

Two Early Quaker Pamphlets from the East of England

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This research note contextualises, and in one case transcribes, two early pamphlets concerning the Quakers which remain difficult to access. In each, dated 1655 and 1659, we can see crucial early interactions between the movement and outsiders. The earlier, an anti-Quaker work, details a sexual scandal in Norfolk that brought criticism from within and without the movement, including local magistrates and an active puritan community. Though compiled by a critic, the text includes written testimonies by Quakers. The later text concerns a series of disputes at the University of Cambridge, illustrating the development of debating styles between Quakers and scholars, as well as the occasional dislocation between in-person disputes and their transcription. In both cases, Friends set about drawing early dividing lines, in a region of Britain which has often received less scholarly attention.



Early Quakers used the burgeoning print culture of the English Revolution to discuss their faith and publicise their beliefs.¹ Their pamphlets of this period have proved a fertile source for researchers of seventeenth-century religion, politics, and culture. Two tracts of the mid-1650s remain, unusually for modern historians, undigitised and little known. Both concern controversies in the East of England, and shed light on the Quaker movement's beginnings in that region and wider political and denominational relations.

One, *The discovery of a Wolf in Sheeps Cloathing* (1655. Wing, A4126A), is a single sheet, anonymous, anti-Quaker work which intersperses Quaker testimonies. It does not appear in historian Rosemary Moore's bibliography of anti-Quaker writings – a popular endeavour among contemporary religious controversialists – and is only available at Trinity College, Cambridge.² Given its length, it is reproduced in this Research Note below.³ The other, by Quakers George Whitehead and George Fox the Younger, entitled *Truth defending the Quakers* (1659. Wing, W1969A), appears in Moore's bibliography of Quaker works as only available at Trinity College.⁴ This is not strictly true: the Library of the Society of Friends in London also holds a copy, but it remains difficult to access.

Both works, despite their obscurity, shed valuable light on religious disputation during the period in which England was a Commonwealth (1649–53, and 1659–60) and quasi-monarchical Protectorate under Oliver (1653–58) and Richard Cromwell (1658–59). The earlier tract, *The discovery of a Wolf in Sheeps Cloathing* (1655), illustrates instances of persecution, inter-denominational strife, and gender politics in Cromwellian England. For the Quakers, it concerned germinal problem: the policing of behaviours. The pamphlet related a sexual scandal involving Christopher Atkinson, a Friend hailing from Kendal, Westmorland, in the north of England, which requires recounting. Atkinson and Lancashire Quaker Richard Hubberthorne had gone to Norwich (in the south-eastern county of Norfolk) with other Friends, including George Whitehead and Thomas Symonds, to spread the Quakers' message. Margaret Fell, a prominent Friend who took an early lead on organisational and disciplinary matters, had initial doubts about Atkinson. He acted in Norwich as an authority of sorts, but while imprisoned with Hubberthorne, conducted a sexual affair with a servant of Symond's,

¹ Rosemary Moore, *The Light in their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666*, University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2nd edn, 2020; Kate Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

² For both bibliographies, see 'Quaker publications 1652/3-1659' and 'Anti-Quaker publications 1653-1666', *Quaker Heritage Press*, <http://www.qhpress.org/rmoore/> (accessed 27/10/2023).

³ *The discovery of a Wolf in Sheeps Cloathing* is reprinted here with the permission of The Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.

⁴ 'Quaker publications 1652/3-1659'.

named Ursula, was disowned by the Norwich-based Friends,⁵ and issued the confession contained in the pamphlet transcribed below this Research Note.

The text details several interesting features: the precise goings on among Friends in England's East; the early activities of several leading Friends in subsequent years; puritan and Quaker approaches to perceived sexual immorality; and the conditions of imprisonment during this period. Atkinson fled his confines, and the Quakers' engagement with him appears to have ended. Prior to this episode, he published four pamphlets defending the movement from 1653–55, including in collaboration with Whitehead, Hubberthorne, and Edward Burrough. Before the scandal broke, Atkinson's name was attached, from his jail cell, to *Ishmael, and his mother, cast out into the wilderness, amongst the wild beasts of the same nature* (1655).⁶ This text responded to *The Scriptures proved to be the word of God, and the only foundation of faith, and rule for our obedience* (1654) by Sampson Townshend,⁷ the minister for St. Austin's and Saviour's parish in Norwich, and other 'Priests' within the town. Whitehead, Symonds, and James Lancaster, also contributed to the Quaker pamphlet.⁸ Evidently, Atkinson was a prominent early leader and disputant in the area prior to his misconduct.

The discovery appears as number 13 in a bound collection of Quaker-authored pamphlets at Trinity College, Cambridge (K.7.84). Three points are worthy of note alongside its reproduction below. Firstly, the alleged, earlier conversion of John Gilpin by Atkinson, alluded to in the pamphlet, is probably spurious. Gilpin was another Kendal resident, who was purportedly seduced and suffered delusions under the Quakers' manipulation. Gilpin published a pamphlet about this, to which Atkinson responded in hostile terms (this may account for the confusion, although expansions on the Gilpin theme were common at this time).⁹ Secondly, the publishing of this piece by William Frankling of Norwich followed a stream of puritan publications which Frankling released concerning his home town.¹⁰ This included Sampson Townshend's text. Frankling's and Townshend's contributions suggest a settled puritan-Quaker divide, with different communities regularly arrayed against one another. The work is indicative, finally, of

⁵ Moore, *The Light*, pp. 26, 136.

⁶ Christopher Atkinson, George Whitehead, James Lancaster, and Thomas Simonds, *Ishmael, and his mother, cast out into the wilderness, amongst the wild beasts of the same nature*. London: Giles Calvert, 1655.

⁷ Sampson Townshend, *The Scriptures proved to be the word of God, and the only foundation of faith, and rule for our obedience*. London: William Frankling, 1654.

⁸ It is possible, but not definite, that the weaver 'Thomas Symonds' of *The discovery of a Wolf in Sheeps Cloathing* ('Thomas Simonds' in *Ishmael, and his mother*), is the same as the prolific London printer of Quaker pamphlets, Thomas Simmonds/Simmons, from 1655–61.

⁹ See Euan David McArthur, *James Nayler and the Quest for Historic Quaker Identity*, Leiden: Brill, 2024, pp. 43–44.

¹⁰ See, for examples, the anonymous *Vox Norvvici: or The cry of Norwich, vindicating their ministers*, London: William Franckling, 1646; John Collinges, *Saints duty discoursed*, London: William Franckling, 1649.

the twin perils early Quakers faced, between attacks from outside the movement and possible infidelity from those inside it. Norwich-based Friends disowned Atkinson, and perhaps Ursula, at this point, but did so partly under the prompting and duress of non-Quakers.

The dilemmas concerning Atkinson came to the fore again in 1656. Another early leader, James Nayler, began accepting Christological a select band of Friends, causing consternation among the wider movement in this year. The controversy culminated in October, with an enactment by Nayler and his group of Christ's entry to Jerusalem in Bristol and other towns in the south-west. Nayler's trial followed in Parliament, accompanied by accusations from non-Quakers impropriety between Nayler and his female devotees, foremost Martha Simmonds. Friends largely rejected Nayler's actions, but condemned his imprisonment and corporal punishment, and eventually welcomed him back to the fold. Though different in provenance and outcome, issues similar to the Atkinson case remained live.

The second pamphlet in question presents a contrast. In this, the Quakers appear a confident force, establishing themselves and returning to face powerful adversaries in the East of England – this time in Cambridgeshire, a neighbouring county to Norfolk. The movement developed more enemies in the four years between the pamphlets, but also an enhanced capacity to respond to them at length. Rather than appearing vulnerable or besieged, this tract shows a willingness by Quakers to challenge elites, in this case university scholars, in their own terms. The publication and collation of *Truth defending the Quakers, and their principles; or the Answer of truth to 55 questions propounded to George Whitehead and George Fox* (all editions published in London, 1659, by Thomas Simmonds), requires some unpacking. The pamphlet is not extant as an independent work, despite not seeming to be especially rare among contemporaries: Quaker critics cited it throughout the seventeenth century.¹¹

Truth defending is available, instead, in bound volumes at Trinity (C.9.106[9] and Y.9.75[9]), as well as the Friends House Library (s 011.2 WHI). The first collection at Trinity, C.9.106, contains nine pamphlets. A handwritten note tells us that it was 'bequeathed' by James Duport (1606–79), a classical scholar, Dean of Peterhouse and eventually Master of Magdalen College. The first six works are by Hugh Broughton (1549–1612), an English theologian; another two concern Protestant theology. *Truth defending*, somewhat incongruously at the back, is truncated, ending after 54 pages.

¹¹ George Keith, *The Arguments of the Quakers*, London: C. Brome, 1698, p. 40; Charles Leslie, *Satan Disrob'd from His Disguise of Light*, London: C. Brome, 1698, p. 10; Thomas Underhill, *Hell Broke Loose: or An history of the Quakers*, London: Simon Miller, 1660, p. 45.

The other Trinity volume, Y.9.75, in which it appears contains a variety of controversial tracts from the 1640s and 50s: some anti-Quaker, one pro-Scottish in a Civil War context, and pamphlets by William Caton, an early Friend and preacher. This edition of *Truth defending* includes, following page 54, the divisional title page ‘The integrity of the innocent, and the living truth vindicated’, a section responding to a work by controversialist Christopher Wade, *Quakery slain* (1657). The anti-Quaker pieces, both by Thomas Danson (a minister ejected from the Church of England in 1662), concern an in-person debate with Quakers Whitehead, Richard Hubberthorne, and Samuel Fisher, and a response to Whitehead’s *The voice of wisdom* (1659). The edition of *Truth defending* at Friends House (s 011.2 WHI) also contains the final section, following page 54, against Wade. It is bound and preceded by two earlier Whitehead pamphlets, *The voice of wisdom* and *The seed of Israels redemption* (also 1659). These are more fitting accompaniments, but the origins of this collection are equally unknown.

While the latter two volumes are thematically coherent, neither captures the discursive context in which *Truth defending* emerged. The Quakers often made clear their opposition to the learning at the great universities, including in debates at Cambridge.¹² But *Truth defending* showed a developing relationship between university men and outsiders, as well as the wider public. The text developed from debates held in the city in August 1659, in which Whitehead was joined by a George Fox, this one ‘Younger in the Truth’ (though not age) than his more famous namesake, to debate Thomas Smith, Fellow of Christ’s College and University librarian. Fox had been converted by Whitehead in Suffolk in 1655, and spent nearly a year with him in prison in Bury St. Edmunds. After both had carried out missions elsewhere, including London, they found themselves back in England’s East, preaching and debating adversaries in Cambridge.¹³

Those with degrees in Divinity were, like Smith, controversial figures;¹⁴ in *Truth defending* itself, Whitehead and Fox point to the divine wisdom of many ‘without being taught at Schools or Universities’, and the lack of wisdom of many that are.¹⁵ The first literary sally concerning their August 1659 debates was Thomas Smith’s *The Quaker disarm’d, or, A true relation of a late publick dispute held at Cambridge by three*

¹² Richard Hubberthorne, *The immediate call to the ministry of the Gospel*, London: Giles Calvert, 1654.

¹³ Richard L. Greaves, ‘Fox, George, the younger (d. 1661)’ [2004], DNB, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10030> (accessed 21/12/2023).

¹⁴ Richard Hubberthorne, *A True Testimony of the Zeal of the Oxford-Professors and University-Men*, London: Giles Calvert, 1654; Richard Hubberthorne, *A Reply to a Book set Forth by [...] R. Sherlock, a Batcheler of Divinity*, London: Giles Calvert, 1654.

¹⁵ George Whitehead and George Fox the Younger, *Truth Defending the Quakers*, London: Thomas Simmonds, 1659, Trinity College, Y.9.75[9], p. 27.

eminent Quakers against one scholar of Cambridge (1659).¹⁶ Smith related his debate with Whitehead in Westminster in May, and another in Cambridge on 29 August with him, Fox and William Allen, which prompted his pamphlet. The text itself purports to reproduce the later debate, recalling what Whitehead, Fox, and Smith said to one another, before reproducing a letter from Smith to another individual near Cambridge (in Cambridgeshire) on theological matters. The text is particularly interesting for its attempt by a scholar to meet Quaker propositions by syllogistic reasoning,¹⁷ as well as outlining the intimate enmity between Quakers and their interlocuters.

Truth defending primarily responded to Smith's text. It begins by appealing to the apparently innocent 'people of Cambridge' against the magistracy, university, rabble, and 'Priests' such as Smith, referring to a wider, local constituency. Whitehead and Fox's response to 55 hostile written queries delivered to them signed by 'R.B.', a pseudonym, follows. The authors repeatedly allege that 'thou Thomas Smith [...] hast concealed thy name like a thief';¹⁸ the questions from 'R.B.' suggest Smith's style, and Whitehead's autobiography also surmised that they were from him.¹⁹

Both Whitehead and Fox were familiar with such debates. They engaged in lengthy literary debates with another East of England group, men whom they called 'Manifestarians', from the second half of 1659. The Manifestarians included, most prominently, Thomas Moore, a weaver of Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, and King's Lynn, Norfolk, Moore's son, also Thomas, and John Horne, a minister in King's Lynn who had been educated at Trinity College, Cambridge.²⁰ The region was evidently an arena of intellectual contest. *Truth defending's* final section, concerning *Quakery slain* (1657), was directed at its author, Christopher Wade. Wade, an occasional controversialist, released subsequent publications expressing anti-Quaker views and was living at Waterbeach, near Cambridge, in May 1659.²¹ In the Cambridge debates, Smith quoted *Ishmael, and his mother* (1655), the text Whitehead co-authored with Atkinson and others in Norfolk, against Whitehead and Fox.²² This seems to be the extent to which *The discovery* and *Truth defending* were linked, but disputation, drawing together magistrates, scholars, and Quakers, defined the area.

¹⁶ Thomas Smith, *The Quaker Disarm'd*, London: J.C., 1659.

¹⁷ Paul Hammond, 'Thomas Smith: a Beleaguered Humanist of the Interregnum', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 56 (Nov. 1983), pp. 180–94.

¹⁸ Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, p. 13.

¹⁹ George Whitehead, *The Christian Progress*, London: J. Sowle, 1725, p. 167.

²⁰ Geoffrey Nuttall, 'Appendix: The Manifestarian Controversy', in *Early Quaker Letters from the Swarthmore MSS. to 1660*, London: Friends House, 1952, pp. 293–97.

²¹ Christopher Wade, *To All Those called Quakers*, London: Samuel Speed, 1659, p. 16.

²² Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, p. 24.

Truth defending is not groundbreaking in terms of its theological content, although it contains important reflections on the Trinity, sacraments, and tithes. Whitehead writes against the ‘Popish tearm of three distinct persons in the Trinity’, and the conceptualisation of ‘three Gods’²³ in sharp contrast to his later attempts to align Quakerism with Protestant Christianity, particularly after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.²⁴ The text demands that magistrates be inspired by the law of God, yet against the revolutionary trends in the country denies the validity of temporal revolution outside the ecclesiastical sphere.²⁵ Perhaps most notably, Whitehead and Fox are prompted to debate scholastically, equipping themselves with arguments and evidence against what they deride as the ‘old road of Philosophy’.²⁶ They turn, through this, to occasionally humorous and casuistical logic: on the topic of women speaking, for example, they point out that many are bereft of men to provide good counsel.²⁷ After addressing the 55 queries, on page 30 the pair address Smith’s *The Quaker disarm’d* under a new heading (with similar arguments), and on pages 46–52 they provide their own questions for Smith, ‘or for any other Priests and Scholars in Cambridge, or elsewhere’.²⁸ The text concludes with a Postscript examining Smith’s pastoral inattention and ecclesiastical pluralism, labelling him a ‘wolf [...] with the sheeps cloathing upon him’,²⁹ echoing Matthew 7:15 and the earlier pamphlet concerning Atkinson.

Others were attracted to the literature surrounding the Cambridge debates. The debates prompted, curiously, a pamphlet sympathetic towards the Quakers from a General Baptist, Henry Denne. Denne produced *The Quaker no Papist, in answer to The Quaker disarm’d. Or, A brief reply and censure of Mr. Thomas Smith’s frivolous relation of a dispute held betwixt himself and certain Quakers at Cambridge*.³⁰ He met his own response from Smith, entitled *A Gagg for the Quakers, with an Answer to Mr Denn’s Quaker no Papist*,³¹ accusing him of all manner of popery. All of these works were issued in 1659, and in 1660 followed a final written work: Whitehead’s *The Key of knowledge not found in the University Library of Cambridge* in response to *A Gagg for the Quakers*. Intriguingly, Whitehead provides a qualified defence of the Postscript from *Truth defending* detailing Smith’s indignities as a minister, but denies that either he or Fox authored it.³²

²³ Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, pp. 40, 42.

²⁴ Rosemary Moore, *George Whitehead and the Establishment of Quakerism*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp. 74–75, 105.

²⁵ Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, pp. 9–10, 21.

²⁶ Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, pp. 46–52.

²⁷ Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, p. 23.

²⁸ Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, p. 46.

²⁹ Whitehead and Fox, *Truth Defending*, p. 53.

³⁰ Henry Denne, *The Quaker no Papist*, London: Francis Smith, 1659.

³¹ Thomas Smith, *A Gagg for the Quakers*, London: J.C., 1659.

³² George Whitehead, *The Key of Knowledge*, London: Robert Wilson, 1660, ‘A Postscript’.

Some of the agendas at work might escape us, but it is clear that much was at stake. The existence of *Truth defending*, and the web it fell within, showed the willingness of Quakers to engage with learned scholars, including at the universities, when given the opportunity, rather than merely chastise from the sidelines. In 1660 came an extensive exercise in Quaker Biblical criticism, targeting learned men – *Rusticus ad academicos ... the rusticks alarm to the rabbies, or, The country correcting the university and clergy* (1660)³³ – by Samuel Fisher, a graduate of Oxford who was possibly aware of these debates. While 1659–60 were years of frenzied political activity for Quakers, many maintained a focus upon theological matters. With the movement displaying unity on matters of morality – partly in response to the James Nayler incident, but also the disciplining of lesser figures such as Atkinson – broader struggles came into view.

³³ Samuel Fisher, *Rusticus ad academicos ... the rusticks alarm to the rabbies, or, The country correcting the university and clergy*, London: Robert Wilson, 1660.

Appendix

The discovery of a Wolf in Sheeps Cloathing; Or, A true Relation of one Christopher Atkinson, A Quaker, who hath seduced divers simple people in Norwich; And to prevent further mischief, this following Narration was thought good to be Printed.

This Atkins. is he that seduced John Gilpon of Kendall, he was taken in the Street going up and down, crying out against the Minsters and people, telling them that they were in the flesh, and in darkness, of the World, and that the Ministers were dum dogs and prophesied lies, and much more to that purpose; and being caried before the Maior and examined the eleventh December 54

He said, That his habitation according to the flesh is in Kendall in Westmorland, and that he came from thence to London, and from thence to Norwich, at the command of the Lord, to declare the Message delivered to him to call men to repentance, and that is all the business he came about.

And being demanded to shew that respect to the Court as was requisite, he refused it, and said, He durst not do it for conscience sake, and being asked what he held concerning the Scriptures, he answered That the Scriptures were not the word of God, but a Declaration of the mind of God, and that the Elements of Bread and Wine, which they call Sacraments, are Carnall. Soon after he was apprehended for disturbing a Minister in the time of his Sermon, and being in custody, many of his seduced friends came daily to visit him, amongst the rest this Ursula servant to Thomas Symonds one of his company whom he hath got with Child, as is testified by these Notes which were delivered into the Court of Mairalty.

Given in Norwich Gaele the third day of the fifth Moneth, 1655.

Whereas from the truth I am departed through the deceitfulness of sin, and the temptations of the Devill, by which the truth is like to suffer, therefore my condemnation I may justly own, and clear the truth of God, and them who in the truth dwell, who are clear and free from that which is the cause of my condemnation. The sin which I am guilty of, is that of having the carnall knowledge of a Woman, for which now the judgments of the Lord I find, which is a portion just for such:

For if the light of God which is pure been owned, my freedom had been from this, but now the vengeance of the Lord lyeth heavy upon me, which is my just reward, and the portion of all that fall from the light By mee.

Christopher Atkinson

Witnesse of the above said Declaration from mouth,

Iohn Stubbs, William Cotton [Caton?], Thomas Symonds

The above writing being declared to mee, I am moved of the Lord to make it known to you that are the Rulers of this City, that the truth of God may be cleared, and he to beare his own Iniquity which hath done this wicked deed, the which is hated of them that dwell in the light.

This from me. Tho. Symonds.

The Information of Thomas Symonds Weaver, taken before John Salter Esquire, Maior of the City of Norwich, the fourth day of July 1655.

Hee saith, That Christopher Atkinson did confess in this Informants hearing that he had the carnall knowledge of one Ursula the servant of this informant, and this said Ursula did confesse that the said Atkinson hath had the use of her body several times, and saith, That the wench is now gone, but whether he knows not.

Thomas Symonds.

He is now gotten out of the Prison, under pretence to go to the Post-house for a Letter, and being runn away, there is the description given of him the better to discover him in place where he shall come, to prevent him in his further delusions.

These art to will and require you, and in the name of his Highness Oliver Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, &c. straightly to charge and command you and every of you, forthwith upon sight hereof, to make diligent search in all suspected places, within your Towns and Parishes for the apprehending and taking of one Christopher Atkinson (who is called a Quaker) He is a little low man, somewhat round shouldered, with little or no hairs on his face, the hairs on his head somewhat long, and of a light brownish colour, his Clothes of a Tanto Starge[?] of a Greenish Gray colour, with a short Coat, and a gray Hat with a broad verge, a small Band on his Hat, and Russet Shoos, about the age of thirty years, who escaped out of the City Gaole in Norwich upon Wednesday the fourth of July 1655. And hath carried away certain Goods which are none of his own. These are therefore in case you shall or apprehend or take the partie above mentioned, That then you conveigh him or carry him before some Iustice of the Peace for the same County, there to be examined and dealt withall according to Law, or else to conveigh him back to the City Gaole in Norwich aforesaid. And hereof faile ye not, as you will answer this contrary at your perill. Given under my hand and Seal the fourth day of July, 1655

[Crossed out] John Salt, Maior

London, Printed for William Franckling Bookseller in Norwitch. 1655.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

