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William Penn and the Socinians

OF ALL the "problems" in the life of William Penn, not the least beguiling is his brush with those Unitarians of his time, the Socinians. One does not usually imagine the majestic Quaker in the company of religious radicals whom we may call Christians only in very uncertain tones. He himself became indignant when viewed as their ally, and launched furious assaults on both those who censured, and those who praised, what they took to be his Socinianism. The fact is there, nonetheless, that he was pushed to a spate of denial so substantial as to create suspicion, while his protest springs from an attitude so equivocal that one critic has stigmatized him for being "disingenuous."[1]

To untie this knot in Penn's biography is not easy. Obscurity pervades seventeenth-century Unitarianism because of Socinian books burned and Socinian spokesmen silenced. We possess only fragments from the Socinians to inform us how they saw and interpreted William Penn. These fragments would hardly suffice for the outline of a coherent story, but fortunately they can be supplemented from other sources that include a few significant pages by Penn himself. Many details of the action are lost beyond recall, but the leading characters are identifiable and the main plot can be followed with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

[1] H. John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1951), 306.

The backdrop is the left-wing creed of Faustus Socinus. How much did Penn know of the fountainhead of Socinianism? The works of Socinus were available to him. A steady smuggling trade carried on by English converts to the creed had been bringing Socinian books over from the Continent since early in Penn's century, among them Socinus' *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, his major work, and various editions of the *Racovian Catechism*. In Penn's own generation these were widely disseminated, so widely as to touch off savage denunciations by Puritans like John Owen and Anglicans like Edward Stillingfleet.

Penn was too learned in the theological literature of the period, too interested in knowing what non-Quakers were saying, not to have consulted secondary Socinians certainly, and Socinus himself almost certainly. He refers to the man several times, commends his handling of the Bible, and quotes him as an authority on the meaning of the Inner Light. These, however, are only partial references of the kind that Penn culled even from his opponents. Of much greater moment are certain passages where Penn speaks of Socinus as an individual, and manifests real knowledge of him. The knowledge must have been accumulated early in Penn's life, for it is in one of his first pamphlets that we read this remarkable tribute to the great heresiarch: "As for the Socinian, I know him to have Wit and Learning enough, to encounter a more redoubtable Adversary than mine; and however he has expos'd himself to the just Censures of some, his Exemplary Life and Grave Deportment I must acknowledge to be very singular."[2]

It seems impossible to doubt that Penn had read Socinus when he set down this sentence. A number of Penn's readers refused to doubt it, and they felt that their suspicions were justified when he published *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* (1668), which, because of its rude description of orthodox Christian dogmas like the Trinity and the Atonement, caused its author to be thrown into the Tower of London. True, he does not mention Socinus, but his manner of juxtaposing reason and the Bible when formulating his theology, and the content of that theology, sounded Socinian to Socinians and non-Socinians

[2] *The Guide Mistaken*, in Joseph Besse, ed., *A Collection of the Works of William Penn* (London, 1726), II, 16, hereinafter cited as *Works*.

alike. John Evelyn noted in his diary that Penn had just published "a blasphemous book against the Deity of our Blessed Lord."[3]

The following year Penn gained his freedom with an apologia called *Innocency with Her Open Face*. In this work he *does* mention Faustus Socinus, and in extremely complimentary terms, even while declining to be considered one of his disciples.

> As for my being a Socinian, I must confess I have read of one Socinus of (that they call) a noble Family in Sene [*Siena*] in Italy, who about the year 1574, being a young Man, voluntarily did abandon the Glories, Pleasures and Honours of the great Duke of Tuscany's Court at Florence, (that noted Place for all worldly Delicacies) and became a perpetual Exile for his Conscience, and whose Parts, Wisdom, Gravity and just Behaviour made him the most famous with the Polonian and Transylvanian Churches; but I was never baptized into his Name, and therefore deny the reproachful Epithet; and if in any Thing I acknowledge the Verity of his Doctrine, it is for the Truth's Sake, of which, in many Things, he had a clearer Prospect than most of his Contemporaries.[4]

Taking this passage at its face value, no one would question the writer's familiarity with the original Socinian texts, or his favorable impression of them. If we pause to query what conceivably could have drawn him to them, the reply seems evident. A recently converted Quaker with a background of theological studies, still in reaction against the Calvinism he had been taught by John Owen at Oxford and Moses Amyraut at Saumur, he was susceptible to anti-Calvinist ideas, and these he could have found in abundance in Socinus. The Unitarian may have tempted him with such principles as theology with a minimum of dogma, religious toleration, and basic morality. These were some of the "many Things" in which Penn must have judged Socinus to have had "a clearer Prospect than most of his Contemporaries."

Yet only four years later Penn is found denying any knowledge of Socinian literature when he wrote *The Sandy Foundation Shaken*. He describes himself as one "who had never read any one Socinian Book in all my Life, if look't into one at that Time."[5] For this assertion he has been labeled disingenuous, and it is hard to doubt that he was stretching the truth somewhat, using as his force a certain amount of

3 William Blay, ed., *Diary and Correspondence* (London, 1886), II, 41.

4 *Innocency with Her Open Face*, *Works*, I, 268.

5 *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication of His Book*, *Works*, II, 453.

self-sophistication. That phrase "if look't into one" does not have an air of utter candor about it. Perhaps we should use a bit of charity at this point, and take him to mean that he derived his information from secondary authorities who refused to be called Socinians on the ground that they were not entirely in agreement with Socinus (a common gambit of the crypto-Unitarians when they were under fire, used even by John Biddle, the "father of English Unitarianism").[6] It should be added that Penn could have learned about Socinianism from its enemies, for Owen and Amyraut had both written against it.

This accepted, Penn's disclaimer is too heated to reflect nothing more than a change in his abstract theology. Personalities are involved. Penn stops commending Socinus and begins berating Socinians because of his experience with two of the Unitarian faithful he met in London.

The circumstances of their meeting were as follows. In 1668 Penn came forward as Quaker apologist and polemicist, and it was as such that he debated at an open gathering with the Presbyterian minister, Thomas Vincent. The controversy circled around the dogma of the Trinity, with Vincent defending the dogma in Calvinist fashion, and Penn impugning it in Quaker fashion. Shortly afterward Penn repeated his thesis in print in *The Sandy Foundation Shaken*, the book that caused enough scandal to bring its author to the attention of the authorities, and to land him in the Tower.

His reputation was now that of a religious radical, perhaps even an Arian. The orthodox intensified their criticism of him. For the same reason, he appealed to the left-wing sectarians. They defended him; they made overtures to him. Among his new acquaintances thus accumulated were some Socinians who felt that in Penn they had an ally and a prospective convert. Looking back later on, he perceived the logic of their attitude toward him: "At the Time of our Disputation . . . at the Spittle, being engaged in the Negative concerning the common doctrine of distinct and separate Personality, [Thomas Firmin] and some others fell into great Intimacy with us; Who but we in his and their Thoughts?"[7]

Now this Thomas Firmin is a man about whom we know much. Half of his importance in history is summed up in the words with

[6] McLachlan, 75 (note 2).

[7] *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication of His Book*, 453.

which the *Dictionary of National Biography* opens its article on him: "Thomas Firmin (1632–1697), philanthropist." He was one of the successful businessmen of London, and, moreover, a humanitarian laboring in the interests of his fellow citizens, a kind of Robert Owen beforetime. An inventor of public charities, he agitated for prison reform, unemployment relief, better hospital administration, and even the improvement of manners. One of the first to urge a scheme of social services run by the government, he himself built a workshop to create jobs for the unemployed. During the disaster of the plague he was cautious enough to move his family to the countryside out of reach of the pestilence; according to his friend and biographer, however, he did not dismiss from his mind the plight of the less fortunate, but "left a Kinsman in his House with order to relieve some Poor weekly, and to give out Stuff to employ them in making such Commodities as they were wont."[8] His only known publication was typical of him: *Some Proposals for the Imploying of the Poor, especially in and about London, and for the Prevention of Begging.*

The second reason for remembering Firmin is that, as the "best-known and most influential Socinian in England in the latter part of the seventeenth century,"[9] he included among his philanthropies public support for his brand of theology, in particular by financing literature of a Unitarian content. If he never left the Church of England, his friends and enemies alike knew he entertained convictions at variance with his professed Anglicanism. John Tillotson, with whom he was on good terms, admits that Firmin "imbibed the Socinian doctrine."[10] The Bishop of Gloucester describes him as "a nonconformist to all Christendom besides a few lowsy sectarys in Poland."[11] Bishop Burnet goes even further by saying that "he was called a Socinian, but was really an Arian, which he very freely owned, before the revolution; but he gave no public vent to it as he did afterwards."[12] These judgments are clarified by the fact that Firmin was a follower of John Biddle and a friend of John Locke.

8 Stephen Nye, *The Life of Mr. Thomas Firmin* (London, 1698), 27.
9 McLachlan, 294.
10 Nye, 16.
11 See article on Firmin in *Dictionary of National Biography*.
12 *Bishop Burnet's History of His Own Time* (Oxford, 1833), IV, 387.

Why Firmin approached Penn is obvious, for part of his vocation in life was to rally converts to the anti-Trinitarian side, and the Vincent episode followed by *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* convinced him that here was another anti-Trinitarian in the making, if not already made. Then again, Penn was not just another catch: he owned a great name and social status, his father being Admiral Sir William Penn, a man close to the King and the Duke of York, and Firmin entertained the hope that by way of the junior Penn Socinianism might gain an unwonted respectability, and possibly even start circulating through the Court.

Penn's acceptance of Firmin is almost as easy to account for. To begin with, there was Firmin's applause for the stand Penn had taken against Vincent, something that Penn could have considered a leaning toward Quakerism in Firmin, whose Socinian reputation was not yet in the public domain. Perhaps each looked to converting the other. Moreover, Firmin the Socinian may have been hidden behind Firmin the philanthropist, a figure certain to move Penn's sympathies. Having been in London himself at the time of the plague, Penn could have been aware of Firmin's work in behalf of the stricken.

The "great Intimacy" of 1668 came about as the result of desire on both sides, with Penn much less cool to the idea than he lets on in retrospect. In one of his angry moments the truth slips out that he and his family visited Firmin at Hoxton, where the Socinian leader had an estate, cultivated a garden, and entertained his acquaintances. The relationship was close enough for Firmin to be willing to lend Penn money. Even after their estrangement Penn remarks on Firmin's

> lending me (as he thought) by one that was my Servant at that Time of my Tower-Imprisonment, about Forty Pounds (he coming in my Name, counterfeiting both Messages and Letters, as I made appear to him afterwards) which, though mine Eyes never saw one Penny of it, nor was there a Penny employed in my Service, or to my Use, I did, when God enabled me, having then no Estate in my Hands, faithfully repay, as if I had really had every Penny; believing then, and still, that it was a Kindness in him to me that was abused by a knavish Servant; and I would never let him suffer for it.[13]

[13] *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication of His Book*, 454.

Firmin's liberality was due in part at least to the fact that Penn looked like a martyr for Unitarian truth. Penn's attack on traditional theories of the Trinity and the Atonement had brought him to the Tower; logically, he was a Socinian; morally, his Socinian friends were bound to stand by him; prudentially, the radical movement would be enormously enhanced could the prisoner be stiffened in his anti-Trinitarianism and win a pardon all the same, as might be expected of one of his rank. Firmin, an honorable man and an experienced propagandist, had all these thoughts running through his mind. As to his basic notion, Penn himself notices it:

> When my Book intituled, *The Sandy Foundation Shaken*, came out, it being a farther Detection of what we call Errors, and it happening the Socinians did the same, as if I was a rank Socinian (who had never read any one Socinian Book in all my Life, if look't into one at that Time) so these Men, at least T.F. was ready to believe me nearer akin to them, than, God knows, I was; that is to say, in Denying the Divinity of Christ.[14]

For all Penn's expostulation, Firmin had reason enough when he made his interpretation. Many passages of the book could have been paraphrases of Socinian literature, and even if there be no causal sequence here, the similarity is very striking.

The Socinians always invoked the Bible to vindicate their primary theological principle, or negation. They argued that since God is invariably called One, the Trinity is compromised by Holy Writ itself. Exactly the same thesis forms the starting point for Penn: "If God, as the Scriptures testifie, hath never been declar'd or believ'd, but as the Holy One, then it will follow, that God is not a Holy Three."[15] Penn thus agrees with the Socinians that the Nicene Creed embodies Tritheism. He goes on to say with them that the Catholic theologians fabricated the Creed in defiance of the Bible, a return to which would restore the primeval Unitarianism of the apostolic age.

Having used the Bible as one pillar of his theological structure, Penn turns, Socinian-style, to reason as his second. The Socinians had theorized that the philosophical concept of substance does not permit us to believe in more than one person to a substance. Penn says the same thing: "No one Substance can have three distinct Subsistances, and preserve its own Unity . . . so that three distinct

[14] *Ibid.*, 453.
[15] *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* (London, 1668), 12.

Subsistences, or manner of beings, will require three distinct Substances or Beings; consequently three Gods."[16]

He will not allow any mystery within the Godhead. This is the most Socinian thing about his anti-Trinitarianism. He rationalizes theology in the manner of Socinus, and like the arch-Socinian he is not above chopping logic to make a point: "If each Person be God, and that God subsists in three Persons, then in each Person are three Persons or Gods, and from three, they will increase to nine, and so *ad infinitum*."[17]

Since to this apparently Unitarian theology Penn adds a Socinian-type theory of the Atonement, holding with Faustus Socinus that Christ came as an example to men rather than as a propitiation for them, we may easily imagine the extreme joy with which Firmin read *The Sandy Foundation Shaken*, for he himself had been spreading just these principles.

Still, Penn was not hypocritical in refusing to grasp the hand proffered to him. There is an undercurrent of irony running through the affair, an irony of misunderstanding possible only because the two men actually were so far apart. Standing at opposite poles all the time, Penn and Firmin attacked Trinitarianism for contradictory reasons. Firmin supports his kind of Unitarianism by doubting the divinity of Christ. Penn maintains a very different kind by making Christ identical with the Godhead. Firmin is a Socinian; Penn is a Sabellian.[18]

The misunderstanding could not last for long. Penn claims that he and the Quakers discovered the truth first, and were repelled by it: "But pulling off their Masks, at least we found them to have been the Followers of J. Biddle, in that which is commonly call'd the Socinian Way."[19] Exactly what this means is not clear. We cannot tell what character the exposure took, when it happened, or how much mutual animosity it provoked. The loan incident aside, Firmin had not been alienated up to the time that *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* ap-

[16] *Ibid.*, 10.

[17] *Ibid.*, 13.

[18] The word Sabellian comes from the name of Sabellius, a theologian of the third century who held that the Biblical terms Father, Son, and Holy Ghost refer not to three Persons of a Triune Godhead, but to different "modes" of a single divine Person. Therefore, Christ was the Father and the Holy Ghost as well as the Son.

[19] *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication of His Book*, 453.

peared, for he accepted the book "as grist to the Socinian mill and undertook to distribute copies of it."[20]

Firmin *was* alienated by Penn's next published work, *Innocency with Her Open Face*, which turned him from eager friendship to abusive hostility, if we can believe Penn.

This small pamphlet was the apologia that won Penn his release from the Tower of London. His problem was to mollify the Anglicans by showing that he had never intended to be extravagantly heterodox in his previous publication, and he succeeded so well that they saw no reason to hold him any longer.

This time he turns the Scripture argument around, holding that the sacred texts definitely identify Christ with God, above all the Fourth Gospel with its "the Word was God." Then there is the line from the Magnificat: "My Spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." Statements like these, says Penn, can have only one meaning:

> He that is the Everlasting Wisdom, the Divine Power, the true Light, the only Saviour, the creating Word of all Things, (whether visible or invisible) and their Upholder by his own Power, is without Contradiction God; but all these Qualifications and divine Properties are by the concurrent Testimonies of Scripture ascribed to the Lord Jesus Christ; therefore, without a Scruple, I call and believe him really to be the mighty God.[21]

The author does not go into the philosophical relation of substance and personality, or attack the dogma of the Trinity outright; but there is an implied Sabellian Unitarianism in his argument that "if Christ be distinct from God, and yet God's Power and Wisdom, God would be without his own Power and Wisdom; but inasmuch as it is impossible God's Power and Wisdom should be distinct or divided from himself, it reasonably follows, that Christ, who is that Power and Wisdom is not distinct from God, but intirely that very same God."[22]

Penn always denied that he took anything back. He regarded his apologia as merely an explanation of what he had been saying all along. He satisfied the Anglicans because of his firmly expressed conviction of the divinity of Christ, and they did not inquire too closely into his opinion of the Trinity. The Socinians, naturally, were by no

20 McLachlan, 306.
21 *Innocency with Her Open Face*, 268.
22 *Ibid.*, 267.

means satisfied. Feeling that they had relied on a broken reed, they castigated Penn as a traitor who had joined their ranks while free and then retreated toward orthodoxy in the face of official displeasure and ecclesiastical sanctions. Thomas Firmin, of a temper "naturally quick and warm,"[23] was probably more furious than anyone just because he had been so close to Penn. Unfortunately, it is to Penn rather than to Firmin that we must go for information, but the one-sidedness of the following passage does not alter its essential authenticity.

> At this Time, what would he not have done for me, if I might have believ'd him, and in Reality the Man was wonderfully taken; but, which was grievous, he was shamefully mistaken; and when he came to read my Confession to Christ's Eternal Godhead, in my little Book, intituled, *Innocency with her open Face*, (though he had another, call'd *The Guide Mistaken*, that p. 28, abundantly doth the same, which was writ and read by him before the *Sandy Foundation* was thought of) he deserted me, broke all Bonds of Friendship and Rules of Civility, and his extreme Shews of Kindness, turned to continual excessive Reflections; he would have it a *Retraction*, rather than he be thought to be mistaken; He had built his Hopes too high for the Foundation, and then became Wrathful, that they fell.[24]

Penn had no idea that his apologia would be thus received by the Socinians, let alone that Firmin would become violent about it. He was startled to learn that Firmin was "calling me the basest Names, undervaluing, detracting and traducing me in almost all Companies behind my back."[25] Before Penn realized the full extent of this campaign, he paid Firmin a visit at the Hoxton estate, and was treated to some shocking rudeness by his host: "in a Garden at Hoxton, where I went to accompany some of my Relations, [he affronted] me with opprobrious Names, as many can witness."[26] The guest, determined to be charitable, "demean'd my self with all Gentleness towards him."[27] But the host would not be placated.

To Hoxton Penn went no more. The erstwhile "great Intimacy" gave place to a mutual antipathy at once silent, frigid, and permanent.

23 Nye, 64.
24 *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication of His Book*, 453.
25 *Ibid.*
26 *Ibid.*
27 *Ibid.*

William Penn, then, was always and only the injured party, one who had nothing to do with starting or continuing the war of words, but rather turned the other cheek too often instead of standing up for his rights. If so, he had only himself to blame, for he was not absolutely incapable of circumventing his magnanimity long enough to deal as he should with the enemies of Goodness and Truth. In one of his letters he addresses the vice-chancellor of Cambridge as "Poor Mushroom."[28] In another he tells Richard Baxter the Presbyterian, "I perceive the Scurvy of the Mind is thy Distemper; I fear it's incurable."[29] A Baptist preacher is summarily disposed of in a typical Penn syllogism: "He that Lyes is not of God; but Thomas Hicks is a Lyar; therefore not of God, then no Christian."[30]

Surely *this* William Penn might have handled Firmin in a manner more fitting to the occasion. Conceivably we would find that he did—if we had Firmin's account of their difference of opinion. As it is, Penn does not lay claim to a superhuman sufferance under the insults laid upon him. He confesses to taking the Socinian aside for "Observation and Admonition" about the perils of "his Natural Haste, and sometimes ungoverned Speech."[31]

Firmin, for some reason, did not seem grateful or in the least inclined to profit from the salutary advice. His speech remained "ungoverned," to Penn's amazement and distress. Mournfully, Penn contemplated taking Firmin into court on a charge of defamation of character, thought better of it, and deprived us of the edifying spectacle that such a trial must have been.

This was not quite the end of the affair. Firmin's iniquities had not been entirely personal; his animosity extended beyond Penn to the Quakers generally, and he now began "to act in the Quality of an incessant Agent against us by Informations, Reports, Books, &c. (Who once did all these Things for us, and we are no worse than we were").[32]

Firmin, that is, was financing anti-Quaker writers, among them the second Socinian who antagonized Penn beyond endurance.

28 *Works*, I, 154.
29 *Ibid.*, 171.
30 *Reason against Railing* (London, 1673), 154.
31 *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication of His Book*, 454.
32 *Ibid.*, 453.

Henry Hedworth was a follower of John Biddle and a friend of Thomas Firmin, but one who preferred to defend his creed behind a screen of anonymity. Where Firmin came out boldly in favor of Socinianism, Hedworth, just as anxious about the cause, turned to writing instead of action, and to writing signed with initials instead of his name. In the Firmin-Hedworth axis, Hedworth provided the copy, while Firmin saw it through the press and into the channels by which it might arrive at the proper destinations.

Hedworth was a prolific writer. His general misdemeanor, as far as William Penn took note of him, was his war on George Fox and the Quakers; his specific misdemeanor, his identification of Penn as a traitor to the Socinian flag. Twice within the space of a year they traded blows. Hedworth wrote *The Spirit of the Quakers Tried* (1672); Penn retorted with *The Spirit of Truth Vindicated* (1672). Hedworth wrote *Controversie Ended* (1673); Penn retorted with *A Winding-Sheet for Controversie Ended* (1673).

The question of Socinian versus Quaker hardly interests us anymore. The personalities are what we want to know about, and we learn a great deal concerning these adversaries, both being given to "ungoverned Speech." Penn jibes at the "Biddlean or Socinian Cause,"[33] and castigates his opponent for "a Vizarded Socinian, either ashamed or afraid of his profession"[34]—a reference to Hedworth's anonymity, a disguise that Penn saw through either at the time or immediately thereafter. Of Firmin's place he had no doubts at all, for there is no question of the meaning when Penn refers to "an Eager officious Broaker" who publicizes Hedworth's writings.[35]

Hedworth protests at this treatment of one who had been a confidant of them both. Identifying Penn as Firmin's "Quondam Friend,"[36] he points out that Firmin had helped distribute Penn's publications, had been "so kind as to give away some Six-Penny Books to those he knew would not buy them."[37] The reminder prompts Penn to spitting vituperation with regard to "that Little Great Pragmatical Thomas Firmin: A Monster, all Tongue, and no

33 *The Spirit of Truth Vindicated* (London, 1672), 6.
34 *Ibid.*, 136.
35 *Ibid.*, 6.
36 *Controversie Ended* (London, 1673), 5.
37 *Ibid.*

Ears."[38] As for "this Socinian Agent"[39]—"Henry Hedworth by Name"[40]—he is "like Satan from Heaven fallen among the Anabaptists."[41] Penn the controversialist rises to the occasion with a shower of epithets on Henry Hedworth: "a Busie-Body, Cavilling, Conceited, Proud, Wrathful, Equivocating, Slandring, yet Cowardly Man, that loves Debate, but is both unable to maintain what he begins, and afraid to own it when he has done."[42]

Hedworth evidently drowned in the flood of unflattering adjectives. He made no reply. Pacific by nature, he must have recoiled when his anonymity was rudely pulled aside and he found himself being pushed into an arena where he would have to fight in single combat.

Firmin and Hedworth were now silenced; but Penn never escaped from this somewhat sticky corner of his past. For the rest of his life he had to meet the charge of being a Socinian, and he and his admirers were hard pressed to refute the charge. Hence the fury of his denial that he was acquainted with the Unitarian literature. We can accept his word on the theological issue, for he was a Sabellian rather than a Socinian. It is not, at any rate, a problem over which anyone will expend much ink today. His personal duel with the Socinians is more memorable if only because it puts a touch of humor into the rather sober biography of William Penn.

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38 *A Winding-Sheet for Controversie Ended* (London, 1673), 2.
39 *Ibid.*, 4.
40 *Ibid.*, 1.
41 *Ibid.*
42 *Ibid.*, 8.