

# Transformative Faith and the Theological Response of the Quakers to the Boston Executions

Madeleine Ward  
University of Oxford, England

## Abstract

Scholarly discussion of the early Quakers has rarely considered the Quakers' theological understanding of their persecution. The focus has instead been political or legal, leading to a view of the early Quakers in retreat and conforming to society's expectations. This article focusses on the theological response to the Boston executions (1659–61) in order to demonstrate that the Quakers in fact appropriated their suffering positively through theological engagement with adversity. The fundamental tenets of Quakerism were used to formulate a response based on the distinctive Quaker theological anthropology and hope for a transformation of the individual. From this, Quakers constructed an apocalyptic world view in which they understood their persecutors to be provoking the judgment of God. Early Quakers were much less defensive than has often been implied, and their adversity offered a vehicle for a potent and creative expression of their faith.

## Keywords

Boston, light within, martyrdom, persecution, theological anthropology, theology.

## Introduction

On 27th October 1659, William Robinson became the first Quaker to be executed for his faith. He had returned to Massachusetts Bay Colony after Quakers were banished from the region upon pain of death. From the gallows, Robinson reiterated the motivation for his death: 'This is the Day of your Visitation wherein the Lord hath visited you. This is the Day the Lord is Risen in his Mighty Power to be Avenged on all his Adversaries... I suffer for Christ, in whom I live, and

for whom I die.’<sup>1</sup> Moments later, Marmaduke Stephenson, a Quaker farmer from Yorkshire, was also executed. A third Quaker, Mary Dyer, was hanged in May 1660, and in March 1661 William Leddra became the last of the so-called ‘Boston martyrs’. As Robinson’s final words suggest, those executed at Boston died for a faith which defined their experience of life and death, and which they believed would soon transform the world.

This article will analyse how the early Quakers presented their theology of persecution, demonstrating that a commitment to the power of God’s presence in the world was at the heart of their response to these events. This is reflected in the integration of Quaker theological anthropology and persecution theology, and the eschatological discourse which flowed from this understanding. Persecuted Quakerism has often been depicted as a movement on the back foot, adapting and compromising in order to defend itself against the establishment. Where positive engagement with society is envisaged, it is understood to have operated in a political or legal context.<sup>2</sup> Such accounts suggest that Quakers engaged with their opponents on society’s terms, and so were actively moving towards ‘a position of respectability’: the call for religious toleration is therefore understood as their most significant contribution.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that the Quaker response included a critique of religious persecution. However, their voices were not modern voices, and analysis of their political critique alone does not convey how suffering was actually experienced. By focussing on the Quakers’ own presentation of adversity—that is, how Quakers hoped their suffering would be understood by others, rather than how others received it—this article seeks to offer insights into persecution as lived experience. Theological discourse was itself constitutive of reality for the Quakers, and their approach must be considered within the framework of divine immanence, prophecy and transformative faith which is clearly expressed in the dying words of William Robinson.

Given the Quakers’ articulate theological defence in the face of adversity, the lack of scholarly attention given to their theology of persecution is surprising. Of

1 Cited in Burrough, E., B5994, London: Wilson, 1661, p. 24. All capitalisations in primary quotations throughout this piece reflect the formatting of the original sources. Italics are used to denote where a mixture of roman and italicised font is employed; double quotation marks denote where the font changes from roman to blackletter font.

2 Horle, C. W., ‘Changing Quaker Attitudes Towards Legal Defence: the George Fox case, 1673–75, and the establishment of the Meeting for Sufferings’, in Frost, J. W., and Moore, J. M., (eds), *Seeking the Light: essays in Quaker history*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1986, p. 35; Cole, A., ‘The Quakers and the English Revolution’, *Past and Present* 10 (1956), 39–54.

3 Allen, R., ‘Restoration Quakers’, in Angell, S. W., and Dandelion, P., (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 43; Kirby, E. W., ‘The Quaker Effort to Secure Civil and Religious Liberty’, in *Journal of Modern History* 7 (1935), pp. 401–21; De Krey, G. S., ‘Rethinking the Restoration: dissenting cases for conscience, 1667–1672’, *Historical Journal* 38 (1995), pp. 53–83.

course some studies, most notably those contributed by Rosemary Moore, have considered the role of theology in response to persecution.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Moore poses the question of whether the early Quakers really understood themselves to be ‘martyrs’. Whilst she suggests that ‘martyrdom’ was only a category employed by the Quakers after the death of James Parnell in 1656, and even then not as part of an active encouragement towards suffering, she does not attempt fully to answer her own question. Instead, she focusses on categorising different approaches to persecution, and her work openly invites expansion: specifically, Moore emphasises the perspective of Quakers from within Quakerism, rather than from a broader context of early modern martyrology.

Others have considered the Quaker response almost exclusively as part of this broader context. Notably, Adrian Chastain Weimer argues for the apocalyptic significance of suffering at this time, stating that, for the Quakers, ‘the primary weapon in these battles between light and dark, good and evil was the suffering of the (Quaker) saints’.<sup>5</sup> Yet Weimer does not address the centrality of the spiritual relationship that drove this apocalyptic discourse. Consequently, she stresses the importance of martyrdom in itself, rather than viewing it as an expression of a wider theological witness. So too, John Knott’s work on this topic does not include any explicit consideration of the significance of theological anthropology in Quaker persecution theology.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the important spiritual and pastoral concerns of the persecuted early Quakers have often been considered apart from either their historical or theological context. This article will examine these concerns in their own right whilst accounting for their context within a broader martyrological tradition, focussing primarily on the direct response to the Boston executions. In section one, I will examine the central importance of the Quakers’ theological anthropology in this response, before turning in section two to consider the effect of this anthropology upon their broader understanding of God’s action in the world.

## I

The engine of early Quakerism was a promise of personal transformation. This was founded largely upon a claim to innocence, often used as a rhetorical device, which pervaded accounts of the trials of the persecuted Quakers. In a letter Dyer

4 Moore, R., ‘Reactions to Persecution in Primitive Quakerism’, *Journal of the Friends Historical Society* 57 (1996), pp. 123–31. Moore, R., *The Light in their Consciences: early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1666*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. Bitterman, M. G. F., ‘The Early Quaker Literature of Defense’, *Church History* 42 (1973), pp. 203–28. Barbour, H., and Frost, J. W., (eds), *The Quakers*, London: Greenwood Press, 1988.

5 Weimer, A. C., *Martyr’s Mirror: persecution and holiness in early New England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 102–03.

6 Knott, J. R., *Discourse of Martyrdom in English Literature, 1563–1694*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 216–54, 223.

apparently wrote to the Boston Law Court, she accused the Court of making ‘a Law to take away the Lives of Innocent Servants of God’; Stephenson similarly charged his persecutors with ‘bring[ing] Innocent Blood upon your own heads’ in his trial.<sup>7</sup> These claims were not merely attempts at legal justification. Rather, they denoted righteousness before God. This emphasis upon innocence had been a feature of Quakerism from the outset. Most obviously, the earliest insights of Fox himself were presented as a reaction to his contemporaries who were ‘all pleading for sin and imperfection’. This led to a concern for genuine moral transformation and the realisation that he himself had returned to ‘pureness, and innocency, and righteousness... so that I say I was come up to the state of Adam’.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the claim to innocence at Boston expressed the heart of Quaker faith—the complete transformation of the individual—and immediately cast the victims as the Quaker ideal.

The reference to ‘Innocent Blood’ also created an interplay between this innocence and the guilt of the persecutors. In the Old Testament tradition, the shedding of blood was reciprocated in the course of divine justice, and the spilling of innocent blood was particularly connected with murder. Innocence was therefore vindicated by God and blood had strong connotations with guilt. Moreover, the emphasis upon reciprocal justice also entailed that blood was an acceptable sacrificial offering—and, of course, Christ’s own innocent blood was viewed by Christians as the ultimate atoning sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> The Quakers’ claim was not just a straightforward suggestion of moral righteousness, then, but encapsulated both a condemnation of the persecutors and an imitation of Christ. This interpretation is further supported by references to the ‘Lamb’ in response to the Boston executions: the ‘martyrs’ upheld themselves and were upheld by others as ‘Saints who are the Lambs [*sic*] followers’.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the lamb was a symbol of meekness, but it was also the traditional Passover offering, to which Christ’s death had been compared from the earliest Christian traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Such allusions were inescapably connected to the notion of the measure of Christ within. Joseph Nicholson’s discussion of the Boston incident opens with the repeated accusation that various groups ‘hate the Light’, before turning to

7 Burrough, B5994, pp. 23, 25.

8 Nickalls, John L. (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox*, Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 2005 [1952], pp. 7, 15, 27. The use of the *Journal* as evidence in this article, despite its dubious historical veracity, reflects its prime importance as a measure of how Quakers wanted their experience to be understood by others, both in the first generation and beyond. As Luella Wright notes, Quaker journal practice was ‘pre-eminently the outgrowth of the Quaker group mind’ (Wright, L., *The Literary Life of the Early Friends, 1650–1725*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1932, p. 193). Therefore, Fox’s *Journal* is important as a measure of a communal theology of persecution, as well as providing some insight into Fox’s own view.

9 Gen. 9:5–6. Exod. 29:38–42. Deut. 21:1–9. Isa. 53.10. Jn 1:29.

10 Chandler, J., C1927B, London: s.n., 1659, p. 6.

11 Exod. 12:3, Lev. 16:8, Rom. 3:25, 1 Cor. 5:7, 1 Pet. 1:18–21, Rev. 5:1–7.

describe how the Quakers 'are in the life, who come to witness forth the Truth, as it is in Jesus Christ, made manifest in them'.<sup>12</sup> Nicholson equated this manifestation with the realisation of spiritual rebirth: 'so it is the second birth, the Righteous that God hears, that which is immortal of himself, and that which he hath given to every man to profit withal, a measure of himself, which is Gods [*sic*] gift to man'.<sup>13</sup> This 'measure' of God entailed important ontological consequences in the believer: a baptism, a change of direction, and the manifestation of 'Truth' within the martyrs 'as it is in Jesus Christ'. The same 'Truth' revealed in Christ was witnessed by those executed at Boston, and the basis for this claim was not their individual piety, but the Quakers' fundamental belief in the measure of God within.

Solidarity with Christ was also demonstrated through solidarity with others who bore His witness. This is seen most obviously in the discussion of the executions in Fox's *Journal*. Although Fox did not hear of the events in Boston immediately, he apparently later claimed that at the time of the deaths he 'had a perfect sense of their sufferings, as though it had been myself, and as though the halter had been put about my own neck; though we had not at that time heard of it'.<sup>14</sup> Here, Fox suggested a sense of shared experience so profound that the suffering of an individual was felt, physically, by the whole movement. The basis for this unity was located in the unity of the Light of Christ within each person. Indeed, participation in Christ's suffering was envisaged in strikingly literal terms. Direct comparisons were made both with Christ's approach (for example, with the interplay between silence and prophecy during the trial) and with the manner of his treatment.<sup>15</sup> In an account reminiscent of Matthew 27:58, George Bishop even described how a friend asked the authorities for the permission to bury Robinson and Stephenson properly.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, whereas the Matthaean request was granted, the Boston authorities would not allow an alternative burial. In this way, Bishop portrayed the persecutors as worse even than those who killed Christ.

The suffering could be compared to Christ's passion only because, in order to secure this transformation, Quakers aspired to a total rejection of interfering personal preferences which would lead them to express Christ within perfectly: it was, literally, Christ who was targeted by the Boston authorities. Indeed, it is telling that the title of Nicholson's tract describes the Quakers as a 'suffering seed', referring here to the 'seed' of Christ within each person as their primary (and perhaps even sole) identity.<sup>17</sup> The Boston martyrs '[were] Christ's soldiers, and their duty [was] to stand in the battle, and bear all the shot and persecutions

12 Nicholson, J., N1109, London: Wilson, 1660, p. 3.

13 Nicholson, N1109, p. 14.

14 Nickalls, *Journal*, p. 411.

15 Burrough, B5994, p. 22.

16 Bishop, G., B3003, London: Wilson, 1661, p. 94b.

17 Nicholson, N1109, p. 1.

of the enemy'.<sup>18</sup> They were not their own, but answered to a higher authority. As Mary Dyer succinctly noted, 'The Will of the Lord be done'. In other words, 'I have no Self-ends'.<sup>19</sup>

The need for self-denial meant that obedience to the Light within was also crucial, and the emphasis upon obedience in response to the Boston executions is striking. In a letter to the Boston Law Court, William Robinson stated that 'we came to the Town of *Boston* again in obedience to the Lord the Creator of Heaven and Earth... And will you put us to *death* for obeying the Lord...?'.<sup>20</sup> Robinson was not alone in his striking appeal. Marmaduke Stephenson wrote his whole autobiography in terms of obedience to God's commands. His story began long before the immediate events of 1659, with an account of his call, whilst 'at the Plow in the Eastern parts of Yorkshire'.<sup>21</sup> At this moment, he was 'filled with the Love and presence of the Living God, which did Ravish my heart when I felt it'. Stephenson then felt called to leave his family and travel across the Atlantic to Barbados 'in obedience to the Living God'.<sup>22</sup> From Barbados, the same voice directed both him and Robinson to Boston and, fatefully, to the gallows. The voice of an obedient Quaker was a voice silenced for its commitment to the truth.

Thus, whilst Boston authorities claimed the Quakers' martyrdom 'to be a wilfull rushing, and their Death... their own Act, and their blood... upon their own Heads', the Quakers were adamant that 'they did rather suffer the losse "of their own lives" for their obedience *towards God*'.<sup>23</sup> Despite the Quakers' apparent image as religious fanatics on a suicidal mission to Boston (and it is again telling that 'blood' is here also used by the persecutors to identify blame), the Quaker commentators stressed that this was instead the natural result of the obedient life. The actions which led the Quakers to the gallows did not belong to the carnal individual, but to the Light raised up: the innocent. As the Quaker ecstatic Jone Brooksop wrote to the Boston authorities, 'Unto that in your Consciences I speak, which is God's Witness, and my Witness, which never consented to sin, but ever stands a Witness against it, in all your Consciences'.<sup>24</sup> For Brooksop, the true witness—the true martyr—was the Light, speaking to individuals and interacting directly with the world.

This emphasis upon self-denial also enabled the 'martyrs' to take an active role in the creation of their own martyrological cults. Their claims to innocence and spiritual authority may have been interpreted by opponents as the most egregious spiritual pride, but amongst Quakers they were acceptable because all righteousness was ultimately assigned to the Light. There was, of course, a strong

18 Penington, *Works*, vol. i, p. 342.

19 Cited in Burrough, B5994, pp. 23, 25.

20 Robinson, W., in Stephenson, M., S5466, London: Simmonds, 1660, p. 23.

21 Stephenson, cited in Gould, G1415, p. 21.

22 Stephenson, cited in Gould, G1415, pp. 21–23.

23 Burrough, B5994, p. 11.

24 Brooksop, B4983, London: Wilson, 1662, p. 14.

tradition within Quakerism of similar involvement in the interpretation of one's own spiritual significance. The entry of James Nayler into Bristol had occurred just three years before the Boston executions, and the practice of 'going naked as a sign' also experienced something of a revival around 1659–60.<sup>25</sup> In all these cases, the individual, and especially the individual's body, became the vehicle of a message, justified by claims of extreme self-denial and the real ontological consequences described in Nicholson's words above. The distinction between the individual believer and the community of believers was therefore diluted as each individual submitted their identity to a greater religious vision, of Christ's reign heralding transformation in individual hearts and beyond. The Boston executions were merely the most audacious examples of this much wider trend.

Of course, this commitment to obedience required discernment, and the direct sovereignty of the Light within meant that this could not be achieved simply by listening carefully in church or following the unaltered dictates of the Bible. Rather, the virtuous Quaker should 'wait in the Light of Christ within ourselves, to know the Word there, as they did, who gave forth the Scriptures'.<sup>26</sup> Such trust that one would simply 'know the Word', the emphasis upon 'witness', and the vivid descriptions of God's direct speech to the Quakers throughout their accounts suggest that divine illumination was thought obvious to its Quaker recipients. Clues to the precise mechanism of this discernment process are found in the Quakers' silent worship and the exhortation to 'wait in the Light'; it clearly required time. Yet in their writings they hoped to portray discernment as something understood intuitively: no sense of hesitancy was implied.

How then might modern readers understand this impervious certainty? The Quakers' discussion of 'conscience' perhaps provides an analogy to aid understanding. Yet it is also crucial to recognise that their calls for freedom of conscience were a result of their preoccupation with obedience, rather than autonomy.<sup>27</sup> Edward Burrough was adamant that Quakers in New England 'patiently suffered... simply and barely for our Consciences to God'.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Isaac Pennington, first imprisoned in 1661, connected obedience and the conscience in his statement that 'what we do herein, we do for conscience' sake, in obedience to the Lord'.<sup>29</sup> 'Conscience' here relates not to liberty, but recognition of (and commitment to) divine commands, communicated as a function of that of God within. In this sense, the appeal to conscience in response to the Boston executions

25 Carroll, K., 'Early Quakers and Going Naked as a Sign', in *Quaker History*, 67 (1978), pp. 69–87, p. 81. See, for example, Simpson, W., S3843, London: Simmons, 1659, p. 8. Eccles, S., E130, London: s.n., 1663.

26 Nicholson, N1109, p. 10.

27 Bitterman, 'The Early Quaker Literature of Defense', p. 228.

28 Burrough, B5994, p. 19.

29 Pennington, I., *The Works of Isaac Pennington: A minister of the gospel in the Society of Friends; including his collected letters*, 4 vols., Memphis, TN, General Books LLC, 1999–2012 [1681], vol. i, p. 284.

was not fundamentally a call for freedom. It was ‘not made a plea by us; but the answering and obeying the light of Christ in our consciences’—and Quakers themselves must be keen to check that ‘nothing be received, but according to the light in the conscience’.<sup>30</sup>

Secular freedom was therefore necessary only because the command of ‘Christ within’ was sovereign. Of course, there were also significant voices calling for toleration in the political arena.<sup>31</sup> Yet typical Quaker experience seems not to have prioritised autonomy in this way. As Leddra stated when asked to leave the jurisdiction of Boston Court, ‘If I may have my freedom, I shall go, but to make you a promise I cannot’.<sup>32</sup> Leddra emphasised that he was bound to a certain course of action—not that he deserved freedom—and, as Robinson conveyed, liberty itself was not conceived as the freedom to choose, but the freedom to enact ‘obedience to the Lord’.

Taken as a whole, this Quaker emphasis upon innocence and obedience ostensibly provides a striking contrast to the inherited Protestant emphasis on total human depravity. Particularly since the profound impact of John Foxe (but drawing on a tradition which can be traced back to Augustine, and arguably even to the New Testament), Reformed English Protestants had departed from an understanding of martyrdom as a claim to exceptional innocence towards the view that martyrdom was a universal experience.<sup>33</sup> To be a *martus*—a witness—was expected of all believers, and the cause of the martyr was emphasised rather than the credentials of the individual. This entailed that whilst the virtue of Protestant martyrs was of course highly praised it was conveyed in part through their acceptance of their own weakness, in line with the teaching of their theological tradition. Thus, Bishop Hooper’s martyrdom (cited in Cotton’s *Martyrs’ Mirror*) was accompanied by an assertion that ‘I am swill and a sincke of sinne, but thou art a gracious GOD, and a merciful Saviour and Redeemer’.<sup>34</sup> The martyrs prostrated themselves before God as a demonstration that ‘we are sinners and have merited nothing but wrath’.<sup>35</sup> When compared to the spiritual confidence of the Quaker tradition, the extent to which Quakers utilised the existing martyrological inheritance is cast into doubt. Yet, despite the apparent contrast of Quaker appeals to innocence, the two approaches share the same underlying concern for the righteous cause. The commitment to individual righteousness was simply the most important consequence of that cause: the Quaker message.

In this sense, claims to innocence not only vindicated the individual, but validated the theological authority of a whole community. Allegiance to ‘the Light’ allowed

30 Penington, *Works*, vol. i, pp. 365, 383.

31 Rous, J., R2043, London: s.n., 1659.

32 Bishop, B3004, London: s.n., 1667, p. 12.

33 Knott, J.R., ‘John Foxe and the Joy of Suffering’, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 (1996), pp. 721–34, p. 728.

34 Cotton, C., ESTC S756, London: Budge, 1613, pp. 127–28.

35 Luther, M., *The Large Catechism*, Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008, p. 65.



persecuted Quakers to leave court 'triumphing in the strength of the Lamb'.<sup>36</sup> The importance of the executions as communal validation is further demonstrated by their integration into a larger story of persecution. Writing in 1700, Daniel Gould explained how 'they hanged those two Innocent and Precious Servants of the Lord', before including himself in this experience as 'this was a time of Love, for as the World hated us, and Dispitefully used us: So the Lord was pleased in a wonderfull manner, to manifest his supporting Love... in our innocent suffering'.<sup>37</sup> Gould took ownership of the adversity even 40 years later, primarily referring to the executions but then switching to the first person. Again, it is clear that the Quakers were concerned with the victims' innocence more as evidence of the wider theology of transformation than as a demonstration of individual piety. The understanding of a wider narrative of persecution indicated the fellowship of all who believed. Those executed at Boston were merely the tip of the iceberg.

This narrative did operate alongside an explicit understanding of the executed individuals as 'martyrs', both at the time and in later discussion of the event.<sup>38</sup> To this extent, their suffering was placed in a unique category. Yet the term itself did not feature heavily in Quaker persecution literature. First, the expression seems only to have been used of those who died for their faith (though not only of those who were deliberately killed).<sup>39</sup> Secondly, even in response to Quaker deaths, the term was not employed regularly. That is not to say that martyrdom was an unimportant motif in the Quaker response to persecution; the Quakers were profoundly influenced by ideas of martyrdom, not only in their theology but in their commitment to the recording and memorialising of those who died for their faith. Yet it does demonstrate that for the Quakers greater issues were at stake. Whilst martyrdom was understood as a distinct phenomenon, this distinction was not the major concern of early Quakers. Rather, a complete transformation of self and the world was the fundamental motivation. Death was possible, but not necessary.

All this entailed that persecution was neither an indictment nor a vindication of the Quaker who bore it. Rather, it was an instrument which God may or may not use to further His ends in the world: 'bearing the brunt' was understood as 'an obedient taking up of the cross according to [God's] will and command'.<sup>40</sup> Moral judgment of the individual depended not on the adversity they faced, but on their ability to remain faithful to God's will in the face of that adversity. In determining God's will for the world, the role of the Quaker was straightforward: 'there is a time to suffer persecution, and a time to flee

36 Burrough, B5994, p. 24.

37 Gould, D., G1415, New York: Bradford, 1700, pp. 8–9.

38 See, for example, Burrough, B5994, pp. 1, 19; Bishop, B3003, pp. 48, 94, 179.

39 Moore, *Light in their Consciences*, pp. 161–62. See, for example, the case of James Parnell, and George Whitehead's designation of Burrough as a martyr after his death in prison, aged 29, in Howgill, F., H3181B, London: Warwick, 1662, p. 13.

40 Penington, *Works*, vol. i, p. 342.

from persecution; and both these are to be known in the Lord, and to be obeyed in the leadings of his spirit'.<sup>41</sup> For the same reasons that martyrdom was not seen as essential, persecution could have a variety of meanings depending on God's will. In any case, self-identity must be sacrificed to the transcendent ends which Quakers understood as their mission. Divine commands were a reality; obedience was required; a path would follow.

The view that suffering was merely a by-product of religious communion (which itself resulted from faith) is perhaps seen most clearly in the life and death of Mary Dyer, who was keen to partake in what she viewed as the ultimate obedient service to God. Dyer was marched to the gallows along with Robinson and Stephenson. Bishop tells us that when asked her feelings on the prospect of execution she responded that 'it is the greatest Joy, and Hour, I can enjoy in this World', going on to describe 'the sweet Incomes and Refreshings of the Spirit of the Lord which now I enjoy'.<sup>42</sup> Dyer was acquitted through her family's efforts, 'though she was freely Given up to suffer, And how the Lord was Pleased Gloriously to signifie his Peace and Love to her, in her obedience in what she did'.<sup>43</sup> She initially refused to abandon her martyrdom unless their 'wicked law' was repealed, but was pulled from the gallows. Bishop wrote from England, and undoubtedly based his account on second-hand reports. Yet his narrative seems consistent with Dyer's obvious tenacity in the face of persecution: she later returned to Boston to be hanged alone in 1660.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, faith was an immersive and transformative experience. Penington (speaking of his own suffering in 1662) summed up this position well: 'I have had experience myself of the Lord's goodness and preservation of me, in my suffering with them for the testimony of his truth, who made my bonds pleasant to me, and my noisome prison... a place of pleasure and delight'.<sup>45</sup> As Knott notes, Quakers often referred to the 'cheerfulness' of suffering, and loyalty to the 'testimony of truth' was understood to have a transformative effect on even the most dreadful of situations.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the call for (and claim to) transformation was not simply a vague declaration of loyalty to Quaker values. Rather, it was the hallmark of true faith: the transformation itself played the equivalent role of a creed. This also perhaps reflects the lack of a confessional identity as a reaction against both Reformation confessionalisation and the perceived hypocrisy of the Puritans. It was in this sense that, for the Quaker community, 'holinesse becomes the house of God, whose house we are, whom he hath called out of the world to be a witness to his truth, as it is manifest in us'.<sup>47</sup>

41 Penington, *Works*, vol. i, p. 342.

42 Bishop, B3003, p. 109.

43 Gould, G1415, p. 37.

44 Burrough, B5994, p. 25.

45 Penington, *Works*, vol. iii, p. 317.

46 Gould, G1415, p. 9.

47 Nicholson, N1109, p. 6.

It is clear, then, that early Quakers made positive sense of their persecution in terms of a distinctive Quaker anthropology which rested on a transformative process of self-minimisation. This understanding drew heavily on the motifs of innocence, obedience and 'Christ within', and was expected to pervade all aspects of life, whether or not suffering was entailed. Yet the Quaker message was not simply one of joy. Persecution may be neutral with regards to the victim, but it was certainly a moral indictment of the oppressor: the Quakers not only bore witness to a transformative faith, but also to the injustice of a 'wicked law'. Judgment was coming for everybody, and so the early Quakers addressed those outside the movement as a matter of principle. Therefore, I will now turn to a consideration of the Quakers' interaction with the world, particularly considering their characterisation of persecution as carnal or devilish brutality, their understanding of martyrdom as an aspect of prophetic vocation, and their expectation of apocalyptic judgment.

## II

The early Quakers' famous critique of persecution was driven profoundly by their hope for transformation—social injustice had theological ramifications aside from its political and legal significance—and this too began at the level of the individual. Whilst the Quakers demonstrated Christ-like obedience, the persecutors were thought to be driven by a '*spirit* "of Persecution, Violence" and "Cruelty"', or the 'persecuting Spirit'.<sup>48</sup> These phrases suggest a certain degree of correspondence between the 'Spirit of Christ' and an opposing force, and John Chandler even went so far as to denounce the Boston authorities as the 'compleat Antichrist'.<sup>49</sup> Later, Chandler spoke of persecution as occurring 'through malice and enmity to the Seed of God', which suggests a failure to respond positively to a divine call, rather than the evil workings of a separate metaphysical reality.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Penington asked 'whether they did arise from the seed of God... Or whether they did arise from the fleshly part' which also suggests a dichotomy between selfish, carnal desire (as opposed to the precise work of Satan) and the way of the Lamb.<sup>51</sup>

That is not to say that Satan was absent from Quaker persecution literature, however, and Francis Howgill even suggested that persecution was inflicted 'to strengthen the Devils Kingdom and the subjects thereof, against Christ and his Kingdom, *who came not to destroy mens lives, but to save them*'.<sup>52</sup> Howgill clearly believed that the Devil was behind the persecution. Nonetheless, it is significant

48 Burrough, B5994, pp. 5–6.

49 Chandler, C1927B, p. 8.

50 Chandler, C1927B, p. 9.

51 Penington, *Works*, vol. i, p. 305.

52 Howgill, H3166, London: Simmonds, 1659, p. 5.

that he framed his commentary in terms of ‘subjects’ whose lives could be destroyed or saved. This suggests that he understood the Devil to operate through individuals: the Boston authorities were denounced as his ‘champions’, and the local minister, John Norton, was even accused of having ‘manifested his Master’.<sup>53</sup>

Yet Howgill did not see the roles of darkness and light as equal forces upon the human soul. Rather, Satan was envisaged as a confusing, interrupting and polluting power, as is suggested by his statement that ‘*Sathan* being cursed and banished from the presence of the Lord... hath laboured to deceive and lead the hearts of the sons of Men aside from the holy Commandment of God... and to lead them to his Kingdom of darknesse.’<sup>54</sup> The Devil’s encouragement of chaos is further suggested by Howgill’s articulation of the problem as a matter of true doctrine. A sizeable section of his argument related to distinguishing the ‘Doctrines of the Devil’ from the ‘Doctrines of the Quakers’.<sup>55</sup> ‘Ignorance and Error is also arisen out of [the pit of darkness] to hinder the Light from shining... that so... the King of the bottomless pit might not lose his Dominion.’<sup>56</sup> The chaos of the Devil relied on the prevention of obedience and was reflected in the policies of those who opposed the Quakers. The Boston authorities had been led astray, in contrast to the Quakers’ virtuous obedience. In this sense, for both Penington and Howgill, societal injustice was cosmically significant as the opposite of spiritual submission.

Thus, Quakers were morally obliged not only to bear suffering imposed on them, but to point out the perceived injustice. This was demonstrated most strikingly in the experience of Wenlock Christison, who was sentenced to death like the four ‘martyrs’, but escaped execution through the intervention of Charles II.<sup>57</sup> Christison gave a bold performance in court and even managed to persuade several members of the jury to abstain from the vote, so forcing the judge to conduct his sentencing alone. He strikingly declared, ‘Guilty, or not Guilty, I deny all guilt... for my Conscience is clear in the sight of God’, before ‘thank[ing] God’ that he was ‘not afraid to give Judgement’.<sup>58</sup> Christison’s association of conscience and judgment demonstrates the centrality of his theological anthropology—and it was this metaphysical understanding of the law which, for the Quakers, ultimately undermined the legitimacy of the trial.

In line with the Protestant emphasis upon the martyrdom of all true believers (noted above), then, the specific role of ‘martyr’ was just one possible manifestation of the wider calling which applied to all Quakers. This calling was explicitly understood as the prophetic vocation, and Stephenson’s call narrative again provides the most vivid demonstration of this motif: he described hearing

53 Howgill, H3166, pp. 3–4.

54 Howgill, H3158, London: Simmonds, 1660, p. 3.

55 Howgill, H3166, pp. 26–37.

56 Howgill, H3166, p. 3.

57 Bishop, B3004, p. 38.

58 Bishop, B3004, p. 34.

a 'still, small voice' which told him that 'I have ordained thee a Prophet to the nations; And at the hearing of the word of the Lord, I was put to a stand being I was but a Child for such a weighty work.'<sup>59</sup> Thus, expressions of judgment provided opportunity to express not only a condemnation of oppressors, but also a deeply prophetic self-understanding. Indeed, the association of prophecy and martyrdom was not without precedent: traditions relaying the martyrdom of several prophets exist in biblical and apocryphal accounts, suggesting that death might have been an unsurprising result of the prophetic mission.<sup>60</sup>

The importance of the prophetic or diagnostic motif over that of the martyr is further reflected in the fact that suffering and death were not the focus of the Quakers' theological message: in response to Moore's question of whether the Quakers were expected to 'seek out suffering', at least the answer they hoped to present from their own theology was 'no'.<sup>61</sup> Gruesome elements of suffering itself were actually played down in Quaker descriptions, giving greater weight to the words of witnesses and the injustice of their suffering, as symptoms of the perceived sinfulness of the persecutors. Aside from an extensive explanation of Robinson's final conversation, Burrough spoke only of how the man was 'turned off' before moving to discuss Marmaduke Stephenson.<sup>62</sup> By swiftly passing over the death itself, he provided a stark contrast to the inherited martyrological tradition, which focussed on the most horrific elements of persecution.

A significant exception is found in accounts of humiliating suffering, for example, where Quakers (women and men) were stripped before being whipped.<sup>63</sup> However, the function of including these details still seems to have been to demonstrate the gratuitous humiliation levelled on the Quakers, again reiterating the injustice and cruelty of the Boston regime, rather than valorising the suffering itself. Thus, Burrough described these events as 'inhumane', listing only brief descriptions of each incident before ending with the simple conclusion (noted above) that all this was 'suffered... for our Consciences to God'.<sup>64</sup> The contextualisation of the humiliation in terms of 'Consciences' again stressed Christ-like passivity in contrast to the persecutors' brutality. This enactment functioned similarly to the metaphor of 'Innocent Blood': the presentation and vindication of righteousness in the Quakers served to expose the sinfulness of the Boston regime in God's sight.

How then, does all this relate to the Quakers' well-documented eschatological understanding? They clearly framed their writings eschatologically. As Nicholson predicted, 'Gods judgements draws [*sic*] near all you, who had a hand in shedding

59 Gould, G1415, p. 21; Jer. 1:5-7; 1 Kgs 19:12.

60 See, for example, references to prophets' martyrdom in 1 Kgs 19:10, Heb. 11:37 and the apocryphal *Ascension of Isaiah* and *Lives of the Prophets*.

61 Moore, *Light in their Consciences*, p. 161.

62 Burrough, B5994, p. 24.

63 For example, Burrough, B5994, p. 17.

64 Burrough, B5994, p. 17.

innocent blood, the blood of the innocent is upon you, wo [*sic*] will be to you for evermore except you repent.' Nonetheless, the emphasis upon eschatological judgment came precisely because the Boston authorities 'rejected his messengers, and slighted the day of your visitation, and put his servants to death'.<sup>65</sup> Thus, destruction of the Boston authorities was provoked by the rejection of God's message, both as it was delivered by his servants, whom they killed, and as it worked in their hearts, which they ignored as they 'got above the light of Christ in themselves'.<sup>66</sup> Gerard Guiton has particularly argued for the importance of the 'Kingdom', and undoubtedly one of the most fundamental dichotomies in Quaker literature is between the present reality (the 'World') and the coming Kingdom of God.<sup>67</sup> Yet, despite the importance of the 'Kingdom' in mainstream Quaker literature, the Quaker responses to the Boston executions deal much more extensively with the specific motif of 'judgment'. Above all, this emphasised the importance of personal choice (which, as noted above, was paradoxically a choice to sacrifice one's own liberty) at the heart of Quaker eschatological discourse.

This relates to the fundamental notion of a day of visitation, as the unique time at which each individual was called to repent, after which they were either saved or damned. In the sources examined here, the idea of a single visitation seems already to have been established, at least in theory.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, the radical message of the Quakers cannot be understood fully without an appreciation of its intimate connection to the facilitation of individual repentance: visitation, injustice and the eventual judgment were bound together.

Visitation was, however, an ambiguous affair. Writing in 1661, Edward Burrough boldly told his opponents that he had 'no desire "of Revenge" towards them, but I leave "vengeance" to the Lord'. Furthermore, he believed that 'the Lord [would] forgive them' if they rejected their persecuting spirit in favour of the Truth before death.<sup>69</sup> Yet this was stated after both Stephenson and Robinson had blatantly declared that their opponents' visitation was upon them. Visitation had passed, but repentance and forgiveness were still possible. This suggests confusion over whether the visitation was really the unique event which it was portrayed to be in later systematising accounts.<sup>70</sup> A similar tension is found in the work of Jone Brooksop, who lamented:

howl and weep ye Rulers of Boston, for the men of Nineveh shall rise up in Judgment against you, for they repented at the Preaching of Jonas, but a greater than Jonas is here; but you have hardened your hearts against his servants, and against the witness of God in your Consciences!

65 Nicholson, p. 20.

66 Nicholson, p. 23.

67 Guiton, G., *The Early Quakers and 'the Kingdom of God'*, San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2012.

68 See, for example, Howgill, F., F1436, London, Simmonds, 1660, p. 1.

69 Burrough, B5994, pp. 6–7.

70 C.f. Barclay, B720, p. 105.

She simultaneously bemoaned that they are 'so ignorant of [their] own Salvation'.<sup>71</sup> The perceived hardness of their hearts suggests that the visitation had passed, and Brooksop clearly thought that the judgment of God was nearing. Yet redemption was still proclaimed as a possibility.

This is unlikely simply to reflect a reluctance to diagnose the spiritual progress of opponents: as Christison's trial demonstrates, the Quakers clearly thought they were invested with some authority to judge. Rather, the Quakers were committed to the notion that judgment would fall upon individuals, at least in the first instance. Thus, whereas in Luke 11.32 (which inspires Brooksop's words) the judgment was made against the whole generation, Brooksop's lament was given specifically against the 'Rulers'—and, crucially, this also meant that Quakers were individually compelled through obedience to deliver God's messages to their oppressors, even if those oppressors were already lost. Again, the prophetic dimension of Quaker activity was crucial, and the use of Jonah's story in response to the Boston executions was particularly significant: like the Ninevites the persecutors must repent, and like Jonah the Quakers must deliver a message of destructive judgment, despite the enduring ability (and tendency) of God to save those who reject him.

Nonetheless, the call of God remained unanswered by many and the cost of ignoring visitation was high. The eschatological context of the Quakers' hope for repentance entailed that salvation would always be an opportunity with an expiry date: 'the mighty day of the Lord [was] coming'.<sup>72</sup> Writing in 1661, Edward Burrough pleaded urgently with the Boston authorities: 'in love to you all, take Warning before it be too late... for assuredly, if you put us to Death, you will bring Innocent Blood upon your own heads, and swift destruction will come upon you'.<sup>73</sup> And, of course, many Quakers clearly personally believed that their opponents' opportunity for salvation was lost: even as early as 1659, Howgill wrote to Boston authorities that 'the wrath of the Lamb shall torment you' as 'his People shall have peace when you shall have trouble, his People shall have joy when you shall have mourning'.<sup>74</sup> The Lamb which appeared weak and helpless in the present reality would soon exert its wrath. Elsewhere, *Bishop reinforced to the Boston authorities that 'the Hour of your Visitation is Over, as was told ye by M. Stevenson... The Decree is sealed, it is done it cannot be revoked'*.<sup>75</sup> Here, Bishop referenced the chilling words of Stephenson in the Boston courtroom: '*That same Day you put his Servants to Death, shall the Day of your Visitation pass over your Heads, and you shall be Cursed for evermore; The mouth of the Lord of Hosts hath spoken It*'.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the repentance that they hoped for clearly never materialised, as

71 Brooksop, B4983, pp. 13–14.

72 Nicholson, p. 3.

73 Burrough, B5994, p. 23.

74 Howgill, H3166, pp. 39–40.

75 Bishop, B3003, p. 94b.

76 Burrough, B5994, p. 23.

is demonstrated by the existence of later works cataloguing the persecution, such as Gould's 1670 *A Brief Narration of Suffering*.<sup>77</sup> The 'Warning' was given; the 'Innocent Blood' was shed; the 'destruction' would surely follow.

This body of persecution literature (including later accounts, such as Gould's *Brief Narration*) shows no sign of decline in an apocalyptic world view, then, even if hopes for conversion of the world were dampened. Barbour and Frost have argued for a sharp distinction between the initial expectations of the Quakers and their later acceptance that they would remain a minority movement.<sup>78</sup> Yet this must be distinguished from a fading belief in an imminent end time and, on this point, at least in the responses to the Boston executions, persecution seems not to have slowed the Quakers' apocalyptic expectation. Rather, the emphasis rested on the terror which would ensue for those left unconvinced, demonstrated by the preference for terminology of 'judgment' over 'Kingdom' and the pervasive reliance upon the notion of a day of visitation. It is perhaps here that the most profound legacy of persecution upon Quaker theology is exposed.

An examination of the Quakers' use of apocalyptic motifs clearly demonstrates their belief that the most important transformation was yet to come. Yet this transformation was inescapably understood as a culmination of the individual transformation explored above. Quaker anthropology motivated Quakers to live and die in faithful obedience, and it was this which drove their eschatology, reminding and informing them of the imminent Day of the Lord. The 'Light' would eventually cocoon the whole of creation, so heralding a metamorphosis which renovated all levels of reality—but this Light was experienced first in personal interaction with the divine. Innocence, obedience and transformation all expressed this deepest reality which would soon be terrifyingly evident in the world.

### III

Quakers experienced some of the most intense religious persecution of any group in the seventeenth century, and their extensive legal and political engagement throughout this period does demonstrate a desire to minimise suffering. This has often led to the presentation in secondary literature of a movement struggling to survive, so resorting to a change of direction. However, a study of their theology of persecution demonstrates that this is not the case. Rather, even under duress, the Quakers were theologically articulate and were keen to affirm the potential for transformation in all individuals, situations and societies. Furthermore, this theological zeal was inherited in later accounts of the executions, and the willingness of writers such as Gould to appropriate this suffering suggests a group keen to assert its own strength.

77 Gould, G1415, esp. pp. 1–2.

78 Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, p. 61.



This vision taken in its entirety was the sole reason for the Quakers' refusal to conform. The emphasis on the proclamation of a cause over the religious significance of suffering itself clearly demonstrates the importance of their theological perspective in understanding their response to persecution. In this sense, the importance of the righteous cause in Quaker literature demonstrates the exact sense in which those executed at Boston can be considered 'martyrs' at all. The early Quakers understood themselves in terms of a prophetic vocation, which in some cases could lead to martyrdom, but in all cases led them forcefully and famously to denounce the actions of their opponents. This in turn stemmed from a self-understanding constructed in terms of obedience, innocence and transformative faith.

An understanding of such a vision also necessitates some reconsideration of subsequent developments within Quaker theology and organisation, although such investigation is outside the scope of this study. It is often suggested that experience of persecution led in the first instance to a withdrawal of the Quaker movement and a re-evaluation of Quaker theology.<sup>79</sup> However, the Quakers' theological response to the Boston executions suggests that experience of adversity alone was not enough to shake their theological conviction. Rather, a transformative view of faith was held alongside their experience of persecution, even in later accounts. This further entails that early Quaker theology could not simply have been affected by outside factors imposed upon the movement by society, but must also have shaped the development of the movement in its own right.

Thus, the early Quakers' theology of persecution points to a significant degree of stability within the movement at the dawn of the Restoration (and reflected in later accounts of the executions), and in this respect the Quaker concern to minimise suffering cannot be understood as a comprehensive representation of their attitudes to persecution. Yet more than this, Quaker persecution literature demonstrates the relationship between individual and universal transformation which was so central to early Quaker theology. Above all, the Quakers proclaimed a dramatic transformation of the individual, the world and of all experience. Their celebrated calls for toleration, uncomfortable shouts of judgment and uplifting exhortations to innocence are all underpinned by this fundamental theological framework.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to Alec Ryrle for his kind encouragement and invaluable expertise throughout the production of this article, and to Sarah Apetrei for her extremely helpful comments upon earlier drafts.

<sup>79</sup> Allen, R., 'Restoration Quakers', pp. 33–43; Braithwaite, W., *The Second Period of Quakerism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961 [1919], pp. 217, 251; Reay, B., *The Quakers and the English Revolution*, London: Temple-Smith, 1985, p. 107.

**Author Details**

Madeleine Ward is a doctoral student in the Theology Faculty at the University of Oxford, where she is researching the wider intellectual context of the theological development of Quakerism, 1656–1700.

Mailing address: Wolfson College, Linton Road, Oxford, OX2 6UD, England.

Email: [madeleine.ward@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:madeleine.ward@wolfson.ox.ac.uk).