

Summary of papers.

AROUND 1788. THE ORIGINS OF THE QUAKER MOVEMENT IN FRANCE.

A conference held October 18-19, 2008 at the Quaker Centre in Congénies

The Cévenol Prophets and the resilience of religious convictions.

Axel Jensen, international forestry expert, explained that certain forests when they are destroyed, no longer regenerate. Others, depending on their species and the environmental condition, reappear after five to ten years. This capacity to survive is called resilience by forestry experts.

Axel Jensen first gave a brief résumé of the emergence and development of the Quaker Movement in England, followed by a description of the Cévenol Prophets. This permitted him to make a comparison between the first Quakers and the Cévenol Prophets, who showed a remarkable resemblance especially in the role of women and non programmed meetings, as well as certain physical manifestations during the meeting. This may be explained by similar conditions in the two movements in their respective times: non-violent resistance to persecution, which led to the emergence of non-hierarchical and egalitarian social organisations, as well as an oral religious culture. In such a culture the possibility of a return to religious expressions like the shamanism of ancient societies was invoked as a possible explanation of the trembling and sighs during the meeting.

The Couflaïres and the Edict of Tolerance 1787.

Historian Georges Liens first examined the value that can be attributed to the scarce documents related to Couflaïres or Inspired from Vaunage (a small area west of Nîmes where the village called Congénies lies) since the beginning of the 18th century, during a period that could be called the protohistory of French quakers. Then he showed how, from 1785, and thanks to the dominant action of Jean de Marsillac, these Couflaïres became closer to English Quakers, until they ended up joining the Society of Friends in 1788.

Jumping very far back, Liens surfed on the evolution of the problem of citizenship of French Protestants since the Edict of Nantes of 1598 to the Edict of Tolerance of 1787, through the tragic crisis following the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1685 (the Revocation), then by the progress of the spirit of « Lights ».

Then he showed how, thanks to the personal action of Jean de Marsillac, the Quakers from Vaunage, managed to take advantage of this Edict of Tolerance of 1787, although they belonged to a sect that « does not recognize baptism as necessary ». Such decision, that looks microscopic, since the human group to which it applied was infinitely small, is a very important landmark in the general history of French law since it directly favours the creation, under the revolution, of an authentic citizenship fully with a universal value.

The Couflaïres become quakers in 1788.

Francoise Delord-Tomlin, a descendant of the Congénies Quakers, explained how her Couflaïres ancestors found the Quakers. An announcement placed by the Englishman Edward Fox in the *Gazette de France* in 1785 explained Quaker principles. This announcement sought to find, in order to reimburse them, the owners of French boats captured by his ships during the American War of Independence; The announcement explained that his ships had been armed by his partners who supported the war against his wishes. Learning this, the « Quakers of Congénies-Calvisson » sent a letter to « the virtuous Mr. Fox. » British and American Quakers, interested in this little group in the Vaunage which seemed to share the same spiritual values they did, sent a delegation of four men and three women (two Americans, two Irish, and three English) who arrived on May 23, 1788. They were very well received in Congénies, and rapidly discovered similarities between Quaker faith and

practice and that of the Couflaires. Thus, three days later, May 26, 1788, the small community of « Inspirés » or « Couflaires » was recognized as a group of French Quakers. An old register attests to this, followed by the names of families such as: *Bénézet, Majolier, Brun, Delord, Rabinel*, etc. Some of these names are still found in Congénies and neighbouring villages. It is important to note also that in 1788 a Quaker school for boys and girls opened its doors in Congénies. It was free and welcomed many Quaker and Protestant children until the middle of the 19th Century.

From 1785 to 1791, Another result of the American Revolution. The Petition of 1791.

Jeanne Henriette Louis, professor of American history, pointed out the ties which bind Quakers to the United States. She spoke of William Penn founder of Pennsylvania, who was a student at Saumur. She described the ties between the Couflaires and the whalers of Nantucket, a small island south of Boston.

At the end of the XVIIIth century, American owners of whaling ships were settled down at Dunkerque. They were asked by Louis XVI to re-establish a whaling industry in France, and were granted subsidies and excused from paying taxes. The objective was to free France from depending on England, Holland or other European countries for its supply of oil. These ship owners were Quakers from Nantucket: Benjamin Hussey, the first Nantucket native to establish himself in Dunkerque, followed by William Rotch and his son Francois, who arrived in 1785, assisted by an American agent, already in Dunkerque, Coffyn.

Coming from America, they arrived with their boats, captains and the necessary equipment. They also outfitted boats in Lorient. William Rotch and his son Benjamin accompanied the spokesman of the Couflaires of Congénies, Jean de Marsillac, to the National Assembly on February 10th, 1791, to present a petition in favour of a non-violent revolution. But Mirabeau, president of the « Assemblée constituante », said this was unrealistic.

Some outstanding figures among Friends in Vaunage.

Besides Jean de Marsillac, who played the prominent role in the transformation of Couflaires into Quakers, and in the application of the Edict of Tolerance of 1787 to them, Françoise Tomlin spoke of three personalities among the first Quakers of Congénies:

- **Paul Codognan** (dates unknown), known as « good man Paul Codognan » who in 1769 « walked to the Low Countries where he heard the Quakers spoken of. He then went to England, where he was welcomed, but, since he only spoke Languedocien, conversation was limited. He walked back across France with two Quaker books in French hidden under his shirt.
- **Louis Antoine Majolier** (1764-1842) was one of the most active Quakers following their recognition as such in 1788. He had left his job as a notary clerk, and became a weaver in order to devote himself to the development of the Quaker Community. He was the one who, with the aid of English Quaker John Elliott, created the free independent school in his house. He also introduced the cultivation of potatoes, until then unknown in the village, which greatly improved the life of the citizens. His son, Louis Majolier, was mayor of Congénies in 1867 and 1869.
- His daughter **Christine Majolier** (1805-1897) was taken to England in the « seventh month » of 1817 at the age of 12 by William Allen to give her a better education and make her acquainted with the other Quaker women of her time. She grew up and became a « Minister of the Gospel. » She accompanied Elizabeth Fry as an interpreter, and travelled a great deal in Europe, visiting heads of state, kings and heads of prisons.

Short sketches of foreign Quaker visitors of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Libby Perkins spoke of some of the overseas Quakers who have visited Congénies since 1788.

- **Sarah Tuke Grubb**, who was born in York, visited Congénies in 1788 with her husband and other Quakers. At that moment, the Majolier family and others became Quakers, linked to London Yearly Meeting.

Etienne de Grellet left France at the time of the revolution. He became a citizen of the United States and a Quaker in Philadelphia, the capital of Pennsylvania, the colony created by Friends in the 18th century. He ministered in Quissac, St Hippolyte du Fort, and Ganges.

- **Elizabeth Fry**, who was renowned for her efforts for prison reform, visited Congénies when she came to see the director of the Nîmes prison, at his request, who wanted her advice on the treatment of prisoners. Her portrait is on the 5£ bill in England today.

- **Joseph G. Alexander** in 1899 was much interested in the Protestant population of the region. He spent a few days in Nîmes and Congénies, riding to the nearby villages. In the course of the summer of 1899, he spent some time in the Yonne and in the neighbouring departments, then he returned to Congénies where he had left his older son, Gilbert. The latter spent five months and lived at the home of a Quaker, Marie Bernard, deceased in 1928) and her children, M. and Mme Delord. At that time (1900), the meeting room was only seldom used, and only when there were important visitors. The meeting, each Sunday, took place at the Delords'.