

LIKE A DOG WALKING ON ITS HIND LEGS: SAMUEL JOHNSON AND QUAKERS

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Johnson liked some individual Quakers but disliked the sect; an examination of his encounters with them, as reported in Boswell's *Life*, along with reminiscences of the Lloyd family, Mary Knowles and Anna Seward, throws significant light on both Johnson's religious and social views and on some aspects of the Quakerism of his time. The commonly-held view of Quakerism in the Quietist period is, in W. C. Braithwaite's phrase, that these were 'years of outward respectability and inward spiritual decline'. He adds that 'religion as a whole was suffering from the lassitude of Dissent and the devastations of Deism'. Kathryn Damiano challenges many of these perceptions of the Quietist period, arguing that the process of spiritual formation for Friends of this period combined both the negative way, denial of the world, the disciplines of silence, waiting, plainness, and the affirmative way sustained by the community of faith, which encourages faithfulness, transformation and nurture of the inward life. These issues underscore aspects of Quakerism which most trouble Johnson, notably the participation of women in vocal ministry, trust in the leading of an inward light, and the emphasis on the authority of the individual conscience.

Boswell, Knowles and Seward each report Johnson's vehement denunciation of a young woman who has become a Quaker. It is clear that death and the final judgment—about which the company had been talking—terrified Johnson. In his attack on Mary Knowles and her protegee, we are seeing that terror being expressed *for* the young woman, whose immortal soul Johnson believes she has frivolously put at risk. For Johnson, there is no greater danger to one's immortal soul than departing from the faith one was born into. He feared standing before the Almighty and justifying himself on his knowledge, rather than on his obedience. Providence has placed each of us, and obedience to what has been given one, is safety. Mary Knowles argues that God will understand and forgive human error and look only at whether we follow conscience, mistaken or not.

Even these brief glimpses of Quaker lives reveal nuances to the conventional views of eighteenth-century Quakerism. Mary Knowles in particular evidences a far more energetic faith than portrayed by W.C. Braithwaite; in her we see a strong, independent, well-educated woman, capable of inspiring an admiration of Quakerism in others, able to move easily and

gracefully and with sincerity within the Society of Friends and between it and the sophisticated literary world of Samuel Johnson.

KEYWORDS

Samuel Johnson, Mary Knowles, Anna Seward, Quietism, William Law, inward light

'Quaker' is often used as a metonym for spiritual integrity, honesty and goodness, and a vaguely eighteenth-century icon—a gently smiling face framed by a broad-brimmed dark hat and plain clothes—recommends everything from oatmeal to whiskey to the buying public. Samuel Johnson's views of Quakers are far more astringent, and an examination of his encounters with them, as reported in Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD*, placed in context with reminiscences of the Lloyd family, Mary Knowles and Anna Seward, throws significant light on both Johnson's religious and social views and on some aspects of the Quakerism of his time.

The commonly-held view of Quakerism in the Quietist period (stretching from the eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries) is, in W.C. Braithwaite's phrase from *The Second Period of Quakerism*, that these were 'years of outward respectability and inward spiritual decline'. (Braithwaite 1961: 179)

It must be confessed that the Quaker movement, after two generations of vitality, was resting on its past, accommodating itself to the ease of the present, and losing its vision... A religious movement, beginning in the first-hand conviction of all its adherents, inevitably alters its character as new generations succeed. The mechanism of organization begins to replace the free activity of the living organism... [A]nd the membership consists largely of those born and bred within the Church and accepting its great traditions and well-ordered way of life from their elders, rather than as their own vital discovery. (Braithwaite 1961: 631-33).

Agreeing with Rufus Jones' views in his history of *The Later Periods of Quakerism* (1921), Braithwaite points to the narrowness of guarded education and tight corporate discipline, the loss of energetic leadership to the Quaker colonies of the New World, and 'the clogging growth of wealth and worldly prosperity' as chief contributors to the decline of spiritual energy in eighteenth-century British Quakerism (Braithwaite 1961: 636). He adds that 'religion as a whole was suffering from the lassitude of Dissent and the devastations of Deism' (Braithwaite 1961: 637). By the last quarter of the century, J. William Frost says, 'American Quakers wrestled with pacifism, Indian rights, antislavery; English Quakers with rationalism, quietism and evangelicalism' (Damiano 1989: 36). We may further note that the two crises of the French and Indian

Wars, which prompts American Quakers to withdraw from political office and power, and the American Revolution, which severely tests Quakers' adherence to the peace testimony, intensifies efforts on both sides of the Atlantic to maintain church discipline through strict adherence to the 'testimonies' for peace, for plain dress and 'the plain gospel speech', and against oaths. The more directly Friends are drawn into both the world of business and manufacturing and into broad philanthropic and charitable work, the harder they try to withdraw into and preserve the intimate, guarded familial world of Quakerism.

In her 1989 doctoral dissertation, *On Earth As It Is In Heaven: Eighteenth-century Quakerism As Realized Eschatology*, Kathryn Damiano challenges many of these perceptions of the Quietist period. She argues in particular, that the process of spiritual formation for Friends of this period combined both the negative way, denial of the world, the disciplines of silence, waiting, plainness, and the affirmative way sustained by the community of faith, which encourages faithfulness, transformation and nurture of the inward life. This she calls 'realized eschatology'. In her critique of Rufus Jones and more recent writers, she says they:

tended to diminish many of the qualities that are associated with Quietism such as waiting, receptivity, and nurturance. As these authors have demonstrated, Eighteenth-century Quakerism saw the home and family life as the center from which to nourish and sustain Quaker beliefs and practices. Traditionally, the qualities of waiting, receptivity and nurturance have been associated with the 'feminine'. Home and family life have been relegated to the realm of women as well (Damiano 1989: 90-91).

She concludes that '...Quietism instead of being world-denying can be an incarnational, relational, and transforming religious outlook. Correspondingly, the mysticism of Eighteenth-century Quakerism incorporates an involvement with there here and now... [and] reflects the paradox of living in eternity now as an aid to this-worldly transformation' (Damiano 1989: 243).

This is not the place to adjudicate between such different understandings of the Quietist Period, but it is both appropriate to note these disputed issues and useful for underscoring some of the aspects of Quakerism which trouble, even enrage, Samuel Johnson, most notably the participation of women in vocal ministry, trust in the leading of an inward light, and the emphasis on the authority of the individual conscience.

Talking of the uses of biography, Johnson says to Kemp Malone, 'If nothing but the bright side of characters should be shewn, we should sit down in despondency, and think it utterly impossible to imitate them in *anything*' (Bate

1777: XIX). If we first meet Samuel Johnson through Boswell's biography, we encounter the overwhelming personality, the idiosyncratic wit, the verbal duelist who seems never to lose, of whom Sir Joshua Reynolds said, if his pistol misfired he would use it to hit you on the head, the inimitable hero of brilliant anecdotes whom nonetheless we try to imitate. His idea of 'good talk' was tossing and going those around him. His idea of keeping the conversational ball bouncing was to say things like, 'Sir, I see you are a vile whig'. When we read Johnson himself in *Rasselas*, the *Preface to Shakespeare*, *The Lives of the Poets*, *The Rambler* and *The Idler*, we meet a far more complex figure, working with more complex ideas, than we see in Boswell, but he still remains a hard case—quick to judge and condemn, full of prejudices, happy to insult the Scots, Americans, Whigs, religious enthusiasts and Quakers.

In the most famous anecdote on the subject, Boswell writes, of 31 July, 1763, 'I told him I had been that morning at a meeting of the people called Quakers, where I had heard a woman preach.

JOHNSON 'Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all' (Boswell 1960: 327).

We know that Johnson had been acquainted earlier with a few Quakers, most poignantly when, at the age of fifteen, at Stourbridge School, 'he was much enamoured of Olivia Lloyd, a young quaker, to whom he wrote a copy of verses...'. (Boswell 1960: 66) There is no evidence Johnson ever *heard* a woman preach, but the anecdote alerts us to the volatility of mixing orthodox Christianity, Quakers and women, for Johnson.

A later passage in *The Life*, 22 March 1776, tells of Johnson and Boswell going to dinner at the home of Sampson Lloyd, 'one of the people called Quakers'. Johnson had told Boswell, 'that he liked individuals among Quakers, but not the sect', so Boswell tried not to introduce any questions 'concerning the peculiarities of their faith'. (Boswell 1960: 701) Even so, Johnson skims a passage on baptism in Barclay's *Apology* and announces 'He says there is neither precept nor practice for baptism, in the scriptures; that is false'. Boswell adds, 'Here he was the aggressor, by no means in a gentle manner; and the good Quakers had the advantage of him, for he had read negligently, and had not observed that Barclay speaks of *infant* baptism...' (Boswell 1960: 703).

A Quaker and family source for this incident, Samuel Lloyd's book *The Lloyds of Birmingham*, reports: 'Tradition says that Johnson in his fury with Barclay flung the volume on the floor and stamped on it', and continued the debate at dinner 'in such angry tones, and struck the table so violently,... that

the two children were frightened, and desired to escape'. (Lloyd 1907: 108) It is hard to credit the accuracy of this tradition. Could Samuel Johnson have so forgotten the ordinary courtesy required of a guest as to throw the host's valued book on the floor and stamp on it? Could he have been so outraged by the little bit of Quaker doctrine being discussed that he would scare the children? And would even the gentlest, meekest of eighteenth-century Quakers have put up with that behavior? All we can say with confidence is that the dismissiveness and vehemence with which he has treated both Quaker practice and doctrine in these two cases suggest important issues for him, so it seems right to look at what we might say about his own faith.

From being what he called 'a sort of lax *talker* against religion' Johnson became converted to orthodox Christianity at around the age of 19–20, when he read William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) 'expecting to find it a dull book (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational inquiry' (Boswell 1960: 50–51).

Law's *Serious Call* stresses the spiritual life of the individual, the inward life, the life of meditation and prayer especially. This is the tradition of individualism and 'interiority'. In that tradition, one turns within to find God working, to learn what one is called to do. Certainly the church, the Bible, the Christian traditions can support and sustain one in the quest of faith, but in this tradition each of us must ultimately undertake that quest alone. One is ultimately answerable to one's own conscience, rather than to any outward authority, for one's beliefs and behavior. John Wain points out that 'Law's concern is with the spiritual life of the individual' (Wain 1974: 54). And that is exactly the point of greatest vulnerability for Johnson; he knows too much about what he calls the treachery of the human heart, the capacity, even the desire, to delude ourselves. 'He saw God not as a loving Father but as a judge, who had the absolute right to consign him to an eternity of torment' (Wain 1974: 55). According to Walter Jackson Bate:

Johnson is probably the most extraordinary example in modern times of a man who in his own character concretely and dramatically exemplifies the Augustinian tradition of individualism and 'interiority'—'it is within the soul itself that man must search for truth and certitude'...—and yet, far from welcoming it or turning to it with conscious choice, he distrusted and in many ways tried to resist it. In this respect he is of enormous interest in illustrating the transition to the modern inwardness of the religious life and self-doubt that attended it (Bate 1977: 455).

At the center of Johnson's religious struggle, Bate says, were two things in particular: 1) the inexplicability of the problem of evil and his 'fixed incredulity of everything he heard', so he could not remain content with 'mystery', and 2) his impatience with 'publick worship' and subsequent reliance on private devotions, particularly prayer.

This naturally meant that the task of controlling and focusing thoughts became far more a matter of self-responsibility than it would otherwise have been, and that opportunities for self-examination and self-blame, in the very act of religious devotion, were immensely increased... In his religious life Johnson's battle to resist the temptations of excessive self-reliance—one of his most deeply implanted characteristics—was unceasing (Bate 1977: 450-53).

Few people can match Samuel Johnson for courage, but courage often resides in how we handle our terrors, so it is no disparagement of him to say that he feared standing before the Almighty and justifying himself on his knowledge, rather than on his obedience. Two conversations can illustrate this point. Boswell tells us of one in 1770, where Johnson speaks of the *inward light*:

which some methodists pretended[.] He said, it was a principle utterly incompatible with social or civil security. 'If a man (said he) pretends to a principle of action of which I can know nothing, nay, not so much as that he has it, but only that he pretends to it; how can I tell what that person may be prompted to do? When a person professes to be governed by a written ascertained law, I can then know where to find him' (Boswell 1960: 443).

This doctrine of the *inward light* is one which the earliest Methodists would have had in common with Quakers. For Quakers, the doctrine derives from an understanding of the Gospel of John, where we are told that the light enlightens everyone who comes into the world, and from the passage in Jer. 31.31-34, where the prophet says that God has written God's law on human hearts. Were this essay an exploration of *William Law and Quakerism*, we would turn to Stephen Hobhouse's book by that title and discover that many of Law's critics, including John Wesley, fault him, in *The Serious Call* and elsewhere, for coming too close to Quakerism in his teaching on the Inner Light. 'The most obvious point of contact between William Law's teaching and Quakerism was the doctrine of the Inner Light, which he himself puts in the forefront of his creed' (Hobhouse 1927: 324). Hobhouse tells us that John Wesley devotes 'some seven pages' of his *Letter to the Rev. Mr. Law* (1756) to Law's teaching on the Inner Light and adds 'Wesley maintains with some force that such teaching is both unscriptural and calculated to keep men asleep in unbelief and sin' (Hobhouse 1927: 315).

If it were possible to recover all the numerous sermons and pamphlets that appear to have been produced in the middle years of the eighteenth-century against the mystical errors of the author of the *Serious Call*, I think we should find the specific attribution of Quakerism to him a frequent point of attack (Hobhouse 1927: 325).

What Johnson fears—indeed, what the first generation of Quakers had good reason to fear—is that speaking from the authority of one's own Light exposes one to all the dangers of self-deception, self-will and what was called *ranterism* in the seventeenth century. There is reason to worry how we can discern in ourselves or in others when the light of God is truly working. Despite William Law's strong affirmation of the inward light, however, Johnson simply rejects the principle. Boswell uses some form of the word 'pretends' three times in the seven printed lines of this passage, putting the word in Johnson's mouth twice.

This passage is worth comparing to another conversation ten years later, in 1780. 'Talking on the subject of toleration, ... he made his usual remark, that the State has the right to regulate the religion of the people, who are children of the State'. (Boswell 1960: 1073) It is clear that Johnson has no tolerance for toleration. He believes the Established Church should be able to *establish* as well as regulate the religion of the people. It stands *in loco parentis* to those who cannot judge for themselves. When a clergyman in his audience agrees with him—and we know that it is as dangerous to agree as to disagree with him—Johnson replies, 'But, Sir, you must go round to other States than our own. You do not know what a Brahmin has to say for himself'. In an earlier vehement debate, he makes a similar point. '... The greatest part of our religion is implicit faith; and as to religion, have we heard all that a disciple of Confucius, all that a Mahometan, can say for himself?' (Boswell 1960: 1073) The thrust of his argument here is *not* that there is something to be said for other religions, but that no individual can or should trust his own judgment to choose among them.

That is the religion given you, the religion in which it may be said Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously in that religion, you may be safe. But error is dangerous indeed, if you err when you choose a religion for yourself (Boswell 1960: 952).

For Johnson, there is no greater danger to one's immortal soul than departing from the faith one was born into. We cannot over-emphasize the importance of this phrase, '*you may be safe*'. At the conclusion of his disquisition on toleration, Johnson says to the clergyman, 'In short, Sir, I have got no further than this: Every man has a right to utter what he thinks truth, and every other

man has a right to knock him down for it. Martyrdom is the test' (Boswell 1960: 1073). That passage might be held to show either how stubbornly intolerant Johnson could be, or how determined he was not to be agreed with. But this apparently cranky outburst is sharply focused on the *cost* of belief. If one is willing to be martyred for a belief, surely God will see it is genuine and obedient to some principle other than wishful thinking. To recapitulate how this small bit of argument has gone: every state has the right to regulate the religion of its people. It is not important whether one has been born in a Hindu, a Muslim, or a Christian state; Providence has placed each of us, and obedience to what has been given one, is safety. Beyond safety, if one wills to speak one's own truth, the test, even the safety, of that position, is martyrdom.

All this prepares us to examine an especially resonant story, Johnson's dialogue with Mrs Mary Knowles, the woman Boswell calls 'the ingenious Quaker lady', and Bate 'the beautiful and learned Quakeress', rather like 'the pretty Birmingham quakeress' Olivia Lloyd. She was married to a medical doctor with whom she travelled in a scientific tour on the continent. When she was 'admitted to the toilette' of Marie Antoinette, dressed in the simple grey garb of Quakers of the time, the queen made many inquiries about the principles of Quakers 'and acknowledged that at least they were philosophers' (Lloyd 1907: 111). Mary Knowles had also become on familiar terms with George III and his wife through her needlework, having made a portrait of the king in worsted (Seward 1975: I, 46n.).

The debate, under the date 15 April 1778, appears both in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and in versions from Mary Knowles herself (*Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1791, cited in Lloyd: 1907, 115-117) and in a letter from Anna Seward (Seward 1975: 97-103) who was also present. In Boswell's account, five particularly volatile topics—some generating or building up to Johnsonian outbursts—were discussed in the course of the evening: whether men and women should be equal; whether courage and friendship are Christian virtues; Johnson's dislike of Americans and his anger at the American Revolution; whether death was to be feared; and, the source of the greatest explosion of wrath, Mrs Knowles' intercession on behalf of her protegee Jane (Jenny) Harry, a young woman who had left the Church of England to become a Quaker.

It is important to trace the trajectory of that evening's discussions as Boswell describes it. First, he tells us, 'Mrs Knowles *affected* (emphasis added) to complain that men had much more liberty allowed them than women'. Johnson answers that women have all the liberty they should wish to have; '...we have all the labour and the danger, and the women, all the advantage'.

She presses on, saying he reasons wittily but not convincingly and cites what we would call the double standard. Johnson answers that, if men require more perfection from women than from themselves, it is doing women honor. Mary Knowles replies that she thinks it a hardship that men are more indulged than women. 'It gives a superiority to men, to which I do not see how they are entitled'. Johnson says it is plain that one or the other must have superiority, and then there follows a certain amount of old-boys-club joshing, from Dilly and Boswell, on this subject. Mrs Knowles concludes by hoping that in another world the sexes will be equal, and Boswell says that *that* is too ambitious, we can only be happy in our different capacities. (Boswell 1960: 944-45)

Next Johnson and Mary Knowles have a small skirmish over whether friendship is a Christian virtue. Johnson says no, friendship always involves preferring the interests of a friend against another's. She reminds the company that the Saviour had twelve apostles but there was one whom he loved.

JOHNSON (with eyes sparkling benignantly), 'Very well, indeed, Madam. You have said very well'.

BOSWELL 'A fine application. Pray, Sir, had you ever thought of it?'

JOHNSON 'I had not, Sir' (Boswell 1960: 946).

From this pleasing subject he, I know not how or why, made a sudden transition to one upon which he was a violent aggressor; for he said 'I am willing to love all mankind, *except an American*', and his inflammable corruption bursting into horrid fire, he 'breathed out threatening and slaughter;' calling them 'Rascals—Robbers—Pirates;' and exclaiming, he'd 'burn and destroy them'. Miss Seward, looking at him with mild but steady astonishment, said, 'Sir, this is an instance that we are always most violent against those whom we have injured'.—He was irritated still more by this delicate and keen reproach; and roared out another tremendous volley, which one might fancy could be heard across the Atlantick. During this tempest I sat in great uneasiness, lamenting his heat of temper; till, by degrees, I diverted his attention to other topics (Boswell 1960: 946).

We should note some of the elements at work here: Johnson is challenged, at a moment of heavy fire-breathing, by a learned woman who is not a favorite of his, who presumes to meet him as an equal, and who argues the Whig position on the American Revolution. First Mary Knowles has argued the equality of men and women, and then Anna Seward has presumed to challenge Johnson as a equal on a matter on which his feelings are very strong. He may well feel unhappily surprised by how well these women preach.

The company is drawn into a very dangerous and powerful discussion, when Boswell speaks of feeling horror at the thought of death and Mary Knowles replies 'Nay, thou shouldst not have a horror for what is the gate of life'.

- JOHNSON ' (standing upon the hearth rolling about with a serious, solemn, and somewhat gloomy air) No rational man can die without uneasy apprehension'.
- MRS 'But divine intimation of acceptance may be made to the soul'
- KNOWLES
- JOHNSON 'Madam, it may; but I should not think the better of a man who should tell me on his deathbed, he was sure of salvation...'

She says the scriptures tell us the righteous shall have hope in death, but Johnson answers that one's hope of salvation depends on the terms on which it was promised, our obedience, 'and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance...' (Boswell 1960: 950). Boswell intervenes to say we must be content then to acknowledge death is a terrible thing. Johnson agrees, but Mary Knowles, '(seeming to enjoy a pleasing serenity in the persuasion of a benignant divine light)' says:

- MRS 'Does not St Paul say, "I have fought the good fight of faith, I have finished my course; henceforth is laid up for me a crown of life?"'
- KNOWLES
- JOHNSON 'Yes Madam, but here was a man inspired, a man who had been converted by supernatural interposition...' (Boswell 1960: 950).

Mary Knowles cannot know it, but they are discussing the greatest terror of Johnson's daily and spiritual life, and her serene self-confidence can only increase his terror. One wonders whether even Boswell fully appreciates how much effect her 'seeming to enjoy a pleasing serenity in the persuasion of a benignant divine light' would have on Johnson. Here he is in the middle of a conversation with one of those people sure of an inward light, and she is chatting familiarly about the blessings of death! The dominant themes in Johnson's part of this conversation deserve special note: profound doubts about anyone's worthiness in God's eyes, the unsure safety of obedience and even of repentance—for who can know what God will see in one's own heart? Even hope seems doubtful, motivated by wilful self-confidence rather than trust in God. These are, as we have seen in both Bate's and Wain's analyses, lifelong apprehensions for Johnson:

Trust in God...is to be obtained only by repentance, obedience, and supplication, not by nourishing in our hearts a confused idea of the goodness of God, or a firm persuasion that we are in a state of grace; by which some have been deceived... (Bate 1977: 458).

It cannot have improved Johnson's mood that Anna Seward again enters the conversation and again manages to tread heavily on one of the most painful issues in his life.

- MISS There is one mode of the fear of death which is certainly absurd; and
SEWARD that is the dread of annihilation, which is only a pleasing sleep without a dream.
- JOHNSON It is neither pleasing, nor sleep, it is nothing. Now mere existence is so much better than nothing, that one would rather exist even in pain, than not exist... The lady confounds annihilation, which is nothing, with the apprehension of it, which is dreadful. It is in the apprehension of it, that the horror of annihilation consists (Boswell 1960: 950-51).

After this intense and, for Johnson, terrifying conversation, there follows the most telling and distressing discussion of the evening. Mary Knowles mentions the young woman, once a favorite of Johnson's, who had recently become a Quaker. She still holds Johnson in affection and is sorry to find 'that he was offended at her leaving the Church of England, and embracing a simpler faith'. Boswell says Mary Knowles, 'in the gentlest and most persuasive manner, solicited his kind indulgence for what was sincerely a matter of conscience'.

- JOHNSON (frowning very angrily) 'Madame, she is an odious wench. She could not have any proper conviction that it was her duty to change her religion, which is the most important of all subjects, and should be studied with all care, and with all the helps we can get. She knew no more of the Church which she left, and that which she embraced, than she did of the difference between the Copernican and Ptolemaick systems' (Boswell 1960: 952).

This formerly loved young woman is now hated. 'Wench' is always a derogatory term, meaning at best a female servant and at worst a wanton woman or prostitute—extravagant, rude language to use in front of ladies, in polite society, about a young woman whose worst crime was becoming a Quaker. Boswell treats Mary Knowles' own published recollection of this conversation dismissively in a footnote: '...no doubt the lady appears to have greatly the advantage of Dr. Johnson in argument as well as expression...' (Boswell 1960: 952-53) but a close examination of the various sources of the story does not give all the credence to Boswell. Boswell's footnote after the first edition claims that she:

communicated to me a Dialogue of considerable length, which after many years had elapsed, she wrote down as having passed between Dr. Johnson and herself at this interview. As I have not the least recollection of it, and did not find the smallest trace of it in my *Record* taken at the time, I could not in consistency with my firm regard to authenticity, insert it in my work (Boswell 1960: 952-53n).

The dinner party took place in 1778. The first edition of the *Life* came out in April, 1791, and Mary Knowles' published account in June, 1791. We know

Boswell's practice was to write extensive notes immediately after an event, so Mary Knowles' account, coming after his is in print, might be assumed to be self-aggrandizing. In recalling intense conversations, especially a long time later, we all tend to remember having said most of the best things. But in fact we have here a recollection which rests substantially on 'minutes' recorded at the time by Anna Seward and reported to Boswell and others while he was collecting materials for his book. In a letter to Mary Knowles, 27 March, 1785, she reports 'Mr Boswell has applied to me for Johnsonian records for his life of the despot. If he inserts them unmutated, as I have arranged them, they will contribute to display Johnson's real character to the public...' (Seward 1975: I, 47) In one to Mrs Mompessan, 31 December, 1785, she includes *'those requested minutes, which I made at the time of the ensuing conversation'*. (Seward 1975: I, 100, emphasis added.) In a letter to Mary Knowles on 19 May, 1791, Anna Seward writes:

So Mr. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is out at last. The second volume contains the memorable conversation at Dilly's, but without the part of it of which I made minutes, and in which you appear to so much advantage over the imperious and gloomy intolerant. This omission is surely unjustifiable, as I gave Mr. Boswell my memoir, and as I am sure though it *by no means contains all that was said*, it contains what was said by you and by the despot. Mr. Boswell well might have given as much more as you and he could recollect, but he should not have omitted those highly characteristic sentences (Seward 1975: III, 74).

Wilson Armistead adds that Mary Knowles's account in the June 1791 *Gentlemen's Magazine*, 'is taken from Anna Seward's minutes, with a few particulars supplied by Mary Knowles herself' (Armistead 1851: 95). Writing to Helen Williams, 19 October, 1788, Anna Seward says:

Mrs K. is curiously dissatisfied with that tract [i.e., her 'minutes'] because it does not record a long theologic dispute, which succeeded to what I *did* put down, and in which she ably defended the Quaker principles from the charge of deism and absurdity, which the Doctor brought against them. She fancies that she appears in a poor eclipsed light on this manuscript, because she there opposes only strong, calm, and general reasoning to the sophistic wit of her antagonist (Seward 1975: II, 179-80).

We cannot determine which set of recollections is most accurate. We can only conclude that Boswell's memories, which tend to show Johnson triumphant in argument, may be at least as flawed as those in which Mary Knowles wins the debate. But if we bracket the question whether Knowles or Boswell has the greater reason to treat the experience objectively (Seward clearly dislikes Johnson and rarely misses an opportunity to disparage him) and only look at

the themes which each reveals, we can make some judgment on what was at issue. In Knowles' version, Johnson calls the young woman a wench, arrogant, a little slut, and a fool. He also blames Mrs Knowles for 'seducing' the young woman from Christianity into Quakerism, and calls Quakers not Christian, little better than Deists, upstart sectaries, 'perhaps the best subdued by a silent contempt' (Lloyd 1907: 116-17).

Mary Knowles' own 'confession of faith' places her with evangelical Quakers in her understanding of the authority of scripture and her relative comfort with the Apostles' Creed:

I take upon me to declare, that the people called Quakers do verily believe in the Holy Scriptures, and rejoice with the most full reverential acceptance of the divine history of facts as recorded in the New Testament. That we consequently fully believe those historical articles summed up in the Apostles' Creed, with these two exceptions only, to wit, our Saviour's descent into Hell, and the resurrection of the body. These mysteries we humbly leave just as they stand in the holy text, there being from that ground no authority for such assertion as is drawn up in the creed' (Lloyd 1907: 118).

Both Boswell and Knowles versions agree that much of the argument is over whether the young woman was right or competent to follow her conscience instead of the authority of the church she was born in.

MRS KNOWLES '...she had an undoubted right to examine and change her educational (sic) beliefs whenever she supposed she had found them to be erroneous; as an accountable creature, it was her duty to do so'.

JOHNSON 'Pshaw, pshaw! an accountable creature—girls accountable creatures!—It was her duty to remain with the church wherein she was educated...' (Armistead 1851: 96-97; Lloyd 1907: 116).

Now we come to a remarkable passage in Mary Knowles' version, which rings true. In Boswell's version, Johnson argues that we have not heard what a disciple of Confucius or a Mahometan has to say for himself, so we can never go on anything but implicit faith, the faith we were born into. (Boswell 1960: 952) As Mary Knowles tells the story, she asks, had Johnson been born Muslim and maintained that faith despite having convincing Christian evidence, 'how would thy *conscience* have answered for such obstinacy at the great and last tribunal?' And as she recalls it, Johnson says *his* conscience would not have been answerable, the *State's* would. 'In adhering to the religion of the State as by law established, our implicit obedience therein becomes our duty' (Armistead 1851: 97; Lloyd 1907: 116). Boswell's version of this part of the discussion we have already seen:

We ought not, without very strong conviction indeed, to desert the religion in which we have been educated. That is the religion given you, the religion in which it may be said Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously in that religion, you may be safe. But error is dangerous indeed, if you err when you choose a religion for yourself (Boswell 1960: 952).

In the earlier encounter with Sampson Lloyd, Boswell reports of himself, 'I have always loved the simplicity of manners, and the spiritual-mindedness of the Quakers; and talking with Mr Lloyd, I observed, that the essential part of religion was piety, a devout intercourse with the Divinity; and that many a man was a Quaker without knowing it' (Boswell 1960: 702-703).

Had Johnson heard Boswell's words, he would have been outraged at how easy and simple the most awful aspects of religion were being made. We can hear him howling his disapprobation: on matters affecting the immortal soul's bliss or damnation, can one *be* religious without knowing it? What is at issue in this discussion which makes Johnson lash out so angrily against Jane Harry and Mrs Knowles? It is clear that death and the final judgment—about which the company had been talking—terrified Johnson. One way a courageous person deals with terror is to attack it, to be angry, to yell out loud. In this explosive attack on Mary Knowles and her protegee, I believe, we are seeing that terror being expressed *for* this young woman, whose immortal soul Johnson believes she has frivolously put at risk. Mary Knowles argues that God will understand and forgive human error and look only at whether we follow our conscience, mistaken or not. Johnson, Bate reminds us, 'never felt qualified to write directly or at any length about religion itself... The inner censorship imposed on him by his conscience was almost complete' (Bate 1977: 449). In his Dictionary, Johnson had defined a pilgrim as 'a wanderer, particularly one who travels on a religious account'. Bate comments that Johnson 'was to remain, by his own definition, 'a pilgrim' until the end' (Bate 1977: 460). He was perpetually assailed by self-doubt, self-criticism, even self-loathing. How hard it was for him to hear others, perhaps especially women, handling with such nonchalance the most important and terrifying choices of our lives. Bate cites a single line, without context, which appears in one of Johnson's journals in 1777, 'Faith in some proportion to Fear' (Bate 1977: 452).

For commentators who cite the incident at all, like Bate, this encounter between Johnson and Mary Knowles is a minor event in his long and complex life. Our conclusions look in two directions. As it pertains to Johnson, the incident throws added light on his tormented psychology and religious sensibility, on his fears as well as his courage. It also gives us insight into aspects of

Quaker beliefs in his time. Elton Trueblood says that Johnson distrusted 'feelers, ... those who relied exclusively on religious emotion...'. 'He opposed the use of a special plain garb, saying, "A man who cannot get to heaven in a green coat will not find his way thither the sooner in a grey one"'. (Trueblood 1981: xii-xiii) At first glance, it seems hardly possible to describe eighteenth-century Quakers more accurately. As represented by the Lloyds or Mary Knowles, they are wealthy, peculiar in their dress but very comfortable in the world, serene in the face of other people's doubts, sure of heaven. They dress in grey but get invited to meet kings and queens. But even these brief glimpses of Quaker lives reveal nuances to the conventional views of Quietist Quakers of the eighteenth-century. Mary Knowles in particular evidences a far more energetic faith than portrayed by W. C. Braithwaite; in her we see a strong, independent, well-educated woman, capable of inspiring an admiration of Quakerism in others, able to move easily and gracefully and with sincerity within the Society of Friends and between it and the sophisticated literary world of Samuel Johnson.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James speaks of once-born and twice-born souls. The once-born, he quotes Francis W. Newman as saying, '...see God, not as a strict judge, not as a glorious potentate, but as the animating spirit of a beautiful, harmonious world' (James 1990: 79). William James calls them '...the healthy-minded, who need to be born only once' in contrast to those he calls 'the sick souls, who must be twice-born to be happy' (James 1990: 155). James' distinction helps us understand Samuel Johnson's quarrel with Quakers. The once born are fortunate; God has shown them grace, and they have been spared much of the torment of doubt and fear. They are not necessarily superficial or trivial; they are optimists, trusting God and their own consciences. The twice-born are not necessarily wiser or better than their fortunate siblings, but nothing about faith has come easy to them. Samuel Johnson is the quintessential twice-born. In his encounters with these gentle, confident Quakers, he is talking to the once-born, to children of light. We cannot know which is the wiser; the once or twice-born, but while admiring Mary Knowles' serenity, we can look beyond Johnson's outrageous behavior, the roaring insults, and feel gratitude and sympathy for one who testifies with such honesty to the darkness.

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