

# Letters on England

by

**Voltaire**

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## 1. On The Quakers

I was of opinion that the doctrine and history of so extraordinary a people were worthy the attention of the curious. To acquaint myself with them I made a visit to one of the most eminent Quakers in England, who, after having traded thirty years, had the wisdom to prescribe limits to his fortune and to his desires, and was settled in a little solitude not far from London. Being come into it, I perceived a small but regularly built house, vastly neat, but without the least pomp of furniture. The Quaker who owned it was a hale, ruddy-complexioned old man, who had never been afflicted with sickness because he had always been insensible to passions, and a perfect stranger to intemperance. I never in my life saw a more noble or a more engaging aspect than his. He was dressed like those of his persuasion, in a plain coat without pleats in the sides, or buttons on the pockets and sleeves; and had on a beaver, the brims of which were horizontal like those of our clergy. He did not uncover himself when I appeared, and advanced towards me without once stooping his body; but there appeared more politeness in the open, humane air of his countenance, than in the custom of drawing one leg behind the other, and taking that from the head which is made to cover it.

"Friend," says he to me, "I perceive thou art a stranger, but if I can do anything for thee, only tell me." "Sir," said I to him, bending forwards and advancing, as is usual with us, one leg towards him, "I flatter myself that my just curiosity will not give you the least offence, and that you'll do me the honour to inform me of the particulars of your religion." "The people of thy country," replied the Quaker, "are too full of their bows and compliments, but I never yet met with one of them who had so much curiosity as thyself. Come in, and let us first dine together." I still continued to make some very unseasonable ceremonies, it not being easy to disengage one's self at once from habits we have been long used to; and after taking part in a frugal meal, which began and ended with a prayer to God, I began to question my courteous host. I opened with that which good Catholics have more than once made to Huguenots. "My dear sir," said I, "were you ever baptised?" "I never was," replied the Quaker, "nor any of my brethren." "Zounds!" say I to him, "you are not Christians, then." "Friend," replies the old man in a soft tone of voice, "swear not; we are Christians, and endeavour to be good Christians, but we are not of opinion that the sprinkling water on a child's head makes him a Christian." "Heavens!" say I, shocked at his impiety, "you have then forgot that Christ was baptised by St. John." "Friend," replies the mild Quaker once again, "swear not; Christ indeed was baptised by John, but He himself never baptised anyone. We are the disciples of Christ, not of John." I pitied very much the sincerity of my worthy Quaker, and was absolutely for forcing him to get himself christened. "Were that all," replied he very gravely, "we would submit cheerfully to baptism, purely in compliance with thy weakness, for we don't condemn any person who uses it; but then we think that those who profess a religion of so holy, so spiritual a nature as that of Christ, ought to abstain to the

utmost of their power from the Jewish ceremonies." "O unaccountable!" say I: "what! baptism a Jewish ceremony?"

"Yes, my friend," says he, "so truly Jewish, that a great many Jews use the baptism of John to this day. Look into ancient authors, and thou wilt find that John only revived this practice; and that it had been used by the Hebrews, long before his time, in like manner as the Mahometans imitated the Ishmaelites in their pilgrimages to Mecca. Jesus indeed submitted to the baptism of John, as He had suffered Himself to be circumcised; but circumcision and the washing with water ought to be abolished by the baptism of Christ, that baptism of the Spirit, that ablution of the soul, which is the salvation of mankind. Thus the forerunner said, 'I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance; but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.' Likewise Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles, writes as follows to the Corinthians, 'Christ sent me not to baptise, but to preach the Gospel;' and indeed Paul never baptised but two persons with water, and that very much against his inclinations. He circumcised his disciple Timothy, and the other disciples likewise circumcised all who were willing to submit to that carnal ordinance. But art thou circumcised?" added he. "I have not the honour to be so," say I. "Well, friend," continues the Quaker, "thou art a Christian without being circumcised, and I am one without being baptised." Thus did this pious man make a wrong but very specious application of four or five texts of Scripture which seemed to favour the tenets of his sect; but at the same time forgot very sincerely an hundred texts which made directly against them. I had more sense than to contest with him, since there is no possibility of convincing an enthusiast. A man should never pretend to inform a lover of his mistress's faults, no more than one who is at law, of the badness of his cause; nor attempt to win over a fanatic by strength of reasoning. Accordingly I waived the subject.

"Well," said I to him, "what sort of a communion have you?" "We have none like that thou hintest at among us," replied he. "How! no communion?" said I. "Only that spiritual one," replied he, "of hearts." He then began again to throw out his texts of Scripture; and preached a most eloquent sermon against that ordinance. He harangued in a tone as though he had been inspired, to prove that the sacraments were merely of human invention, and that the word "sacrament" was not once mentioned in the Gospel. "Excuse," said he, "my ignorance, for I have not employed a hundredth part of the arguments which might be brought to prove the truth of our religion, but these thou thyself mayest peruse in the Exposition of our Faith written by Robert Barclay. It is one of the best pieces that ever was penned by man; and as our adversaries confess it to be of dangerous tendency, the arguments in it must necessarily be very convincing." I promised to peruse this piece, and my Quaker imagined he had already made a convert of me. He afterwards gave me an account in few words of some singularities which make this sect the contempt of others. "Confess," said he, "that it was very difficult for thee to refrain from laughter, when I answered all thy civilities without uncovering

my head, and at the same time said 'thee' and 'thou' to thee. However, thou appearest to me too well read not to know that in Christ's time no nation was so ridiculous as to put the plural number for the singular. Augustus Caesar himself was spoken to in such phrases as these: 'I love thee,' 'I beseech thee,' 'I thank thee;' but he did not allow any person to call him 'Domine,' sir. It was not till many ages after that men would have the word 'you,' as though they were double, instead of 'thou' employed in speaking to them; and usurped the flattering titles of lordship, of eminence, and of holiness, which mere worms bestow on other worms by assuring them that they are with a most profound respect, and an infamous falsehood, their most obedient humble servants. It is to secure ourselves more strongly from such a shameless traffic of lies and flattery, that we 'thee' and 'thou' a king with the same freedom as we do a beggar, and salute no person; we owing nothing to mankind but charity, and to the laws respect and obedience.

"Our apparel is also somewhat different from that of others, and this purely, that it may be a perpetual warning to us not to imitate them. Others wear the badges and marks of their several dignities, and we those of Christian humility. We fly from all assemblies of pleasure, from diversions of every kind, and from places where gaming is practised; and indeed our case would be very deplorable, should we fill with such levities as those I have mentioned the heart which ought to be the habitation of God. We never swear, not even in a court of justice, being of opinion that the most holy name of God ought not to be prostituted in the miserable contests betwixt man and man. When we are obliged to appear before a magistrate upon other people's account (for law-suits are unknown among the Friends), we give evidence to the truth by sealing it with our yea or nay; and the judges believe us on our bare affirmation, whilst so many other Christians forswear themselves on the holy Gospels. We never war or fight in any case; but it is not that we are afraid, for so far from shuddering at the thoughts of death, we on the contrary bless the moment which unites us with the Being of Beings; but the reason of our not using the outward sword is, that we are neither wolves, tigers, nor mastiffs, but men and Christians. Our God, who has commanded us to love our enemies, and to suffer without repining, would certainly not permit us to cross the seas, merely because murderers clothed in scarlet, and wearing caps two foot high, enlist citizens by a noise made with two little sticks on an ass's skin extended. And when, after a victory is gained, the whole city of London is illuminated; when the sky is in a blaze with fireworks, and a noise is heard in the air, of thanksgivings, of bells, of organs, and of the cannon, we groan in silence, and are deeply affected with sadness of spirit and brokenness of heart, for the sad havoc which is the occasion of those public rejoicings."

## 2. On The Quakers

Such was the substance of the conversation I had with this very singular person; but I was greatly surprised to see him come the Sunday following and take me with him to the Quakers' meeting. There are several of these in London, but that which he carried me to stands near the famous pillar called The Monument. The brethren were already assembled at my entering it with my guide. There might be about four hundred men and three hundred women in the meeting. The women hid their faces behind their fans, and the men were covered with their broad-brimmed hats. All were seated, and the silence was universal. I passed through them, but did not perceive so much as one lift up his eyes to look at me. This silence lasted a quarter of an hour, when at last one of them rose up, took off his hat, and, after making a variety of wry faces and groaning in a most lamentable manner, he, partly from his nose and partly from his mouth, threw out a strange, confused jumble of words (borrowed, as he imagined, from the Gospel) which neither himself nor any of his hearers understood. When this distorter had ended his beautiful soliloquy, and that the stupid, but greatly edified, congregation were separated, I asked my friend how it was possible for the judicious part of their assembly to suffer such a babbling? "We are obliged," says he, "to suffer it, because no one knows when a man rises up to hold forth whether he will be moved by the Spirit or by folly. In this doubt and uncertainty we listen patiently to everyone; we even allow our women to hold forth. Two or three of these are often inspired at one and the same time, and it is then that a most charming noise is heard in the Lord's house." "You have, then, no priests?" say I to him. "No, no, friend," replies the Quaker, "to our great happiness." Then opening one of the Friends' books, as he called it, he read the following words in an emphatic tone:—"God forbid we should presume to ordain anyone to receive the Holy Spirit on the Lord's Day to the prejudice of the rest of the brethren.' Thanks to the Almighty, we are the only people upon earth that have no priests. Wouldst thou deprive us of so happy a distinction? Why should we abandon our babe to mercenary nurses, when we ourselves have milk enough for it? These mercenary creatures would soon domineer in our houses and destroy both the mother and the babe. God has said, 'Freely you have received, freely give.' Shall we, after these words, cheapen, as it were, the Gospel, sell the Holy Ghost, and make of an assembly of Christians a mere shop of traders? We don't pay a set of men clothed in black to assist our poor, to bury our dead, or to preach to the brethren. These offices are all of too tender a nature for us ever to entrust them to others." "But how is it possible for you," said I, with some warmth, "to know whether your discourse is really inspired by the Almighty?" "Whosoever," says he, "shall implore Christ to enlighten him, and shall publish the Gospel truths he may feel inwardly, such an one may be assured that he is inspired by the Lord." He then poured forth a numberless multitude of Scripture texts which proved, as he imagined, that there is no such thing as Christianity without an immediate revelation, and added these remarkable words: "When thou movest one of thy limbs, is it moved by thy own power? Certainly not; for this limb is often sensible

to involuntary motions. Consequently he who created thy body gives motion to this earthly tabernacle. And are the several ideas of which thy soul receives the impression formed by thyself? Much less are they, since these pour in upon thy mind whether thou wilt or no; consequently thou receivest thy ideas from Him who created thy soul. But as He leaves thy affections at full liberty, He gives thy mind such ideas as thy affections may deserve; if thou livest in God, thou actest, thou thinkest in God. After this thou needest only but open thine eyes to that light which enlightens all mankind, and it is then thou wilt perceive the truth, and make others perceive it." "Why, this," said I, "is Malebranche's doctrine to a tittle." "I am acquainted with thy Malebranche," said he; "he had something of the Friend in him, but was not enough so." These are the most considerable particulars I learnt concerning the doctrine of the Quakers. In my next letter I shall acquaint you with their history, which you will find more singular than their opinions.

### 3. On The Quakers

You have already heard that the Quakers date from Christ, who, according to them, was the first Quaker. Religion, say these, was corrupted a little after His death, and remained in that state of corruption about sixteen hundred years. But there were always a few Quakers concealed in the world, who carefully preserved the sacred fire, which was extinguished in all but themselves, until at last this light spread itself in England in 1642.

It was at the time when Great Britain was torn to pieces by the intestine wars which three or four sects had raised in the name of God, that one George Fox, born in Leicestershire, and son to a silk-weaver, took it into his head to preach, and, as he pretended, with all the requisites of a true apostle--that is, without being able either to read or write. He was about twenty-five years of age, irreproachable in his life and conduct, and a holy madman. He was equipped in leather from head to foot, and travelled from one village to another, exclaiming against war and the clergy. Had his invectives been levelled against the soldiery only he would have been safe enough, but he inveighed against ecclesiastics. Fox was seized at Derby, and being carried before a justice of peace, he did not once offer to pull off his leathern hat, upon which an officer gave him a great box of the ear, and cried to him, "Don't you know you are to appear uncovered before his worship?" Fox presented his other cheek to the officer, and begged him to give him another box for God's sake. The justice would have had him sworn before he asked him any questions. "Know, friend," says Fox to him, "that I never swear." The justice, observing he "thee'd" and "thou'd" him, sent him to the House of Correction, in Derby, with orders that he should be whipped there. Fox praised the Lord all the way he went to the House of Correction, where the justice's order was executed with the utmost severity. The men who whipped this enthusiast were greatly surprised to hear him beseech them to give him a few more lashes for the good of his soul. There was no need of entreating these people; the lashes were repeated, for which Fox thanked them very cordially, and began to preach. At first the spectators fell a-laughing, but they afterwards listened to him; and as enthusiasm is an epidemical distemper, many were persuaded, and those who scourged him became his first disciples. Being set at liberty, he ran up and down the country with a dozen proselytes at his heels, still declaiming against the clergy, and was whipped from time to time. Being one day set in the pillory, he harangued the crowd in so strong and moving a manner, that fifty of the auditors became his converts, and he won the rest so much in his favour that, his head being freed tumultuously from the hole where it was fastened, the populace went and searched for the Church of England clergyman who had been chiefly instrumental in bringing him to this punishment, and set him on the same pillory where Fox had stood.

Fox was bold enough to convert some of Oliver Cromwell's soldiers, who thereupon quitted the service and refused to take the oaths. Oliver, having as



great a contempt for a sect which would not allow its members to fight, as Sixtus Quintus had for another sect, Dove non si chiamava, began to persecute these new converts. The prisons were crowded with them, but persecution seldom has any other effect than to increase the number of proselytes. These came, therefore, from their confinement more strongly confirmed in the principles they had imbibed, and followed by their gaolers, whom they had brought over to their belief. But the circumstances which contributed chiefly to the spreading of this sect were as follows:- Fox thought himself inspired, and consequently was of opinion that he must speak in a manner different from the rest of mankind. He thereupon began to writhe his body, to screw up his face, to hold in his breath, and to exhale it in a forcible manner, insomuch that the priestess of the Pythian god at Delphos could not have acted her part to better advantage. Inspiration soon became so habitual to him that he could scarce deliver himself in any other manner. This was the first gift he communicated to his disciples. These aped very sincerely their master's several grimaces, and shook in every limb the instant the fit of inspiration came upon them, whence they were called Quakers. The vulgar attempted to mimic them; they trembled, they spake through the nose, they quaked and fancied themselves inspired by the Holy Ghost. The only thing now wanting was a few miracles, and accordingly they wrought some.

Fox, this modern patriarch, spoke thus to a justice of peace before a large assembly of people: "Friend, take care what thou dost; God will soon punish thee for persecuting His saints." This magistrate, being one who besotted himself every day with bad beer and brandy, died of an apoplexy two days after, the moment he had signed a mittimus for imprisoning some Quakers. The sudden death with which this justice was seized was not ascribed to his intemperance, but was universally looked upon as the effect of the holy man's predictions; so that this accident made more converts to Quakerism than a thousand sermons and as many shaking fits could have done. Oliver, finding them increase daily, was desirous of bringing them over to his party, and for that purpose attempted to bribe them by money. However, they were incorruptible, which made him one day declare that this religion was the only one he had ever met with that had resisted the charms of gold.

The Quakers were several times persecuted under Charles II.; not upon a religious account, but for refusing to pay the tithes, for "theeing" and "thouing" the magistrates, and for refusing to take the oaths enacted by the laws.

At last Robert Barclay, a native of Scotland, presented to the King, in 1675, his "Apology for the Quakers," a work as well drawn up as the subject could possibly admit. The dedication to Charles II. is not filled with mean, flattering encomiums, but abounds with bold touches in favour of truth and with the wisest counsels. "Thou hast tasted," says he to the King at the close of his epistle dedicatory, "of prosperity and adversity; thou knowest what it is to be banished thy native country; to be overruled as well as to rule and sit upon the throne; and, being oppressed, thou hast reason to know how hateful the Oppressor is both to God

and man. If, after all these warnings and advertisements, thou dost not turn unto the Lord with all thy heart, but forget Him who remembered thee in thy distress, and give up thyself to follow lust and vanity, surely great will be thy condemnation.

"Against which snare, as well as the temptation of those that may or do feed thee and prompt thee to evil, the most excellent and prevalent remedy will be, to apply thyself to that light of Christ which shineth in thy conscience, which neither can nor will flatter thee nor suffer thee to be at ease in thy sins, but doth and will deal plainly and faithfully with thee, as those that are followers thereof have plainly done.--Thy faithful friend and subject, Robert Barclay."

A more surprising circumstance is, that this epistle, written by a private man of no figure, was so happy in its effects, as to put a stop to the persecution.

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