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Shakerism and the Godhead

By Arthur Gagnon, Jr.
Enfield Shaker Museum Interpreter

Individuals from all walks of life visit our museum. Their questions are varied and sometimes complex. Many are interested only in the furniture, while others are interested in Shaker history and theology. It has been my experience that Shaker theology is the one area least understood by our visitors, especially the concept of the Godhead. In an effort to better explain the Shakers and their beliefs, I looked at Shaker texts, both early and contemporary. I offer the following comparisons between the traditional Christian Godhead, the Holy Trinity, and the dual deity of the Shakers.

Central to any religious belief system is a definition of the Godhead. The traditional Christian Godhead—the Holy Trinity—is revealed in Old and New Testament scripture. The Oneness, or unity of the Godhead, is illustrated by Deut. 6:4:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.

The three distinct Persons of the Trinity are readily seen in Matthew 28:19 of the "Great Commission":

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

The following example of the Trinity is often used as a benediction: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.* (II Cor. 13:14)

The preceding passages of scripture illustrate the mysterious nature of the Trinity. Within the Oneness and the unity of the Godhead, there are three distinct and coequal persons.

Any discussion of Shaker beliefs must include Mother Ann Lee, the seminal figure in Shaker history. Historians Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, also members of the Mt. Lebanon, NY, Shaker community, highlighted Mother Ann's importance in a single sentence:

Among the revelations to Ann Lee and imparted through her life and teachings, were ideas new to the Christian World (White & Taylor 1905:255).¹

Central to the teachings was the duality of God. Mother Ann Lee taught the Believers that God was a duality of Father and Mother, and not an all male Trinity (as defined in "God is Dual" below). White and Taylor felt compelled to vigorously examine the concept of the Trinity. In the following carefully worded definition of the Shaker Godhead, it is obvious that they were defending their unorthodox beliefs:

God is Dual

Shakers believe in One God—not three male beings in one, but Father and Mother. And here the Bible reader turns at once to Genesis 1:26.

"And God said"—in the beginning of creative work, whether by fiat or evolution matters not—"let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Did three masculine beings appear, in contradistinction to every form of life heretofore known? Nay! Verse 27 says: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female created He them" (White & Taylor 1905:255).

The above definition uses Genesis 1:26-27 to illustrate their belief that male and female are mirror images of the maleness and femaleness of God, the Father-Mother progenitor.

The following is a clear and concise contemporary explanation of the Shaker Godhead. It can also be found at the Sabbathday Lake website:

Having no body, God has no sex in our human understanding of the term; yet being pure spirit He may be thought of by man with his limited power of comprehension as having the attributes of both maleness and femaleness. This duality of attributes within God's oneness is one of the Shaker theological concepts most misunderstood by the world (Johnson 1969:6).

Most of the misunderstanding regarding the Shaker Godhead may come from "the world's people" who assume that Shaker beliefs are the same as orthodox Christianity. However, there are clear and profound differences.

Hervey L. Eads, a Shaker Bishop of South Union, Kentucky, defended and promoted Shaker beliefs in an 1889 publication called *Shaker Sermons: Scripto-Rational*. The following is a spirited examination of Trinitarian concepts:

I am well aware that your divines (?) when closely pressed, acknowledge the Unity of the Supreme Being . . . and so interpret words as to make you believe that the terms unity and trinity are synonyms. . . But these divine reasoners, whilst they declare that the Son is the Father still hold that there is a Father aside from the Son . . . But the defenders of the triple-God doctrine say the three are combined in a "mysterious yet all harmonious union" . . . (Eads 1889:14-16).

The notion that the Trinity is a great mystery is answered by Eads in the following statement, "God is no mystery to those to whom He is revealed" (1889:17).

A booklet, *Plain Talks*, published by the Shakers at Watervliet, New York, circa 1882, states under the section titled "Are the Shakers Spiritualists?":

By our Spiritualism we are become confirmed infidels to the foolish

Continued on page 4.
