

REACTIONS TO PERSECUTION IN PRIMITIVE QUAKERISM

The persecution of Quakers did not end with the passing of the Toleration Act, but, in respect of their witness on oaths, and even more with respect to tithes, continued into the next century. Quakers developed several strategies for minimising the effects of persecution. They encouraged one another with thoughts of the dire fate awaiting persecutors. They gave maximum publicity to persecution, while trying to present a positive image of Quakerism, in order to enlist public sympathy. They built up a strong organisation for discipline and mutual support. They lobbied for changes to the law, and used the law to have particular acts of persecution declared unlawful. Finally, they developed their theological ideas, so that suffering came to be seen as part of the experience of salvation. This paper will look at the origins of these reactions to persecution in the early years of the movement.

The causes of the hostility to Quakers, which accompanied the undoubted success of their mission, may be briefly summarised. Firstly, there was alarm at their doctrine, which led to several trials for blasphemy. Then, Quakers took direct action on matters that had long been a matter of concern to radical groups. Parish ministers whose services were disrupted and tithes unpaid became very angry, and used dubious methods to collect what they thought to be their due. Magistrates were enraged by Quakers who would not remove their hats, and addressed them as 'thou', thereby challenging their authority.¹ Often both ministers and magistrates failed to restrain, or even encouraged, hooligan elements who turned upon people who were different and were thought to be easy game.² Thirdly, especially after the imposition in 1655 of the Oath of Abjuration, which Quakers would not take, Quakerism came to the notice of the national authorities as a potentially subversive movement, possibly linked with Jesuits.³ Quakers were the targets when the laws on vagrancy and on interrupting church services were tightened, and in consequence there was an increasing number of clashes with authorities.⁴

Whether they were the objects of what, according to the law of the land, was legitimate prosecution or whether they were the victims of spite or of hooligans, to Quakers it all appeared as persecution, the activity of AntiChrist, or the great Beast of Revelations. The earliest Quaker message was a call to repent for the Day of the Lord was actually arriving. Their first reaction when they met with opposition was to

deliver fierce warnings of coming doom. Elizabeth Hooton, imprisoned with George Fox in Derby in 1650 wrote to the mayor, 'The day cometh that shall burn thee seathe the Lord... friend if the love of God was in you you would love the truth and hear the truth spoke and not preson unjustly.'⁵ Francis Howgil, imprisoned in Kendal in 1654, wrote a pamphlet entitled *A Woe against the Magistrates, Priests, and People of Kendal... which may warn all the persecuting Cities and Towns in the North, and everywhere, to Repent and fear the Lord.* it begins, 'The Word of the Lord came unto me, saying, write and declare against that bloody town of Kendal.'⁶ The same attitude was still evident up to the end of the decade in a number of similar denunciations of specified people and places.⁷

Apocalyptic imagery faded away after the Restoration, but long before then Quakers had passed from merely threatening disaster to finding actual examples of it. As was normal at that time, they believed in the active intervention of God to punish evildoers.⁸ Persecution might even be a sign that they themselves had sinned. In Norwich in 1655 a leading Quaker, Christopher Atkinson, was found to be having a sexual relationship with the maidservant of another Quaker, and Friends ascribed their recent persecution to the fact that they had tolerated the 'defiled thing' within their 'camp'.⁹ It was not until the Protectorate fell in April 1659 that Quakers found a clear case of the intervention of the Lord on behalf of his people. The Protectorate had persecuted the Children of Light, and it had fallen, and the governments that succeeded were warned not to go down the same path.¹⁰ It was about this time that Friends began to collect 'Examples', the name given to instances of persecutors coming to a bad end. The first collection was published in 1659 in a pamphlet by Edward Billing. He had found 42 Examples, and he appended a further list provided by his friend Humphrey Smith, 'that he was an eye-witness of'.¹¹ The practice of collecting such Examples continued until 1701.

The second method used by Quakers to reduce the effects of persecution was to seek public sympathy. Those in trouble with the law frequently published their own accounts of their trials, which usually contained a description of the circumstances of their alleged crimes and of their arrest, together with copies of legal documents and correspondence with the authorities, accounts of what was said at their trials, and finally a record of what happened afterwards. Many of the authors had fought for Parliament, and pointed this out in no uncertain terms.¹² Some pamphlets of this type, especially the earlier ones, were straightforward factual accounts, but as the Quaker mission proceeded, and mistreatment of Quakers became more common, the emphasis

changed. The style became less confrontational. Writers attempted to enlist the sympathy of their readers by their descriptions of violent acts and unjust processes of law. This is the beginning of what came to be called Quaker Sufferings literature. It forms a separate section in Joseph Smith's *Catalogue of Quaker Books*, entitled 'Sufferings of Friends for Testimony of the Truth'.¹³ The first true example of the genre was probably Richard Hubberthorne's description of the beating-up of two women preachers at Oxford, *A True Testimony of the Zeal of Oxford Professors and University Men*, written in June 1654. An even more shocking event, to Quakers, was the death in April 1656, from maltreatment in prison, of the young James Parnel, who has often been called the first Quaker martyr. The inquest on his death found that he had died from wilful self-neglect, and Friends were quick to answer this accusation in a pamphlet which described the horrible conditions in which he had been held.¹⁴

The Sufferings literature rapidly increased in volume. In 1655 there is the first record, in a letter to Margaret Fell, of an attempt to collect information on all cases of sufferings of Friends, and the next year this was published.¹⁵ Other collected accounts followed.¹⁶ Before long there were more deaths, from bad prison conditions, mistreatment by gaolers, or attacks by members of the public. A broadside of 1659 lists all fatal cases with the details picked out in red; there were twenty-six.¹⁷

As well as their publicity value, these collection of records also enabled Friends to target relief where it was needed, which leads to their third method for minimising the effects of persecution. A system of local and regional meetings was built up in the North from 1654, and was extended in 1656 and 1657 to all parts of the country where Quakers were strong. One function of these meetings was to provide a network for the care and support of Friends in trouble. A check was kept on Friends whose goods were confiscated for tithe or who were imprisoned, their families were looked after, and the prisoners visited.¹⁸ This organisation was damaged in the persecution of the early Restoration years, and was afterwards re-formed on the advice of George Fox.

The fourth strategy was use of the law. In the early years there were a number of appeals directly to the Protector, and to Parliament when one was sitting, but the later Protectorate Parliaments did not favour radical sectarians, and Cromwell, although he supported liberty of conscience, would not countenance public disorder.¹⁹ There was a further spate of such appeals in 1659, but their usefulness depended on the attitude of

the government of the day. Friends found other ways of using the legal system.

Especially in the North, in the early days, some justices and other influential persons became allied to the Quakers, and would bend the law a little in their favour. Fox received such support when charged with blasphemy in 1652 and in 1653.²⁰ A less well known but interesting example is the case of Robert Widder in 1655-56. He had not paid his tithes and was proceeded against by being declared an outlaw, which made it possible for the aggrieved minister to apply for seizure of his goods. Advice was sought from Friends and sympathisers with legal knowledge, and with their help a means of setting aside the outlawry was found.²¹

Most of the sufferings pamphlets attacked the legality of what was done, and some Friends had acquired considerable legal experience by the time the Meeting for Sufferings was set up in 1676. This survives to the present day as the national executive committee of English, Welsh, and Scottish Friends, but its original remit was to deal with the legal problems of Quakers.²² There was however doubt among some Friends of the time as to whether it was right to use the law in this way; if the Lord wished them to be saved from suffering he would save them himself.²³

This leads to the final weapon used against persecution, the theological explanation of their sufferings that Quakers developed. By 1655, if not before, Quakers were realising that the Kingdom of God, although it was to an extent present within them, was not immediately coming in fulness, and there was going to be a time of severe trial. Fox wrote that year:

Brethren everywhere that are imprisoned for the Truth, give yourselves up to it... and the power of the Lord will carry you over all the Persecutions... For since the Beginning hath the Persecution got up... For as the Apostles and true Christians suffered... so ye do... So the Power, and Life, and Wisdom of the Lord God Almighty keep you, and preserve you... that ye may witness every one of you a Crown of Life Eternal.²⁴

Quakers do not seem to have been greatly concerned as to why the elect should suffer, but they noted the facts, that Christ had suffered and had given warning that his followers must expect similar treatment. During the 1650s the primitive Quaker faith and the Quaker experience of persecution reinforced each other. The process of becoming a Quaker was often in two parts. First there would be a conviction of sin, a long and painful process, in which people came to realise that they

were outside the church, separated from God, and must turn to the light of Christ which was at least potentially present in everyone. This would be followed by a transformation of life, and it was not expected to be pleasant. One typical Quaker wrote that he felt 'the Lord... raise a swift witness in me, that the waies of man were evill continually, and that self must be denied, and a cross to it must be borne; and so the life of Christ Jesus was manifest unto me...'.²⁵ References to bearing the cross become more frequent towards the end of the decade, as persecution worsened. Suffering came to be understood as a privilege, and evidence of election. A letter from Burrough about his imprisonment at Kingston gives an example: 'I have noe cause of trouble in itt, but rather of joy and peace, knowing yt itt shall be for the furtherance of ye gossell... my name is assuredly written in ye Lamb's book of life.'²⁶

The same pattern was repeated frequently. If Friends felt that the Lord was calling them to a certain course of action, then danger must not turn them aside, but was rather to be welcomed. One example must suffice. Humphrey Smith was a parish minister who was called, 'contrary to my strong will', to leave his work, family, and possessions, 'to be exposed to want, hardships, revilings, imprisonments, whippings, stonings and all manner of cruel tortour.'²⁷ He and several others were accused of public preaching, unlawful travelling, and refusal to remove their hats, and were imprisoned for a year at Winchester in revoltingly insanitary conditions. He wrote:

And this I say plainly to you, that your long tyranny will never weary out the patience we have received, neither can you inflict more punishment than the Lord hath enabled us to bear... for selfe we have denied, and we have given up our bodies and souls a living sacrifice unto God, to do or suffer his will. And he that kills the body we fear not, much less those that can but whip or imprison for a few months, neither can you disturb their rest whom the Lord hath crowned who rejoyce, being counted worthy to suffer for his sake... yea there is none can make them afraid with all their threats, unrighteous laws, bonds... long unjust imprisonments, or death itself.²⁸

The question has to be asked whether Friends actually went out of their way to seek a form of martyrdom. There was a contemporary accusation that they deliberately exposed themselves to abuse and suffering in order to appear more like ministers of Christ, and this they denied.²⁹ Certainly they were uncompromising. There are records from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century of Friends recording their refusal of tithe, not allowing others to pay their tithe for them, and following up members of their meeting who were thought to be weak in this witness.³⁰

Quakers sometimes put themselves into situations that would inevitably lead to trouble. A Quaker who went to a church service was most indignant at being turned out and beaten when, as he said, he had 'stood there peaceably'. What he had done was to keep his hat on when the priest was praying.³¹ In New England there was a more serious confrontation. The authorities tried to stamp out Quakerism with floggings, brandings, and imprisonments. Finally a law was passed banishing Quakers under pain of death if they returned. Quakers repeatedly entered the colony in defiance of this law, and four people were hanged before the newly restored Charles II intervened. Here it seems that deliberate martyrdom was sought, although the Friends concerned were sure that they were called by God to this witness. Mary Dyer, before being hanged, said, 'I came in Obedience to the will of God... desiring you to Repeal your unrighteous Lawes of Banishment upon pain of Death.'³²

It remains to consider whether John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, and possible actual memories of martyrs, increased the willingness of Quakers to suffer. Knowledge of martyrdom must have been part of their inheritance. It is quite likely that the style of *Sufferings* tracts was influenced by memories of the *Book of Martyrs*. There is however no evidence that individual Quakers in the 1650s accepted suffering because they felt themselves to be in the martyrs' tradition. The examples they referred to were invariably biblical. Quakers were too conscious of the new beginning, and too sure that they alone constituted the true church, to be much concerned about what had gone before.

Richard Baxter seems to have been the first to raise with Quakers the question of the Marian martyrs, which he did in his dispute with Nayler concerning the nature of the ministry. He wrote: 'Are not the Ministers whom these men despise of the same calling, practice, as those were that suffered death in the flames in queen Maryes dayes... did they not preach from pulpits, and take tythes or money for their due maintenance...?' Nayler replied: 'I say it was for denying the Popish way of worship, according to their measure of light, that these men suffered... though the fulnesse of the light was not then come, but this is no ground to uphold the rest of their popish inventions contrary to Gospel worship.'³³ Under pressure in controversy, Quakers admitted somewhat grudgingly that God had indeed had his faithful witnesses in all ages. Fox wrote: 'Luther and Calvin, something there was stirring in them, Luther was true in his place, but it was but a little... neither... Luther, not Calvin was in the very life... the Apostles were in.'³⁴ Unambiguously favourable references to John Foxe's book and the

earlier martyrs were not made till 1659, and then in two pamphlets where the main reference was not to the sixteenth century but to an earlier time, to Wyclif and Hus, who had not supported tithes.³⁵

So by the time of the Restoration Quakers were well placed, both in their theology and their experience, to withstand the events of the years which followed, when 400 died in prison and several thousand were crippled in health or ruined in fortune. They were, perhaps, rather marginal martyrs, for while individuals accepted their suffering as God's will, and as evidence of their salvation, the organised Quaker movement was at the same time fighting the persecution vigorously and to some extent successfully.³⁶ Quakers were also rather ambivalent about their martyrology, for in the changed atmosphere of the eighteenth century it was not thought appropriate to publish accounts of what was now past, and so the Sufferings pamphlets were forgotten, and the great mass of manuscript records remained in store till it was finally printed in 1753.³⁷ By then it was history.

Rosemary Moore

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Examples of the antagonism of ministers and magistrates to Quakers can be found in any account of Quaker Sufferings. See for instance Norman Penney, ed., *Extracts from State Papers relating to Friends*, (London, 1913), 37-93.
- ² A startling example of hooliganism in this period is the attack on a Quaker meeting with incendiary devices constructed by the local apothecary, described in Anon., *Cains Offspring demonstrated*, (London, 1659), 1.
- ³ The earliest example of an attempt to link Quakers with Jesuits seems to be that in Thomas Weld, *A Further Discovery of that Generation of Men called Quakers*, (Gateshead, 1654).
- ⁴ Norman Penney, ed., *First Publishers of Truth*, (London, 1907), appendix by William C. Braithwaite, 'Penal Laws affecting Early Friends in England', 345-352. See for instance Edward Burrough, *A Standard Lifted Up*, (London, 1658), 13, for Quaker attitude to the law.
- ⁵ London, Friends House Library, MS Swarthmore Collection [hereafter Sw.], ii.43.
- ⁶ Francis Howgil and James Nayler, *A Woe against the Magistrates, Priests and People of Kendal*, (London, 1654), 1.
- ⁷ e.g. Henry Gill, *Warning to Godalming*, (London, 1658) and George Fox, *To the People of Uxbridge*, (London, 1659).
- ⁸ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (London, 1971), ch.4, 'Providence', 78-112.
- ⁹ Arthur J. Eddington, 'The First Fifty Years of Quakers in Norwich' (typescript 1932), 14-22 & Appendix B, 270-272. The context makes it clear that 'defiled thing' is a reference to Josh. 7, though neither the AV nor the Geneva Bible uses this phrase.

- ¹⁰ Pamphlets expressing this viewpoint include the anonymous *Copie of a Paper presented to Parliament* and *To the Parliament of England who are in Place to do Justice*, and William Morris, *To the Supreme Authority of the Commonwealth*, (all London, 1659).
- ¹¹ Edward Billing, *Word of Reproof and Advice to my Fellow-Soldiers*, undated but apparently 1659 from internal evidence. The Examples are appended to the main pamphlet, 79-84. A reconstruction of a collection of Examples attributed to George Fox has been attempted by Henry J. Cadbury in his *Narrative Papers of George Fox*, (Richmond, Indiana, 1972), 209-231.
- ¹² e.g. Thomas Salthouse and Robert Wastfield, *A True Testimony of Faithfull Witnesses Recorded*, (London, 1657), 40, 'Most of us... are men that have... conscientiously engaged for the Commonwealth interest... some of us in places of Trust and Concernment...'
- ¹³ Joseph Smith, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Friends Books*, 2 vols., (London, 1867), vol.ii, 644-686. I am grateful to Dr. Geoffrey F. Nuttall for permission to consult his unpublished survey of this literature, 'Record and Testimony: Quaker Persecution Literature 1650-1700', (1982).
- ¹⁴ Thomas Shortland and others, *The Lamb's Defence against Lies*, (London, 1656).
- ¹⁵ Sw. iv. 162, Geoffrey F. Nuttall, 'Early Quaker Letters', (typescript in main Quaker libraries, 1952), [hereafter EQL], no.169, Gervase Benson and Anthony Pearson to Margaret Fell, 1 Aug. 1655. This was followed by the published book of Gervase Benson and others, *The Cry of the Oppressed*, (London, 1656).
- ¹⁶ There was a document issued in Hampshire in 1659, summarised in William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, (Cambridge, 2nd ed. 1955), [hereafter BQ], 315, and also in A.R. Barclay, ed., *Letters of Early Friends*, (London, 1841), 283. Two 1657 epistles of Fox, Sw.ii. 88 & 89, refer to the collection of sufferings records, and this was followed by the publication, with an introduction by Richard Hubberthorne, of *The Record of Suffering for Tithe in England*, (London, 1658).
- ¹⁷ Anon., *To the Parliament of England now sitting at Westminster*, (London, 1659).
- ¹⁸ BQ 311-315, includes summaries of early documents describing organisation.
- ¹⁹ John Camm and Francis Howgil were the first to have an interview with Cromwell, in the spring of 1654 (BQ, 156 gives all MS references).
- ²⁰ See George Fox and James Nayler, *Saul's Errand to Damascus*, (London, 1653), and comments in BQ 107-109, 118-119, and by John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey* (London 1984), 57.
- ²¹ The reasons for the use of this process, and its working in practice, are explained by Alfred W. Braithwaite, 'Early Tithe Prosecutions - Friends as Outlaws', *JFHS* 49 (1959-60), 148-156. The letters concerning this case are, in chronological order, Sw.iv. 41, 29, 30, 102, i.63, iv.101, and i.380, (EQL 221-225, 240, 246). See also Benson, *Cry of the Oppressed*, 23f.
- ²² William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, (Cambridge, 2nd ed.1955), [hereafter SPQ], 282-285. Craig Horle, *Quakers and the English Legal System*, (Philadelphia, 1988), deals fully with the legal activities of Friends during the Restoration period.
- ²³ Isaac Penington and William Dewsbury both took this view, according to SPQ, 284.
- ²⁴ George Fox, *Epistles*, no.92, in *The Works of George Fox*, collected edn. vol.7, (Philadelphia, 1831).
- ²⁵ John Higgins, *To All Inhabitants of the Earth*, (London, 1658), 2.
- ²⁶ Sw.iii.18, 25 Aug. 1657.
- ²⁷ Humphrey Smith, *Man driven out of Earth and Darkness*, (London, 1658), 5.

- ²⁸ Humphrey Smith, *The Sounding Voyce of the Dread of Gods Mighty Power*, (London, 1658), 7. Also in *The Fruits of Unrighteousness and Injustice*, (London, 1658), 53.
- ²⁹ George Whitehead, John Whitehead, and George Fox the Younger, *A Brief Discovery of the Dangerous Principles of John Horne and Thomas Moore jnr*, (London, 1659), 30, answering Horne and Moore, *A Brief Discovery of the People called Quakers*, (London, 1659).
- ³⁰ Nicholas Morgan, 'The Social and Political Relations of the Lancaster Quaker Community, 1688-1740', in Michael Mullett, ed., *Early Lancaster Friends*, (Lancaster, 1978), 27-31.
- ³¹ Edward Bourne, *The Truth of God Cleared*, (London, 1657), 12.
- ³² Francis Howgil, *The Heart of New England Hardened*, (London, 1659). Edward Burrough, *A Declaration of the Sad and Great Persecution and Martyrdom of the People of God*, (London, 1660), 28 for Mary Dyer's last words, and George Bishop, *New England Judged*, (London, 1661).
- ³³ James Nayler, *Answer to a Book called the Quakers Catechism*, (London, 1655), 44.
- ³⁴ George Fox, *The Papists Strength*, (London, 1658), 52.
- ³⁵ John Crook, *Tithes No Property nor Lawful Maintenance*, (London, 1659), 5. There is a similar passage on Wyclif and Hus in the anonymous pamphlet ascribed to Isaac Penington, *A Brief Account of Some Reasons why Quakers cannot do Things*, (London, about 1659-60). Crook and Penington knew each other well and came from a different background from the earliest Quakers; there may be a link between these pamphlets.
- ³⁶ See Horle, *Quakers and the English Legal System*.
- ³⁷ Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers*, 2 vols. (London, 1753).