeared (May 9)
John Adams' resolution was adopted in the Congress and the respec-
tive "Assemblies and Conventions of the United States" were directed
to establish new governments in the colonies "sufficient to the exigen-
cies of their affairs." This was immediately "seized upon by the
zealous Whigs of Pennsylvania as an excuse for the abrogation of the
old government." A meeting was called in Philadelphia and a con-
vention was jubilantly settled upon for drawing up the new govern-
ment. Through June and part of July the radical Whigs stirred up
feeling against the conservatives, blocked legislation in the Tory
Assembly by absenting themselves, and obtained control of the Con-
ference for the revision of the constitution. At length the Conference
was held and the radical, unicameral constitution voted in. It is clear
that the conservative groups opposed the entire proceedings and the
Quakers, along with one or two other sects "had little or nothing to do
with the movement for a constitution."

The following year, 1777, the Quakers under the leadership
of John Pemberton, one of the most zealous of the anti-war group put
forth another testimony "declaring their attachment to the British
government." Paine spoke out boldly against this growing Toryism
among the Friends in the third Crisis paper.

Were the Quakers really impressed and influenced by the quiet principles
they profess to hold, [he says] they would, however they might disapprove the
means, be the first of all men to approve of independence . . .
O! ye fallen, cringing, priest-and-Pemberton-ridden people! What more can
we say of ye than that a religious Quaker is a valuable character, and a political
Quaker a real Jesuit.

And in the same pamphlet he refers to the "incendiary publication
of the Quakers" which was "evidently intended to promote . . . trea-
son, and encourage the enemy." When, after the Trenton disaster

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26 Writings, I, 124.
27 Quoted from Adams' writings by Selsam, op. cit., 113.
28 Ibid., 115.
29 Ibid., 150.
30 Writings, I, 186. A New York paper reported (Dec. 30, 1777) that the "Quakers
begin to speak openly of their attachment to the British constitution."
31 Ibid., 208.
32 Ibid., 217.
(December 25, 1777), Paine went to Philadelphia to write, he settled in "Second Street opposite the Quaker meeting." "The Quakers," says Paine’s biographer, "regarded him as Antichrist pursuing them into close quarters" and they counseled their followers "to refuse obedience to whatever ‘instructions or ordinances’ may be published, not warranted by ‘that happy constitution under which they and others long enjoyed tranquillity and peace.’ "

The year 1778 was the most trying of all the war years for the Quakers. The activities, centering around the entrance and occupation of Philadelphia by Lord Howe, made the Quaker policy of passive resistance plus the published evidence of their loyalist sympathies the object of criticism from both sides, though especially from the American. After Howe's retreat two Quakers were hanged in Philadelphia by the Revolutionists, and many were persecuted or driven from their homes.

It was in 1778, after the signing of the treaty of alliance with France, that Gérard de Rayneval was sent by Vergennes as minister to the colonies. Gérard found the situation quite different from what the French primitivist philosophers had pictured it, especially with respect to the Quakers. In a letter dated September 18, 1778, he re-

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33 Conway, Life, I, 90.
34 R. M. Jones, Quakers in American Colonies, 566–568.
35 The point of view of Bernard Fay in his Revolutionary Spirit in France and America on this matter deserves special attention. Mr. Fay, drawing on the archives of the French foreign affairs with the United States, makes out a glowing, if somewhat ambiguous case, for the vast influence which the connection of France (through Gérard de Rayneval) with the Quakers had on liberalizing "the social and political bonds" of Puritan America. Stressing the intimate friendship of Gérard with Anthony Benezet, prominent Philadelphia Quaker, which led the French minister to correspond with Benezet about important matters of state and about his duties in America, Fay breaks into the following eloquent passage:

As a matter of fact, Louis XVI, or rather Vergennes, was anxious to be in the good graces of this estimable sect and to reconcile them as much as possible with Congress. Under French influence the harshness of Puritanism thawed to such an extent that Quesnay played Beaumarchais’ Eugénie at Philadelphia at a time when all theatrical productions were forbidden by Congress. This was the first French play given in the United States. A tempering of too bleak a morality, an easing of social and political bonds, a moderate sentimentality and, on the whole, a tendency to rely on men and instincts rather than on governments—these are the characteristics that we find among the Americans who came under the influence of French philosophy about 1780; and they were the best minds of the country. The Constitution of Pennsylvania is an example of the work of faithful readers of Turgot. . . . Here the blind enthusiasm that France had received from America comes back to it. It is a curious case of a people imitating itself by taking as a model a concept that another people has formed of it. (p. 131–2.)

The implication of Mr. Fay, if I read the passage rightly, that the French influence in "thawing" the "harshness of Puritanism" had something to do with the Quakers is open
ports to his government: “During the occupation of Philadelphia by the English, proofs were obtained of the services rendered them by the Quakers . . . ; they had bought “merchandise” at low prices of the English, at the time of the evacuation (of Philadelphia) and resold it very dear.”

Gérard later describes his efforts to force the Quakers to pay war taxes and to submit to the demands of Congress “because the number, wealth, and consideration of the Quakers . . . give standing to the Tory party.”

“It seems, however, that the Quakers did not submit. Six months later, Chevalier de la Luzerne, who had succeeded Gérard de Rayneval, reports (Nov. 26, 1780), that Pennsylvania is making every effort to maintain its army contingent by suitable taxation, but that the Quakers, together with other religious bodies, obstruct their efforts.”

The evidence, on the whole, points toward a determined, if passive, resistance on the part of the Quakers to the American cause. A revealing treatment of the Quaker position during the revolution is that of Isaac Sharpless, a modern member of the sect, who would defend his early Friends from the charge of Toryism, yet is in too full command of the facts to do it well. He says first that the really influential to serious doubt, since the morality of the Quakers was stricter by far than that of the Puritans. Furthermore, the close friendship which Faÿ makes out as existing between de Rayneval and Benezet seems to be somewhat exaggerated. John Durand in his New Materials for the History of the American Revolution (New York, 1899) quoting from documents in the French Archives (the same source as that given by Faÿ) notes a letter of de Rayneval, dated Sept. 15, 1778, in which he tells the story of his meeting with Benezet. He relates how his accusation of “avarice” to one of the Quaker sect in regard to his activity during the war stirred up the Quaker who brought Benezet, a native Frenchman, to defend his position to de Rayneval. Gérard writes as follows: “The name of this person is Benezet, son of a French refugee, who has turned Quaker, and who is a man of intelligence and learning. Finally he came and we had several conversations on the history, principles, and career of his sect. It was only at our last interview, two days ago, that he at last declared yielding to my arguments . . . that the Quakers ought to submit to the actual government and pay taxes . . . ; he ended by begging me to favor the fraternity . . . . I replied that it was not in my mission to arrest the energies of the American government, and that when the Quakers had performed their duties they would no longer be in fear of persecution.” (pp. 182–3.)

This letter hardly bears out Mr. Faÿ’s assertions and would indicate rather cool indifference than warm friendship on Gérard’s part. How much Faÿ bases his later remarks about French influence in America on this relationship I leave the reader to decide. At any rate the claims seem over-stated.

37 Ibid., 184.
38 Ibid., 184. It must be noted, however, that more Quakers joined the American side as time went on. La Luzerne writes (May 4, 1781): “All the Quakers in Philadelphia who have taken up arms, or voluntarily paid war taxes, have been excommunicated; these, increasing in number, declare themselves loyal.” (Ibid., 180.)
Quakers espoused the American side “while those dealt with as offenders in the country were often such as had little vital relationship to the Meetings.”\(^{39}\) As an influential Quaker, Sharpless takes John Dickinson who, he says, had the “Friendly habit of thought” even if he was “not a member” of the sect.\(^{40}\) Dickinson’s revolutionary sympathies are dwelt on at length. He was active in American affairs only stopping short of signing the Declaration of Independence because “he thought the occasion to be premature.”\(^{41}\) In attempting to explain the Quaker Testimony of 1776 Sharpless admits the loyalist sympathies of the Friends. “Hereafter,” he says, “there was a concurrent testimony to be borne against war and against revolution, which placed Friends in quiet opposition to the American cause. Not only must they keep out of martial operations but they must keep out of all participation in the new government set up for the purpose of independence.”\(^{42}\)

Our conclusion, then, as regards the Quaker influence, in the political sphere, on the colonies during the war may be threefold. First, the Quaker effort, insofar as it can be called such, was against rather than for the American cause. Second, Thomas Paine, far from being sympathetic with the Quaker point of view, was quite on the opposite side. And third, the French enthusiasm for Quaker ideals had slight effect on the practical politics of the Quakers this side of the Atlantic.

\(^{40}\) I. Sharpless, *loc. cit.*, 559.