

A PLEA FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION: WILLIAM PENN AND FRIENDS IN EMDEN

Friends in Anglophone countries have heard of the sufferings of their spiritual ancestors in Protestant colonies of America such as Massachusetts. Mary Dyer's sacrifice is related in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1994), 19.18. Less well known are the sufferings of Quakers in what is now North West Germany, and the great letter of William Penn in their defence. The present article, made possible because of researches undertaken by Netherlands Friends, seeks to make this European history accessible for Anglophone Quakers.

In August 1670 George Fox and other Quakers visited Emden, Hamburg and Friedrichstadt¹ in what is now the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as towns which in the twenty first century lie in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. That year, the first steps were taken which led in 1677 to the setting up of Amsterdam Yearly Meeting. This was the fifth Yearly Meeting after New England, London, Baltimore/Maryland and Virginia. The area originally covered by Amsterdam Yearly Meeting included Friedrichstadt, Hamburg, Luebeck, Gdansk, and the Palatinate. There were at first three Monthly Meetings, one in Amsterdam, one in Rotterdam and one in Harlingen, a port on the west coast of the Netherlands province of Friesland. The Harlingen Monthly Meeting covered Friesland and East-Friesland.² Returning from Emden, Hamburg and Friedrichstadt in 1670, Fox and his company met William Penn at Harlingen.

Emden is the chief town in the region still known as East Friesland, in Germany. What are now the Netherlands provinces of Friesland and Groningen plus German East Friesland were in the days of George Fox and William Penn one cultural area. From the sixteenth till far into the eighteenth century there was a Netherlands garrison at Emden. The Netherlands³ language was the *lingua franca* in that town at least till the start of the twentieth century. Emden had played an important part in the Protestant Reformation, including that of the Netherlands.

In 1671, William Penn visited Emden, staying with friends in the Mennonite community. Penn spoke fluently the Netherlands and German languages. Through his ministry, some citizens of Emden became convinced Quakers. Among them were the medical doctor Johann Wilhelm Haesbaert and his wife: a small Quaker Meeting consisting of twelve households developed in their home.

After some of the inhabitants of Emden complained about "Quaker missionary activities", the city government and the council of the very influential Protestant church at Emden took action against the Friends. Through the intervention of a magistrate, the Quaker house meetings were forbidden and, when they continued, the Quakers were expelled from Emden. But the Friends returned after only a few days and were promptly imprisoned. Some gave in to the pressure and rejected Quakerism. As leader of the group, Dr Haesbaert was kept in jail. When the news reached William Penn that the Friends in Emden "were being treated in a bitter and barbaric manner" he sent them letters of comfort and wrote appeals for mercy to the Emden City Council.

This first formal business meeting of the Society of Friends at Harlingen was held on 11th September 1677 in the presence of George Fox.⁴ Probably a message reached the Meeting that Quakers in Emden were undergoing great suffering, and Penn was requested to take quick action. On 16th September, William Penn took an early morning boat from Delfzijl, the port on the west bank of the River Ems, and travelled to Emden again. He found an alarming situation. Now he saw the effects of the persecution with his own eyes, he was all the more affected. The Emden Friends Meeting, some twelve households in all, was scattered and broken. Dr Haesbaert had been repeatedly arrested and finally died in jail. His wife also died. The Emden Friends had been imprisoned and fined; they had several times been driven out of the town, but kept on returning.

Penn searched out the house of Dr Haesbaert's mother's family, and after meeting them was so deeply troubled by the suffering of the Emden Quakers that he sat down to write a letter to the Burgomaster (mayor) of Emden. But the task was difficult: Penn felt that his skills were inadequate and he laid down his pen. He said to his travelling companion, the Netherlands Friend Jan Claus, "I must myself go to plead the cause of our innocent Friends!"

The distinguished Burgomaster was amazed to receive these visitors and listened attentively to their pleas. He assured William Penn and Jan Claus that he did not regard the Emden Quakers as enemies; if Penn would write a letter to the Town Council, the Burgomaster would deliver it.

But in 1674 Penn had already written a similar letter to the Emden city fathers. This document was written in Latin and English, and translated into the Netherlands language by our Friend Benjamin Furlly from Rotterdam. The translation was made into the *lingua franca* in Emden, as the Town Government could not be allowed to say that its members were unable to read the letter! The letter was

addressed to the Burgomaster and the town council of Emden. In abridged form it reads as follows:

May the Kings of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the God of all human beings who are here on earth incline your hearts to Justice Mercy and Truth, Amen.

The report of your harsh measures taken towards those inhabitants of your city, who are, contemptuously, called Quakers, has also reached this region and given rise to universal pity and astonishment. We hear with compassion of the misery and the evil treatment of innocent and sincere people, against whom you can bring no complaint except that they try to serve God without causing trouble and according to their conscience.

We hear to our amazement that you, a Protestant government, use your worldly power to obstruct people who are trying to follow their conscientious convictions and to persecute and punish them!

I advise you be mindful of your famous ancestors, who rightly and with powerful arguments diligently defended their freedom of conscience against papal laws, imperial decrees and the Spanish Inquisition! Did these ancestors not condemn all coercion of conscience as the work of Anti-Christ? The power and weight of these arguments cannot be lessened by your actions. On the contrary, your unfriendly, not to say unrighteous measures strengthen these words of your spiritual ancestors!

The name Protestant, by which you wish to be known, was given you because of protest against persecution. And will you yourselves now be persecutors?

Remember that belief is a gift of God and that everything that does not arise from belief is sin. And therefore it is unrighteous and unreasonable to force people to believe that which goes against their conviction. Without any doubt, you want to be Christians and you would be insulted to be called anything else. But what is more unchristian than to try forcibly to change people's conscience in matters of belief by the use of violence and pressure?

Even Jesus Christ, the Lord and founder of this religion, rebuked His disciples when they asked for fire from heaven to destroy listeners who did not accept His teaching. Consider then, that, through your actions, you justify the persecution of the first Christians and the first reformers, yes that you show the Popes how they could treat your brothers! If you want freedom, grant others freedom!

Bear in mind that you cannot say you know everything that is to be known, since not everything has been revealed to you. Take care that, if you take harsh action against what seems strange to you, you do not persecute angels!

Think no evil, and certainly speak no evil of that which you do not fully understand. I am completely convinced of the sincerity of the people whom

you have treated so harshly. I am completely convinced that they mean well in what they do and certainly mean better than you imagine.

I also believe that the reason for your difference in understanding lies not so much in that these Friends are publishing damaging or dangerous opinions, but that they want to lead a life of self-sacrifice that is holy and pure.

Since you cannot grant people faith, your conduct is all more unjust: you oppress people because they are not what they could not be without becoming hypocritical, and your power cannot reach further than that.

You daily struggle against the Roman Catholic Church because of its belief in infallibility, and yet you make yourselves guilty of the same, or an even worse error. For either you base your harshness on infallible knowledge, or you do not. In the first case, you restate the fundamental principle of the Roman Catholic Church and contradict yourself. In the second case, you punish people because they will not submit themselves to that about which you are uncertain!

Do you know whether you are coercing people to truth or to falsehood? Your inhuman actions are a disgrace to your creed, make your government hated and will bring eternal scandal to you and your descendants.

I pray you: find an easier way to help yourselves than by persecuting those who are different from you. Follow the merciful God of Nature and Grace who is kind to all people, lets His sun shine on everyone and His rain fall on everyone, who gives life and being to the whole creation, who visits all people with His grace and hides His face in times of ignorance. And although you probably think that we are in a state of ignorance, I hope you will understand that you, with your harsh measures are not following in the footsteps of the Lord. Have you so recently escaped ruination by your enemies that you can so quickly mistreat your friends?

If the Lord should judge you in the same manner, what would happen to you?

Let His Mercy empower you so that you may emulate His Greatness.

May the great God of the whole Earth, namely the God of all flesh, who does not accept the rich and the powerful in His Judgement, grant you His Mercy on the Day of Judgement. Amen

I am in great sincerity Your Honour's Friend in the universal principle of Love and Truth.

William Penn.

24 December 1674.

(translated into Netherlands and printed at Rotterdam 1675).

Note: Penn's letter was written in the Netherlands language of the time. A new and slightly abridged version was made for the Netherlands Quaker Monthly Newsletter *De Vriendenkring*, January

2005. Later it was discovered that an original English language version of this letter may be found in Sewell's *History of the rise, increase and progress of the Christian people called Quakers*, 1722, reprinted 1811, ii 360.

It is not known whether in 1677 Penn wrote a similar letter to Emden town government or whether he re-sent a copy of the original.

What is certain is that, as a result of Penn's plea, Emden Friends eventually were granted freedom of belief and conscience. The language and tone of the letter would have had a better reception in Emden in 1570 than in 1670, for Penn's spirit was present in the town in the early Protestant years. By the time Penn wrote his letter, other religious groups such as the Lutherans and the Mennonites were in conflict with the dominant Calvinists and city fathers for their religious freedom.

In spite of Penn's letter, the persecution continued for a time: in 1675 the magistrate of Emden forbade the publication of Barclay's *Apology*.⁵

But when Penn returned to Emden in 1677, he presented a petition to the Burgomaster Djurtko Andrée. It was not till 1686, when a group of British Quakers fleeing persecution in their own country, came to Emden and joined local Friends, that the city and church of Emden granted the Quakers full freedom of conscience as well as all civil rights by a special legal instrument. The 1686 document enabled Emden Quakers to buy a property where they could hold their meetings for worship.

But when William of Orange became King of England as well as King of the Netherlands, he ended persecution on grounds of conscience through the Act of Toleration of 1689. As a result, many Quakers of British origin left Emden, returned home and only about five Quaker households remained in the town. Eventually the Quaker community in Emden died out in the early eighteenth century.

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Source Material

Book about church history in Emden in the Johannes a Lasco library.

William Penn's letter in the Town Archives in Emden.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Now in the *Land* of Schleswig Holstein.
- ² For more information on Frisian language and culture in the present-day Netherlands and Germany, search under European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages on the Internet.
- ³ Graham, J.W., *William Penn*, Swarthmore Press, 1917, The language called Dutch by Anglophone people is called Nederlands by native speakers. I propose to use the closest possible English term, "Netherlands".
- ⁴ Website of the Quakers in the Netherlands.
- ⁵ Published in England in 1678.