Locusts and Wild Honey
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Quakers or Friends are members of the Religious Society of Friends, a religious sect rooted in Protestant Christianity which is not restricted to any particular creed or theology but rather brought together by an opposition to violence and a common belief in the God, Divinity, and/or Light in all human beings. In *A Quaker Book of Wisdom*, Robert Lawrence Smith describes Quakerism as "an experiment in religious anarchy." More extensively, the Wikipedia page (forgive me) for "Anarchism and religion" states:

> The Quaker church, or the Religious Society of Friends, is organized along anarchist lines. All decisions are made locally in a community of equals where every [member's] voice has equal weight. While there are no formal linkages between Quakerism and anarchism and Quakers as a whole hold a wide variety of political opinions, the long tradition of Quaker involvement in social justice work and similar outlooks on how

> power should be structured and decisions should be reached has led to significant crossover in membership and influence between Christian anarchists and Quakers. The Quaker influence was particularly pronounced in the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s and in the North American anti-globalization movement, both of which included many thousands of anarchists and self-consciously adopted secular, consensus-based aspects of Quaker decision making.

And despite "no formal linkages," Professor Ben Pink Dandelion accounts in a video for QuakerSpeak how he began as an anarchist activist during the 80s but became disillusioned with a revolutionary strike strategy. He then turned to the Friends, who are "a group committed to peace, a group that didn't take votes just as the anarchists, and who didn't have any fixed leadership."

Delving further into the anarchistic nature of Quakerism: at a time when one was expected to use "you" and "your," bow, and take off your hat in the presence of aristocracy, Friends refused to acknowledge such artificial inequality and practiced none of these social norms. They referred to everyone—regardless of status—with "thee" and "thou." In similar anti-hierarchical fashion, many Friends reject titles and do not practice hierarchy within the faith. They believe in the priesthood of all believers, the sanctity of any group worship regardless of location, the power of spontaneous speech instead of planned/centralized sermons, and—as mentioned in the Wikipedia quote—coming to decisions through consensus. As Margaret Hope Bacon reports in *The Quiet Rebels*:

> Throughout [the] loose structure [of meetings], decisions are made not by voting but by the group as a whole reaching a common conclusion. After

> discussion–in a monthly meeting for example–a clerk states what he feels to be the sense of the meeting, but if a single Friend feels he cannot unite himself with the group, no decision is made. In the same fashion a quarterly meeting will not make a decision without the support of all its member groups. The process is slow, but the miracle is that decisions are finally made.

The horizontal structure of Quaker worship is even reflected in physical structures of Quaker meetings. Ralph Hetherington explains, for example, that:

> Quakers have no church buildings as such. Indeed, Meeting for Worship can take place anywhere and does not need any specially consecrated building. There is no altar and no pulpit. Seats are arranged in a circle or hollow square, round a table on which there are books and possibly a vase of flowers. The emphasis here is not on the administration of the sacraments nor on the expounding of the word of God, but rather on the experience of the worshiping group.

Overall, this rejection of social (and even physical) hierarchy bears a striking resemblance to a socioreligious application of Noam Chomsky's interpretation of…

> [t]he core of the anarchist tradition[:] . . . [T]hat power is always illegitimate, unless it proves itself to be legitimate. So the burden of proof is always on those who claim that some authoritarian hierarchic relation is legitimate. If they can't prove it, then it should be dismantled.

In fact, Friend Tim Sowerbutt accounts that Friends "were very sympathetic to the non-Franco forces [during the Spanish Civil War], because the aspect of Quakerism which means there's no central leader or authority is rather familiar to Spanish anarchism." The Quaker consensus process is also praised by anarchist and Friend Robert Kirchner as a possible solution to the debate between pro and anti-democracy anarchists who falsely accept the notion that collective decision making must necessarily be coercive to one degree or another and that the fundamental debate is regarding whether this coercion is acceptable or not in an anarchist society.

Friends have no official scripture, but one extremely important text is *The Journal of George Fox*, written by the sect's titular founder in the 17th century. And, interestingly enough, the Journal contains messages both theological and practically anarchist. For example, the proclamation:

> Therefore ye, who know the love of God, and the law of his spirit, and the freedom that is in Jesus Christ, stand fast in him, in that divine faith which he is the author of in you; and be not entangled with the yoke of bondage. For the ministry of Christ Jesus, and his teaching, bringeth into liberty and freedom; but the ministry that is of man, and by man, which stands in the will of man, bringeth into bondage, and under the shadow of death and darkness.

This statement is aimed at those institutions of organized religion that prey upon the meek in order to empower themselves, but it could just as easily be aimed at the institution "of man, and by man" that is the state, which entangles most of the world in the yoke of bondage. Interesting too is how, Fox, while (in rebellious fashion) in prison, "was moved to write to the judges concerning their putting men to death for theft of

"How I Went From Being an Anarchist to a Quaker" by QuakerSpeak

"Non-Coercive Collective Decision-Making: A Quaker Perspective" by Robert Kirchner

Oppose and Propose!: Lessons from Movement for a New Society by Andrew Cornell

"Quakers and Slavery" from Haverford and Swarthmore Colleges

"Revolutionary War Records Overview" from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

The Conscience of an Anarchist: Why It's Time to Say Good-Bye to the State and Build a Free Society by Gary Chartier

The Journal of George Fox by George Fox

The Quiet Rebels: The Story of the Quakers in America by Margaret Hope Bacon

The Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers by William Penn

"Universal Quakerism" by Ralph Hetherington from *A Quaker Universalist Reader: Number 1*

"Universalist Quakerism: A Seedbeed for Change" by Rhoda R. Gilman

cattle, and money, and small matters; and to show them how contrary it was to the law of God in the past" and instead called "for the thieves . . . to make restitution." This comes rather close to Chartier's call, in *The Conscience Of An Anarchist*, for a non-state…

> victim-based [justice] system, in which people make tort claims against each other [where] a real person who claims to have suffered a real injury (or someone substituting for such a person) has to demonstrate that you've actually harmed her to qualify for compensation. [Whereas,] a state-based system that features prosecution by the state for crimes, the state doesn't need to demonstrate that you've injured someone in an independently specifiable way in order to subject you to potentially severe penalties.

In a related fashion, Bacon describes how the second generation of Friends in the North American Colonies "were asked not to carry their quarrels into the courts of the world's people but to settle them within the meeting." In the aforementioned Quaker rejection of hierarchy, Fox proclaims…

> that to be bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not sufficient to make a man a minister of Christ . . . [and] regarded the priests less, and looked more after the dissenting people. Among them I saw there was some tenderness; and many of them came afterwards to be convinced, for they had some openings.

This may be a bit of a stretch, but who today are dissenting people against the priests of what Samuel Edward Konkin III

calls "the Established Church of Statist [I]deology" but the anarchists and the anarchist-adjacent; punks, hippies, radical libertarians, wildcat unionists, prison and police abolitionists, revolutionaries of the Global South, peace activists, back-to-the-landers, and so on? Bacon even specifically compares Friends and their early socioreligiously rebellious contemporaries to the radicals of the 1960s, writing: "Like today's young dissidents, the Seekers, Ranters, Diggers, and Quakers rejected the built-in hypocrisy of the society of their day."

And the radicalism of Quakerism extends beyond just organizational and scriptural antiauthoritarianism, as Friends have almost always sided against established authority; perhaps first and foremost because of an early association with other radical groups during the English Civil War like the Levellers and aforementioned Diggers (True Levellers). The former were proto-anarchists who advocated for a society consisting of agrarian, egalitarian communes and land held in common. Nicolas Walter writes:

> Gerrard Winstanley, the ideologist of the Diggers or True Levellers, who came nearer to anarchism than anyone before the French Revolution, moved within a few years from quoting the Bible to invoking 'the great Creator Reason'. The tradition was continued by the Ranters and Seekers, the Quakers and Shakers, and later the Universalists and Unitarians, and may be seen in the modern peace movement.

The Levellers are as described by Libcom.org, as "a relatively loose alliance of radicals and freethinkers" bound together by…

> the general belief that all men were equal; since this was the case, then a government could only fulfill their aspiration of 'living the revolution' now.

Alongside roles in Occupy Wall Street, the Black Lives Matter movement, environmental activism, and more, this is the current political legacy of the Religious Society of Friends. As such, there is much common ground between anarchists and the anarchist-minded and the Religious Society of Friends, and much groundwork to be done in the 21st century to explicitly cross-pollinate between these various communities and their beliefs. A great resource can already be found in the 'anarcho-Quaker' podcast *Friendly Anarchism*, which delves "into issues surrounding mysticism, radical praxis, theology, empowerment, anti-fascism, and the arts from a leftist Religious Society of Friends perspective." My hope is that this piece can participate in that ongoing dialogue by bringing together these many sources and, hopefully, pushing Friends to meet with their political neighbors and anarchists to meet with their theological neighbors.

Sources (nonexhaustive):

"1642-1652: The Diggers and the Levellers" by Steven on Libcom.org

A Quaker Book of Wisdom by Robert Lawrence Smith

"Activism, Anarchism, and Power" by Noam Chomsky and Harry Kreisler

An Agorist Primer by Samuel Edward Konkin III

"Anarchism and Religion" by Nicolas Walter

"Anarchism and Religion" on Wikipedia

"Creating Heaven on Earth: The Radical Vision of Early Quakers" by Stuart Masters

"From eco activists to anarchist allies, Quakers are redefining what it means to be Christian" by Siobhan Hegarty

"Hicksite Quakers and the Antebellum Nonresistance Movement" by Thomas D. Hamm from *Church History* Vol. 63, No. 4

while at the same time Quaker women like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were leading the charge for Women's Suffrage. Then in the 20th century, Friends participated in the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement—with one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s confidants being gay communist Friend Bayard Rustin—and the struggle against the U.S. invasion of Vietnam. As part of the aforementioned peace movement, Friends have been forerunners in tax resistance and consciousness objection as practices in opposition to warfare; utilizing both in resistance against the Vietnam War. Gilmen points to, in the same era, the Movement for a New Society as "[a] 20th-century example of the continuing parallels between Quakers and anarchists . . . which existed in the United States from 1971 to 1988." The MNS…

> grew directly from Quaker efforts to carry medical supplies to both sides during the [Vietnam] war. Blocked by the U.S. armed forces and disgusted by the bloated consumerism and militarism of American society, they turned hopefully to the task of creating a 'New Society' on their home turf.

The activities and projects of the MNS have been explored from an anarchist perspective by Andrew Cornell in his book *Oppose and Propose!: Lessons from Movement for a New Society*. Gilmen, drawing from this text, identifies that:

> [s]till alive are a number of alternative and countercultural institutions (the distinction is not always clear) that were founded and nurtured by the MNS in Philadelphia and other places around the country. They include co-ops, collectively managed businesses, land trusts, a few intentional communities, and other activities that prefigured the desired future and that allowed members to

> have legitimacy if it was elected by the people. The Leveller demands were for a secular republic, abolition of the House of Lords, equality before the law, the right to vote for all, free trade, the abolition of censorship, freedom of speech and the absolute right for people to worship whatever religion [or none] that they chose.

And according to Rhoda R. Gilmen, these…

> [t]wo 17th-century movements that were closely associated with the evolution of Quakerism could quite properly be called anarchist in the philosophical sense. They were the Diggers [or True Levellers], who established short-lived agricultural communes around England in 1649-50, and the Levellers, a more urban and political challenge to the aristocracy. The leaders of both groups, Gerard Winstanley and John Lilburne, survived the revolution and the restoration of monarchy to become Quakers in their final years.

Among the precursors of Quakerism were also the aforementioned Seekers and Ranters, disorganized collections of antinomian Christians who fought against what they saw as the authoritarianism, profiteering, and political corruption of almost all organized religion in Europe.

These groups help lay the political groundwork for the anti-authoritarian spirit in all of Quakerism. This is especially clear in the first generation of Friends. As Stuart Masters sums up:

> [T]hey [believed] were no longer really subject to human authority, Christ was ruling within them and that was their ultimate authority, human governments are about to die, the kingdom of heaven is coming – when that doesn't happen

> and Quakers have to survive in the world as it is and they want toleration and they want to be respected and they want to be seen to be not a threat to those in power, apocalyptic pronouncements and prophetic warnings are discouraged, attention turns to preserving certain Quaker peculiarities and arguing for religious toleration, rather than that more, what you might call in a sense, a kind of Christian anarchist position that was strong within that first generation.

This spirit did not cease after the end of the English Civil War and can even be found amongst Whig and monarch-friendly Friends such as William Penn who, at least within the realm of theology, explains that Friends "required conformity upon no human authority." Bacon argues accordingly that Penn "seems to have believed there would be very little need of the coercive aspects of the state [in Pennsylvania], which would finally wither away, leaving a holy community." And this actuality of this project is identified by Konkin, who points out that…

> [s]ome of these ['men and women' who 'derived the ideas of freedom and defended freedom as they understood it with little comprehension of the mechanics of humans action'], such as the Quakers of Pennsylvania, settled colonies away from predatory statism and developed peace and trade with the natives.

Of course, this does not alleviate Quakers from the guilt of the statist settler-colonial project in North America, but it represents a willingness to break away from it and its related violence as much as possible. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission even accounts how, from 1682-1775,

Pennsylvania had no standing military and only ever had temporary and spontaneous volunteer companies who, in 1775, were eventually organized into decentralized township battalions. This line of anti-centralist and anti-violence living continued with some radical Friends in the 19th century believing, as Thomas D. Hamm accounts, "that human government was by its very nature unchristian, [and therefore] no consistent Christian could have anything to do with it. Many thus argued that if war and force were wrong, then it was equally wrong to participate in choosing men who would use the sword or be the commander-in-chief."

The Friends' commitment to human freedom extends beyond the confines of Quaker communities, with members playing an important role in some of the most important struggles of the last several hundred years. "Quakers and Slavery"—a project by Haverford and Swarthmore Colleges—identifies that not only did "[t]he earliest anti-slavery organizations in America and Britain [consist] primarily of members of the Society of Friends," but…

> The Religious Society of Friends . . . was the first corporate body in Britain and North America to fully condemn slavery as both ethically and religiously wrong in all circumstances. It is in Quaker records that we have some of the earliest manifestations of anti-slavery sentiment, dating from the 1600s. After the 1750s, Quakers actively engaged in attempting to sway public opinion in Britain and America against the slave trade and slavery in general. At the same time, Quakers became actively involved in the economic, educational and political well being of the formerly enslaved.

This continued into the 19th century with the emergence of the mainstream anti-slavery movement in the United States,