

ALONE ON MY ISLAND

by Nikos Philippides



John Gummere

Nikos Philippides is retired and now lives on Andros, the Greek island on which he was born. He became a Quaker while living in the United States and is on FWCC's overseas membership list.

"You're what?"

"I was expecting that. Long had the parishioners of the Greek Orthodox church of the village tolerated the strange newcomer, worshiping among them, who was never partaking of the *hagia koinonia* (the bread and wine symbolizing the body and the blood of Christ), was never lighting the candles, was never kissing the hand of the priest, or the icons of the saints, was never crossing himself, was never kneeling down. I wasn't participating. I was an intruder within their cosy orthodox world bringing, like Socrates, *kania daemonia* with my unorthodox actions. Since my return from abroad, I was attending *faute de mieux* the orthodox liturgies. I felt the need to worship somewhere on Sundays and that was the only place available; besides, the goings-on inside the church were reviving fond memories of the past, of when I was a little boy.

And now one bright and cold Sunday morning, after services, one of the boldest but tactful parishioners popped up the inevitable question: "Pardon me, sir. But are you not a Christian anymore?"

"Certainly I am—a Quaker. Member of the Religious Society of Friends." He didn't seem to get it and I had to repeat it. A big question mark shrouded his sunburned and weather-bitten face. "Never heard of that."

Right after services the worshipers always repair to the only coffee house of the village, where they drink heavy Turkish coffee in demitasse cups, smoke cigars or cigarettes, play cards, and exchange the latest gossip. Usually I am loth to attend because I don't smoke, or play cards, and the tobacco fumes always bother me, giving me a headache. That day, however, a bitter cold and windy day in January, I followed the crowd in. The warmth of the wood-burning stove in the center of the room was inviting. Since I don't drink coffee, Mitsos the proprietor reached over for the whistling pot of boiling water, on top of the stove, to prepare me a cup of sage tea.

"Mr. Nikos here," were the first words of my ex-interrogator, as we entered and took seats, "tells me that he isn't a Greek

Orthodox anymore. He is a . . . a . . . a”

“A Quaker,” I volunteered.

“Quaker? Never heard of it.”

The same big question mark covered the faces of all. Precisely at that time the door was opened wide and, with a gust of cold wind, in rushed Father Demetrios, the village priest.

“Papa, Mr. Nikos here just told us that he isn’t anymore one of us.”

The priest looked at me scornfully and accused: “I always suspected, sir, that you were a Hiliastis.”

He was referring to the sect of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, most numerous and militant in Greece after the Catholics. There are also some Seventh-Day Adventists and Evangelical Christians and a few others here who have been tolerated; however, 97 percent of the Greeks belong to the Eastern Orthodox religion. The Witnesses, on the other hand, always had been held in contempt by the church and the state alike, being considered *persona non grata* due to their tenacious proselytizing zeal. Their services were interfered with and some of them even landed in jail. Now, however, with the socialist government, church and state are almost torn asunder, and freedom of worship for one and all is expressly guaranteed.

“No, Father,” I answered, “I am not a ‘Hiliastis.’ I am a Quaker. A member of the Religious Society of Friends.” The same perplexed grimace distorted the face of the clergyman: “Never heard of it!”

I remembered then in juxtaposition, another related incident when, while at Athens, I drifted one Sunday morning into a church of the Evangelical Christians to attend the services there. I introduced myself as a Quaker to the pastor, George Kariotakis. His eyes shone, his smile broadened, and his hand shook, more vigorously, mine: “Never could anyone have given me a better introduction,” he said.

He put me to sit at a front pew and, during his sermon, his caressing look was thrown frequently at my direction with an aura of admiration and respect. George Kariotakis wasn’t a peasant priest, but a learned clergyman, evidently the graduate of a proper theological seminary. He was admiring something in which he would have liked to participate, circumstances, perhaps beyond his control, preventing him from doing so.

The Greek island of Andros is situated about the middle of the Aegean Sea, the northern-most and second in size, after Naxos, of the Cyclades group; nearby is situated the famous tourist island of Mykonos. The climate is exceptionally mild and the sun shines the greatest part of the year, as a rule. Andros surpasses the other islands as to the amount of available water.

Hundreds of cool, pure springs bubble-up everywhere, and in ancient times the island was appropriately named "Idroussa" (waterful place). At that time it was also covered with lush vegetation, with thick stands of pines, oaks, poplars, cypresses, chestnuts, and carobs.

Long since, however, all those trees were cut down for fuel, and the high summits of Andros are now denuded, a nonexistent obstacle for the fierce northerners that blow the year round. The valleys, though, due to the springs are all covered now with groves of fruit trees, among which the citrus and olive trees predominate.

The water on Andros generally flows, after the irrigation, to the sea; there are no stagnant waters for mosquito breeding. There are also many springs with healing and curative properties. The rocky foundation of the isle seems to be well embedded in the earth after the past geological upheaval, when the plains of the Aegean foundered, leaving the mountain peaks above the sea. Due to this, in an earthquake country like Greece, the Andros infrastructure seems to be surprisingly stable; we hardly ever feel an earthquake tremor.

A paradisiacal place? I don't know. There are more beautiful, exotic, and enchanted lands the world over. For me, however it is paradise. Within a miniature "Schwartzwald" right in the heart of the island, and at a small village named Ipsiloy, that's where I was born and that's where I returned, after half a century of peregrinations around the world, to die!

Quakerism in Greece is practically unknown. When I returned to my homeland, retired after a life as Marine officer and then a professional man, I found, by inquiring, a small functioning group of Quakers at Athens. John Boduroglou was clerk of the meeting, which was held every other Sunday in the library reading room of the American School for Greek Classical Studies; that was almost ten years ago. I remember that a visiting American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Newell Stewart, were the regular attenders, as well as Mr. A. Argyropoulos (since deceased), Mr. Boduroglou, and myself. Occasionally some of the students from the school attended. After I left Athens, in order to reside permanently in my birthplace, I heard that the Stewarts had moved away and that the only Quaker in Athens is now Mr. Boduroglou, who can't hold a meeting by himself.

My own life, as the lonely Quaker in Andros among the "heathen" (in reality a simple, kind, considerate, honest, hard-working folk) is uneventful, sure enough, aside from the fact of being quite unorthodox. After the people learned that there was an "unbeliever" amongst them, in their kindness and their laudable spirit of toleration they did not reject me entirely. They

did not "draw a circle and throw me out," to quote Ed Markham. But neither did they embrace me with the loving-kindness, the esteem, the regard, and the respect as befitted a learned man. I can't say that they remained aloof, but they kept me at a distance, until I decided that my obligation as a bona fide Quaker was "to draw a circle and take them in."

But how? Must I turn into a missionary in that spiritually unfertile place, and with a strong proselytizing zeal, try to make them all Quakers? It was then that the wise words of Walter Mackensen, clerk of Chicago's 57th Street Meeting, came to my mind: "Proselytizing is not the thing. Goodness knows that perhaps we are not even perfect among the rest of the world's faiths. On the contrary our true Christian aim must be to make our fellow men better human beings. Better Catholics, better Orthodox, better Lutherans, better Baptists, better Buddhists, better Mohammedans, better Hebrews. . . . The spiritual needs of the world won't be satisfied by a single faith but by the good deeds as exemplified in the message of Christ—the good example, the only thing that sinks permanently into the hearts of men!"

Then, I thought, why not start acting according to the spirit of my Quaker religion? This I did and I am continuing to do so until now.

There are innumerable good deeds that anyone can do, Quaker style, limited only by the lack of imagination of the individual. Besides my radio engineering experience I have also studied and practiced naturopathy. I began to check the blood pressure of anyone who wanted. I attend to their sicknesses; I treat their wounds, bruises, and broken bones. The pensions of the elderly peasants are low as a rule (and a decade or so ago were even nonexistent). In certain hardship cases I supplement them from my own funds.

The rustic roads of the village become impassable at times from weed growth; I pay to have them cleaned and I also lend a hand myself at times (I don't believe that there should be a shame on manual labor). Since I know several languages, people come to me for translations, letter writing, and official petitions. Children come with questions about their homework, and I even give private lessons to weak students. Every time I go to town I always ask the elderly if they need something brought to them; I cultivate and water the gardens of those unable to do so; I cut hay. . . . I do so many tasks that I better stop lest I am suspected of braggadocio.

"And how much do we owe you, sir?"

"Nothing at all. The pleasure in helping you out has been all mine."

This is beyond the comprehension of the simple and innocent people. At a time when, in this cruel world, people too often try to exploit, cheat, and extort their fellow people—at a time when, due to inflation, one day you pay a price for something and a month or so later you pay double—it is difficult to grasp the willingness of somebody to do something for nothing. People feel embarrassed, they begin to harbor feelings of taking advantage of somebody's kindness, of being guilty for not repaying in equal value. They insist, but I insist also in refusing remuneration. So they immediately begin to make plans for "revenge."

Several days later, so as not to appear as payment for services rendered, they beat a path to my door *dona ferentes*. If people of meager circumstances who hardly are able to make ends meet, after due deliberation, decide to part with a portion of their deficiency, they consider it the worst insult if the one for whom the gift is intended refuses to accept it. I know that well and so I abide with the custom by accepting the present with profound thanks. They know that I am a lacto-vegetarian, and they bring only appropriate presents: eggs, homemade cheese, vegetables, and fruit, for which I have a weakness.

And now after the shock of me being an "unbeliever" began to wear off, compliments circulate among them:

"Mr. Nikos is a good man, a holy man," names which I don't think I deserve. Never have I heard being mentioned that "Mr. Nikos is a good man, because he is a Quaker." Quakerism is something they can't or don't want to understand, although on many an occasion I've tried patiently to explain it to them. "So what?" they answer. "We also do good works. Something however that has been traditional with us for generations, we can never forsake."

That doesn't matter! The world won't be saved, indeed, by all the people in it becoming Quakers, for which it is not yet ready, but by all the peoples of whatever faith becoming incited by good example to apply to their lives the golden commandments of Jesus Christ. Especially us Christians: we have had more than enough already of theological dissertations, deliberations, enmities, and schisms for almost 20 centuries, without benefit at all for the attainment of the elusive Fatherhood of God and fellowship of Man. Isn't it about time we turn our energies to other more proper and practical directions? □

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