



American Shakers – Dying Religion, Emerging Cultural Phenomenon

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Abstract

Through analysis of doctrine, cult, social and political organisation and the relations with the outside world, the article traces a dual development in the history of Shakerism, an American communitarian religious group: its rise and decline as a religion that has led to its almost complete extinction, and the accompanying process of its absorption into the mainstream of American culture. This became possible when, in the 20th century, Shakers – celibate communitarian pacifists – ceased to be perceived as a serious challenge to the American values of individualism, private property and the traditional model of family. Instead, their image was romanticised and material aspects of their culture emphasised, thus making Shakerism a sort of antiquarian curiosity, despite the survival of a small community of believers.

Słowa kluczowe: shakeryzm; komuny religijne; religie amerykańskie; kultura amerykańska
Keywords: Shakerism, religious communes, American religions, American culture

Shakerism¹ has been a constant presence in the American religious and cultural landscape since the late 18th century, a unique example of “realised utopia” – a communitarian religious group which, in contrast to its secular counterparts, has survived for well over two centuries. Nonetheless, this presence has not been static. The group has gone through periods of rise and decline, in terms of demography (from nine English immigrants in 1774 to the peak of around five thousand members in the mid-19th century, to just three believers remaining at the time of writing), religion (original

¹ Throughout the article, the terms “Shakers,” “Shakerism” etc. refer to the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, i.e. English Shakers, not to Indian Shakerism – a syncretic religion with a mixture of native and Christian elements that developed among Native Americans in the second half of the 19th century.

developments in theology and ritual in the 19th century, compared with relative inactiveness of the last hundred years) and social organisation.

Much as they sought isolation from the “world” in their secluded villages, Shakers could not avoid entering into relations with the surrounding society and the culture it represented. These relations were initially hostile: nobody shed a tear when they fled England in the late 18th century, nor were they greeted with open arms on the American soil. The hostility continued well into the 19th century, gradually giving way to indifference, finally to be replaced by active interest in the Shakers themselves and all things Shaker. Just about the time Shakerism was dying as a religion, it was absorbed into the mainstream of American popular culture.

The article seeks to analyse and explain these dual developments of the decline of Shakerism as religion and its emergence as a recognisable cultural phenomenon. The convergence of the two processes can be accounted for by the same factors – their communitarian, celibate lifestyle and pacifist views – which, when present, made Shakerism attractive for converts but repulsive to their non-Shaker neighbours and, when absent or at least weakened, cleared the way for a softened, romanticised image of Shakerism to recognition as a welcome addition to American culture at the cost of their survival as a religious group.

1. Shakerism as a religion

The approach adopted here for the analysis of Shakerism will be sociological rather than historical. Instead of presenting a point-by-point history of the sect, certain stages of the group’s development will be distinguished, with their characteristic features as far as theology, cult, way of life, patterns of leadership and relations with the outside world are concerned.

1.1. The prophetic period

From the point of view of sociology of religion, Shaker history reproduces a fairly typical pattern of charismatic beginnings followed by institutionalisation (routinisation), a virtually necessary condition of the group’s survival beyond its first generation. The Shakers originated in Manchester in England around 1758, when Ann Lee, a young working-class girl, joined a group of religious enthusiasts founded by John and Jane Wardleys² and, about ten years later, took over the leadership of the sect.³ Lee established herself as a prophetess and an inspired instrument of God and, having

² The group originated from the Quakers, but was influenced by the so-called French Prophets, Protestants fleeing to England from persecution in Catholic France during and in the aftermath of the Camisard revolt. Spiritual possession, trance prophesying and similar phenomena became widespread among these Huguenot communities during Catholic repression in the late 17th and early 18th century (see C. Garret, *Origins of the Shakers*, Baltimore and London 1987, chap. 1, 2).

³ R. Francis, *Ann the Word. The Story of Ann Lee, Female Messiah, Mother of the Shakers, The Woman Clothed with the Sun*, New York 2000, pp. 49–50.

failed to make significant missionary progress in England, led her eight most devoted followers to America on board the *Mariah* in 1774. There the group, after a period of dispersion, founded the first Shaker village – Niskeyuna in New York. Soon, a successful missionary journey by Ann Lee and other Shaker leaders in the 1780s won the group new converts in New York, New England and, in the early 19th century, as far away as Ohio and Kentucky.⁴

The doctrine of the group was basically Christian, but it contained a number of original features. It stressed the dual male-female nature of the Godhead⁵ and proclaimed the return of the Christ Spirit, once embodied in Jesus, in the person of Ann Lee.⁶ This quiet Parousia marked the beginning of a final dispensation in which all who repent and adopt the Shaker way of life can live without sin awaiting salvation. Another extremely important element of both the doctrine and the lifestyle of the sect was the requirement of strict celibacy, reflecting Mother Ann's – as she was called by the believers – abhorrence of all carnal desire.

One of the most interesting aspects of this opening stage of the Shakers' history was their cult. Ecstatic practices like shaking (hence the name of the sect, initially a derogative word attached to it by its critics), whirling, rolling on the floor, glossolalia, barking, laughing, dancing, running after one's outstretched hand, long trances and similar behaviour – interpreted as the operation of the Holy Spirit – bear obvious resemblance not only to the Camisards, who were among the Shakers' spiritual forefathers, but to ecstatic modes of worship of other religious traditions and even shamanic practices.⁷ They reflected the believer's faith in the constant presence of God in their life, providing continuous revelation through the mouths of their prophetic leaders and intervening in their daily affairs.

Predictably, the political organisation of the group was initially based almost exclusively on the personal charisma of the leaders – Ann Lee, her brother William, and James Whittaker – who did not hold any official position or rank within the sect. As far as the social structure is concerned, the new converts were not forced, in these early years, to move to Shaker settlements, pool their resources and adopt a fully communal way of life, beyond the spiritual community of faith.

Shakers' relations with the rest of the society in that period were complex. In Bryan Wilson's terminology, they displayed characteristics of a utopian sect, combining reformist (trying to remedy the evils of the world) and introversionist (seeking isolation from the outside world) tendencies.⁸ On the one hand, in the reformist vein, they felt an urge to share the truth they had just found with others and to spread the Word. The tactics they adopted, however – zealous, offensive preaching, disrupting

⁴ J. Neal, *The Kentucky Shakers*, Lexington 1977, chap. 1.

⁵ F. Evans, *Shakers. Compendium of the Origin, History, Principles, Rules and Regulations, Government, and Doctrines of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing*, New York 1859, p. 103.

⁶ T. Johnson, *Life in Christ Spirit*, Sabbathday Lake ME 1969, p. 6.

⁷ J. Sieradzan, *Szaleństwo w religiach świata*, Kraków 2007, pp. 345–347.

⁸ B. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium*, New York 1973, p. 26; for the application of this theoretical framework to the Shakers see: J. Whitworth, *God's Blueprints. A Sociological Study of Three Utopian Sects*, London and Boston 1976, pp. 4–6.

other denominations' worship etc. – did not serve them well. It aroused almost universal hostility towards the Shakers and resulted in their persecution. After the move to America, the hostility continued, albeit for different reasons. Shakers arrived in the middle of the Revolutionary War and, true to their pacifist ideals, refused to bear arms or even support the American cause. They simply did not take sides at all. Small wonder, in these circumstances, that they were treated as English spies, persecuted, and even, for a time, threatened with expulsion.⁹

On the other hand, within a few years of their arrival in America, they withdrew into the “wilderness,” for a time avoiding all contact with the world (the introversionist element). Even later, when the group grew in numbers, the Shakers limited communication between the rank-and-file members and their non-Shaker neighbours to a necessary minimum: all commercial transactions, financial dealings etc. were entrusted to a few carefully designated trustees.

1.2. Charisma institutionalised

The process of charisma institutionalisation, i.e. “basing doctrine, cult and social organisation, including leadership of the sect, on a set of durable institutions, repeatable procedures and stable structures that slowly replace the initial divinely inspired pronouncements of a prophetic leader-founder of the group,”¹⁰ is characteristic for the second period of a typical charismatic religious sect's development, when a new generation of members (or leaders) takes over.¹¹

The process was initiated, after Ann Lee's death in 1784, by her immediate successor James Whittaker, who stressed discipline and organisation within the hitherto loose group of believers. However, it took the energy and extraordinary administrative skills of the next Shaker leader, the American-born Joseph Meacham, to complete the task. In the area of social organisation, Meacham insisted on gathering all sect members into villages, which consisted of “families” – units of believers, naturally unrelated, living and working together. Shaker life was based on the triple community of goods, production and consumption and on the principle of the separation of sexes, which included both absolute celibacy and separate habitation, eating and working.

As regards the sect's political system, the original charismatic authority had gradually been replaced with the charisma of office (to borrow another Weber's category), even though the leaders had not completely renounced their claim to divine inspiration at least until well into the 19th century. Meacham instituted a four-member Central Ministry, composed of two male and two female members. Technically with authority over the New Lebanon bishopric only, it actually performed the role of the entire sect's governing body. Similar power structures, also based on sex parity, grounded, as indicated above, in Shaker theology, were replicated at the level of each

⁹ S. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, New Haven–London 1992, pp. 13–14.

¹⁰ M. Potz, *Legitimation Mechanisms as Third-dimension Power Practices: the Case of the Shakers*, “Journal of Political Power” 2012, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 383.

¹¹ M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley 1978, Book I, III:5.

bishopric (a unit of several villages) and each “family.”¹² The succession procedure within the ministry was co-optation by the surviving members, which contrasted with the acclamation, typical of the succession of the first three leaders in the charismatic period. Both procedures were theocratic in that they sought to transmit and confer on the new leaders a divine sanction.¹³

As far as the religious doctrine of the group is concerned, the institutionalisation process meant gathering orally propagated beliefs and testimonies and fitting them into a comprehensive theological system. This was based on accounts of the first Shakers, who had the privilege of knowing the prophet herself, written down into functional equivalents of sacred texts, such as *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee etc.*¹⁴ or *Testimonies Concerning the Character and Ministry of Mother Ann Lee and the First Witnesses of the Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing etc.* The editors of these accounts, the first Shaker theologians, were naturally inclined to present Ann Lee as a larger-than-life figure, more or less consciously crossing the line dividing biography from hagiography. In the process, a sort of foundational myth was established, in which some supernatural powers and qualities were attributed to Ann Lee. Among other things, she was miraculously delivered from being starved to death in an English prison by James Whittaker, who fed her through a pipe;¹⁵ she calmed the churning waters of Atlantic during the Shaker party's passage to America on the *Mariah*;¹⁶ she spoke twelve, or even, according to another version, seventy-two different languages;¹⁷ and she was capable of spiritual healing. Mother Ann's words and deeds, often repeated and discussed, were regarded by all Shakers as indispensable guidance in their spiritual and everyday life. Consequently, the form in which they reached the future generations of Shakers, especially after Lee's contemporaries had died out, was all-important. Other Shaker religious literature of the period comprised theological treatises, laws and regulations as well as apologetic and polemical texts.

No less interesting were developments in cult practices. The ecstatic dancing, chaotic trance sessions and inspired utterances of the previous era were discouraged and eventually abolished. Instead, certain dances with set steps, figures and group movements, sometimes very elaborate, were introduced. In terms of social control, this made the believers' behaviour more predictable and easier to supervise, thus con-

¹² P. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*, Hanover and London 1986, pp. 25–27.

¹³ See testimonies of eye-witnesses of the early successions in *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee and the Elders with Her; Through Whom the Word of Eternal Life Was Opened in This Day of Christ's Second Appearing: Collected from Living Witnesses*, R. Bishop, S.Y. Wells, J. Tallcott et al. (eds.), Albany, NY [1816] 1888, p. 278; R. Bishop, *A Journal or Register of Passing Events Kept by Rufus Bishop (1839–1849)*, manuscript no. 2 in Shaker Manuscript Collection, New York Public Library; for a more in-depth analysis of the Shaker succession procedures see M. Potz, *Legitimation Mechanisms...*, pp. 391–395.

¹⁴ *Testimonies of the Life...*

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹⁶ R. Francis, *op.cit.*, s. 82.

¹⁷ N.R. Campion, *Mother Ann Lee. Morning Star of the Shakers*, Hanover and London 1990, p. 37.

tributing to the discipline and cohesion of the community¹⁸. By the first decades of the 19th century, with the exception of periods of revived religious enthusiasm (notably the Era of Manifestations in the late 1830s and early 1840s), the Shakers were not shaking any more.

Relations with the “world” in this phase were still dominated by concerns similar to those that caused the initial hostility and suspicion towards the Shakers. However, a new issue was also added to the traditional charges of pacifism and lack of patriotism. Shakers were accused of breaking families by drawing into their ranks wives or husbands who left their spouses (and often children) behind. Even though Shakers were careful to settle all financial matters before admitting any new believer, a number of cases reached the courts. Nonetheless, in general, the situation began to normalise towards the middle of the 19th century. The perception of the Shakers became more favourable; they came to be generally regarded as hard-working farmers, friendly and helpful neighbours and fair business partners.

1.3. Decline

Shakers were at the peak of their fortunes around the middle of the 19th century. Their numbers reached four to six thousand, according to various estimates.¹⁹ They were economically prosperous (specialising in agriculture, especially seed production, but also manufacturing of high-quality goods such as furniture, various home appliances etc.) and socially well-organised. But soon, in the second half of the century and especially towards its close, the situation had gradually worsened. The ranks of the Society dwindled for a number of reasons. First, there was a shortage of new converts – the main source of the sect’s membership – due to their celibate life (the other source was gaining custody of orphans). Mass religious movements – such as the great awakenings or revivals of the past, whose participants often joined groups like the Shakers when the event was over but the enthusiasm still high – were now rare, especially after the great prophecy of William Miller failed in the 1840s.²⁰ Second, the ordered, disciplined, monotonous, semi-monastic way of life of Shaker communities, offering little amusement and no chance for intimate interpersonal relations, was less and less attractive, especially for young people. They rarely entered the sect voluntarily, and those who were brought up by it often left when they reached adulthood. Third, the torments of the Civil War, unfair financial dealings of some trustees and the growing feminisation of the Society²¹ all undermined its economic well-being. As a result of all these processes, the United Society entered the 20th century with just over 800 members.²² Out of the maximum of over twenty villages, spread over a ter-

¹⁸ M. Potz, *Legitimation Mechanisms...*, pp. 383–384.

¹⁹ E.D. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers. A Search for the Perfect Society*, New York 1953, pp. 290–292; S. Stein, *op.cit.*, p. 87; P. Brewer, *op.cit.*, p. 217, providing data for the Shaker Eastern communities.

²⁰ See L. Festinger, H. Riecken, S. Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, London 2008, pp. 13–25.

²¹ P. Brewer, *op.cit.*, table B.3, p. 218.

²² S. Stein, *op.cit.*, p. 242.

ritory from Kentucky to Maine, only three survived into the second half of the 20th century. These were populated by several dozen elderly believers.

But the decline of the Shakers was not just a matter of demography and economy. Religiously, they found themselves at a crossroads. A strong modernist current emerged within the Society, calling upon the Shakers to display greater openness, entering into dialogue with the outside world and fascinated with the development of secular thought. The spirituality of its representatives, most prominently Elder Frederick Evans of New Lebanon, was inward-oriented, of an Eastern, individualistic, rather than communitarian type. Shakerism was for them a path leading to God through individual experience rather than a set of communal religious practices.

At the other end of the spectrum were traditionalists, led by Elder Harvey Eads of South Union village, Kentucky. They condemned abandoning the traditional Shaker way of life as precisely the source of the crisis that had begun to loom on the horizon from the middle of the 19th century and eventually led the group to the verge of extinction. From their perspective, the disciplined, ordered way of life and worship of Shakers of the past generations was crucial to the fortunes of the Society and, most importantly, to the salvation of believers.²³ To paraphrase the long-standing Catholic dogma, for Shaker traditionalists there was no salvation outside the community.

This silent controversy – never an open conflict with schisms, mass apostasies or anything of that sort – continued into the 20th century, finally culminating in a bitter dispute over the future of Shakerism. In 1965, the Central Ministry of the United Society, in the persons of Eldresses Emma King and Gertrude Soule, both residing in Canterbury village, New Hampshire, decided to close the ranks of the Society, i.e. refuse to admit any new members, thereby condemning the group to slow extinction. This curious step, an “institutional suicide” of sorts,²⁴ even more puzzling considering the growing popularity of Shakerism at that time (see 2 below), was never accepted by the other of the two remaining villages, Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

The divide between the two villages went along the lines of the modernist-traditionalist controversy referred to above. For the sisters of Canterbury (no male Shaker survived into the 1960s), Shakerism would continue even after the last believer was gone, in the form of Shaker values, moral rules, work ethic and original spirituality. The conservatively oriented Sabbathday Lake sisters, on the other hand, could not imagine Shakerism without actual Shakers living in the villages. To them, a living community of believers was the essence of their religion. And even though, following the 1965 dictum of the Ministry, they could not formally admit new members into the ranks of the Society – which included signing a formal covenant, a sort of a contract, to certain extent resembling monastic vows – a number of new believers joined the community and effectively became Shakers, some of them reaching the leadership position in the village (namely, Brother Theodore Johnson in 1960 and, later, Wayne Smith and Arnold Hadd in 1978). Present-day Sabbathday Lake Shakers do not regard the Ministry pronouncement as anything but a suggestion for the two

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 333–335.

²⁴ M. Potz, *Shakerzy – studium instytucjonalnego samobójstwa*, [in:] *O wielowymiarowości badań religioznawczych*, Z. Drozdowicz (ed.), Poznań 2009, p. 205.

then-surviving communities, rather than a legally binding declaration. According to their understanding, the covenant is a contract between a new member and the community he or she joins, and not the United Society as a whole. Therefore, the Central Ministry could not prevent any Shaker community from admitting new members.²⁵ Eventually, by the early 1990s, all Canterbury Shakers had passed away. The only surviving community, Sabbathday Lake in New Gloucester, Maine, currently consisting of just one brother and two sisters, faces an uncertain future.

2. Shakerism as a cultural phenomenon

2.1. In the eyes of strangers

As already indicated, the Shakers' first encounters with the outside world were not auspicious. They faced persecution both in England – not entirely unprovoked by themselves – and in America, where they arrived right at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, not the best time for a group of English pacifists to enjoy the blessings of religious liberty in their new promised land. There were other reasons for hostility, too, like the charges of breaking families, which led to pogroms and heavy beatings of several Shakers, including Ann Lee herself. Even when persecution ceased, the Shakers were treated as weird curiosities at best. Especially their cult practices – initially trance movements, later ordered, but still unique dancing – engendered unhealthy fascination, as numerous spectators flocked to Shaker meetinghouses to watch their worship.

But the sort of people who looked at Shakers with true appreciation and even admiration were various social reformers, progressive thinkers and writers, the likes of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier or Leo Tolstoy. They perceived Shaker villages as successful experiments in communal living, something that some of them had been striving for themselves, most often with unsatisfactory results. The details of Shaker social organisation had been studied and the role of religion considered in this utopia-come-true they seemed to have achieved.

The idea of communism was not, of course, new to Americans, in theory or in practice. Various communities have been formed, both of religious and secular provenience. Some of them were founded by immigrant prophets and reformers (the German Rappites, the Swedish colony of Bishop Hill or Owen's New Harmony),²⁶ while others had American origins (e.g. Brook Farm of the Transcendentalists),²⁷ but none could rival the Shakers in endurance and prosperity. Friedrich Engels, the major theorist of communism and leading thinker of early Marxism, found the example of Shakers an

²⁵ S. Paterwic, *Historical Dictionary of the Shakers*, Lanham, Toronto, Oxford 2008, entry: "Closing of the Covenant."

²⁶ D. Cohen, *Not of the World. A History of the Commune in America*, Chicago 1973, chap. 4–5; G.B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, New York 1971.

²⁷ D. Cohen, *op.cit.*, pp. 117–122; T. Żyro, *Boża plantacja. Historia utopii amerykańskiej*, Warszawa 1994, pp. 204–216.

ideal argument to demonstrate the realism and practicality of the idea of a communitarian society. Contrary to critics, who dismiss communism as attractive in principle but utopian in practice, Shakers managed to create and maintain thriving societies based on common ownership of goods. Engels, drawing on a traveller's report, marvelled at their prosperity. "Their barns are full of wheat... They have cattle of the finest quality... In every case there is more than they need."²⁸ At the same time, as the German philosopher was quick to stress, Shakers are free, happy people. "Among them no one is forced to work against his will.... They know no poverty and have nothing to fear. In their ten villages there is not a single policeman; there are no judges, no lawyers, no soldiers, no prisons, and yet everything functions normally. As far as they are concerned, the laws of the country do not exist."²⁹ This great, somewhat anarchistic vision, nicely vindicating the author's theoretical assumptions, is, to be sure, largely idealised, but it nevertheless betrays a fascination with Shakers' successful social experiment. As for the role of religion and the principles derived from it (such as celibacy), Engels, rather predictably, disposes of them as of "no importance." He remains, to a large extent, blind to the fact that other, non-religious communities (some of which he himself mentions) were extremely short-lived in comparison to the Shakers.

Leo Tolstoy, another early admirer of the Shakers, certainly cannot be accused of underestimating the role of religious inspiration in social life. His own social ideas, especially since the 1880s, were based on his reading of Christ's gospel, especially the Sermon on the Mount. In many respects they were quite similar to Shaker principles, such as simplicity, pacifism or non-resistance. Tolstoy corresponded with elders Alonzo Hollister and Frederick Evans in the 1890s. In his letters he expressed his appreciation for the progressive views and social organisation of the Shakers (although he disapproved of spiritualist tendencies in their doctrine), but also posed an important question, central to his own thinking. If Shakers are, as he himself was – and as all genuine Christians should be according to the Russian writer – believers in non-resistance, how could they keep property at all? Their property was communal, to be sure, but still it belonged to somebody – the whole commune in this case. What if someone else tried to take it away from them? "Do you acknowledge the possibility for a Christian to defend property from usurpators?"³⁰ asked Tolstoy. He regarded holding property as inevitably leading to violence, since defending it, even by legal, non-violent means, involves relying on the institutions of the state (courts, police etc.), whose *modus operandi* is, precisely, the legalised use of violence.³¹ Ev-

²⁸ Quoted in: H. Desroche, *The American Shakers. From Neo-Christianity to Presocialism*, Amherst 1971, p. 295.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Leo Tolstoy to Frederick Evans*, 15.02.1891. The manuscripts of the correspondence between Leo Tolstoy and Shaker leaders (Frederick Evans and Alonzo Hollister) are mostly in the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio and Tolstoy Museum, Moscow; photocopies can be found in Sabbathday Lake Shaker Library, New Gloucester, Maine. The transcription is available at: M. Potz (transcription and ed.), *Leo Tolstoy-Shakers correspondence (Korespondencja Lwa Tolstoja z shakerami)*, Repozytorium UŁ, <http://repozytorium.uni.lodz.pl:8080/xmlui/handle/11089/1128> (accessed: 30.11.2014).

³¹ M. Potz, *Tolstoj i shakerzy. Z dziejów idei radykalnego chrześcijaństwa*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy" 2010, vol. 235, no. 1, pp. 5–20.

ans did not share these reservations, since the Shakers were already reconciled with the American state at that time and had ceased to perceive it as a threat to their non-violent ethics (as Evans writes, “We, the Shakers, under the American secular government, can carry out the abstract principles, taught by the revelation of the Christ spirit, more perfectly than has hitherto been done by mortal men and women”³²). Nonetheless, Tolstoy remained interested in the Shaker experience and kept in touch with Evans until the latter’s death in 1893.

2.2. The rediscovery of the Shakers

Despite this interest, the few remaining Shakers, secluded in their villages, fell into oblivion in the early 20th century. Already in the 1930s and ‘40s, however, the interest in Shakerism began to resurface, initially in the circles of art collectors and history enthusiasts, and later among the wider public, too. If one was to name a single person who contributed most to the rediscovery of the sect, it would no doubt be Edward Deming Andrews. Himself an art collector and merchant, Andrews came across the Shakers by accident and almost immediately became fascinated with virtually every aspect of their culture. He wrote extensively (often with his wife Faith) on topics ranging from Shaker furniture and other crafts to their songs and religious art to the history of the group.³³

Fascination with the Shakers, which the works of Andrews and his followers aroused, centred initially on Shaker architecture, furniture and other material objects. Their material culture was admired for its distinctive style, combining harmony and simplicity with usefulness. Collecting Shaker items has become fashionable and remains in vogue to date. A chair that could be obtained for a few dollars in the times when one Shaker village after another was being closed down is now worth a few thousand dollars. The most valuable pieces of furniture, fine examples of Shaker woodworking, may sell for up to \$220,000 – the price paid by Oprah Winfrey at a 1990 auction.³⁴ Other celebrities, such as Bill Cosby, are serious collectors, too. Shaker style is now recognisable, at least among people of some knowledge of art and design. Those who cannot afford originals can choose from a flourishing market of Shaker replicas or, indeed, learn the crafts themselves at a variety of workshops.

The revival of interest in Shakerism was by no means limited to their material culture. In the 1950s and especially 1960s, Shaker villages became popular destinations for various spiritual seekers of the hippie generation, drawn by what was perceived as the isolation, serenity and simplicity of the Shaker life. The majority of them left after periods extending from a few weeks to several months, but even those who seri-

³² Frederick Evans to Leo Tolstoy, 6.03.1891.

³³ E.D. Andrews, *op.cit.*; E.D. Andrews, F. Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere. A Study in Shaker Religious Art*, Charlottesville 1969; *idem*, *Work and Worship: The Economic Order of the Shakers*, Greenwich 1974.

³⁴ R. Reif, *What Recession? Auction Records of 1990*, “New York Times,” 17.01.1991.

ously contemplated joining one of the two surviving communities were denied the possibility of signing the covenant at that time.³⁵

In parallel, the Shakers became a tourist attraction. Some of the closing villages were re-opened as museums (e.g. Hancock, Massachusetts and Canterbury in New Hampshire, Pleasant Hill in Kentucky) with large collections of Shaker buildings, furniture, decorative objects, tools, utensils and other items on display. Each year they host thousands of visitors drawn by the rich heritage of the group, most of them not even realising that there still are Shakers alive in America. The last functioning village, Sabbathday Lake, apart from providing guided tours of some of the buildings, has many supporters from around the country. Organised in an association called Friends of the Shakers, they participate in the life of the village and support it financially.

Further evidence for the absorption of Shakerism into the mainstream of American culture is the enhanced media presence of the group. Several articles on Shakers have been published in wide-circulation magazines such as *National Geographic*³⁶ and *Yankee*³⁷ as well as dailies including *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*. A number of documentaries have been produced, including Tom Davenport's *The Shakers* (1971), Ken Burns's *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God* (1984) and Jane Treays's BBC film *I Don't Want to Be Remembered as a Chair* (1990; the title comes from a bitter comment by a Canterbury eldress on the widespread fascination with Shaker material culture to the point of forgetting the still living Shakers themselves).

Shakers attracted the attention of many scholars, some of them rather prolific (Edward Andrews himself, or June Sprigg), which resulted in scores of books and articles published on various aspects of Shaker religion, culture and everyday life. There are some outstandingly researched studies among them, dealing with the Shaker history,³⁸ social organisation,³⁹ religious art,⁴⁰ music,⁴¹ and the groups' attitude to the natural world,⁴² as well as valuable works on Shaker theology and social structure, including from a feminist perspective.⁴³ But the vast majority of publications have been of a lighter sort, including Shaker cookbooks, do-it-yourself books on Shaker crafts, photographic albums of the villages, memoirs, children's books etc.

³⁵ S. Stein, *op.cit.*, pp. 386–390.

³⁶ C. Newman, S. Abell, *The Shaker's Brief Eternity*, "National Geographic" 1989, no. 9.

³⁷ T. Clark, *Shattering the Shaker Image*, "Yankee" 44 (1980), no 1.

³⁸ S. Stein, *op.cit.*

³⁹ H. Desroche, *op.cit.*; J. Whitworth, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ E.D. Andrews, F. Andrews, *op.cit.*

⁴¹ D. Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, Princeton 1979.

⁴² C.B. Straub, *Honorable Harvest. Shakers and the Natural World*, New Gloucester 2009.

⁴³ M. Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship. A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism*, Lewiston 1985.

3. The mainstreamisation of the Shakers – a conclusion

The curious path the Shakers walked through two centuries of American history has led them from persecution to oblivion to their recent rediscovery by American popular culture. The reasons for the initial hostility are quite clear. As pacifists, they refused to bear arms or support the American cause in the Revolutionary War, which brought about the accusation of loyalism and lack of patriotism. Shakers had other “un-American” characteristics, too. They condemned all carnal relations as impure and sinful, denounced marriage and replaced the natural, biological family with a notion of spiritual family – an unrelated and, to a certain degree, isolated group of men and women. Still worse, they were accused of breaking families by drawing wives and husbands into their ranks. Finally, the Shakers held all property in common, a disgrace for individualistically minded Americans. The pacifist, celibate communists that were Shakers must have been a thorn in the side of their individualistic, patriotic, traditional, family-loving compatriots.

It is more intriguing, perhaps, just why American popular culture, despite this triple anathema of pacifism, sexual asceticism and communism, embraced the Shakers with the enthusiasm it did in the 20th century. For one thing, just as the sect’s fortunes began to decline, their economic prosperity came to an end and their attractiveness to potential converts was greatly diminished, they ceased to present any danger whatsoever to the mainstream Protestant establishment of the country, just as they could not compete economically with their non-Shaker neighbours any more. A potential rival turned into a harmless curiosity.

Secondly, the Shakers themselves, without giving up their communal way of life, have been opening to the world as the years have passed. Their asceticism was limited to the sexual sphere, but was not anti-modernist. Unlike the Amish, they welcomed new developments, both in technology and ideas. Some Shaker “modernists,” like Elder Frederick Evans, actively participated in the social and political debates of their times.

But the single most important factor in the process that led Shakers from the fringe to the mainstream of American culture was their representation in literature, film, newspapers and other media of mass communication. The image of Shakerism that emerged from the writings of Edward Deming Andrews and his followers is highly romanticised and, as some critics charge,⁴⁴ ahistorical. Their peculiarities are played down; instead, they are presented as hard-working, industrious, honest, reliable farmers, the personifications of American virtues.⁴⁵ This sentimental picture is perpetuated by filmmakers and newspaper reporters, heralding the fast-approaching end of the last surviving Shakers, but eager to immortalise their values and their lifestyle into a nostalgic rural utopia.

⁴⁴ S. Stein, *op.cit.*, p. 423 ff.

⁴⁵ This statement, admittedly, is not true for all scholarly literature – many works, such as those mentioned above in notes 38–43, consider these original, untypical aspects of Shakerism. It is, nonetheless, certainly true for the bulk of the popular Shaker-related literature.

This is not to imply that the last surviving Shakers have passively accepted this role of “wax figures” in the gallery of American social and religious history. Even though the Sabbathday Lake village is open to all sorts of visitors, friends, tourists and seekers, and can get quite busy in the summer season, the life of the small group is still genuinely communal and celibate, and their religious observances sincere and meaningful. Especially Brother Arnold Hadd has retained a vivid interest in and a deep knowledge of Shaker theology and has made successful efforts to revive certain aspects of Shaker religiosity, such as regular prayer meetings, singing etc. How demanding this quasi-monastic way of life still remains is testified to by a number of prospective converts who abandoned the group after periods of novitiate extending from a few days to a few months.⁴⁶ All this contrasts sharply with the sites of the former Shaker villages, now turned into visitors’ centres with exhibitions, workshop, libraries etc., to a large extent contributing to the pop-cultural, idealised image of the group. How this culturally constructed utopia relates to reality matters little, for the Shaker image has long slipped out of control of the Shakers themselves.

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⁴⁶ Personal communication with Br. Arnold Hadd, Sabbathday Lake, Maine, September 2012.

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