

# Quakerism's French roots<sup>1</sup>

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Congénies, a village not far from Nîmes, is regarded as the heart of the early Quaker movement in France. In 1983 the municipal authorities had renamed one of its main streets "Avenue des quakers"<sup>2</sup>. Congénies boasts the only purpose-built Quaker meeting-house in France, built in 1822 with financial support from British and US Quakers.<sup>3</sup>



In 1988, French Quakers celebrated their bicentenary in Congénies. Louis XVI signed the Edict of Tolerance in November 1787 ; it was registered in January 1788. It had been negotiated on the Protestant side especially by Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Étienne, a lawyer and Protestant pastor in Nîmes.

It allowed the Quakers to come out of hiding. That was what the bicentenary was celebrating ; the movement had grown from beginnings as much as a century or more earlier, although its origins in



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<sup>1</sup> William Penn was at the Protestant Academy at Saumur around 1663-1664, but that is quite another story.

<sup>2</sup> Photo : Gérard Verhoest, <https://www.objectifgard.com/2017/07/24/le-gard-meconnu-la-communaute-quaker-de-congenies/>

<sup>3</sup> Painting by Karina Knight, <https://www.maison-quaker-congenies.org/>

a largely illiterate rural community are poorly documented. None the less, academic work on the subject has made great strides in the last few years. The account I gave in *Les quakers* (1990) is obsolete.

The whole area is firmly Protestant. An official count in 1663 gave 500 Protestants and 6 Catholics in Congénies. Patrick Cabanel wonders whether one can say there is a deep-rooted “heretical disposition” in the Cévennes. A 1998 study of wills in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, well before the Reformation, already reveals a disenchantment with the Church : 77% leave money to the poor, against 29% in the bishopric as a whole ; only 10% leave money to pay for a mass, against the bishopric average of 41%.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Protestants in the Cévennes after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes**

The Edict of Nantes of 1598 recognised certain rights to the Protestants in certain parts of France. Its aim was to put an end to the wars of religion which had been bloodying the country since 1562. Louis XIV revoked it in 1685, after a few years of increasing oppression and persecution of Protestants.

The revocation created a range of conditions favourable to Quaker forms of worship. Firstly, there was a shortage of pastors :they were encouraged to emigrate ; if they didn't and were caught, they were likely to be executed. Furthermore, official exactions had ruined the peasantry, so there were no means of remunerating pastors. “Deprived of pastors, the prophets continued, in secret, to edify one another.”<sup>5</sup> Preaching became widely spread among the faithful, both men and women.<sup>6</sup>

During the days of Protestant anarchy the feeling survived that giving communion was a privilege reserved to ordained pastors. Since they had

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<sup>4</sup> Cabanel 2016, p.38

<sup>5</sup> Jaulmes 1898, p.6. Edmond Jaulmes (1872-1960) was a member of one the Quaker families of Congénies. Indeed it owns the Congénies Quaker cemetery. Edmond became a Protestant pastor. The essay he wrote on the history of the Congénies Quakers as part of his course is one of the rare accounts of them from a source close to them.

<sup>6</sup> The print reproduced here is drawn from *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, Amsterdam 1723. For more details, see <https://www.musee-reforme.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Document-explicatif-sur-l-expo.pdf>



become scarce, communion became rare. In the second half of the 18th century, when relations with the royal and catholic authorities as with mainstream Protestantism became more relaxed, Quakers and Protestants on occasion attended each others' services ; never taking communion became a characteristic which distinguished the Quakers.

Secondly, worship became clandestine. On the one hand, the authorities demolished the Protestant churches. On the other, to avoid discovery by the authorities, it retreated into small gatherings in private homes. It was prudent not to advertise them. As any resistance or guerrilla movement can confirm, the less one knows the less one can reveal to the authorities even under torture. All those conditions encouraged the development of a diversity of forms of worship.

Mainstream Protestants on occasion held services which gathered large numbers of participants in remote spots hidden in the woods. There were suitable places in the forested hills of the Cévennes, but not in the open country of the Vaufrage where Congénies was located.

## *Prophets, fanatics and such*

In the anarchic state of Protestantism which developed around the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a cloud of different sorts of religious expression grew up. Names flew - they were indeed often used as derogatory terms - like 'fanatics', 'illuminated', 'prophets', 'inspired'. They probably did not designate distinct movements, but applied fairly indiscriminately. A publication of 1893 referring to the Vaunage of the mid-18th century mentions "the Moravian Brethren commonly called Quakers".<sup>7</sup> In any event, relations among them all seem to have been cordial and people circulated freely between them.

The Provençal word 'couflaire' has come to be particularly associated with the early Vaunageol Quakers. It roughly means 'swollen' or 'pumped or puffed up'. It might connote being filled with the Holy Spirit, or simply having a high opinion of oneself. Some take it as a synonym of 'Inspired'.<sup>8</sup> It can also connote taking deep breaths, puffing, gasping or sighing. In these latter senses it is not far removed from quaking ; both can describe the agitation of a person grappling with the Spirit in worship, especially in the animated Quaker meetings of the early days in Britain, as of the Prophets and such in the Cévennes. The shift to the name Quaker or trembleur was but a small step for the Couflaires of Congénies.

An analysis of the archives of the *Intendance de Montpellier* carried out in 2003 concerning 462 prophets or fanatics arrested in 1685-1709 gave the following results.<sup>9</sup>

- 51% men, 49% women
- Average age : men 30, women 28 ; 7% under 14
- 19% had at least once manifested a physical expression of prophetism (quaking, fainting, etc.)
- 70% declared they did not know how to sign their name.

Some "French prophets" came from the Cévennes to London around 1706-1708 after the Camisards war. They held meetings at first in private houses, later also in hired rooms in taverns. The meetings excited much

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Jaulmes 1898 p.25

<sup>8</sup> e.g. <https://www.objectifgard.com/2017/07/24/le-gard-meconnu-la-communaute-quaker-de-congenies/>

<sup>9</sup> Jensen 2008. He does not give the reference of the 2003 study.

interest from both "sober and religious people" [including some Quakers] and those merely "interested in seeing novelties". Prophetic utterances were accompanied by theatrical convulsions which excited much scorn : an observer describes "very violent and strange Agitations or Shakings of Body, loud and terrifying Hiccups, and Throbs, with many odd and very surprizing Postures".<sup>10</sup>

This recalls Voltaire's description of a Quaker Meeting in London a few years later :

*The women hid their faces with their fans, and the men were covered with their broad-brimmed hats. All were sitting, and there was a universal silence amongst them .... This silence lasted a quarter of an hour; when at last an old man rose up, took off his hat, and after making a number of wry faces, and groaning in a most lamentable manner, he, half-mouthing, half snuffling, threw out a heap of unaccountable stuff—taken, as he thought, from the Gospel—which neither himself nor any of his listeners understood. When this religious buffoon had ended his curious soliloquy, and the assembly broke up, very much edified, and very stupid, I asked my guide how it was possible the judicious part of them could suffer such incoherent prating? "We are obliged," said he, "to suffer it, because no one knows, when a brother rises up to hold forth, whether he will be moved by the spirit or by folly. In this uncertainty, we listen patiently to every one. We even allow our women to speak in public."<sup>11</sup>*

Apparently there was better still in the earliest days of British Quakers : Jaulmes , after quoting an unnamed source according to whom "in the midst of an assembly in the Vaunage a woman would undress and be dragged naked around the room", added, quoting another unnamed source, that the first years of the Quaker sect in England had seen a similar scene : "A prophetess ran naked into the Whitehall chapel in the presence of Olivier Cromwell".<sup>12</sup>

### *The restoration of the institutional Protestant Church*

As a youth, Antoine Court (1695-1760) made it his mission to restore the institutional Protestant Church. In his youth he participated in the prophetic

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<sup>10</sup> Rodama 1789

<sup>11</sup> Voltaire 1733. With corrections where the translation does not correspond to the original.

<sup>12</sup> Jaulmes 1898 p.8



meetings which were a normal form of Protestant worship. He was ordained pastor in 1718 by Pierre Corteiz, a leading figure of the Camisard revolt who had himself been ordained in Zürich. Antoine Court was in Geneva between 1720 and 1722 to finish his training to be a pukka pastor. He had already been involved in convening in 1715 a synod at Montèzes (about 40km. from Congénies).<sup>13</sup> It resolved to re-establish discipline in the Protestant Church. This involved forbidding women from preaching. It also involved re-establishing a salaried body of pastors notwithstanding the utter poverty to which the exactions of the royal and Catholic authorities had reduced the Protestant population. The movements we have been describing discovered that they had a new adversary.



Quakers feel at home with a statement by Isaac Elzière, probably the same person as the Auzière who often preached in Congénies :

*My name is Isaac Elzière and I confess before God and before men that I am not of the Papist law, nor of the Lutheran law, nor of the Calvinist law, nor of any of these different sects which are invented and manufactured by the philosophy of men like those. But I am of the religion of Jesus Christ and his prophets and apostles, and of all those who were clothed with the Holy Spirit, whether by faith or prophecy, as were the prophets and apostles and faithful believers of old.*

Pierre Conrad Fries, a former Lutheran pastor turned Moravian missionary who travelled through the South of France, describes Elzière as "the leader of the inspired". The group of which he was leader, "the new Sion", met at Congénies in particular. Fries did not like him: he "boasts of still having inspirations"; "by a movement of his spirit [he] took his wife away from a living man". He also recounts that at a meeting at someone's lodging "the

<sup>13</sup> The photograph shows the corresponding commemorative plaque in Montèzes, <https://www.museeprotestant.org/notice/antoine-court-1695-1760/>

leader of the inspired came to the door and, when he was refused entry, he began to prophesy on the staircase so noisily that I thought it prudent to retire".<sup>14</sup>

Nor is Elzière's declaration the only one of its kind. When the authorities surprised a clandestine Protestant meeting, they sometimes imposed a collective fine on the villages concerned. Such declarations were used to distance oneself from these meetings in the hope of avoiding the fine.

Paul Codognan is another figure often mentioned as important in the early days of Quakerism in the Cévennes. A peasant, native of Congénies, he was part of the same "inspired" circles as Elzière. In 1769, at the age of about 60, he left for Holland with the hope of publishing prophetic writings of his own and others by Elzière. He was unsuccessful there, but was advised to go to England to see the Quakers, as their views were similar to his own. He attended Quaker Meetings. He stayed ten years in London without leaving any lasting memories - some say that British Friends had trouble communicating with him since he spoke Provençal, not French - before returning in 1780 with the French translations of William Penn's *No Cross, no Crown* and *The Rise and Progress of the People called Quakers*, or possibly Barclay's *Apology*.<sup>15</sup>

### *Pacifism*

Pacifist currents definitely flowed among the Cévenol fanatics. A letter which the Quakers describe as "written by the Languedoc fanatics nicknamed Quakers to the rebellious Protestants or Camisards of the Cévennes" is considered by them to be a harbinger or even a founding document of Vaunageol Quakerism. It contains this passage in particular :

*We pity you for finding yourselves in such cruel tribulations , but all of you who call yourselves Christians, and Reformed Christians, if you have not completely forgotten what the Apostles and the disciples of Christ have taught us, remember ... that you blaspheme the truth by declaring yourselves to be our brethren, we who patiently suffer all persecution without ever seeking revenge.... Remember that the crimes and violence of your Enemies do not allow you to commit similar ones... Blind as you are, have you forgotten that it is never permitted to the true Christian to return*

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<sup>14</sup> Gembicki 2013, p. 119-120

<sup>15</sup> Chabrol and Roger 2005 stress the lack of documents to support this account (p. 124)

*evil for evil... that you are no longer under the old Law ... but that you are under the new Law of Christ who does not want the death of the sinner but his repentance, his conversion and his life ?*<sup>16</sup>

The letter turns out to be a cut-and-paste of an assortment of documents. The passage just quoted is copied from a letter of which the original was signed collectively but anonymously by a group of Protestant pastors in Geneva whom one can imagine to have been émigrés.

The composition is dated 1703 and purports to be signed by a certain Daniel Raoulx ( or Raoux or Raoul), also known as Prophet Daniel. He was a preacher whom some classify specifically among the Inspired. He was widely admired although illiterate. Even Antoine Court reports that Raoulx' audiences found his sermons far superior to his education.<sup>17</sup> His signature was thus clever marketing ; the snag is that he had been tortured to death by the authorities in 1701.<sup>18</sup>

There are people who claim that the letter could be the work of the Catholic psychological warfare services and that it was intended to undermine the Camisards' motivation to take up arms. In any event, it was influential. J.B. L'Ouvreul<sup>19</sup>, who was active in those services, describes it as a pastoral letter which spread throughout the Cévennes.<sup>20</sup>

## **Quakerism settles down, around Congénies**

A current among the Prophets, Inspired, Fanatics<sup>21</sup> or Couflaires amounting to up to 280 members<sup>22</sup> had become settled in the Congénies area around 1770. By this time relations with the authorities had become more relaxed. The Catholic Church kept an eye out and occasionally cracked down, but less and less especially from the 1750s onwards. The enlightenment was casting its rays over the whole of French society.

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<sup>16</sup> Translated with [www.DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator) (free version), adjusted.

<sup>17</sup> Jaulmes 1898

<sup>18</sup> Musée du Désert

<sup>19</sup> 1652 - after 1727

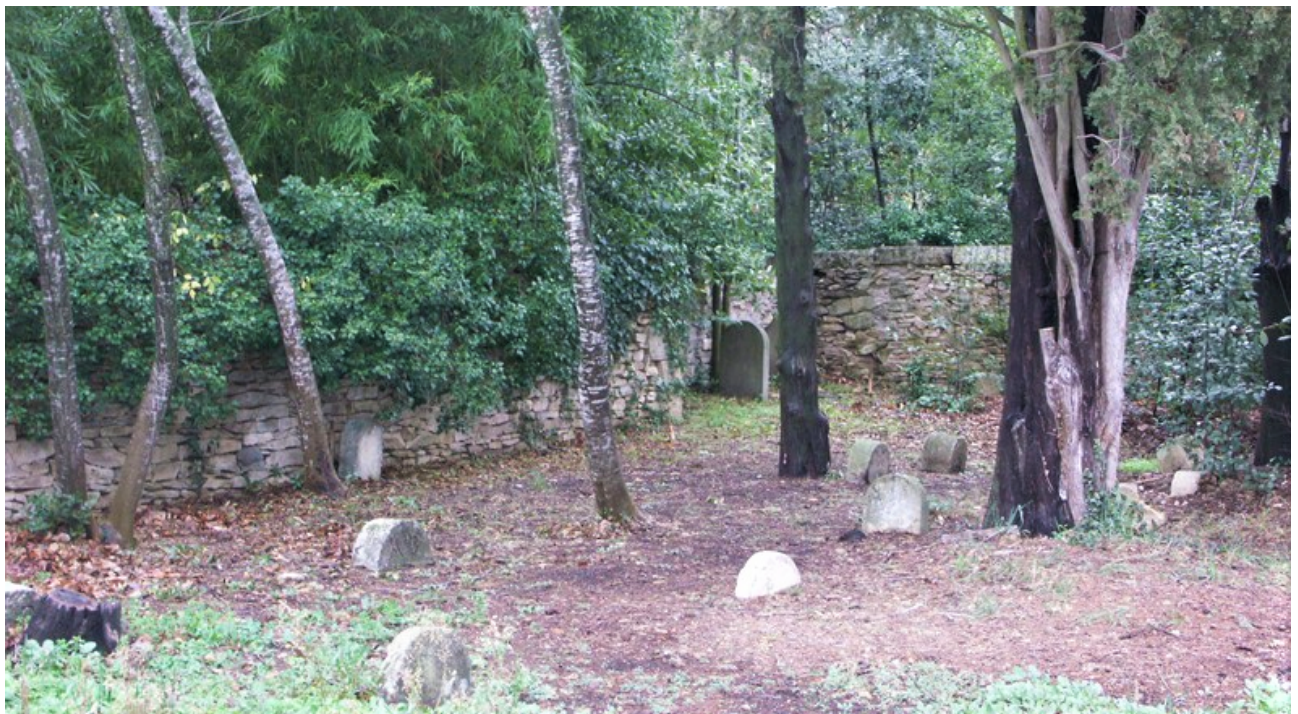
<sup>20</sup> Chabrol and Roger 2005 p. 129

<sup>21</sup> Chabrol & Roger 2005 name them all in the same breath in this specific setting. Pp.116-117

<sup>22</sup> Jaulmes 1898 p.21



In a letter to the royal agent for the province, dated March 10, 1772, the sub-delegate of Languedoc reported that they were not dangerous for three main reasons : first, because they had no leader [ ! It makes one wonder whether they had a form of collective self-management which escaped the royal functionary's attention] ; second, because they declared themselves good and faithful servants of the king; and finally, because they did not attend the [Protestant] assemblies. He added that they did not like Protestants any more than Catholics.<sup>23</sup>



**The Quaker cemetery in Congénies<sup>24</sup>**

In the small number of villages in the Gard where they peacefully went about their activities they left more numerous marks in morals and religious habits than one might think. Heirs of the Cévennes Prophets, little by little they shed the extravagances of their predecessors, preserving only their lively sense of communion with God. When they heard about the English Quakers,

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<sup>23</sup> Chabrol and Roger 2005, p. 117, Laborie p. 240

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.objectifgard.com/2017/07/24/le-gard-meconnu-la-communaute-quaker-de-congenies/>

they were ready for them<sup>25</sup> : “ We readily acknowledge that both sides were only too willing to find perfect harmony between themselves.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Lasting links are established with British Quakers**

On 25 February 1785 an advertisement appeared in the *Gazette de France* and other newspapers. It read :

*The principles of peace and union which characterise the Society of Quakers forbid them to take part in wars and make any profit from them. One of their number, having an interest in various vessels which his associates, at the outbreak of the recent hostilities, saw fit to arm as privateers despite his opposition, and desiring to return to the true owners his share of the proceeds of the take, has sent the following notice:*

*“People interested as owners or insurers in [follows a detailed list of the vessels taken] and all those who have an interest in the said vessels or any other taken by the said Letters of marque may contact Doctor Edward Long Fox, Hotel d’York, rue Jacob in Paris, to make known to him their names, their residence, their claims and he will give them some satisfaction on this subject.”*

The newspaper found its way to Congénies where it sparked a reply Fox was certainly not expecting :

*The Quakers of Congénies, Calvisson etc. to the virtuous Fox  
Friend Fox,*

*The testimony that you have just given to France of your inviolable attachment to the true principles of Christ and your peaceable humanity, which have led you to pour the cup of beneficence on your enemies, have thrilled with joy and satisfaction some brethren who are Friends, though isolated from the world 150 leagues from you. It is a small flock of about 100 people... Even though your compatriots are the enemies of France, you and all our Friends called Quakers in scorn have never ceased to look upon us as brothers...*

*Dear Friend Fox, you bear the name of a venerable founder as dear to our hearts as William Penn...*

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<sup>25</sup> Jaulmes 1898 p.4

<sup>26</sup> Jaulmes 1898 p.15

*... we shall give thanks every day for the happy tolerance which the clemency of a virtuous Monarch and the kindness of his ministers have for some time deigned to grant us. We constantly hope that our fidelity to the Sovereign's orders, our respect for those he has established to govern his people, our love for our brothers and our feelings of peace which have always made us condemn war as the fury of tigers and lions and the former revolts of the Protestants as an abominable rebellion against the divine will ...*

*Jourdan le Cointe  
Majolier fils  
Marignan  
De Lord  
Benezet*

The authors of the letter clearly knew about Quakers already.

It is generally considered that the first signatory, Jourdan Le Cointe, corresponds to Jean de Marcillac (1751 - 1821), or more precisely Jean-Baptiste Lecointe de Marcillac (et var. - he was fairly free with the names he gave himself). Jourdan was his mother's maiden name ; she lived in Nîmes. Son of a noble Protestant family, he entered the Conti regiment commanded by his father and was rapidly promoted captain. However, he turned away from military aims and in 1777 he left the army to study medicine in Montpellier.

Some surmise this change of course followed his discovery of Quaker ideals. A Count of Essec who had visited Pennsylvania is said to have told him about the Quakers. He read about Robert Barclay's *Apology* in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, the monument of the Enlightenment. After a great deal of searching Marcillac found a copy of the French translation in a bookshop in Paris. Thus he was familiar with Quaker theology and terminology. Last but not least, he spoke French, unlike the hapless Codognan.

In the wake of the exchange with Edward Long Fox, he was the obvious person for the Congénies group to delegate to introduce themselves to the English Quakers. He travelled to London in November 1785, carrying a letter of introduction from the Vaunageol group signed - in Quaker fashion - by about forty people. It said in particular :

*... this good Brother, born of the highest condition according to the maxims of the world, endowed with the greatest qualities of nature and a fortune of more than two hundred thousand francs [!], was destined by his parents for the abominable profession of war.... His birth or talents [Quaker frankness !] soon earned him the rank of captain ; he was still of a tender age when he reached that rank, and it is certain that he would have reached a much more eminent degree, but [he was] destined by the Almighty for a greater end ... Excited by Divine Power, he uttered such excellent exhortations to us that all our souls were moved by them ...<sup>27</sup>*

From then on contact was firmly established with British Quakers.

With the involvement of Marcillac, who made good use of his social standing, Quakers were instrumental in arranging, against the opposition of the Protestant Church, for the Edict of Tolerance to extend to “all the sects on Earth that cherish order and peace”, as Marcillac put it in a letter to a British Friend.<sup>28</sup> It included the civil registration of births, deaths and marriages for non-Catholics. In 1791 Marcillac, accompanied by two Nantucket Quaker whalers settled in Dunkirk and carrying a letter from the Congénies Quakers, presented to the National Assembly a “Respectful Petition by the Friends of the Christian society called Quakers” seeking to be dispensed from the obligation to swear oaths, and the right to conscientious objection against military service. The latter was refused but elicited a substantial reply from the president of the National Assembly, Mirabeau. The former was left unanswered<sup>29</sup>, but according to Jaulmes their refusal to swear was tolerated.<sup>30</sup> The Quakers had rapidly become active members of French civil society.

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<sup>27</sup> Chevallier 2018

<sup>28</sup> Chevallier 2018

<sup>29</sup> Etten 1938 chap. 5 quotes several of the original documents on these subjects.

<sup>30</sup> Jaulmes 1898 p. 21

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