

# “Queer People”

## By Dorothy Thompson

**EDITOR'S NOTE: THE ESSAY BELOW WAS WRITTEN BY DOROTHY THOMPSON AFTER SHE HAD GIVEN A LECTURE AT BETHEL COLLEGE, NORTH NEWTON, KS IN 1951. IT WAS PRINTED IN THE JANUARY 1952 ISSUE OF LADIES HOME JOURNAL (COPYRIGHTED BY THE CURTIS PUBLISHING COMPANY). MS. THOMPSON, WHO DIED IN 1961, WAS A WIDELY-PUBLISHED JOURNALIST AND THE AUTHOR OF SEVERAL BOOKS, MANY OF THEM REFLECTING SUPPORT FOR HUMAN AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND STRONG OPPOSITION TO NAZI GERMANY.**

Recently I was booked to speak at a small college in Kansas, and en route, mentioned its name to a fellow passenger on the train, who had opened a conversation regarding the various stops on my tour. “I believe that Bethel College is a Mennonite institution,” I said, “and that interests me very much, because I really know nothing about the Mennonites.”

“Queer people,” remarked my companion. “All the men wear beards, and the women some sort of gray clothes, don’t they?”

A man across the aisle joined in, “Aren’t those the folks who wear no clothes at all? I thought they lived in Canada.”

“Those are Dukhobors,” I said from my limited knowledge, “and I don’t think they wear no clothes except occasionally, but anyhow they aren’t Mennonites.”

“They have a college? Didn’t know they believed in higher education”, said the first speaker. “They don’t believe in war, like the Quakers. And don’t they believe in the Second Coming of Christ?”

“They’re wonderful farmers,” remarked the second speaker. “Don’t know why.”

“Anyhow,” concluded my companion, therewith dismissing the subject, “they are queer people—very queer.”

And the conversation turned to whether President Truman was certain to run again, whether General Eisenhower would be a candidate, and what were the chances of Taft.

In the next two days, however, I earned more about the people we had discussed, and what I learned has occupied my thoughts ever since.

My hosts and sponsors in Newton, Kansas, did not wear beards, and their wives and daughters dressed like any other modest American women, with the emphasis on cleanliness and simplicity. They lived in charming homes with (I thought) exceptionally natural, well-mannered children.

They are not proselytes, nor did they seek to ram their religious concepts down my throat. But I was quickly caught up in a unique atmosphere, difficult to describe. It was not an atmosphere of “piety” in the usual connotations of that word, nor of sectarianism, which so easily becomes wrangling, nor of the self-righteousness that so quickly puts one on the defensive. It was an atmosphere, no less powerful because entirely unobtrusive, of serenity and peace, and far from being “queer”.

These “queer” people, I learned, are practically creedless. The sum of their faith is to be found in the New Testament, and especially in the Lords’ Payer and the Sermon on the Mount. They believe that in His teachings, Christ revealed to man the laws of God, laws that are basic in the structure of the universe, and that, unlike man-made laws, operate without the slightest possibility of failure. These laws, if recognized and observed, are the path to abundant life and they are summed up in the injunction to “love the Lord thy God with all thy strength and with all thy spirit, and thy neighbor as thyself.”

The “queer” people believe that the Christian life is a life to be lived, every day, in every thought and deed—nor do they divided thought and act. Thought, in its highest, most concentrated form, is directed, as payer, for the fuller understanding and revelation of God’s law of love; such though, they believe, is an actual force in the universe, as “real” as electricity, as the actions which follow and conform with it are its incorporation in external reality. To think and act according to God’s revealed laws is therefore to live naturally, according to inherent, natural law, and to reap inevitably a more abundant life.

Into everything, therefore, that the “queer” people do, enters this fourth-dimensional element of love and service to God’s laws. Therefore, one’s work must be lovingly done well, joyfully, but without strain, with gratitude for its material rewards, but without concentration on them, since all one’s doings are a service to God and to His children—humanity.

I saw a very simple illustration of this when I visited a center for the collection of food and clothing for the victims of war and hatred living in refugee camps abroad. Although the “queer” people settled in various communities number altogether only 100,000 people in America, they have sent thousands and thousands of tons of food and clothing abroad. The manager of the collection center in Newton, Kansas, is a woman who receives for her services, “because she needs the little extra money,” \$40 per month. Housed in a huge Quonset hut were bales and bales of clothing and food. I remarked on the neatness of the secondhand clothing: everything was immaculately clean; neatly mended, where mending was necessary; never a button missing; shoes cobbled and shined. In each garment was a small label, only two inches square, bearing the words “In the name of Christ.” The director said smilingly (but with even a shade of tartness), “One can’t send a suffering people useless old castoffs in the name of Christ. What we send has be decent and worthy of that label.”

Then I understood why the “queer” people are famous the world over as farmers. To them the earth is the Lord’s, to be worked in harmony with His laws, as these can be discerned. An ill-kept field, soil mined without regard to the generations to come, woods devastated for immediate profit, land eroded from neglect and indifference are affronts to the original and ultimate Owner.

Perhaps one of the ‘queerest’ things about the “queer” people is that though they have lived in many countries, and been persecuted in most, they have always come to new lands on invitation.

Their communities came into existence with the dawn of the Protestant revolution. When Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were carving their mighty sects out of the heart of Europe, a little group of leaders, with beliefs more liberal and simple than those of these great religious sects, gathered together in private homes in Zurich, Switzerland, to formulate the simple faith they hold to this day. They recognized the necessity of the state and taught cheerful payment of taxes, but they rejected war as a deadly sin. They were furiously persecuted—and by all the other religions.

But the industry, frugality and honesty of their lives impressed even great rulers, who recognized them as an asset to any nation. Frederick the Great of Prussia invited them to Germany, to be an example to native farmers. Catherine the Great of Russia offered them great inducements to settle in the Ukraine for the same reason. And there they lived in peace and honor until later rulers of both countries sought to draft them into armies, and popular passions for conformity resented even their non-aggressive existence. In new America, William Penn invited them to Pennsylvania; and the builders of the Santa Fe Railroad, looking for settlers in the wilderness of Kansas, having heard of the Ukrainian settlements, invited them there. These settlers brought with them, from Russia, the first “hard” or winter wheat ever seen in this country, which over the years has transformed the wheat culture of Midwestern America.

Not all their communities are identical. They have their “fundamentalists” whose men wear beards and who affect a peculiar dress, while others adopt in these particulars the habits of the general American community. But spiritually they are one.

The college at which I spoke is a fully accredited liberal-arts college, having on its faculty excellent teachers, many with Ph.D. and masters’ degrees from the greatest American universities. Yet the “queer” people do believe that the cultivation of the intellect alone, divorced from the cultivation of the soul, is productive of evil, not good. “A brilliant spiritual moron, armed with all the instruments that education and training can give him, is more dangerous to society than an ignorant spiritual moron”, a member of the college administration remarked to me.

At any rate, wherever they have settled, the land has bloomed and comely settlements have sprung up. Always they have created substantial, stable, modest prosperity. They have paid their taxes to sustain the laws of the state, but the taxes have not had to be expended upon the “queer” people, among whom crime, divorce and poverty are practically unknown. The prisons that have housed them have been prisons only for those who have refused to register for military service. For the conviction that war is sin, that by the immutable laws of God which are synonymous with laws of nature, war breeds war, hatred hatred, and destruction destruction, they have suffered to greater or lesser degree everywhere, but calmly, without rancor.

When a czar of Russia quizzically inquired of a delegation, “Where would nations get their soldiers if all men were like you?” they did not reply; the answer, of course, being implicit. Yet even the czar did not imprison them, but set them, in wartime, at the hardest, most menial tasks. It remained for Stalin to scatter and disperse the remnants of their communities and to send their

members to forced-labor camps—in the name of a creed promising the end of all human exploitation and universal “peace”.

It is perfectly true—observable in everyday life—that whatever is done for love is well performed, and that the element of love makes the performance voluntary, pleasurable and free.

It is also true that love of others—an extension and sublimation of self-love—is somehow tied to the instinctive knowledge of love as the source of life; i.e., as a Force of Creation, or God. It is also observably true that war has never created a just peace; that those who truly love (without possessiveness) are loved in return; that justice without mercy (which is also love) always turns out to be injustice; and that punishment never reformed anybody. Love both disciplines and liberates. Crime is the expression of hatred of society, and hatred, nine times out of ten, is frustrated love.

Science in our lifetime has discovered the composition of the universe, and has revealed that it is composed not of “matter” but of energy; and science has demonstrated how to disintegrate it. The truths scientists discovered were here all the time for those who could deduce them. But mankind has not, as a whole, discerned the integrating element in the universe—though they have given it a name—God.

And the more I have thought about it, the more I have wondered whether the “queer” people are not just a little more “scientifically advanced” than are the rest of us in the most fundamental of all the sciences, the one that should reveal how we can continue to live together on this planet, in this universe.

They think the secret has been here all the time—ever since Christ lived and died and lived again as a spirit as close to one’s own breathing, as real and discernible as the trust in the eyes of a child.