

Work in Progress

Inwardness and Outwardness: Quietism and Evangelicalism in the Life of Mary Birkett Card, 1774-1817

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Introduction

The following is an exploration of some questions concerning quietism and evangelicalism that have been raised during the course of research into the writings of an ancestor, Mary Birkett Card. It is therefore submitted under the heading of 'Work in Progress'. Mary Birkett Card (1774-1817) was a minister among Friends and was Clerk to the Dublin Women's Monthly Meeting for several years. She also served as an Overseer. She wrote an extensive spiritual autobiography, as well as letters and poetry, which have remained in family possession. The writer of this report is preparing these papers in order to lodge them with Quaker libraries, work which is being funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

As part of an English/History degree course I completed a dissertation which focussed on three pieces of Mary Birkett Card's writing - two poems and a section of spiritual autobiography entitled 'Progress of Infidelity'. This section describes how she underwent a crisis of doubt in her faith in 1796-8 as a result of contact with deism (a stream of religious thinking, arising out of the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, whereby the existence of God as the creator of the universe is assumed as a logical premise but divine interventions, such as miracles, that undermine the natural laws of cause and

effect are rejected) and it testifies to her return to a traditional faith. Various facets of this account together with indications subsequently in her spiritual autobiography led me to believe she eventually embraced evangelistic belief:

...deism was the product of a desire for freedom, a willingness to embrace new ideas, to question and to think, but the price - loss of emotional contact with God, of unified self, of sense of belonging to her religious community and social class, was too dear. In its rejection of rationalism, its uncompromising assertions of right and wrong, evangelism provided certainty. Above all, in its intensity, its emphasis on personal experience of God, it provided the means for that emotional response so vital to Mary's sense of self and its articulation (Teakle 1994).

The opportunity for further study of her manuscripts in this research year, and time to explore more comprehensively eighteenth century quietism within the Society of Friends and its differences from evangelicalism, has clouded this picture. When looked at in their entirety, it is can be seen that Mary's writings in fact display characteristics of a quietist framework of belief and practice which endured throughout her life and, moreover, that she sought to meet her deep-felt needs for certainty and emotional response through the adoption of a deeply conservative quietism. Was my original assumption, then, simply mistaken? In some respects yes, but not completely. Definite pointers towards evangelicalism are present in her work. Yet quietism and evangelicalism seem so far apart from one another - in attitude, outlook and belief. Could they co-exist in any sense in someone's religious life? Or are there other explanations?

When we read history books which define and explain for us the differences between patterns of religious belief, those differences can seem clear, unambiguous. The history writer often draws an outline of facts based on difference - it is after all in the act of differentiating that we begin to understand - and then fills in the picture with the colour of interpretation, example and evidence, so that we are not so much convinced (we may be acutely aware of the vagaries of varying interpretations and the author's own

biases) but we gain an impression, an image of a religious 'environment' that stays with us. This mental image-making process often involves, because it is based on difference, a polarisation of opposites. Quietism and evangelicalism can easily be conceived in this way. Hence, quietism is inward-looking, concerned with the inner spiritual life rather than worldly activity, exclusive because denominational, while evangelicalism is thought of as outward looking, more active, inclusive in its endeavours to convert others and develop links with other Christian groups. But what happens when we are faced with contemporary texts produced by people who actually lived these differences? I found in Mary's case that the picture becomes blurred.

My original conclusion that Mary became evangelical was based partly on an essentially correct yet simplistic understanding of the nature of evangelicalism - looking for evidence of belief in the atonement (Christ's propitiatory sacrifice on behalf of a deeply sinful humankind of itself deserving only damnation), a literal interpretation of scripture, a concern with personal salvation and a desire to convert others, a highly emotional spiritual response - and its differences in these from quietism. My conclusion was also based on evidence of links with evangelicalism such as a letter written in 1815 to David Sands in America, a leading evangelical minister, which shows unbounded admiration for him and his ministry. David Sands had travelled in the ministry in Ireland in the 1790s and was one of the key figures in the controversy which resulted in many Irish Friends of deistical and associated quietist persuasions leaving the Society. In particular, he had been instrumental in the refusal of a ministering certificate for further travel to Hannah Barnard, another American Friend, whose scriptural views were considered unorthodox. Much dissension ensued. Unless Mary had some sympathy with his evangelical beliefs, it seems unlikely she would have written to Sands as one 'whose labours in this land of Ire are not forgotten' or refer to the 'baptizing seasons' when his 'lot was cast in Dublin' as 'precious' in her memory (10th Mo 20th 1815).

If anything, further research confirms these links. The subject of the 1815 letter is the death of a mutual friend, the Irish minister Susanna Hill, who had apparently risked journeying with David Sands himself and other brave souls to the Quarterly Meeting at Enniscorthy in the midst of the 1798 Irish Rebellion. Susanna Hill was a very dear friend for whose personal beliefs and ministry Mary had great respect. Susanna accompanied the evangelical minister, Mary Dudley (a convert from Methodism), on her ministerial travels across Ireland (circa 1802-1804) and is described as 'a kind and affectionate helper,... a valuable associate in the labour', (Dudley 1825:253). Such a partnership indicates, if not a total convergence of opinion, at least some shared ideas and beliefs.

Mary Birkett Card's letters, mainly written later in life, are almost all of an exhortatory or cautionary nature. They are full of scriptural quotation or resonance with a seemingly literal bias, of sin, of Christ's sacrifice and proffered salvation. Many constantly remind the recipients of the awful consequences of neglecting their spiritual calling to which all human beings are invited. Life is viewed as constant battle, a striving to gain the final reward - the victory of eternal life - to which Christ has opened the way. They are repetitive, confined in scope and content and, on initial reading, keenly critical of others' shortcomings. To an undergraduate novice, (with a prejudice against narrowness of vision or over-literal thinking in any shape or form) the haranguing zeal and view of life merely as a testing-ground for heaven or hell seemed definitely evangelical (here betraying a conception of, and perhaps resulting prejudice against, evangelicalism as a narrow, simplistic view of the world). It was easy, too, to see these letters as the output of a woman who, having assayed intellectual and spiritual freedom in her youth and found its sweets turn bitter, had re-discovered the safety net of an unquestioning religious faith and wished to keep others to the straight and narrow path. There is some truth in this picture. However, research has since revealed other factors that should be taken into consideration. For instance, Monthly Meeting Minutes showed that Mary was an overseer during much of the period when the letters were written. As such, she would have had a responsibility for the pastoral care of members of her Monthly Meeting and many of her letters could have arisen out of this role. A deeper understanding

of eighteenth century Quakerism has enabled me to see that many were written in a spirit of loving care rather than criticism.

The letters are actually quietist, not evangelical, exemplars, particularly in their concern for the maintenance of traditional Quaker discipline - urging conformity to plain dress and speech, for instance - and when they and Mary's journal, in which she quotes from writers such as Miguel de Molinos who I found to be a continental quietist, are looked at together, the evidence for her quietism is irrefutable. In true quietist style, the workings of self are denigrated as 'creaturely activity', simplicity is desired in all things (Mary desires freedom from superfluity even in words, thoughts, and sleep), and there is a suspicion of the world of the senses or of rational thought: 'Sophisticated reasonings belong to fools', 'systematic knowledge' is decried as 'serpentine wisdom'. Yet her work does not quite fit the picture of quietism I had formed.

There is a general perception among modern Quakers and historians of quietism as narrowly 'inward looking', even lacking spiritual vitality. It is assumed that the loss of the original fervour of the early Quakers and the need to organise and thus preserve the sect led to the Society's turning in on itself, retreating behind a 'hedge' of strict discipline and conformity to Quaker codes especially with regard to dress and speech, and to a lack of engagement with the outside world. The practice of quietism, as its name indicates, emphasised silent waiting in worship. Talking of frequent silent meetings as the result of the necessity ministers felt to be certain of divine inspiration before speaking, Alastair Heron goes so far as to say that it is in this context of a lack of stimulation 'that the term "quietist" has been used by modern Quakers' (Heron 1995:7), and, while admitting a 'beautiful religious culture' emerged within quietism, John Punshon bewails the fact that this took place 'behind the facade of Quaker denominationalism and exclusiveness', and 'unhappily... apart from the world', (Punshon 1984:103).

Mary's writings are indeed inward-looking in many ways. In her journal she constantly examines her inner self and its failings, desires self-annihilation in God and avoidance of all that might interfere with total spiritual dedication -

but these are features of evangelical diaries too, particularly women's journals, of the period (see Davidoff and Hall 1987:87). Conversely, these themes result in obsessions with the very things that Mary seeks to eradicate - in attempting a loss of self she ends up thinking of herself continually, in wishing to be freed from worldly cares and 'mammon' so she can devote herself to God she becomes frenetic about the state of the family business and the need for sufficient income. (The fear of bankruptcy and consequent disownment for dishonest behaviour not in keeping with Friends' testimonies was, however, a genuine one, so her worries about money are understandable.)

Her writings are also inward-looking in their concern for Quaker discipline and separation from the rest of the world. The journal confesses fallings away from codes of practice in business (for example, accepting stamp receipts above two pounds which was considered a form of 'equivocation'), a relative is disowned for marrying out of the Society. The word 'hedge' appears frequently in connection with Quaker ways of life being the means of separating 'the precious from the vile' - a dichotomy, however, that delineates purity and impurity within the soul itself as well as between worldly and godly people. Plainness is the badge of the godly in the midst of a 'degenerate and perverse generation' - a description, though, that includes Quaker backsliders as much as those of 'the world' outside.

All this *is* constraining, life-restricting and narrow, yet it is counterbalanced by great depth and openness in religious experience: the mystical joy of moments of communion with God, almost to the extent of intoxication - when God fills the soul He 'inebriates' it with Himself, the way this joy is always there if we know how to be open to it - the Lord's Sabbath is not confined to Sundays (First Days) but is the experience of God's rest created at any moment in the human heart, often amidst daily occupations. And there is the sheer beauty of quietist language used to convey mystical experience: interwoven echoes of Biblical texts particularly verses from the Song of Solomon to describe the soul's varying relation to God, rich imagery - the soul as a seed quietly awaiting its appointed time in the ground subjected to the workings of the Gospel plough, a profusion of words not only for God but for

Satan, an exuberance of language despite constant assertions that language cannot capture 'the ineffable'.

This experiential mysticism woven into the fabric of everyday life is more life-affirming than life-denying, but it is still necessarily centred in the inner individual life. Mary's entire journal is 'inward' in this sense - it records her own day-to-day inner experience of God and outward events only so far as they affect that experience. But this was the whole purpose of keeping a spiritual journal - saying little about activity in the world does not mean one is inactive. Besides referring, though without detail, to various philanthropic activities, she specifically expresses a desire to work practically for the benefit of society. More confusing, however, is the desire to spread the Gospel and save souls in a manner more associated with evangelicalism (even if it seems to have arisen from within the quietist experience of silent waiting and denial of 'creaturely activity'):

Knowing experimentally the necessity of ceasing from all my own works, I long ardently & continually to work the works of God. I covet to promote not merely the harmony of society, but... union... with the Father thro' the Son Christ Jesus,... and that I may be instrumental in its promotion & Soul saving spread (8th Mo 25th 1805).

Later, in a phrase resonating with missionary zeal and evangelistic fervour, she yearns to proclaim the gospel across the globe.

Evangelicalism is usually conceived as tending to reach outwards not only to the unconverted but to other denominations and to joint action in the world. It 'moved the Quakers closer to the rest of the religious world; they became more a part of the serious Christian brotherhood' (Davidoff and Hall 1987:87). Though he admits quietists were 'quietly benevolent', John Punshon sees 'social action' as 'the most characteristic effect of evangelicalism on British Friends' (Punshon 1984:167). Mary's writings confirm a quietist view of social action as of secondary importance - 'good as it may be to assist &

benefit the poor, it is better to wait in silence upon God' (10th Mo 5th 1805), but they are also full of concern for the school for 'poor' children she helped run, (probably the Daily Free School - a Quaker project to provide education without denominational bias for the children of Dublin's poor). And she keenly supported the anti-slavery campaign - as evidenced by a published poem ('On the African Slave Trade' 1792) and a poetic plea to her local MP Hans Hamilton urging him to vote against the trade in 1806. This would almost certainly have involved her in campaigning with members of other denominational groups, as would a scheme for setting up a home for retired female servants she refers to. Finally, though her diary concentrates on the great enjoyment of spiritual gifts resulting from a quietist silent waiting, there is an awareness of the dangers of over-indulgence of those gifts: 'It is not enough that we rest in the smile of divine approbation', because 'Labour is the allotment of all' - labour in the world as well as the ever-vital labour towards spiritual regeneration (7th Mo 12th 1796).

Perhaps the experience I think of as most characteristically evangelical is the once-in-a-lifetime conversion - a singular encounter with God when a special knowledge of His presence, an awareness of sin and feeling of total dependence on Him and suffusion of the soul with Divine Grace leads to an acceptance on faith of Christ's sacrifice on the individual's behalf and their own acknowledgement of personal salvation - what is termed 'justification'. Mary first seems to anticipate just such an experience, describing herself as 'hid in a place of safety until the day is accomplished in which it will be given me to sing, "Unto me a child is born, unto me a son is given ..."' (12th Mo 11th 1796), and then later, after passing through the turmoil of deism, she seems to record the experience itself. Seeking with all the powers of her soul to 'reach after God',

He was pleased to reveal the ameliorating influence of Jesus Christ whom I then knew to be the alone intercessor and mediator with God. Jesus I now know thee to be my Saviour, my Redeemer. Thou art the Lamb of God. I never knew thee before that I remember, as I know thee now my crucified Lord. I can now acknowledge thee, and before had I given

worlds for the purchase I could not acknowledge thee the Saviour of men (9th Mo 1798).

Later, in her letters, there are many references to the 'day of visitation' which seems similar. In a letter to a friend (12th Mo 25th 1812), Mary wishes to impress on his/her mind 'a sense of the preciousness of the day of visitation' for which we must wait and seek, but which, like the day of 'outward creation' we cannot 'cause' purely of our own volition or effort because it is the gift of God alone - here seemingly coming close to the evangelical justification by faith rather than works. She desires that another friend, Maria, may be 'more and more sensible of the preciousness of the day of divine visitation which I am satisfied has dawn'd in thee' (2nd Mo 26th 1814), and goes on to define it as a day of 'inestimable value'...

in which we may attain to a near union with our glorious creator, and become gradually transformed into his image and renewed up into that everlasting possession which was purchased for us by the blood and death of an immaculate Redeemer - and verily there is no other way, the cross leads to the crown, we cannot invent an easier passage.

How could this keen experience of salvation purchased by a Saviour's blood be anything but evangelical?

Yet the term 'day of visitation' has nothing to do with evangelical revivalism. It was a concept promoted by the Quaker theologian Robert Barclay (1648-1690). John Punshon explains that whereas George Fox saw 'the light as ready to operate whenever people are persuaded to turn to it,... Barclay displays a narrower conception - for everyone there is a "day of visitation", a period in which the opportunity of repentance and response to the light are on offer. It could be at any time, but it was temporary; once lost the opportunity was gone, never to recur', (Punshon 1984:125). Similarities with the evangelical salvation experience are obvious: it happens once only, what we must do is turn to God seeking forgiveness, yet we cannot achieve anything by

our own efforts but only through acceptance of God's grace or, for Barclay, the operation of the light within. The concept seems alien to the quietist experience of an ever-accessible light within, but nevertheless it was a powerful component in Mary's spirituality.

What then can we surmise about Mary's beliefs? Can her writings tell us anything about quietism and evangelicalism in the lives of Friends two centuries ago?

Actual people do not always conform easily to the patterns we create in order to make sense of the past. In Mary we have someone who was a representative in many respects of late eighteenth century quietism - in her inner life of mystical contemplation, her advocacy of traditional plainness, discipline and separation from the world, her language. But her quietism, while conforming to the 'inward-looking' pattern in many ways, did not stop her acting on behalf of charitable causes or labouring in the world and it gave her a rich and vibrant spiritual life. Then she was influenced by and sympathetic to the ministry of evangelical preachers, had links with evangelical Friends, and yearned to spread the Good News of the Gospel worldwide. Our pictures of quietism and evangelicalism may lead us to feel this was incompatible with quietism, but how would she have felt? Would these categories have held meaning for her? If we were able to ask her how her views of the atonement or scripture differed from evangelical Friends would she be able to tell us? Or if we could ask her whether she was a quietist (bearing in mind that we would need to explain the term as it only came to be used subsequently), would she consider herself as such? One possibility is that she, and perhaps many other Friends living through this period, engaged with whatever they considered valid or relevant from both religious environments without concerning themselves about incompatibilities.

A couple of other thoughts present themselves. Mary was not unaware of dissension in the Society in Ireland - she refers to it obliquely as 'the desolation of the sanctuary' - or of contrasting formations of belief. But the dissension was not so much between quietists and evangelicals as between freer thinkers (quietistic types influenced by liberal or deistic thought) and the more

orthodox. She lived at a crossroads when the orthodox quietism of the eighteenth century was giving way to what was to become the evangelistic orthodoxy of the nineteenth - both traditional quietists and evangelicals were, innately, conservatives. Quietism and evangelicalism also share an experiential, as opposed to intellectual, approach. Early in life Mary had rejected the rationalistic challenge posed by Enlightenment deism for a more orthodox but also more living faith, one which could offer her security, identity and depth in religious experience. Perhaps some of the answers lie here.

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