What was Elias Hicks teaching in 1824?

By Bob Moore

My ancestors would share books and Bibles, and then pass them down to the next generation. Although my family has a long history in the Society of Friends, (see *Canadian Journal of Quaker History* 75 (2010), 64 - 70), my oldest Quaker book was owned by one of my non-Friend ancestors, Gilliam Terhune. The Terhune family came to North America from the Guilderland province of the Netherlands in the 1660s and settled in the Pompton Plains area of New Jersey where they probably worshipped in some form of the Calvinistic faith. They had a little Dutch colony there, and were still speaking Dutch when they migrated to Norfolk County, Ontario in the 1830s. Eventually they joined the Methodist Church. While still living in Pompton Plains, they were given a collection of sixteen of the discourses that Elias Hicks had delivered throughout 1824. Every time Hicks gave a discourse, his words were taken in short hand by M.T.C. Gould, and this 322-page collection was published in 1825 by Joseph and Edward Parker of Philadelphia.

Within a few years after the book's publication, the Religious Society of Friends in North America was breaking up into two groups. One was characterized by what it perceived to be Quaker orthodoxy, and the other was characterized by its adherence to a set of ideas vocalized by Elias Hicks, although those aligned with Hicks's ideas were not his followers. In 1827, there were two Yearly Meetings in Philadelphia, both claiming to be true to the cause, but one was attended by the Orthodox Friends and the other was attended by the Hicksite Friends. This practice continued until the re-unification of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1955.

One would have to study all of Hicks's letters and sermons to get a life-long, comprehensive overview of his theology but for this article we can only ask: what potentially controversial ideas was the seventy-six-year old Elias Hicks teaching in 1824? A summary of themes found in his own words as recorded by Gould will tell us.

The Bible

Hicks looked at the Orthodox movement with its attachment to Scripture and saw its short comings and concluded that Scripture is insufficient for living like Christ (226).[1] Fox had a high regard for Scripture but would have agreed with Hicks that "hearing the word does not have any effect; we must turn inward to the light of God in the soul" (131). Fox taught that the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and was a guide to life and practice but Hicks seemed to demote the Bible somewhat in his statements such as it is "nothing but a history of passing events which occurred 1800 years ago" (315). Ironically, Hicks did exhort his hearers to "search the scriptures" (17, 314) and then he used Scripture to argue that we should not give the Bible too much authority. He opposed the tendency in some Christian and, by osmosis, some Quaker circles to revere the Bible so that it became an idol, and the worshipper was guilty of bibliolatry (6).

Christ

Fox held to the traditional belief that Jesus was the son of God, and part of the Trinity. He wrote in his journal that he told Dr. Cradock of Coventry that "Mary was [Jesus'] mother and that he was supposed to be the son of Joseph, but he was the Son of God."[2] Hicks did believe in the virgin birth (69, 250) but opposed the Incarnation; he taught that Jesus is not the Light, but that the light which was in him is available to all as "a portion of his own spirit" (67).

Hicks went even further to oppose the divinity of Jesus: "We can see that this flesh and blood never could have been in a strict sense, the son of God … spirit and matter cannot be united together, and make a being, or make a son of God" (251).

Still today, one finds different positions within different branches of the Quaker movement. For some Friends, Jesus is Saviour and Lord, for others he is Teacher and Lord, and for some he is the Teacher. For Hicks, He was neither Saviour nor Lord, but he was "our gracious pattern" (106), "our blessed pattern," (116) and "our great pattern" (141).

Salvation

Fox wrote in his journal, "I saw that Christ died for all men, and was a propitiation for all, and enlightened all men and women with His divine and saving light; and that none could be a true believer but who believed in it."[3]

For Hicks, salvation comes from looking inside to find the divine seed of light that is within each one of us and then allowing that seed of light to grow in dominance over our thoughts and decisions and actions (75, 81,141): "We cannot be Christians till, like our high priest and example, we have overcome all temptations" (265). "The Almighty cannot unite with us and speak with us face to face till we are brought off from all these sins which are in direct opposition to his holy nature" (58, 59). Redemption results from coming "home to the light within"(75), which is "the only savior and deliverer of men" (77).

Another topic of theological debate has been the pre-destination, or election, of some for condemnation and some for salvation. On this topic, Hicks was close to Fox and opposed Calvinistic definition of election (24, 25) and stated that "those who elect him are his elect" (117); in this debate, Hicks was closer to those who promote free will (36) like the Wesleyan Methodists.

Some branches of Quakerism found sympathy in the Unitarian Universalist movement. For example, Lucretia Coffin Mott, the Quaker abolitionist and feminist taught from Unitarian pulpits. Perhaps,

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IN

PHILADELPHIA, GERMANTOWN, ABINGTON, BYBERRY, NEWTOWN, FALLS, AND TRENTON.

BY ELIAS HICKS,

A Minister in said Society.

TAKEN IN SHORT HAND BY M. T. C. GOULD.

PHILADELPHIA:

PUBLISHED BY JOSEPH & EDWARD PARKER,

No. 178 Market Street.

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1825.

Hicks laid the seeds for this sympathy when he taught that "to every nation [God] deals in his own way, according to his own kindness, and the proportion of their faithfulness, come to be united to him, and to know salvation as completely as any others" (119, 120).

View of Humanity

The human is made up of Divine Light, a rational soul and an animal body. The Divine Light reveals secrets to the rational soul. We carry out our actions in the outer world through the animal body. The rational soul must balance with understanding the promptings of the inner light and the animal body. (205) Hicks warns that "as free agents, we can reason ourselves into a belief that wrong is right" (208). He also warns against "carnal reasoning (209), counterfeit wisdom" (210) and "counterfeit belief" (215). In this teaching, Hicks seemed to parallel the Platonic view that informed Christianity at the time, and probably Orthodox friends by association, i.e. that a person is a soul which has a body.

View of the World

Hicks taught that God's hand is in all things: "therefore as everything upon the earth is the work of his holy hand, still his power continues in it; and although he made a power in the tree to produce others of the same kind, yet, was his power to be withdrawn from them they would sink into annihilation, or every effect must rest upon its cause, or it cannot stand" (251). Even though he taught the immanent participation of the Creator in the creation, Hicks believed that the study of the created world cannot point us toward God, or teach us the morality required by God (54, 55). We are totally dependent on God, and only he is capable of teaching us what is right through his Divine Light.

Satan

Hicks opposed the concept of Satan as a being (37); rather, Hicks considered Satan to be the tempting disposition within us, which is the man of sin, self, and self-will in man (163, 166). Similarly, fallen angels are people who have fallen away from the life of faith (182), apostate men and women (293). However, a person known as the antichrist seem to have some support, and Hicks described the antichrist as transforming himself into an angel of light (207).

Religious practices

A meeting for worship presents the same experience that the apostles had after Christ's ascension, that is "to sit down in a state of nothingness and self-abasement and not to stir nor to do anything, to proclaim him, or bear witness of his name, till the Holy Ghost should descend upon them" (109).

This state of waiting should also inform each Friend's practice of reflection at the end of each day to address our "balance sheet" of right and wrong (44, 45).

Social Criticism

Hicks was quite outspoken on a number of social issues. On a number of these issues, he felt that some of the influential Orthodox Friends were blending in with the world around them. Hicks used their conformity on these specific issues as justification for his challenges to Orthodox teachings in general. Like many Friends, Hicks opposed slavery but he took the protest one step further and also opposed the use of goods which were manufactured through the use of slave labour. For example, Hicks urged the use of "fair trade" cotton, or some alternative cloth like

wool or linen. He urged no quarter for the oppressor (175, 176).

Apart from William Penn, most Friends were suspicious of political involvement, and Hicks was no exception: "If we are the heirs of God we cannot touch or take part in the governments of the world; because they stand eternally in opposition to the government of God in heaven' (198). By his other statements, it is obvious that Hicks tried to influence political leaders, but would not go as far as seeking office.

Some Orthodox Quakers were noted as leaders in the business world, for example, Lloyds and Barclays banks, Rowntree and Cadbury chocolate, and Clarks shoes; however, Hicks opposed commercial buying and selling. It is "unrighteous gain" (270), he wrote, when the traders charge more than the producers or farmers. The traders are 'living by their wits instead of their labour(270). It is a very great crime to want to be supported by the labour of another, to take advantage of the labour of others, to live by it" (273). Quakers were noted for being honest business owners, but for Hicks honesty was not enough.

It would be no surprise if Hicks opposed dancing, playing cards, and drinking alcohol; however, it might be a surprise to learn that he also opposed Bible Societies, Missionary Societies and Agricultural Societies because they "*gratify the pride and vanity of man in his own selfish wisdom (148*). They draw youth together … and make them love company...[but] our strength is in quietness and peace" (149). Maybe Hicks had somebody like his contemporary, Moses Brown (1738 – 1836), in mind, a Quaker who helped to found the first water-powered spinning mill in America, the Rhode Island Agricultural Society and the Rhode Island Bible Society.

The Orthodox tradition did not put a lot of trust in seminary training. Early in the history of the Religious Society of Friends, George Fox wrote in his journal "that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge, was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ."[4] That statement has been interpreted to mean that formal training is permissible but not adequate. Hicks, however, was clearly opposed to paid clergy (24, 61, 79, 238). He warned that the "merchants of Babylon (278) are engaged in selling the gospel (277). It is a very great crime for us to want to be supported by the labour of another for to take advantage of the labour of others, to live by it." Formal training was considered to be "in direct opposition to God Almighty and his ways" (48, 98, 99, 143). Paid ministers were a hindrance because the members let them do the work of meditating on Scripture, of listening to the Spirit for them (286). For Hicks, the Quaker way of teaching was expressed as "I do not desire, as a brother, to impress my opinion on you; but only to give my views, and leave them as a mirror for you to look into (181). It is the prayer and desire of my spirit that we might think for ourselves, that we might no longer place our faith upon another" (293). The role of the teacher was to call listeners "home to the pure witness in their own souls" (52). Similarly, Hicks mistrusted most higher education, and certainly when it lead to intellectualism (54): "Human science may not be altogether fruitless, it may be of some use in the present state, and yet it is a matter of great debate to me whether it does not shut the way to higher knowledge" (290, 291). It would seem that Hicks was at odds with the Friends who founded almost twenty post-secondary institutes, including Bryn Mawr, Cornell University and Johns Hopkins University.

Hicks was a reformer in the Quaker circles of his day. He thought that his Orthodox brothers and sisters were getting

too close to the ways of the world, and saw it as his mission in life to call Friends back to a simple life based on listening to the Divine Light within. There is a certain irony in Hicks's teaching: he seemed to over-spiritualize the nature of God's communications to us by relying solely on the internal guidance of the Divine Light, while downplaying any revelation from the Bible or from creation; however, when it came to salvation, the internal experience had no value, and salvation was secured by good deeds. It is likely that his criticisms of the Orthodox worldliness, his sole reliance on the inner word of God to the exclusion of all other sources, and his support for works-based righteousness, all contributed to schism of 1827.

Note: the 1824 discourses can be read online by searching "a series of extemporaneous discourses" on www.books.google.ca.

Notes

1 All references to Elias Hicks, *Extemporaneous Discourses* will be noted with an in-text parenthetical citation of the page number(s).
2 *The Journal of George Fox,* revised edition, ed. John Nickalls (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975), 6
3 *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. Norman Penney (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 20.
4 *The Journal of George Fox,* ed. John Nickalls, 10.