

William Penn and the Mennonite

The Dream and the Reality

A Dialogue By John B. Rengier

Directions for William Penn and the Mennonite —

William Penn is dreaming. He speaks to no one in particular, but to the world generally.

The Mennonite addresses his remarks in the direction of William Penn, but is replying to William Penn's words and not to his person.

PENN: On March 4, 1681, the King granted Pennsylvania to me, but it was "God hath given it to me in the faith of the world. He will bless it and make it the seed of a nation." It will be a holy experiment.

I will establish a refuge for the people of my faith and all faiths. There will be absolute religious liberty and tolerance of all faiths.

I will prove that this is not only right and Christian, but profitable and advantageous in every way.

I will show that government can be carried on without war and without oaths.

MENNONITE: (*hesitantly*) You make us sign the following oath when we come to Pennsylvania:

"We, Subscribers, Natives and late Inhabitants of the Palatinate upon the Rhine and desiring to transport ourselves and families into this province of Pennsylvania, a Colony subject to the Crown of Great Britain, in hopes and Expecta-

tions of finding a Retreat and peaceable settlement therein, Do Solemnly promise and Engage, that we will be faithful and bear true allegiance to his present Majesty, King George the Second, . . . and will be faithful to the proprietor of this Province; and that we will demean ourselves peaceably to all His said Majesty's Subjects, and strictly observe and conform to the Laws of England and of this Province, to the utmost of our Power and best of our understanding."²

PENN:

The Lord will permit me to lead forth multitudes of persecuted people to liberty and happiness, to deliver them from prison and sickness, and heavy burdens, and to bring them into the freedom and peace of the primitive and pure gospel of Christ.³

MENNONITE:

(not as hesitant) And Governor Gordon tells the legislature:

"I must make use of this Opportunity to acquaint you, that I have new positive Orders from Great Britain to provide by a proper Law, against these crowds of Foreigners who are yearly pour'd in upon us . . ." "Nor does this arise, as I conceive, from a dislike to the people themselves, many of whom we know are peaceable, industrious and well-affected, but it seems principally intended to prevent an English Plantation from being turned into a Colony of Aliens."⁴

PENN:

As to the voyage across the ocean, which generally takes between six and nine weeks, I advise:

"To render it more healthy, it is good to keep as much upon deck as may be; for the air helps against the offensive smells of a Crowd and a close place. Also to scrape often the Cabins, under the Beds; and either carry store of Rue and Wormwood; and some Rosemary, or often sprinkle Vinegar about the Cabin. Pitch burnt is not amiss sometimes against faintness and infectious scents."⁵

MENNONITE:

(firmly) A shipful of Palatinates took four and twenty weeks in her passage. Their provisions fell short and in the last eight weeks, they had no bread; but a pint of

grouts was all the allowance for five persons per day. They ate all the rats and mice they could catch and the price of a rat was 18d and of a mouse, 6d and water 6d a quart. Of 150 passengers, over 100 were miserably starved to death.⁶

PENN: Pennsylvania is situated 600 miles more to the south, than the latitude of England. As it is upon the same line, it is also about the same degree as Montpelier in France and Naples in Italy. The air is generally clear and agreeable. The summer is longer and warmer and the winter shorter and sometimes colder than in England.⁷

MENNONITE: (*ruefully*) The weather has been so exceedingly hot for a week, that a great number of people have fainted and fallen into convulsions and died and we also hear that a great number of harvest people fainted in the fields and in some places, a multitude of birds were found dead.

In winter, the snow in general was more than three feet deep and great numbers of the back inhabitants suffered much for want of bread.⁸

PENN: (*parenthetically*) Because many stories have been prejudicially propagated, as if we were upon ill terms with the Indians . . . I think it requisite to say thus much: so far are we from ill terms with the Indians, that we have lived in great friendship . . . when they come to our settlements, they offer us no affront, not so much as to one of our Dogs . . ."⁹

MENNONITE: (*directly to William Penn*) Advice from Swatara, in Lancaster County is to the effect that on Tuesday, 20th, a Dutchman was shot and scalped by Indians; and the next day, a man named Samuel Robinson was also killed by them.

And a letter from Fort Henry in Bucks County, dated 19th, gives an account of the wife of John Frantz and their children being carried off by Indians. The woman was found murdered. A son of Jacob Snavely was also killed.¹⁰

PENN: (*playing a trump card*) The Earth, by God's blessing, has more than answered our expectation; the poorest places in our judgment producing large crops of Garden Stuff or Grain. And though our Ground has not generally the symptoms of the fat necks that lie upon

salt Waters in Provinces southern of us, our Grain is thought to excell and our Crops to be as large.¹¹

MENNONITE: (*soberly*) In 1751 and 1752, Lancaster County's German farmers produced tremendous crops of wheat and other grains.

But these great crops are not thankfully received and appreciated.

Many in their wantonness fattened their hogs on wheat.

Others in various parts of the County erected distilleries and thus, consumed the wheat by converting it into a poison and thereby brought great evil upon the community.¹²

PENN: (*back to dreaming*) The province abounds in many sorts of wild animals as elk, stags, deer, beaver, others, wildcats, raccoons, foinés, martins, etc.; some of which are good to eat, and cheap, as a fat deer for two shillings . . .¹³

MENNONITE: (*preaching*) When the Amish Mennonites first settled on the Pequea, its woods were infested by wolves and panthers. These animals committed great depredations, especially among the sheep.

The hunters would laugh at the Amish, because they would not attempt to destroy them. The Amish said in justification:

“That they considered it a crime to deprive any of God's creatures of life, except those which God gave for our use; and that to instruct youth in the use of firearms would be to lead them to eternal ruin.”¹⁴

PENN: And if anyone is unable to *buy* my land and, wishing to go and having wherewith to pay his passage, and his servants, he will be well received, and it is declared that such a person for himself, his wife and child, male or female, if sixteen years old, will have the right to take for each head fifty acres of land, paying one penny per acre annual rent . . . and which they will enjoy for themselves and their heirs forever as if they had bought this quantity of land.¹⁵

MENNONITE: (*sternly*) We are having a very stern struggle to secure our right to make wills and deed land over, or to have

it pass to our children on our death.

We are subject to a strict inquiry into private conversion and our religious faith other than what the law directs.

We ask that there be extended to us the same terms of naturalization granted in England to foreign Protestants.

We also protest the law which requires that the marriage ceremony may be performed only by ministers of the State Church and the arrest and jailing of Anthony Hinkle, a German minister of the Gospel for performing a marriage.¹⁶

PENN:

In reverence to God, the Father of light and spirits, the author as well as the object of all divine knowledge, faith, and workings, I do for me and mine, declare and establish for the first fundamental of the government of my province, that every person that doth and shall reside there shall have and enjoy the free profession of his or her faith and exercise of worship towards God, in such way and manner as every such person shall in conscience believe most acceptable to God. And so long as every such person useth not this Christian liberty to licentiousness or the destruction of others, that is to say, to speak loosely and profanely or contemptuously of God, Christ, the Holy Scriptures, or religion, or commit any moral evil or injury against others in their conversation, he or she shall be protected in the enjoyment of the aforesaid Christian liberty by the civil magistrate.¹⁷

MENNONITE:

(speaking directly to William Penn, the person) Your dream of freedom was not born full blown but the seeds that you planted have prospered and in 1773 our Bishops could report to Europe the following:

“We came here because William Penn, the lord of this land, having received great freedom from the King of Great Britain, made it known to people everywhere. Now, in many places in Europe, the inhabitants were not only hard pressed by being compelled to pay heavy taxes, but also they did not enjoy sufficient freedom to serve God according to the considerations of their conscience, and so many preferred to undertake the difficult and long journey to come to us.

Upon coming into this country, we not only enjoy great freedom, but also find that the land is fruitful and that everything of which a farmer has need, it produces to overflowing — if he will only work. We have no want of food or raiment, and there are among us even people who are rich. Some, in writing these things to their friends in Europe, and others who have made the journey to Germany for merchandise, have much — yes, too much, extolled the country and given such inducements that many have come here for worldly profit . . .

Through God's mercy, we enjoy unlimited freedom in both civil and religious affairs. We have never been compelled to bear weapons. With yea and nay, we can all testify before our praiseworthy magistrates.

We accept no office under the Government because force is used therein. Besides, it is not found good among us that any member of the community should openly, much less secretly, keep any alehouse or inn, because it leads to a great number of irregularities.¹¹⁸

(Crosses over to William Penn and shakes his hand.)

Thank you, William Penn, for your dream.

It has come true for us.

NOTES

¹Oliver Huckel, *A Dreamer of Dreams: The Love Story and Life Work of William Penn the Quaker* (New York: Crowell Publishing Co., 1916). 118-121.

²H. Frank Eshleman, *Annals of the Pioneer Swiss and Palatinate Mennonites of Lancaster County and Other Early Germans of Eastern Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Pa.: Privately published. 1917), 227.

³Huckel, 120.

⁴Eshleman, 230.

⁵William Penn, *A Further Account of the Province of Pennsylvania and Its Improvements for the Satisfaction of Those that are Adventurers and Enclined to be so*. 1685, reprinted in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (Phila.: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1885), IX, 80.

⁶Eshleman, 243.

⁷Benjamin Farley (attributed), *Collection of Various Pieces Concerning Pennsylvania*, 1684, reprinted in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (Phila.: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1882), VI, 313.

⁸Eshleman, 251, 275.

⁹Penn, PMHB, IX, 79.

¹⁰Eshleman, 327.

¹¹Penn, PMBH, IX, 68.

¹²Eshleman, 312.

¹³Farley, PMHB, VI, 314.

¹⁴Eshleman, 208.

¹⁵Farley, PMHB, VI, 315.

¹⁶Eshleman, 222-223.

¹⁷Huckel, 133.

¹⁸William Penn, *Passages From the Life and Writings of William Penn*, editor unidentified, undated, (Phila.:Friends Book Store), 242.

¹⁹J. C. Wenger, *History of the Mennonites of the Franconia Conference* (Telford, 1937), 399.