

'They suffer no one to spit on the floor....'

ISAAC REITER (edited by Carl M. Becker)

The Reverend Isaac Reiter was a busy man of God in and around Miamisburg, Ohio, in the 1850s and 1860s. As pastor on the Miamisburg Charge of the German Reformed Church, he ministered to congregations in Miamisburg, Salem (Springboro), and Farmersville that stretched along a circuit of thirty miles. He was ever hitching his horse to his buggy and driving to the churches, there preaching sermons in English and German at worship, sanctifying baptisms, solemnizing weddings and funerals, and catechizing the young. But one Sunday in 1860, he found time, along with a friend, to attend "exercises" of the Shakers at Union Village, about fifteen miles south of Miamisburg near Lebanon.² As he portrayed the Shakers in his diary, they subscribed to a stained theology but set a high standard of material cleanliness that Protestant denominations could have done well to emulate.³

—Carl M. Becker

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Sunday 26th Pleasant morning. Having no preaching appointment during forenoon, I, in company with Bro. N. [J. J. Null], went to Union

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1. When Reiter accepted the Miamisburg Charge in 1854, it had four congregations, one at Miamisburg, Salem, Farmersville, and Germantown.

2. Organized in 1806, Union Village had about six hundred members in the 1820s and was then one of the largest Shaker communities in the United States; by 1860, though, the membership had dwindled to about one hundred. With an aggregate membership of around 3,800 through its existence, probably Union Village was the largest of all the Shaker communes. See Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York, 1953), 290-292.

3. Composed of two volumes, the Reiter diary is in the Miamisburg Branch of the Dayton and Montgomery County Public Library. "A Diary kept by Isaac H. Reiter, June 28th, 1854—March 28, 1863."

Village in Warren county, Ohio, to attend a meeting of the *Shakers* at 10 A.M., and see their mode of *worship*. Arrived there in good time. Saw them gather in. They appeared very neatly [sic] & cleanly [sic] in their dress, especially the women, who were all dressed alike in white. The "meeting house" is a large frame building, the floor of which was clean to perfection. The pews were benches or moveable seats. Their exercises commenced with singing, which was followed by dancing movements. These were repeated. Then an aged man rose and announced that he had some important remarks to make concerning the *judgment*. He had his discourse written. He read it in an animated tone of voice, with some occasional extemporaneous remarks. His discourse was without any system or clearness of comprehension, and might be regarded a confused conglomeration of truth and error. He certainly had no clear idea of the judgment, and his exegesis was at great variance with the plain teaching of the word of God. His discourse was "spiritualistic" without however being truly spiritual and partook more of the moonlight of fancy than of the true light of the Gospel. He talked much of the "spirit," and of "the spirit world," and of "spiritual mediums," and yet ignored the divine personality of the Holy Spirit, as well as the Trinity of God—making the triune God a *dual* God. This "dual God" is discovered in the eternal power of God, and in the eternal wisdom of God. The former is represented by the man, and the latter by the woman; as these "twain are one flesh," so the dual God is one. Upon these four pillars rests the church of God; and the church of God is the *Shakers*. And as all judgment is committed to Christ, and the spirit of Christ is communicated to the church, so the church—the *Shakers*—has power to judge the world, or all who are not in the church—the *Shakers*—; and consequently the judgment is *now*.

Such were some of the leading ideas of the discourse. A kind of mixture of heathen philosophy & truth, regarding every one in the dark but the *Shakers*, and no salvation outside of their association. Infatuation and bigotry united!

Well, after the "chief speaker" was "through," three others rose successively and bore testimony to the truth whereof the "chief speaker" affirmed, in a few words. The last of these three faithful witnesses, announced that "the meeting is now dismissed," and that ended their so called worship to God in spirit and truth.

There was not a word of prayer heard during the whole of the exercises. Rather a strange anomaly [sic] of divine worship! It would seem after all their pretensions to the "spirit," that they lay more stress on "bodily exercise," which "profiteth nothing," than in real spiritual devotion (of the soul.)

There was however one thing that I really admired, and by which many of the protestant denominations might and should profit. That is

cleanliness. This pertains to their persons, dress, residences and church. The latter particularly. Their house of worship is emphatically clean. They suffer no one to spit on the floor, or in any way to pollute it. It is clean throughout. So ought to be every house of divine worship. But, O, the contrast! How do many of our churches appear? Any thing but clean. The floor bespattered with tobacco juice, and the lean, lank quids piled up enormously; the aisles full of mud; the pews shamefully carved; the windows & walls full of dust & cobwebs; and many things not comporting with the true idea of purity, beauty & glory of the sanctuary of the Lord. May the time hasten when these things shall be right & approved —