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Samuel Gorton and Religious Radicalism in England, 1644-1648

Philip F. Gura

In these pages in 1979 I published an assessment of the radical New England Puritan Samuel Gorton and argued that his chastisement by the Massachusetts Puritans in 1643 stemmed from their fear that he and his followers promulgated an ideology similar to that of such prominent English radicals as John Saltmarsh and William Dell. Though I knew that Gorton had been a popular figure in England's radical underground between 1644 and 1648, I had not located any sources that indicated specifically with which groups he was associated. In the course of research for a book on New England Puritan radicalism, however, I have uncovered several references that allow me to speak more accurately of Gorton's place in Anglo-American Puritanism. This evidence, which links Gorton to London's best-known General Baptist conventicles, verifies my initial assessment of his radicalism and clarifies his relationship to both the Levellers and the Ranters, as well as to New England's first Quakers, whom he heartily welcomed in 1656.

Gorton's whereabouts in England during the time when he was pressing his complaint against the Bay Colony is pinpointed in the heresiographical literature of Thomas Edwards, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie, and Thomas Underhill. Both Edwards and Underhill reveal that, while in London, Gorton was most often found preaching in Thomas Lamb's church in Bell Alley off Coleman Street. By 1644, "Lams Church" had become a byword for the most extreme forms of religious radicalism; and, while Lamb is usually considered a member of the group loosely termed the "General" Baptists, from descriptions of meetings at his conventicle it

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2 The key documents are Edwards, The Second Part of Gangraena (London, 1646); Rutherford, A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist . . . (London, 1648); Robert Baylie [Baillie], A Dissuasive from the Errors of the Time . . . (London, 1645), and Anabaptism, the True Fountaine of Independency . . . (London, 1647); and Underhill, Hell Broke Loose: Or, an History of the Quakers both Old and New (London, 1660).
is clear that adult baptism and Arminian doctrine were hardly the most radical principles espoused by him and his associates. In addition to hearing much talk of “universal Redemption” and “Arminian tenets,” for example, visitors to Bell Alley reported lively discussions of free grace, pantheism, and Milton’s defense of divorce, as well as of doctrine commonly associated with the Seekers. Moreover, these topics were broached not only by such “illiterate mechanicks” as Samuel Oates and Paul Hobson and women preachers like the notorious Mrs. Attaway, but by members of the congregation themselves, who were encouraged to speak out at the meetings. It was in Lamb’s church, according to Edwards, that Gorton “vented” his “desperate opinions,” and Underhill heard him, in 1647, declare the irrelevance of church ordinances and officers.3

Rutherford, who published the most lengthy attack on Gorton, offers another clue to his activities. Citing Gorton’s *Simplicities Defence against Seven-Headed Policy* . . . (London, 1646), Rutherford traced his ideological pedigree to such Antinomians as Robert Towne, John Eaton, and Tobias Crisp, and linked his doctrines to those of such contemporaries as Saltmarsh, Dell, and the General Baptists Paul Hobson and Henry Denne. Further, while he offered no direct evidence that Gorton personally knew any of these men (though Hobson and Denne frequently preached at Lamb’s church), Rutherford clearly intended his readers to believe that Gorton was acquainted with one “R. Beacon,” “a grosse Familist,” who he claimed was the author of the prefatory poem to *Simplicities Defence* and from whose “Catechisme” he quoted to justify his condemnation of Gorton’s ideas. This presumably was Robert Bacon, a Gloucester nonconformist who moved to London, where, Edwards noted, he became associated with Edward Barber, a merchant-tailor and the organizer of a popular General Baptist conventicle at “his great house in Bishopsgate-street.” It most likely was there that Gorton met Bacon, who himself had been criticized for his “close Antinomianism” and later was attacked by Richard Baxter for spreading this error among Cromwell’s soldiers. Or, since several of Bacon’s tracts were printed for the same Giles Calvert who issued one of Gorton’s works, they may have met at his printing shop and bookstore on Ludgate Hill, an establishment that was a well-known clearinghouse for radical Puritans.4


Other important facts about Gorton can be gleaned from the heresiographers. Evidently none other than Roger Williams, for example, with whom Gorton had quarreled in New England, had brought his erstwhile neighbor to their attention. In the late fall of 1645 Williams had given Baillie a copy of a manuscript "Paper" in which he described some of Gorton's opinions and from which Baillie subsequently quoted in his Dissuasive when he added to a discussion of Milton's unconventional ideas about divorce Gorton's equally radical notions on the subject. After Baillie had used this document, he passed it on to Edwards, who then was preparing The Second Part of Gangraena. Eager to add another heretic to his already lengthy list, Edwards solicited information about Gorton's whereabouts and, in addition to locating him at Lamb's church, discovered that the New Englander was "very great" at the conventicle of "one Sister Stag," a woman whose identity is unclear but who, as Christopher Hill has suggested to me, may have been Ann Stag, a brewer's wife. Coupled with Williams's account of Gorton's unorthodox views on marriage, his presence at Stag's meetings suggests that, like many of England's advanced radicals, Gorton was willing to accord women a spiritual and social equality unusual for the time.5

We thus have missed much by neglecting the details of Gorton's four years at the center of England's radical underground. Most important, his activities at Lamb's church and in other General Baptist conventicles placed him in the same ideological crucible from which eventually was poured the spiritual amalgam popularly known as "Quakerism," for the extant reports about these churches make clear that in the early and middle 1640s they were halfway houses for many Puritans who were moving from Seekerism to the camps of the Levellers and the Ranters, and who finally rested in the radical spiritism of George Fox. The practice of lay exhorting, the strident anticlericalism, a belief in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all believers and its supremacy over scriptural law—these Quaker traits or tenets had all been articulated in the General Baptist conventicles of London's sectarian underground.6


during and after his stay in England are replete with passages that illuminate his concern with the same ideas that moved Fox’s disciples. Moreover, when in 1656 four Quakers arrived in Boston and were imprisoned for their beliefs, Gorton immediately declared his willingness to offer them asylum if they “had a mind to stay in these parts.” There were others in Rhode Island—most notably William Coddington and Nicholas Easton—who were instrumental in introducing Quakerism to New England, but none of these individuals had undergone an indoctrination in English radicalism comparable to Gorton’s. To colonists who had grown progressively disenchanted with the Massachusetts Puritans and their restrictive theocracy, Gorton thus represented someone who knew firsthand the exciting possibilities of a more tolerant and democratic ecclesiastical polity. In good measure through him, the “wranglings and disputes” that informed the debates in Bell Alley, as well as the radical ideology of such men as Saltmarsh and Dell, entered the religious discourse of Rhode Island and, eventually, of all New England.

7 See, for example, Gorton, An Incorruptible Key Composed of the CX. Psalme . . . ([London], 1647), 3-4, 98, 102, Pt. II, 111, and An Antidote against the Common Plague of the World . . . (London, 1657), A-H3, esp. G3, 27, 167. Gorton’s letters to the Quakers in Boston first were published as appendixes to An Antidote but are more readily available in Simplicity’s Defence against Seven-Headed Policy, ed. William R. Staples (Rhode Island Historical Society, Collections, II [Providence, R.I., 1835]), 16-19.