

CHOOSE LIFE! EARLY QUAKER WOMEN
AND VIOLENCE IN MODERNITY¹

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ABSTRACT

The peace testimony of the early Quakers was developed in a context where war, killing and death were a major preoccupation. In this article I show how Margaret Fell and other early Quaker women encouraged a choice of life rather than a preoccupation with death. While both women and men Friends developed the peace testimony, in the case of the men, the language of war (albeit the 'Lamb's War') was retained, while many women (though not all) looked for language that was more nurturing and less violent. I suggest that it is the radical choice of life, not just the renunciation of violence, that is ultimately central to the peace testimony, especially in relation to its emphasis on justice and flourishing.

KEYWORDS

Margaret Fell, Quaker women, violence, peace, Lamb's War.

Early Quakers wanting a mark that would distinguish them from worldly ostentation, adopted a plain style of clothing that came to be known as 'Quaker grey'. Not all of them approved this, however. Opposition came even from Margaret Fell, often seen as the Mother of Quakerism, who had lived all her life in south lakeland with its vibrant colours of hills, sky and sea. She wrote with some acidity against the grey uniform:

we must look at no colours, nor make anything that is changeable colours as the hills are, nor sell them, nor wear them: but we must all be in one dress and one colour: this is a silly poor Gospel. It is more fit for

us, to be covered with God's Eternal Spirit, and clothed with his Eternal Light, which leads us and guides us into righteousness. Now I have set before you life and death, and desire you to choose life, and God and his truth.²

History went against Margaret Fell. Quaker grey was adopted; and although for many it indicated the plainness and simplicity which characterised all of life, it also symbolised an inward turning, away from the radical religion and politics of the early years of the Religious Society of Friends and toward a preoccupation with details of dress and the keeping of rules.³

Discussion of Quaker simplicity and its outward expression must await another occasion. What I wish to do here is to note the stark terms in which Margaret Fell presented the choice. Was she not being unnecessarily extreme in her rhetoric? – after all, one would hardly think that the decision whether or not to wear grey was a matter of life and death. Yet that is how she put it. To her way of thinking, drab uniformity was a betrayal of the Gospel itself, a refusal of the light and life and flourishing in which she had taken her life's stand.

The seventeenth century in England was a period much preoccupied with death and violence, a preoccupation which has significantly shaped modernity.⁴ This paper is a case study of some of the ways in which early Quakers, particularly Margaret Fell and other early Quaker women, stood at an angle to this preoccupation with death and offered a creative alternative.

It is a truism to say that early Quakers were at odds in significant respects with the social expectations and norms of seventeenth century England as it stood on the cusp of modernity; and they suffered much for it. It is also obvious that some of the things for which they were feared or ridiculed had as much to do with perceived intervention in the social symbolic as with material things: the refusal of hat honour, for example, or the adoption of plain speech or indeed Quaker grey. These characteristics, which were given enormous importance both by Quakers themselves and by their detractors, were not things that had physical or economic impact on society in the same way that refusal of tithes or refusal of military service might have: if a Quaker did not pay a tithe, somebody would have less money as a result; but if a Quaker refused hat honour, the effect was purely at a symbolic level. Though early Quakers did not put it in these terms, of course, it is clear that they were quite deliberately disrupting the social symbolic of early modernity and offering an alternative to it. If, as I would hold, the social symbolic of the seventeenth century set the pattern for the development of western culture in modernity, especially in relation to death and violence, then it is worthwhile investigating the Quaker women's writings to see what alternative can be offered.

I have chosen to focus on early Quaker *women* for several reasons. First, although they wrote a good deal, and their writings are increasingly accessible, they have been much less studied than their male counterparts, and some redressing of the balance is in order. Second, because of the radical reconsideration of gender and equality among early Friends, Quaker women took on

quite different gender roles from that which was common in society at large. They were thus already differently situated; and thus in a position where they had to rethink aspects of the taken-for-granted symbolic. It is to be expected, then, that this situation gave them a particularly sharp focus on the norms and conventions of gendered society, and in some respects clear differentiation from it. However, I would not wish to be understood as saying that Quaker men were not also at an angle to the prevailing symbolic: clearly they were, and usually in ways similar to women. The detail of that must await another study, as also must consideration of the parallels and contrasts between Quaker and non-Quaker women like Margaret Cavendish, Mary Astell, or Aphra Benn.

Quaker women were of course part of seventeenth century society even while standing against it in some respects. It should therefore not be surprising that the symbolic which we find operating in their writings is often ambiguous. They were part of the life and thought of their time, and it is no wonder that they shared its patterns and assumptions. What is surprising is that they challenged them as often and as radically as they did. I shall therefore investigate four related aspects of early Quaker women's writings to see how they stood with and against the preoccupation with death and violence of early modernity.

1. QUAKER WOMEN'S CLAIM OF AUTHORITY

Early Quaker women like Margaret Fell, Dorothy White, Sarah Blackbarrow, Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers used a self-consciously prophetic and apocalyptic rhetoric of the time as vigorously as did any male writers. The authority of their voice is striking: they never apologise for their gender or for claiming the right to preach and write, whether to those in power or to common humanity. Margaret Fell, in her 'Letter to King Charles' in 1666, written from her imprisonment in Lancaster Castle to admonish him to release Quakers from persecution and prison, reminds the king that

every Mortal Man hath but a Moment in this Life, either to Serve, Fear, and Honour the Lord, and therein to receive Mercy from him; or else to Transgress, Sin, Disobey, and Dishonour him, and so receive the Judgment of Eternal Misery.⁵

These were strong words for a woman to address to a king. Just as strong, and at much greater length, were the words of Katherine Evans when she and Sarah Cheevers were imprisoned in Malta en route to Alexandria in a missionary journey, and in Malta were interrogated by the Inquisition. Katherine Evans went on what today would be called a hunger strike, and at the end of it, having eaten her first food in twelve days, writes:

in the midst of our extremity the Lord sent his holy Angels to comfort us ... and in the time of our great trial, the Sun and Earth did mourn

visibly three dayes, and the horror of death and pains of Hell was upon me: the Sun was darkened, the Moon was turned into Blood, and the Stars did fall from heaven and there was great tribulation ten dayes, such as never was from the beginning of the world; and then did I see the Son of man coming in the Clouds, with power and great glory, triumphing over his enemies; the Heavens were on fire, and the Elements did melt with fervent heat, and the Trumpet sounded out of Sion, and an Allarum was struck up in Jerusalem, and all the Enemies of God were called to the great day of the Battle of the Lord⁶

and so on and on. Nor does there seem ever to be a moment of self-doubt or questioning. Katherine Evans is entirely clear that her enemies are to be identified with Babylon, the Devil, and the Pope, while she and her companion are of God. She is unsure of whether they will get out of prison alive or escape the Inquisition, but she is never unsure that she is in the right. Although her certainties strike me as arrogance, I cannot but be amazed at the self-confidence of this (extra)ordinary woman in 1662, separated from her companion by the prison warders, alone in a cell in very unpleasant conditions, interrogated for months on end by delegates of the Inquisition who promised her only torture and imprisonment until she died.

Along with the authority claimed by these and other early Quaker women in their apocalyptic utterances and throughout their writings, their immersion in scripture is also striking. Virtually every phrase of the above quotation is from the Bible, lifted and strung together to convey Katherine Evans's message. This saturation in Biblical language, reminiscent of medieval monastic writers like Bernard of Clairvaux,⁷ is characteristic of many Quaker women. It is used to great effect, for instance, in Margaret Fell's *True Testimony from the People of God*, as well as in her defense of women's ministry, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*; we find it also in Dorothy White's apocalyptic *Trumpet of the Lord of Hosts*, and in Elizabeth Bathurst's much more sober doctrinal treatise, *Truth's Vindication* and indeed in most Quaker women's writings of the time. Sometimes the interweaving of Biblical phrases is so dense that the woman's own voice gets lost: when Susannah Blandford writes that she cried to God out of the deep because her brethren were involved with a Golden Calf, but God told her to be still and wait for the Wind to separate the Wheat from the Chaff, it is not exactly obvious what incident she might have been referring to in the medley of Biblical allusions.⁸ I shall come back later to the relationship between their use of the Bible and the way these women understood the inner Light. For the present, I wish simply to note that the thoroughness with which they knew and were able to marshal the Scriptures in their writings shows a level of literacy and education well above the average for the mid seventeenth century, and indicates both the importance attached by Quakers to women's education and immersion in scriptures and also probably something about their class background.⁹ This does not by itself account for their courage and competence to claim the authority to speak and write publicly; there were

after all many Puritan women of the rising middle class who were well educated but who did not take such things upon themselves.¹⁰ But once the breakthrough to women's ministry had been made by early Friends, the women had the skills to carry out that ministry with great effect.

2. THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT: APOCALYPTIC WRITING AND QUAKER WOMEN

Quaker women in the seventeenth century believed that they lived in momentous times. They were right: the seventeenth century was after all the century of the civil war, regicide, the rise of parliament and the restoration of the monarchy. The political turmoil was paralleled by social and economic upheaval: the rise of modern science and medicine, the beginnings of colonialism, the fur trade and the slave trade, the growth of competitive individualism. It was 'a world turned upside down'.¹¹ Perhaps it is only to be expected that in such turbulent times people with intense religious sensibilities would think in terms of the end of the world: certainly there is a strong apocalyptic tone to many of the Puritan writers, as well as to the many separatist sects that flourished during the civil war and its aftermath. Puritans made much of Calvinistic doctrines of election and predestination,¹² looking forward to eternal salvation in a heavenly place after bodily death. A devout puritan was a 'stranger and pilgrim in this world' whose citizenship was in a heavenly city.¹³ Puritans thundered against the cities of this world, which they identified with the whoring Babylon of the apocalypse; the king and popery were manifestations of the Antichrist.¹⁴ At first sight such attitudes seem to have all the classic characteristics of obsession with death and life after death.

When we look more closely, however, that impression turns out to be a distortion, at least of the period before and during the Civil War. The New Jerusalem to which these Puritans and sectarians looked forward was not a heavenly city in the sky after death, but a heavenly city built upon earth, a Jerusalem built 'in England's green and pleasant land' as Blake was to put it several centuries later. John Eliot, a missionary to native North Americans and by no means a firebrand in his time, wrote that 'Christ is the only right Heir of the Crown of England... and he is now come to take possession of his Kingdom, making England first in that blessed work of setting up the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus'.¹⁵ As Hugh Barbour points out in his study of the period, it was the wide-spread expectation of Christ coming to be King that prevented Cromwell from taking the throne of England for himself.¹⁶

Along with the hope that the world itself would be transformed into the New Jerusalem went an appreciation of the world, an emphasis on science and exploration, whether of the stars, the seas, or the plants and animals of the earth. Christopher Hill has shown how scientific exploration, invention and navigation aligned themselves with the Puritan and Parliamentary groupings of pre-revolutionary England.¹⁷ Richard Baxter, the great Puritan preacher, exclaimed:

All the world are our servants, that we may be the servants of God... How many thousand plants and flowers and fruits and birds and beasts do attend us! The sea, with its inhabitants, the air, the wind, the frost and snow, the heat and fire, the clouds and rain, all wait upon us while we do our work.¹⁸

The idea of the Puritan as one who hates this world would find very little support in the first half of the seventeenth century. Their apocalypticism, rather, is a denunciation of the corruption and degradation of the world by those who do not honour its Creator and King, and a concerted effort to reclaim the world as the Kingdom of God.

All this changed with the collapse of the Protectorate and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Charles II, not Jesus Christ, was on the English throne. The often frivolous and dissipated court found ways to punish and marginalise the Parliamentarians and Puritans, and to indulge in the sorts of pleasures typified by Restoration comedy – anathema to the Puritans. For those who had expected the New Jerusalem, disillusionment set in. Although many continued to look for the kingdom of God, they increasingly looked more toward heaven and the world to come beyond the grave, and tacitly gave up the expectation that God's kingdom was about to arrive on earth. Puritan and radical writings increasingly condemned this world and all its works, showed disgust with the material body and its sexuality, and looked forward to death as a release from this evil state to the heavenly kingdom in the life beyond.

It is within this changing and complex political context that early Quaker writing must be understood.¹⁹ George Fox's *Journal* recounts his calling, in his early life, to preach to people, forewarning them of the 'great and terrible day of the Lord which would come upon them all': it is set in a context of denunciation of hat honour, 'popish' ceremonies and rituals, social customs of music, games and public festivities, and an exhortation to schoolmasters and mistresses to teach children the 'new covenant of light.'²⁰

It is to this extent consistent with the apocalyptic writings of the early Puritans who looked for the establishment of the kingdom of God on this earth rather than for another world beyond death. The same is true of other male Quaker apocalyptic writings, such as Edward Burrough's *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded*.²¹ None of this should be taken to imply that the early Quakers (any more than the early Puritans) did not believe in life after death, final judgment, heaven and hell. They did, of course. The point, rather, is that they saw the task of their lives as bringing about social and religious change in *this* world, rather than merely preparing themselves for the next.

Although Quaker women of the second half of the seventeenth century adopt an apocalyptic rhetoric, sometimes stridently, I find in their writings a stance that is at an angle to the death-obsessed apocalypticism prevalent in these times of disillusionment at the restoration of the monarchy and the failure of Christ's kingdom to arrive on earth. Esther Biddle, writing in 1662 – two years after the restoration of the monarchy – addresses her apocalyptic writing to

issues of justice and integrity in this political situation, not in some other world beyond the grave. She entitles her tract, 'The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded forth unto these Three Nations' – that is, England, Scotland, and Ireland – and specifies 'especially unto Thee, Oh England, who art looked upon as the Seat of Justice, from whence righteous Laws should proceed'.²² Her exhortation to the king and his court, as well as to the bishops and priests of the established church, is an exhortation to repentance and justice, for this world, not for some other. Though she does not fail to warn them that 'the Fire is kindled, and the Furnace is even hot, in which your works and worship, Faith and Religion must be tried'²³ these are not the fires of hell but the fires of purification. Only if their deeds are not just will they eventually be 'Banished from the presence of the King of Heaven for evermore ... and you shall be a stink to Ages to come'.²⁴ Much more overt in her emphasis on life rather than death is Dorothy White, writing in the same year (1662), a tract with a rather similar title, 'A Trumpet of the Lord of Hosts, Blown unto the City of London and unto the Inhabitants Thereof...'. Her pronouncements of judgment on the injustices of London are vehement, yet she keeps breaking into the theme of Life, that 'true Light which leadeth to Eternal Life'.²⁵ When toward the end of her tract she addresses fellow Quakers, she pleads with them, 'O little Love, overcome, overcome all your hearts, that Life may fill your vessels'.²⁶ And in a second section of 'A Trumpet' she says of the 'Glorious Day of the Lord God', 'So all must be gathered into the Fold, all must know an entering into the Rest, all must know a gathering into the Life, and into the Power, which maketh all things new'.²⁷

This emphasis on Life and its potential for newness and creative change, both of the individual and of the social order, is on a different plane from the focus on death and doom found in much apocalyptic writing of the later seventeenth century.

It is this clear sounding of the note of life, newness and creativity that comes out most clearly in Margaret Fell's *A True Testimony from the People of God*, presented to King Charles II on his accession to the throne in 1660. The language, particularly of the preamble 'Epistle to the Reader', is the language of the Biblical book of Revelation: 'The day of the Lord is come', Margaret Fell declares; the nations have drunk 'the cup of abomination and fornication', and now 'the day is come that Babylon is come up in remembrance with the Lord. The day of her judgments is come. The vials are pouring upon the seat and head of the beast'.²⁸ Up to this point in her text, Fell's writing is standard apocalyptic fare, not much different in kind from that thundered out by many a Puritan divine in the seventeenth century. The pronouncements of judgment were taken to extremes, even by the standards of the time, by sects like the Fifth Monarchy Men,²⁹ and attracted the wrath of the authorities. Because Quakers also were perceived as radical, a good deal of the ensuing persecution fell upon them as well.³⁰

Yet in this text of Margaret Fell, we can discern a difference from other sects. Rather than simply pronounce judgment and doom, Margaret Fell continues: 'The darkness is expelling. The light is arising out of obscurity and shining secretly in the hearts of people where God's appearance and manifestation are,

where he writes his law, and puts his spirit in the inward parts'.³¹ Rather than look only toward catastrophe and punishment, Fell's emphasis is on the new possibilities emerging among Friends, and is an account of what those new possibilities are and why they should now be coming to the fore. If the king and society will not take heed to this 'current of life' which is now on offer,³² then they should beware, because 'the Lord is arisen in his mighty power, with his fan in his hand. He is separating the chaff from the wheat, is gathering the wheat into his garner, and will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'³³ Yet for all the sharpness of the warning in the 'Epistle' the central message of *True Testimony* to which it forms a prologue is a discussion of the way in which God's Spirit comes, not through outward things like the letter of the scripture or the authority of the church, but through the inner life and teaching of the Spirit, available to all, including the King, if he will but heed the living spirit of God. I shall come back to this point.

It is a central feature of the preoccupation with death in the west that it denigrates *this* world and looks for some other, better world not contaminated by this world's faults. In apocalyptic writing of the restoration period this is regularly expressed as damnation and destruction of this present evil world and the salvation out of it of a special remnant who are taken away to a heavenly kingdom. In some ways these characteristics also appear in Fell's *True Testimony*: she warns of judgment, as we have seen, and she writes in advocacy of a remnant, the true people of God. But there is also a great difference. Margaret Fell's *True Testimony* vibrates with references to life: life not in some heaven or other world, but life here, now, welling up in hearts alive to the fountain of life.

Thus the reason for the 'apostacy and darkness' which had come over the world was that 'false apostles' had 'turned aside from the life and power' and were thus unable to discern the inner voice of the Spirit.³⁴ This Spirit Margaret Fell again and again describes as the 'Spirit of life' or 'the Spirit of life and power' or the 'Spirit of life and truth that nourishes the soul and leads into all truth', 'the Spirit of the living God', the 'Spirit that gives life' as contrasted with the letter that kills.³⁵ All these phrases are of course quotations or near quotations of Biblical sources, and it might be thought that their use would be unremarkable in religious writing. Up to a point that is true; but I suggest that the ways in which Margaret Fell uses the trope of life goes well beyond standard usage of the time. Her message is that this life is creative, it offers new possibilities, of which the emergence of the Quakers is evidence and promise. Far from emphasising death and some other better world, Margaret Fell emphasises the new life and new possibilities for justice and truth that are springing up in this world, offering hope and flourishing. It is the denial of this life, the 'endeavour to limit the Spirit of the living God',³⁶ which has caused the ungodliness and death-dealing of the age, says Fell, and it is by returning to the life of God and finding in oneself that welling up of divine life which is the remedy, because it brings the possibility of radically new insight and action. There is, here, a challenge to the ways of thinking of early modernity, the contours of a different approach.

3. THE LAMB'S WAR AND THE SYMBOLIC OF VIOLENCE

This challenge emerges more strongly when we see how early Quaker women confronted issues of warfare and violence that were a significant part of the symbolic of death and that took particular forms in the late seventeenth century. There was of course plenty of actual war and violence and death in that turbulent period: the Civil War, the beheading of Charles I, and the war with the Dutch took up much of the century, to say nothing of Cromwell's forcible occupation of Ireland and the violent 'pacification' of dissenters nearer home. England was also busy exporting violence, as Canada was opened up for the fur trade, and colonialism and the slave trade of the Atlantic triangle got into full swing. Not much attention has been paid to the fact that north Lancashire and Westmorland, which was crucial as a cradle of Quakerism, was also at that time crucial to navigation and slavery: Ulverston was a significant port and a centre of ship building, and Spark Bridge nearby had a large slave market where men and women newly brought from Africa were sold at auction for the West Indies plantations. Swarthmoor Hall was only a few miles away, in easy walking distance. The warfare and violence of the age were so deeply ingrained that major thinkers took it for granted. Thomas Hobbes, in 1651, assumed that in a 'state of nature' there would be 'a war of all against all'.³⁷ That much could be taken without argument; the question was only how to deal with it. Other philosophers and political thinkers shared the premise and differed from Hobbes only in terms of what to do about it.³⁸

Against all this early Quakers took a stand. George Fox sought not only not to do violence but 'to live in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars',³⁹ refused to enlist in the army,⁴⁰ and warned against 'doing violence to any man'⁴¹ though much was done to him. In spite of their frequent and violent imprisonments, beatings and other sufferings at the hands of church and state, Friends were committed to pacifism, both in the negative sense of not reciprocating violence and in the positive sense of working for that which makes for peace. In 1659 George Fox wrote to Quakers:

All Friends everywhere, take heed to keep out of the powers of the earth that run into wars and fightings, which make not for peace but go from that... Keep in peace, and the love and power of God, and unity and love to one another... and so know a kingdom which hath no end, and fight for that with spiritual weapons, which take away the occasion of the carnal; and there gather men to war, as many as you can, and set up as many as you will with these weapons.⁴²

It was a radical stance in a world filled with violence.

George Fox was of course not alone in emphasizing spiritual warfare, nor was he the first. For Puritan thinkers, too, 'the main business of Christian wayfaring was war', the war of the spirit against the flesh and the world. William

Haller, in his classic work on the period, asserts that the supreme image which, for that purpose, they sought to impress upon the minds of the people was that of 'the soldier enlisted under the banner of Christ'.⁴³ Thus, as Haller goes on to observe, the symbolism of the Christian year, of nativity and even of atonement gave way to the symbolic of conflict between Christ and Satan: at the Fall in the garden of Eden, in Jesus' temptations in the wilderness and in the Armageddon to come. This agonistic symbolic was reinforced in countless sermons, pamphlets and books.⁴⁴ The preoccupation of the age with death and violence was thus internalised. The Civil War was fought not only between Royalists and Parliamentarians: according to Puritan thinking, a civil war was perpetually fought within every Christian soul. The outer reality and the inward symbolic of death and violence reflected and reinforced one another.

A crucial difference of this from the early Quakers, as already observed, was that the Quakers renounced the outward expression of this violence: the warfare was to be exclusively spiritual. Yet I suggest that this was not the only difference. In their turning inward, the early Quakers also changed the shape of the symbolic, much mitigating its violence and its preoccupation with death. James Nayler called it 'the Lamb's War'; it was a gentle name for the inner struggle, and found much favour with early Friends.

The Lamb... hath called us to make War in righteousness for his name's sake, against Hell and death, and all the powers of darkness... And they that follow the Lamb shall overcome, and get the victory over the Beast, and over the Dragon, and over the gates of Hell.⁴⁵

And it was overtly seen as a struggle for life, rather than an obsession with death.

The Lamb's War you must know before you can witness his kingdom... The Lamb wars... in whomsoever he appears, and calls them to joyn with him herein... with all their Might... that he may form a new Man, a new Heart, new Thoughts, and a new Obedience... and there is his Kingdom.⁴⁶

That this would have social consequences was not in doubt. This was not, in the seventeenth century, a turn away from the world, much less a romanticising of it: the numbers of Friends in prison and enduring persecution would eliminate any such tendency. It was, however, a rejection of the world's methods of violence and warfare, an effort for a new symbolic and a new society.

In the lives and writings of women Quakers the emphasis on life and newness receives further emphasis and the symbolic of violence – even the internal warfare stressed by Quaker men – is less pronounced. It does not disappear altogether: especially in the apocalyptic writings images of battle and destruction are prominent. Nevertheless many of the women do not write in terms of warfare, and when they do, the emphasis falls differently. Sarah Blackbarrow, writ-

ing in 1658 (only six years after Quakers emerged as a coherent body, and while Cromwell was still alive) pleads with her readers who reject her message that in them 'the pure spirit of the Lord which is light and life' is ignored, 'and the begotten of the Father of life eternall, strangled'.⁴⁷ Although she tries to persuade her readers, her imagery is less that of conflict or violence than a mixture of seeking, illumination, and integrity. She speaks of the inner witness of God, 'which is faithful and true, and will not lye,' and says, 'as you obey it you will come to see and know it, to be the beginning of the creation of God in you again'.⁴⁸ This newness of life was the aim, not simply the vanquishing of sin or Satan.

In 1660 Margaret Fell wrote an account of Quaker principles and practice to the newly crowned King Charles II and his Parliament, which she called *We are the People of God called Quakers*. She asked for toleration and justice, freedom from the persecution to which they had been subjected. This declaration was signed also by thirteen prominent Quaker men, including George Fox. (That they were willing to have a woman represent them to the King, and to put their names to what a woman wrote, says much both about gender relations among early Friends and about Margaret Fell's personal stature and competence.) An important part of her reasoning with the King consisted of a presentation of the Quaker peace testimony, as it has come to be called; and in this the imagery of warfare, even internal warfare, is subdued. It is not completely absent: she speaks (quoting Scripture) of 'weapons... not carnal but spiritual,' and she is honest about the internal conflict involved. But she states the Quaker position forthrightly, almost flatly:

We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity. It is our desire that others' feet may walk in the same. [We] do deny and bear our testimony against all strife, wars, and contentions that come from the lusts that war in the members, that war against the soul, which we wait for, and watch for in all people. [We] love and desire the good of all. For no other cause but love to the souls of all people have our sufferings been.⁴⁹

It is this 'waiting for the soul', watching for the seeds of life in all people, that characterises the writings of early Quaker women much more strongly than do metaphors of violence and war, even the gentler 'Lamb's war' of Quaker men. And these seeds of life and newness were not merely spiritual, leading to heaven beyond the grave; they were, rather, simplicity, integrity, plain speech, and efforts for social justice that early Friends paid for with persecution, imprisonment, and violence.

Women along with men did not shrink from the logic of this peace testimony whose aim was life and goodness rather than death and violence. If they were intent on trying to remove the occasion for war, this could best be done by opening channels of communication with those who might have resorted to violence, and trying to eliminate causes of oppression and inequality. Thus we

find early Friends undertaking journeys which even by today's standards would be daunting, and by the standards of the time were nothing short of heroic. Among the earliest to 'travel in the ministry', as it came to be called, were Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers who, after various journeys in Scotland and England where they were imprisoned and publicly stripped and beaten, went together in 1658 en route to Alexandria: not the sort of destination that would be immediately obvious, but part of the concerted Quaker effort to publish the news of life as they understood it. I have already mentioned their suffering when they fell into the hands of the Inquisition when their ship put in at Malta. Other Quakers went to Holland, Germany, and other parts of the continent of Europe, while still others went to the New World, as did Fox himself. Quakers' efforts to work for peace and understanding took them into situations where they themselves experienced violence, often from the same groups of Puritans who gave them trouble at home.⁵⁰

Clearly illustrative of the efforts of women to work creatively for better understanding and a refusal to collude with oppression was the journey of Joan Vokins to New England and several Carribean islands. George Fox with some companions had been there ten years before, and had met with both Blacks and whites.⁵¹ In the meantime, however, a law had been passed prohibiting Blacks in Quaker meetings in British colonies;⁵² and when George Fox was asked about what the Quaker response should be, he encouraged 'civil disobedience'.⁵³ By the time Joan Vokins went, she experienced difficulty even getting to the Islands; but by various means she managed to get from one to another, often against the advice and wishes of those on whose ships she took passage, and sometimes in peril of her life. Against considerable odds, Vokins got to Barbados, and says of her time there:

most Days I had two or three Meetings of a Day, both among the Blacks, and also among the White People: And the power of the Lord Jesus was mightily manifested, so that my Soul was, often melted therewith, even in the Meetings of the Negro's or Blacks, as well as among Friends.⁵⁴

The troubling distinction between 'Blacks' and 'Friends' – the implicit assumption is that Friends are White – shows something to be desired in Vokins' attitudes. Nevertheless, this is light years ahead of her time: while others were capturing and enslaving Black Africans and selling them to the Carribean market, Vokins goes to Meeting with them, 'her Soul ... often melted therewith'. It is an enactment of the peace testimony, at great personal cost; and it stands in direct contrast to the violent exploitation and death as enacted in British imperialist policy in the late seventeenth century.

4. 'COME HOME TO WITHIN': LOCATING THE DIVINE

Nobody doubts that early Quakers, especially early Quaker women, had different principles and practices from their contemporaries in seventeenth century England. What I am arguing is that not only is this the case, but that at the deeper level of the social symbolic, their perspective was fundamentally different. Whereas society was mired ever more deeply in an obsession with death and violence which became the symbolic of later modernity, Quaker women were much more concerned with choosing life, developing life and peace. I do not wish to overstate the difference between Quaker men and women in this regard: Quaker men were as deeply committed to the peace testimony as were the women, and suffered as much for it. My impression is that women were just a little farther out on the same limb as the men in the development of a symbolic of life as against the symbolic of violence and death.

But if it is the case that the Quaker symbolic was at an angle to that of the late seventeenth century, the question that cries out for an answer is how this came to be so? What was at the root of the difference? What enabled Quakers to focus on justice in this world while others called for its destruction and thought that a better world could be found only beyond the grave? What gave them the insight and courage to develop a peace testimony in a world as full of violence as theirs?

One answer might be that because war is a gendered activity, women who did not go to fight were able to see and deplore the violence and carnage all around them. This would be true of non-Quaker women too, of course; but because of the greater gender equality among Quakers than in the rest of society, Quaker women's voices were heard more strongly and with greater respect, and therefore had greater influence on the collective testimonies of Friends. There is probably something in this, but it can hardly be the whole story, not least because their peace testimony seems to me to flow out of a symbolic of life rather than to precede or cause it.

I suggest, rather, that the key to the difference of symbolic is a difference in the Quaker location of the divine, a difference which became more acute with the passage of time. Whereas the rest of society – for all their religious differences – held to a concept of God sharply other than the world (a concept which in its extreme forms came to be known as Deism), Quakers believed that the divine was within human persons, a life and light and seed and fountain – they mixed their metaphors happily – in everyone. To show something of what they meant by this and how I think it grounded their symbolic, I will once again turn to the writings of women, though I would emphasise that men, too, held to and developed the teaching of God within.

Every Quaker knows Margaret Fell's account of her conviction. She reports that, as she sat with her children in Ulverston parish church, George Fox challenged the priest and congregation with the words, 'You will say, Christ saith this, and the Apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light, and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?'

And Margaret Fell continues,

This opened me so, that it cut me to the Heart; and then I saw clearly, we were all wrong ... And I cried in my Spirit to the Lord, We are all Thieves, we are all Thieves; we have taken the Scriptures in Words, and know nothing of them in ourselves.⁵⁵

In some ways this recognition of the importance of internalising the Gospel would hardly have been disputed by any Christian group: the Puritans after all emphasised personal faith and commitment; and the standard teaching of the established Church, in word and sacrament, would concur with the need for personal, inward appropriation. Yet Margaret Fell seems to have meant something well beyond this standard teaching (which by all accounts of her early life she was already taking very seriously). Whatever exactly she meant at the time of her conviction, her subsequent thought led her to an understanding of God within that put her and those with her into a quite different symbolic frame.

By the time Margaret Fell wrote her *True Testimony* in 1660, the question of locating the divine was one that she found necessary to confront head on. Her central message is that Quakers base their teaching and practice and authority directly on 'the Spirit of life and truth that nourishes the soul and leads into all truth.'⁵⁶ Whereas others insisted on the authority of the Bible and the teachings of the Church, Margaret Fell writes (citing Jesus' saying to the woman of Samaria):

Now I do ask all the teachers and professors of Christendom, where this Spirit is, that God is to be worshipped in, if it be not in man? ... Where this worship of God in the Spirit is performed, if it be not in man? Where God's throne is, where the Ancient of Days does sit? Where the scepter of Christ is swayed, which is a righteous scepter? Where the King is, that shall reign and prosper, whose name is called, The Lord our Righteousness?⁵⁷

It is only by the life of God *within*, locating the divine not in some far off heaven but sitting as King in the human heart, that it is possible to discern truth and righteousness. As Margaret Fell says in her *Declaration*, 'No people can retain God in their knowledge, and worship him as God, but first they must come to that of God in them'.⁵⁸

This insistence on the divine within was already crucial in the earliest Quaker writing. In 1650, several years before Margaret Fell's conviction, a woman named Sarah Jones, who identified herself as 'a poor widow of Bristol', wrote an epistle called 'This is Light's appearance in the Truth to all the precious dear Lambs of the Life', that is, to the earliest clusters of Friends in Bristol and beyond. Even at this very early date, her central message to her 'dear Lambs' is

that they should 'sink down into that eternal word, and rest there, and not in any manifestations ... sink down into that measure of life that ye have received, and go not out with your in-looking at what is contrary to you'.⁵⁹ The Word, the Spirit of God, she insists, 'is in thy heart', and only harm can come to one who turns from this and 'goes a gadding and hunting after the manifestations that proceeds from the word in others' vessels'.⁶⁰ As Dorothy White was to put it twelve years later, the Spirit is within; it is 'your choicest treasure'; and therefore 'let every man come home to within, and search his own house, that he may find that precious Pearl which hath been lost, even that true Light which leadeth unto Eternal Life' because it is this which 'brings up the soul of man out of death'.⁶¹ The linkages of the divine within rather than beyond, the emphasis on life, and the contrast with death are already firmly in place.

The question which the early Quakers would be bound to have to face, and sooner rather than later, was the relationship between the inner Light of the divine within and the authority of the Bible. I have already discussed Friends' saturation in scripture: it is obvious that they treasured and internalised it, learned it by heart so that their very thoughts were shaped by Biblical phrases. Nevertheless, early Quakers held that it was only by the inner Light that one could recognise the truth of Scripture, a truth which was as much a question of obedience and action as of belief: 'tis not Inky Character can make a Saint', said Elizabeth Bathurst in 1679.⁶² It was this same Elizabeth Bathurst who developed a careful theological account of the Quaker understanding of Scripture, *Truth Vindicated*, which was as well reasoned and important in its time as Barclay's *Apology* with which it was roughly contemporaneous.

Before her conviction Bathurst had struggled with the accusation that Quakers 'deny the Scriptures', the Sacraments, and the sacrifice of Christ, together with the resurrection of the body and other standard Christian teachings. Bathurst completely rejects the idea that Quakers deny the Scriptures. Yet she appeals to many instances in the Bible itself, which prove, as she says, 'by Scripture road' that while the Bible is to be believed and obeyed, it can only be understood by the Spirit within. She points out that the Bible itself never claims to be the Word of God, that Word who 'was with God and was God'; it claims only to 'bear witness of Him'. The words of the Bible are 'the Lord's words', but not *the* Word. 'So here it may be seen', she says, 'there is good reason to distinguish between written Words, the Writing or Letter, and the living Word, which is a quickening Spirit'.⁶³ It is a fine distinction; here as elsewhere Bathurst shows herself to be a careful scholar and an acute logician. She argues that in view of the distinction, it is the Spirit of God who is the Rule of Faith and Guide of Life for Quakers, but 'yet doth not this detract from the Scriptures; or the respect in which they are held'. Quakers, she says, 'own' the Scriptures.

But they dare not ascribe them that Glory which is due to God, nor exalt them above his Son Christ Jesus, nor prefer them in his Spirit's stead; neither yet is it any Derogation from the Scriptures, to exalt Christ and his Spirit more than they.⁶⁴

Long before it was usual to do so, Bathurst appealed as well to two further facts: first, that through corruptions of translation and transmission the Bible as we have it is not in any case infallible; and second, that the vast majority of humankind have lived and died without the Scriptures, but it cannot be the case that there was 'no other means appointed for their Salvation'.⁶⁵ This was radical theology for the late seventeenth century, though she did not take the further radical step of asking whether there might be any case of the Inner Light and the Scriptures not agreeing, and which should take priority in case of such conflict.

With the Sacraments, Bathurst dealt rather more sharply. The baptism that is necessary for salvation is 'inward and spiritual', a baptism of the Holy Ghost, not a water baptism. Indeed, she asks, since the bible says that Christ's followers are to be baptised 'with the Holy Ghost and with fire', why don't literalists set themselves alight before being sprinkled with water?⁶⁶ She is scathing about transubstantiation; more sympathetic to the Lord's Supper as an act of remembrance, though once again she warns that this substitutes the outward for the inner divine reality. Her conclusion strongly emphasises the choice between a symbolic of death and the potential for new life which she placed before her late seventeenth century readers:

If any shall be offended at what I have written to vindicate the laying aside of this outward Sign, where the thing signified is inwardly come; if they will dwell upon the Figure of the Death of Christ without, and care not to come to know and witness his Resurrection and Life in themselves, I'll leave them where they are.⁶⁷

But Bathurst's message, like that of the other early Quaker women, is clear: Choose Life!

5. LIFE AND DEATH AT THE CUSP OF MODERNITY

It would be misleading to give the impression that Life was the only trope used by early Quakers, or even the most frequent: Light, for example, is hugely important in their writings. Nevertheless, it has been my suggestion that early Quakers' emphasis on Life, especially the divine life within, is at an angle to the developing symbolic of death and violence of early modernity. God was not far off, in another world to which the soul might escape after death, as was held in acute form in Deist writings and which had resonances also in Puritan thought. The divine, rather, was near at hand, 'that of God in everyone', not just as a divine spark, but as the Light that illumined Scripture and every aspect of 'the outward'.

It was consonant with this location of the divine within, I believe, that Quakers reconsidered many of the attitudes and actions common in the seventeenth century, starting with gender relations and working through to their

peace testimony and their eventual opposition to exploitation and slavery. If they aimed to 'answer that of God in everyone' it could not be by violence. Yet while this stance led to the appreciation of individuals, it would not be merely as atoms of competition in an increasingly market driven world, but as fundamentally sharing in the divine. Moreover, while a Quaker stance would make for delight and appreciation of the physical world, and thus for an enthusiasm for scientific investigation and discovery, this enthusiasm would not be on the basis of a removal of God from the world, as in the increasing secularism of the time. Rather, they sought to discern and cooperate with the divine Life. Hence their approach left room for ecological concern rather than exploitation and domination of the physical world.

The seventeenth century in England was by any standards a turning point for the west. It is my contention that modernity takes its shape from the choices that were made then: choices to construe the divine as other-worldly, to rank people and the earth into hierarchies of domination and exploitation, to pursue competitive individualism, violence, and war, and to invest in an increasingly market driven economy that gradually destroys the earth and its peoples. Modernity chose a love affair with death.

Early Quakers offered a different symbolic: if it had been chosen, modernity would have been incalculably different. We cannot now go back, and make the choices otherwise: we must deal with the violent history of the intervening centuries and the symbolic which is our habitus. But rediscovering the contours of an alternative symbolic at the cusp of modernity may give us resources for thinking and living otherwise, working to subvert from within our lifeworld of death and violence. As Margaret Fell wrote in 1653 to Friends who were paying with their lives for their witness to the divine life within,

So Life and Death is set before you; and if you be obedient to the Light, which never changeth, it will lead you out of death, and out of the fall from under the Curse, into the Covenant of Life... and so wait for the living Food, to come from the living God.⁶⁸

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the John Rylands Trust for this research. Most of the Quaker documents consulted are contained in the Midgley Collection of the John Rylands Library. For the general reader, many of the women's writings have recently been republished in Garman, M., Benefiel, M., Applegate, J., Meredith, D., (eds), *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker women's writings 1650-1700*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1996, hereafter HPS. Additional works of Margaret Fell are reprinted in Wallace, T. H. S., (ed.), *A Sincere and Constant Love: an introduction to the work of Margaret Fell*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1992, hereafter SCL.

² Margaret Fell Fox in *Quaker Faith and Practice: the book of Christian discipline of The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995, 20.31.

³ Cf. Punshon, J., *Portrait in Grey: a short history of the Quakers*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1984; Mack, P., *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth Century England*, Berkeley, CA and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992.

⁴ See Dollimore, J., *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1998.

⁵ HPS, p. 45.

⁶ HPS, p. 180.

⁷ See for example his set of sermons *On the Song of Songs* Vols I-IV trans. K. Walsh, OCSO,

- Cistercian Fathers Series 4, 7, 31, 40., Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977–80.
8 HPS, p. 300.
- 9 See Mack *Visionary Women*; Graham, E., Hinds, H., Hobby, E., and Wilcox, H., (eds), 'Introduction' to *Her Own Life: autobiographical writings by seventeenth-century Englishwomen*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
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- 13 Barbour, H., *The Quakers in Puritan England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964, p. 3; cf Bunyan, J., *Pilgrim's Progress*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- 14 Cf Hill, C., *Antichrist in Seventeenth Century England*, London: Penguin, 1971, pp. 78–88.
- 15 Quoted in Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England*, p. 29.
- 16 Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England*, p. 29; cf Hill, C., *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, London: Penguin, 1970.
- 17 Hill, C., *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1965.
- 18 Quoted in Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England*, pp. 8–9; cf Baxter, R., *The Holy Commonwealth London*, 1659.
- 19 See Gwyn, D., *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the rise of capitalism*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995.
- 20 Nickalls, J., (ed.), *Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, pp. 35–38. The date given for this occurrence in the *Journal* is 1649; but this material was not in the early manuscripts, and was added later, possibly by Fox himself, or perhaps by William Penn or Thomas Ellwood who edited the *Journal* after Fox's death.
- 21 London, 1659.
- 22 HPS, p. 129.
- 23 HPS, pp. 131–32.
- 24 HPS, p. 134.
- 25 HPS, p. 139.
- 26 HPS, p. 140.
- 27 HPS, p. 142.
- 28 SCL p. 15.
- 29 See McGregor, J. F. M., and Reay, B., (eds), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- 30 See Gwyn, D., *Apocalypse of the Word: the life and message of George Fox*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986.
- 31 SCL, p. 15.
- 32 SCL, p. 30.
- 33 SCL, p. 16.
- 34 SCL, p. 20.
- 35 SCL, pp. 23, 32, 33.
- 36 SCL, p. 38.
- 37 Hobbes, T., *Leviathan* (ed.) MacPherson, C. B., London: Penguin, 1968.
- 38 Cf Filmer, R., *Patriarchia and Other Works by Robert Filmer*, Laslett, P., (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1949; Locke, J., *Two Treatises of Government*, Laslett, P., (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.
- 39 Nickalls, *Journal*, p. 65.
- 40 Nickalls, *Journal* p. 67; cf pp. 197–98.
- 41 Nickalls, *Journal* p. 157.
- 42 Nickalls, *Journal* p. 358; cf pp. 357, 398–404.
- 43 Haller, p. 150.
- 44 Haller, p. 152.
- 45 Edward Burrough, quoted in Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England*, p. 40. See also

- Underwood, T. L., *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War: the Baptist – Quaker conflict in seventeenth-century England*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- 46 James Nayler, quoted in Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England*, pp. 40–41. See also Damrosch, L., *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus: James Nayler and the Puritan crackdown on the free spirit*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- 47 HPS, p. 51.
- 48 HPS, p. 51.
- 49 SCL, p. 54.
- 50 A famous example is that of Mary Dyer and her friends. See Plumpton, R., *Mary Dyer: biography of a rebel Quaker*, Boston: Branden Publishing Co., 1994.
- 51 Nickalls, *Journal* pp. 594–611.
- 52 In the late seventeenth century, Britain and the Netherlands were competing 'for monopoly in the buying and selling of black slaves.' Drake, St C., *Black Folk Here and There 2 Vols.*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, Vol. II p. 269.
- 53 Nickalls, *Journal* p. 717.
- 54 HPS, p. 270.
- 55 HPS, p. 235.
- 56 SCL, p. 23.
- 57 SCL, p. 25.
- 58 SCL, p. 53.
- 59 HPS, p. 35.
- 60 HPS, p. 36.
- 61 HPS, p. 139.
- 62 HPS, p. 341.
- 63 HPS, p. 351.
- 64 HPS, p. 352.
- 65 HPS, p. 352.
- 66 HPS, p. 363–64.
- 67 HPS, p. 369.
- 68 HPS, p. 455.

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