

**AN INQUIRY INTO THE LAWS OF
ORGANIZED SOCIETIES AS
APPLIED TO THE ALLEGED
DECLINE OF THE SOCIETY OF
FRIENDS**

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An inquiry into the laws of organized societies as applied to the alleged decline of the Society of Friends by William Logan Fisher

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WILLIAM LOGAN FISHER

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[The following advertisement appeared in "The Friend,"
published in London.]

SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

PRIZE ESSAY.

A GENTLEMAN who laments that notwithstanding the population of the United Kingdom has more than doubled itself in the last fifty years, the Society of Friends is less in number than at the beginning of the century; and who believes that the Society at one time bore a powerful witness to the world concerning some of the errors to which it is most prone, and some of the truths which are the most necessary to it; and that this witness has been gradually becoming more and more feeble, is anxious to obtain light respecting the causes of this change. He offers a Prize of ONE HUNDRED GUINEAS for the best Essay that shall be written on the subject, and a Prize of FIFTY GUINEAS for the one next in merit. He has asked three gentlemen, not members of the Society of Friends, to pronounce judgment on the Essays which shall be sent to them. They have all some acquaintance with the history of the Society, and some interest in its existing members; and as they are likely to regard the subject from different points of view, he trusts that their decision will be impartial; that they will not expect to find their own opinions represented in the Essays; and that they will choose the one which exhibits most thought and Christian earnestness, whether it is favorable or unfavorable to the Society, whether it refers the diminution of its influence to degeneracy, to something wrong in the original constitution of the body, to the rules which it has adopted for its government, or to any extraneous cause.

Rev. F. D. Maurice, Chaplain of Lincoln's Inn; Professor J. P. Nicholl, Glasgow; and Rev. E. S. Pryce, Gravesend, have agreed to act as adjudicators, to whom the Essays may be sent, postage free, to the care of C. S. King, Esq., Messrs. Smith & Elder, Cornhill, on or before 1st October, 1858. Each Essay to be accompanied by a sealed letter, containing the name and address of the writer, the Essay and letters to bear the same motto. The MSS. of the unsuccessful Essays will be returned on application, with their letters unopened, and the successful Essays become the property of the donor.

PREFACE.

THE following was prepared in reference to the prize offered for the best Essay on the decline of the Society of Friends in Great Britain and Ireland; others being preferred, it became of course one of the rejected addresses, and as such is now printed.

I have examined the two Essays which received the first and second prize; the first, by John S. Rowntree, is entitled to respectful consideration, from the clear perception he has of the injurious influence of the Quaker discipline; the second, by Thomas Hancock, is marked by much pedantry and learned ignorance. The people of this country, at least, have too much common sense to believe that reformed Romanism or Puseyism affords a relief to the decaying members of the

Society of Friends; and with the reviewer in "The British Friend," I feel equal astonishment that a prize of one hundred guineas should have been awarded to such a production.

I have also read an American view of the causes which have led to the decline of Friends in Great Britain. The points which the author has endeavored to prove as the cause of the decline, appear to have no reference to the Society in this country; indeed, he seems to doubt whether the Society has declined in America.

As neither of these Essays meet my views, I have concluded to print a few copies of my own. I make no apology for it, but unite entirely with the motto of William Penn: "Truth never lost ground by inquiry, because she is most of all reasonable."

My observations apply to no particular class, but are equally applicable to all the divisions of Friends in Great Britain and America. All who have partaken in the errors whence this decline has resulted, are accountable for it.

ESSAY

ON

THE DECLINE OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

THE examination of this subject would be materially aided if we could decide beforehand what constitutes Quakerism. What is the creed of the Society of Friends? what is the standard by which it is to be judged? what its constitution or elementary law? Without understanding this, we are liable to receive for facts what are not facts, and to go blindly on an uncertain path.

It is asserted that the Society has a creed, and we are referred for its discovery to the early Quaker books. These are of uncertain tenor, and are liable to almost any construction which we may be inclined to place upon them. There is none to interpret; and an examination, instead of making the subject clearer, only makes it more confused.

There are some general principles existing, in

their own nature, of universal application, and to these it is needful to advert as connected with the subject, before we examine its creed.

No serious mind will doubt that there is a universal harmony throughout creation. In the material world, it is manifested as perfectly in the dewdrop, on the spear of grass, as in the heavens.

“That very law that moulds a tear,
And bids it trickle from its source,
That law preserves the earth a sphere,
And guides the planets in their course.”

In man's physical frame, perfect health is the natural result of the harmonious action of each individual part, and we have reason to know that this extends to the minutest insect that crawls on the ground. Thus also it is with all those contrivances which man makes to increase his comfort and promote his aims in life. From the spinning-wheel which the thrifty housewife turns with her foot to the elaborated steam-engine, all their respective parts must harmonize and be adapted to the power and strength of the machine. The pitch of every wheel must correspond to its fellow, or its effect will be destroyed, and the end in view defeated.

The mechanic who applies his square and compass to the formation of his building, may little suspect that they point to principles whose source

is in the Eternal mind, and without an adherence thereto his building would fall to the ground.

Let us not suppose that this harmony extends only to material things; that it is one thing in physics another in morals; one thing in the government of a State, another in the government of a religious society: each has a harmony consistent with its peculiar organization, but all connected by a universal harmony, the source and centre of which is the Divine mind. A comprehension of this truth would save trouble and prevent subsequent difficulty in attempts to form associations in human society. In general, without understanding this principle, it is practically observed, or there would be discord throughout the world.

It is evident that association is consistent with the Divine harmony. All creatures congregate for the proper accomplishment of those ends for which they are created. Associations seem to be equally consistent with the nature of man. We find them among the simple children of the forest: the Indians of America have their chiefs, the wandering Arabs of the desert have their sheiks, each governing an organization consistent with their rude state. These things, so universal and enduring, are not the effect of chance. Religious societies, formed within organized governments, are but wheels within wheels. One law extends to all alike, and they will only be competent to the end for which they were instituted, as each part is adapted to

every other part, forming one general harmony. These are unchangeable principles, applicable alike to every organized society among men, whether religious, political, benevolent, financial, or domestic. Though differing in their objects, they are all alike governments, subject to the same general laws, and every deviation from their appointed harmony is to be atoned for by suffering. The Society of Friends forms no exception to this universal law.

We may draw some striking illustrations from civil government. Long-continued infringements of the rights of man, produced in France that most memorable revolution, which, for successive years, deluged the streets of the principal cities with blood. England has not been exempt from her own troubles. A want of harmony in the respective parts, has again and again, brought the government to the verge of ruin. No reflecting mind that carefully considers the nature of these two governments, for the last hundred years, can fail to perceive how greatly they have strengthened themselves, how much more united the people are, as the contradictions, which were incorporated into their systems have been done away. The American Revolution, which so signally checked the power of the Crown, apparently saved the mother country from a more violent convulsion at home. At the period of the outlawry of Wilkes, and the riots of Lord George Gordon, the government of Great