Why Quakers and Slavery? Why not More Quakers?

Quakers and Slavery, the title of this conference, focuses on phenomena occurring over two hundred years beginning in the 1650s and ending in 1864. Neither Quakerism nor slavery was the same at the beginning of the encounter as at the end. Initially Friends encountered the enslaved on the sugar plantations in the West Indies and tobacco plantations in Maryland and Virginia; soon slavery spread among Friends and other colonists in the North and South, but after the American Revolution it existed primarily in the states south of the Mason Dixon line. While there were common features, the institutions of slavery evolved over time and in different regions.

Major changes also occurred among Friends. Early Friends would have recognized a similarity in styles of worship, the practice of discipline, and the plain style of life among pre-Civil War Friends. They would have found the language Friends used to describe their religious life familiar and would not have been surprised that there were additional schisms. Still, they would have been disturbed, even appalled, at the bitterness and enormous differences in beliefs among American and, to a lesser extent, among British Friends. To put it bluntly, they would have found fault with what we would call theology but Friends defined as the essence of Christianity by Hicksites, Orthodox, Wilburites, and Progressive Friends. Fox would have discovered much to oppose in the faith-statements of Lucretia Mott, Joseph John Gurney, Edward Hicks, Elias Hicks, and John Wilbur. So historians need to be careful to recognize the diversity of Friends over time and not assume that the sources of the Quaker concerns with slavery remained essentially the same over two centuries.
Quakers have generally had a good press for their anti-slavery activities, in spite of the pervasive racism within and outside the meeting. Historians are in agreement that American Quakers were the first church to grapple seriously with the morality of Negro slavery, the first to require members to free their slaves, the first in the North and the South to found manumission societies and to work for the general emancipation and to defend the rights of freed blacks.¹ British Quakers, who had shown little interest in slavery during the first half of the eighteenth-century, took the lead in the agitation after the American Revolution designed first to end the slave trade and then to abolish slavery, although there is no consensus about the influence of the popular opinion on the decisions of Parliament in 1807 or 1833.² The slogan “immediate abolition,” popularized by William Lloyd Garrison, originated with English Quaker, Elizabeth Heyrick. However, British Friends, after 1831, including Joseph John Gurney and Joseph Sturje, had only limited influence in persuading Orthodox American Friends to join antislavery societies.


Instead, American Friends – Wilburite, Orthodox, and Hicksite – closed meetinghouses to abolitionist lecturers and, on occasion, disowned those Friends who criticized the meetings for timidity. It is easy for historians to ignore Friends influence on the broader antislavery movement on the eve of Civil War, except as a symbol of moral rectitude as portrayed in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Here the Halliday family, who seem to have no theology, by kindness and morality can aid fugitive slaves, reform slave traders, and turn a desire for vengeance into love.  

The periodization of Quakers and slavery is fourfold: initially in the 1650s and 60s, ignoring the institution and converting slave holders; 1680’s-1755, debate within the meetings over the morality of perpetual bondage while Quakers continued to buy and own slaves; 1758-1830, Friends first stop any participation in the slave trade, then require members to free slaves, and finally work for the gradual emancipation of the enslaved; 1830-1860s – no agreement among Friends over antislavery tactics – with some favoring Garrisonian abolition, others opposing it; some favoring colonization, others denouncing it; some favoring political action, others insisting that only a moral awakening of the South would work; a few – we don’t know how many – helping fugitive slaves, others doing nothing. As Friends at the time recognized, many varieties of antislavery opinion existed within the meeting. Still, there was agreement on some subjects: all insisted that slavery was immoral and should be ended; all feared war and endorsed a pacifist stance; most but not everyone would have agreed with the sentiment: “Fit for freedom, not for

---

friendship,” the title of a recent survey of Quaker attitudes to Afro-Americans. To summarize, from the 1670s until the Civil War, there was only one brief period from the 1760s until the 1820s when Quakers enjoyed what they termed “a sense of the meeting” or what we would call essential agreement on slavery.

The theme of this paper is Why only one period of Unity? To answer this we need to know: What in Quakerism made Friends antislavery? Also what in Quakerism impeded the influences and responses of Friends to antislavery advocates and were the two impulses or influences in Quakerism from the beginning. And can we make any generalities about the strengths and weaknesses about Friends as reformers based upon the history of antislavery. So my concentration will be the Society of Friends – its theology, organization, and role in society. I am less concerned with factors that historians normally stress – class, economics, social structure, politics and even Friends interactions with the enslaved and the free Negroes. Instead, I hope to show that the basic beliefs that created antislavery success created disunity after 1830. So the concentration will be on those two periods when Friends could be disowned for being too strongly against slavery.

In the nineteenth-century, Soren Kierkegaard denounced the concept of Christendom as an untruth; religion for him was an individual’s relation to God and he complained that a person could not become a Christian if he were already under the illusion (or delusion) that he was already a Christian. We should keep Kierkegaard’s caution in mind when discussing Quakerism that rested upon an individual’s “birth and education” among Friends as well as a religious experience that was shared communally.

---

in the meeting for worship and the meeting for business that was also considered a kind of worship. Colonial and even to some extent British culture from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century may have been more conducive to Christian expression than our own, but Quakers normally lived in societies where there was also overt hostility to their distinctive patterns of life. So even if their intimate acquaintances were other Friends, as seems to be the case in many areas, their secondary associates in the market place and political arena were not. In addition, within the meeting, not all Friends were devout, most took no leadership role, and the amount of time spent on Quaker activities varied enormously. We probably know more about varieties of Quakerism and Quakers and slavery than most of them. The enslaved, except for those who owned them, was often a secondary concern that existed along with more immediate challenges including making a living, preserving Quaker control of Pennsylvania’s government or fending off persecution, war, revolution, and schism. We should not assume that those who became antislavery in the 1680s had the same motivations or drew upon the same ideology as those in the 1790s or 1840s. And a belief or practice that facilitated antislavery in one generation might do the opposite in the next. So a secondary title of this paper is When Testimonies Collide, because then members had to decide which testimonies took precedence.

This paper will discuss the effects of a few pre-1754 Quaker beliefs or practices that influenced the stances Friends took on slavery: the Inward Light, progressive revelation, the Bible, the nature of the church, the “Holy Experiment,” the anti-war stance, the family. We need to understand why Friends who saw or practiced many kinds of unfree labor – indentured servitude, child work, married women’s legal inability to
control the fruits of their labor or property, the impressments of men into the English army and navy – criticized only slavery. By contrast, the early opponents of slavery wanted to turn lifetime slavery extending across generations into a period of labor and then freedom, like indentured servitude.

II.

Friends in all periods have proclaimed the central and defining essence of their religion as the experience of the Inward Light of Christ. So historians have argued that this belief lead to antislavery, and yet what I find most striking in the literature of the first men publicly to oppose slavery is the absence of reference to this doctrine. It may be that we have been mislead by the Modernist Quakers of the early 20th century who saw Quakerism as exalting humanity by insisting upon an “inner light” or spark of the divine in men and women. Certainly, one can find this emphasis in Lucretia Mott and the Progressive Friends of the pre-Civil War period. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, the emphasis was in justifying the ways of God to man, not the ways of man to God. That is, Friends did not believe there was any natural godliness in men and women or children, except that within each person’s conscience was a vehicle or receptacle that, once touched by God, could awaken him or her to receive unmediated insights and messages from God. The Inward Light vindicated God from what Friends believed was the cruel deity of the predestinationist Calvinists.5

Friends’ sense of the presence of sin in adults was as potent as the Puritans’ and even stronger than that of the general Baptist and latitudinarian Anglicans. The first Friends proclaimed that all had the ability to still the will so that God could act within, but in adults the first experience of that of God would be traumatic, a sense of sin or evil that had previously dominated the person. Friends rejected the doctrine of original sin, but in actuality they just postponed sin’s power from birth and childhood until adulthood. Children, who were compared with idiots, because they were not responsible beings, could not sin until they grew old enough to know right from wrong and then they inevitably committed willful sinful acts. The universality of the availability of the Christ Within in conscience at certain times in a human life meant that all peoples, not God, bore responsibility for their sinful acts. So early Friends did not arrive at a judgment against slavery because they saw Africans as noble or humanity as perfectible. In short, there is no necessary link between the Inward Light of Christ and a condemnation (or a justification) of perpetual lifetime slavery. This helps to explain why neither Fox, Keith, Hepburn, Bell, Coleman, nor Woolman (in the 1754 tract only) ever explicitly invoke the doctrine of the Inward Light. (The contrast is with Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay who do cite “openings,” perhaps because they needed a source of authority to directly attack Quaker ministers.)

This neglect need not mean that the doctrine was unimportant to antislavery, because the Inward Light undergirded the entire Quaker method of biblical exegesis and

---

6 Two sources for early antislavery documents are Roger Bruns, _Am I not a Man and a Brother: The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America 1688-1788_ (New York: Chelsea House, 1977) and J. William Frost, _The Quaker Sources of Antislavery_ (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1980). There are modern reprints of Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay and John Woolman’s essays.
epistemological certainty in religious matters. So when the authors referred to Bible
verses, they could gain assurance that they had understood God’s meaning correctly.
They also could receive inward confidence that their moral stance was correct, even if
other Friends disagreed. Virtually all the writers sought to understand the “ground” or
source of an individual’s desire for slaves. They concluded that the foundation of slavery
was not for the good of the enslaved, but the profit or greed of the owner. They do not
tell us how they came to this judgment, by reason or observation or inward meditation.
Although the audience for the early antislavery writers was predominantly Quaker, they
wanted to persuade others who did not share their confidence in knowledge gained
through direct personal revelations.

Directly linked to the experience of the Inward Light was the belief in progressive
revelation – that God could still speak to his chosen servants with the same authority as in
biblical times and that new knowledge could be gained into the nature of God and His
wishes for humanity. Because historians have demonstrated that almost nobody had
previously concluded that slavery was evil, a reasonable assumption is that to gain the
confidence to break established patterns, Friends should have asserted progressive
revelation as revealed by the Inward Light to justify their novel assertions. However,
again, there was silence. The two unpublished papers of Cadwalader Morgan in 1696
and Robert Piles in 1698, probably submitted to the meeting, are two sources where the
processes of beginning to reason with others about the pros and cons of slavery, finding
this process resulting in uncertainty, and then turning to direct revelation. Morgan argues
that he could find no satisfaction by discussions with others, so he “desired” knowledge
from the Lord who “made it known unto me, that I should not be Concerned with them.”
Piles engaged in the same kind of intellectual search until he had a dream that persuaded him not to buy a black man. Note that the revelation in both these cases is personal: a Friend who is debating a course of action with others finds no certainty in seeking for a knowledge of right and wrong behavior. The language of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting on slavery is similar in seeking clearness in response to concerns from individuals. Their decisions invoke a “sense of the meeting,” even though the results were not acceptable to those who opposed slavery, rather than the slave trade. We should remember that “sense of the meeting” did not require unanimity – only that the clerk ascertained the agreement of weighty Friends and that others submitted.

The primary significance of progressive revelation for the yearly meetings was that they could, after years of temporizing, change the testimony on slavery. Quakers had been claiming a “sense of the meeting,” i.e., divine guidance for both how they made and their decisions themselves, and now they were evolving or repudiating earlier conclusions. The Bible showed the Jews and early Christians over time gaining new understandings. These new revelations helped lead to a correct understanding. Friends had long insisted that Christian “perfection” meant perfect obedience but allowed for a growth in the demands of discipleship. So late eighteenth-century Friends could at the same time reverence their ancestors when complaining about declension and repudiate the decisions of the first settlers of Pennsylvania and New Jersey on slavery. They could choose to remember those who opposed slavery in the meeting, or who had refrained

---

*7 The 1754 epistle of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting linked earlier strictures on the slave trade and the new testimony against slavery. There has been a debate over whether Anthony Benezet or John Woolman wrote this epistle. Anyone who has ever been in on a committee writing a document to represent all Friends knows that authorship is shared by many people, no matter who wrote the first draft.*
from purchasing slaves, and see the cautions and strictures on importing Negroes as showing incipient abolitionist sentiments.

In reading the published antislavery authors before Anthony Benezet, most striking is their intense Biblicism. Friends saw no need to invoke progressive revelation because they had another source of certitude: the Bible. George Fox began this process in his 1671 sermon, delivered in Barbados. Confronting for the first time a new form of labor used by non-Friends and also Friends, including his son-in-law with whom he was staying, Fox managed to cite a wide range of verses from the Old and New Testament designed to remind masters of their obligations to their families, servants, and “bought” servants—i.e., the enslaved, particularly the Old Testament instructions to Abraham and from Moses about responsibilities to bought servants, some but not all of whom were Jews. Fox never condemned slavery as evil, but he was sufficiently ambiguous that other early Quaker writers against slavery cite him.

By 1715 the Quakers had mined both Testaments for verses against slavery. In addition to the prohibition against manstealing and God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, there were additional verses from Exodus, Leviticus, Kings, and the prophets. The Curse of Cain and the Hamitic curse could be dismissed as bad exegesis. Noah’s flood ended the race of Cain and the Canaanites had been destroyed in the conquest of the holy land. The New Testament verses cited were the Golden Rule, Christ’s dying for all men and women, Philip and the Ethiopian, and Paul’s claim in Acts that all peoples were of one blood. The early Quaker writers against slavery based their arguments on the Bible and only with John Woolman’s, “Serious Considerations,” Part I
(1754) is the Bible joined to an enlightenment emphasis upon natural rights and reasonableness, a new focus that became even more pronounced in “Serious Considerations,” Part II and the writings of Anthony Benezet. Benezet’s combining of Biblicism, reason, natural rights, history of Africa, and sentimentalism emancipated antislavery from its Quaker sectarian roots and meant that men like John Wesley, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilburforce could join English Friends in the wider movement after the Revolution.

Now the Bible verses used by Friends had been known for centuries; so why did the Friends employ them in a new way, i.e., was the Bible the crucial factor making Friends antislavery? There are several factors in addition to the Inward Light and Progressive Revelation that prompted a significant minority of Friends at first, and then virtually all to oppose slavery: the moneys raised by English Friends to redeem Quakers taken as slavery by Arab states, Fox’s sermon in Barbados, the exalted status of Quakerism as the true church, pioneering new lands, the peace testimony, and family nurture. The early Friends who opposed slavery were not native born Americans. There were many colonists born in New England, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina who became Quakers before the 1670, yet the first “Native Born” American known to oppose slavery is an anonymous writer who provided twenty well thought-out arguments against slavery in John Hepburn’s *Christian Defense of the Christian Golden Rule*, 1715.

The main experience early English Friends had with slavery was through the moneys being paid to Barbary States to ransom members who had been taken captive.8

---

8 Several of the early antislavery writers contrasted Christianity with Islam on slavery by stressing that Mohammad forbad the enslaving of Muslims. They did not mention that
Through the 1670s and 80s, the London Meeting for Sufferings issued repeated requests for monthly meeting to raise funds to captives. This fear of this kind of slavery was very real to George Fox, since his ship narrowly escaped being taken on his trip to the West Indies, a deliverance he claimed was providential. Fox’s concern in Barbados was the conversion or convincement of people and the institution of “gospel family order,” that is, the way Friends organized the life of meetings and of members. Fox did not condemn slavery and explicitly denied to the governor that he sought a slave rebellion, yet he wanted to convert the enslaved and planters and to foster a moral life among both. So he invoked Abraham’s family nurture as a way of exhorting the planters to bring the blacks to meetings, provide them with decent food and clothing, and protect the sanctity of their marriages.

Fox also suggested, in a short passage hidden in the middle of a long sermon, that a modified form of the Hebrew’s jubilee year custom of freeing Jewish servants be applied to blacks after they had served a term of years. When Fox’s sermon was published in England in 1676 and in Philadelphia in 1701, the definite term of years Fox had suggested was made more vague. I have argued elsewhere that Fox’s example could be used in two ways – to the radicals, it legitimized their antislavery stance and they made Fox far more militant than he had been. To the slave-owning Quaker merchants and planters in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Fox stood for a humane treatment of the

the popes in the Middle Ages had prohibited Christians from enslaving Christians, and that neither prohibition had worked.
enslaved, but neither he (nor Penn) advocated abolition. 9 Fox’s primary motive was evangelical, but he never came back to Barbados to see the results of his preaching.

William Edmundson, who had accompanied Fox, did come back in 1676 and to him goes the honor of attempting to end slavery. He wrote letters to Friends in North Carolina and New England, but there is no evidence that these letters circulated widely, and his thoughts probably would not have been widely known until his Journal was published in 1715. The conversion of the enslaved, however, would remain a theme for those Quakers who condoned and those who condemned slavery. The argument would turn over whether compassion for the slave or greed was the primary motive and whether the oppressions of perpetual bondage hindered Christianization.

William Penn’s tract “Primitive Christianity Revived” reflected a theme basic to early Friends: that they had rediscovered and exemplified the teachings and essence of the early church. This belief enforced the sectarian nature of Friends who throughout the period before 1860 would disown any Friend who married a non-Friend. In the colonial period, this sectarian arrogance served as a goad to antislavery, but in the nineteenth would restrict the roles that Friends would play. Because the first Friends had the truth in its purity, they could exalt in looking, speaking, and worshipping in a unique style, because being “peculiar” meant being better. However, Friends’ identification of

9 George Fox, “Gospel Family Order,” reprinted in Frost, 35-55. See also “George Fox’s Ambiguous Antislavery Legacy,” in New Light on George Fox, ed. Michael Mullett (York, UK: 1991), 69-88. The best account of Fox in Barbados is Brycchan Carey, “The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedoms,” Ariel, 38.1(Jan. 2007). 27-47. Friends, when they wished to answer an opponent, could create and publish a tract in a few weeks. Why British Friends waited five years to publish Fox’s sermon is not known, but it may have been linked to Edmundson’s return visit to Barbados in 1676. Edmundson’s Journal was not republished in the colonies and it rarely appeared in meetings’ collections of books.
themselves with ancient Israel and the early church could be a cause for self-satisfaction but also worry, because they also knew that Israel had sinned and been conquered and the purity of the early church had given way to the compromises under Constantine and the rise of Roman Catholicism. While there had been good men and women in all periods, thanks to the Inward Light, the institutions of the church had been corrupted. Was the same happening to Friends? For John Hepburn, Ralph Sandiford, and Benjamin Lay—all of whom had read Eusebius’s account of Constantine’s conversion—Friends’ involvement with the slave trade and slavery was worrisome, a sign of declension that might prompt a just God to cut off his new chosen people. Sandiford and Lay directed their complaints primarily at Quaker ministers who owned slaves, because a false prophet would lead the people to destruction. The chosen people motif was combined with a search to understand God’s providences. So it was no coincidence in the eighteenth century that antislavery agitation became most intense and the meetings most responsive just before wars, because wars were God’s judgment upon a sinful people. The Chester County Quakers petitioned Philadelphia Yearly Meeting against slavery during King William and Queen Anne’s wars. The meetings did little in the years of peace after 1713. The French and Indian War’s approach came at the same time as Philadelphia Yearly Meetings’ decisions in 1754-55 to pronounce slavery an evil. The history of when each American yearly meeting decided to free slaves coincided with fears of the impact of the fighting of the Revolutionary War—first New England, then New York, then New Jersey and Philadelphia, finally, North Carolina and the South.

The “chosen people” motif reinforced another theme that appears first in the Germantown Protest and then was echoed elsewhere by antislavery advocates throughout the eighteenth century. This is the “Holy Experiment” ideal that Friends applied not just to Pennsylvania but also to the entire Delaware River Valley. Pennsylvania and New Jersey were new lands, a holy experience in the wilderness, and the settlers were establishing a pattern that would endure if they remained godly. A sectarian group believing that its members were the chosen people in a land reserved for them by God would be held responsible by Him for the moral character of the entire society. So Quakers wished to be able, if not to impose their beliefs, at least to mold the character of the entire society. Because Delaware was overwhelmingly non-Quaker and its inhabitants wanted a militia and forts, the Pennsylvania Friends did not object and actually welcomed the separation of the two colonies, no matter what William Penn wanted. We know that some Friends worried about the character of their new land if Pennsylvania and New Jersey should become slave societies like Virginia, South Carolina, and the West Indies. The Old Testament showed that the rulers had special responsibilities for the morality of the people, and Quakers in the government would see that at least the laws fostered but could not guarantee goodness. Under Penn’s 1701 Frame of Government, Pennsylvania became a land of peace and prosperity, but Quaker prophets saw wealth as a mixed blessing that could lead to declension and the removal of God’s protection.

---

11 Katharine Gerbner, “‘We are against the traffik of men-body’: the Germantown Quaker Protest of 1688 and the Origins of American Abolitionism,” Pennsylvania History, 74, No. 2 (Spring, 2007), 149-172 provides an excellent analysis of this document.
Fox, Edmundson, Sandiford, and Lay had visited the South and West Indies and observed the effects of slavery on planters, their families, and the enslaved. In fact, it is striking that virtually all early antislavery advocates did not come from those Friends converted in the West Indies, New England, and the South. Rather, Quakers in those areas, some of whom migrated to Pennsylvania and became some of the wealthiest merchants in Philadelphia, provided strong support for slavery and their presence in the meetings stymied the so-called radicals for seventy years. Slave-owners accepted compromises that allowed the meeting repeatedly to advise against bringing slaves into Pennsylvania or engaging in the slave trade, but violation would not be a disownable offence. The Pennsylvania Assembly would even place stiff duties upon imported slaves, measures that could be supported as a tax scheme as well as discouraging more slaves. Those colonists who opposed slavery because they did not wish to compete with unfree labor could join with many who disliked blacks because they were “the other,” allegedly uncivilized and prone to crime and revolt.

Colonization became a divisive issue among Friends only after the 1830’s. During the early colonial period, antislavery Friends assumed that the enslaved would wish to return to their homes in Africa. So colonization could be a blessing in two senses: it would end the cruelty of slavery in America and could introduce Christianity and civilization to Africa. The necessity of spreading the faith had been a major theme in seventeenth-century Friends, and the number of the enslaved at first was small enough that the idea seemed an easy solution. The need to bring true religion and European culture to Africa remained a constant theme in Quaker discussions of colonization up to the Civil War. In time, as the enslaved came to be seen as a permanent feature of the
Middle Colonies, Friends concluded that equality was impossible to obtain because of the anti-black sentiments of the population and the lack of education by the enslaved. Rather than sending the slaves back to Africa, perhaps it would be possible to create a special home for them, somewhere in the West. After the Revolution, creating special reserved places for Indians seemed a practical policy that would allow the Native Americans to become civilized without being corrupted by American culture. The acquisition of the Louisiana Territory by Thomas Jefferson gave plenty of land that could be used to create a reserve for blacks. In the meantime, Friends thought they could prove to their fellow citizens that ending slavery would not threaten them by creating schools for freed blacks and showing that this would make them responsible citizens.

What later Friends would call the “peace testimony” and which colonial Quakers called their “war” teachings could prompt or reinforce the antislavery beliefs in two ways. If Pennsylvania were to be a holy commonwealth and if Friends were called to govern as well as to be a peaceful people, what would happen in case of a slave revolt? Friends were well aware of alleged slave revolts in the Carolinas, West Indies, and New York. In spite of criticisms of Keith and others that Friends’ principles should lead them to decline being magistrates and assemblymen, Pennsylvania Quakers enjoyed power and argued that their peculiar customs and religious toleration would survive only if they controlled a government that protected them from militia duties, tithes, distraints, and, until 1755, taxes for the military. (The Revolution would, ironically, prove them right.) So keeping the slave population non-existent would allow Pennsylvania to be peaceful, a
necessity, because the Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania Assembly would not create a militia.

We don’t how much knowledge early antislavery Friends had about the effects of the slave trade on Africa, but they had enough insights to realize that the Africans sometimes waged war to gain men and women to sell to Europeans. They also knew that Europeans did not enslave other Europeans if they became captives during a “just” war. Some weighty Friends, including Robert Barclay and William Penn, allowed a professedly Christian magistrate who was not a Quaker to wage a “just war” of self defense. However, the wars in Africa to gain slaves were not “just” wars and the European slave traders did not care about or investigate the causes of these conflicts. No matter what Aristotle said or what natural law allowed about slavery being a merciful alternative to killing captives, Hugo Grotius and other “just war” advocates insisted that Christians did not enslave captives. In addition, non-combatant immunity, a basic tenet of all “just war” theories in early Modern Europe, should apply to non-warrior men and to all women and children. So for Quakers there could be no “just war” defense of slavery. A more accurate description was the biblical term, “manstealing.”

During the eighteenth century Friends began to expand the meaning of the anti-war stance into the peace testimony, a belief that family life should reflect a non-violent, non-threatening, gentle attitude. Loving-kindness would characterize the Quaker family. How would having virtually absolute power over other human beings and their offspring impact the master, his wife, and their children and the enslaved? After the Glorious Revolution and the Toleration Act, perhaps for the first time, the living arrangements for
English Friends had enough stability and predictability to debate not survival but the future. With the demise of significant numbers of converts and the loss of thousands of Friends to the New World, British and then American Friends began to concentrate upon family nurture. The result was an emphasis upon the family as a “garden enclosed” where a distinct pattern of what Barry Levy termed “holy conversation” would prevail. Parents had to practice self-discipline and so did children, learning patience and submission to the will of God. Absolute submission, quietness of will before God was required, but power over other human beings tended to destroy humility. The children who grew up ordering slaves would not grow up to be servants of God and deferring to the meeting. Friends who were concerned for their own families extended that scrutiny to the effects of wars in Africa, the Middle Passage, and servitude on the families of the enslaved. Fox was the first to complain about the destruction of marriage bonds in slavery and John Hepburn pictured the plight of husbands separated from wives and children taken from their parents. Quakers could not rest easily with an institution that destroyed family bonds, in whites as well as blacks.

Finally, Quakers had an ambivalent attitude towards wealth. From Penn’s “No Cross, No Crown” to John Woolman’s “Journal” and “Plea for the Poor,” Friends had rejoiced in a moderate prosperity but feared the effects of money on piety. Slavery intensified those misgivings by intensifying suspicions of its effects. All the published attacks on slavery focus on the foundation of the institution: greed. Even in the late

---

seventeenth-century, those who owned slaves remained on the defensive, charged by the reformers with surrendering to the love of money by exploiting other human beings.

George Grey, a West Indian immigrant and minister, published the only explicit defense of slavery written by a Quaker in the entire colonial period. Here he argued, based upon selective biblical verses and distorted quotes from prominent Friends, that Quaker masters sought for the welfare of the enslaved.\textsuperscript{13} Probably submitted to the meeting, Grey’s manuscript was not published.

Beliefs in the Inward Light, progressive revelation, the nature of the church, the “Holy Experiment,” peace, family, and wealth created a persistent critique of slavery, but success in cleansing the meeting of slavery required two new stimuli: a reform movement tightening discipline and war.

\textbf{III.}

The focus of this paper is on those beliefs that allowed Friends to oppose slavery and why they could not obtain unity after 1830, but there needs to be a brief summary given to the period in which the meeting presented a unified testimony against slavery. Friends might have viewed the events from 1750s through 1780 as a “perfect storm,” consisting of the French and Indian War, the march of the so-called Paxton boys on Philadelphia, the battle over repealing Penn’s charter, the agitation over British imperial policy and taxation, the Revolution, the experience of living in war zones, and the new Pennsylvania government that overturned the colonial charter, disenfranchised Friends, and exiled many of their leaders. At the same time, a movement for reform occurred within Quakerism tightening the exercise of discipline, disowning those who fought or

\textsuperscript{13} Printed in \textit{New Light on George Fox}, 82-84.
who married out of unity, and questioning Friends’ participation in and ultimately requiring withdrawing from governing. By refusing to endorse the new revolutionary governments by affirming their loyalty or paying war taxes, Friends embraced suffering as a mark of their obedience to God. Their quest for purity led to abolition, as Friends sought to understand the reasons for God’s chastisement through war and the failure of the “Holy Experiment.” Those who refused to endorse the new purity, who fought or who refused to free their slaves, would be disowned. Colonial American meetings would begin a process of disciplining those who engaged in the slave trade and eventually force all slave-owners to free their blacks. 14

In requiring members to abstain from politics and renounce power, to refrain from fighting and renounce patriotism, and to end slavery and make economic sacrifice, the yearly meetings showed the power of their form of organized religion. At the same time, the meetings’ failure to control the dissenters meant many would be disowned, more for marriage out of unity and fighting than over slavery. Recognizing that disowning slave-owners would not help the enslaved, the meetings moved more slowly and showed more tolerance here than in enforcing other aspects of the discipline. And although slavery was evil, the process of emancipation could be gradual – particularly for children. The Quakers not only did not compensate owners for their ex-slaves, they required that owners provide for elderly freedmen and women.

Gradual emancipation became possible because there were no fundamental disagreements over the nature of the faith or the power of the meeting, i.e., the eighteenth-century quietist vision remained intact. When ministers preached and elders agreed and the yearly meetings spoke about religious subjects, dissenters had no theological basis to oppose the divine status of the sense of the meeting. Their sectarian withdrawing from government in Pennsylvania and New Jersey meant that the meeting did not have to persuade men who held political power to act morally. So Quaker processes could be used on Quakers, i.e., preaching, conversations, visits to the home by hefty members. The main activities involving non-Quakers were visits to the legislature, as John Woolman did in Rhode Island, petitions to authorities, and writings – Anthony Benezet sent copies of his tracts to influential men and women in Great Britain and France. During the Revolutionary period, Quakers were not alone in complaining about the slave trade and slavery and using the language of natural rights. After all, when the Pennsylvania Assembly passed a law decreeing eventual emancipation, except for Anthony Benezet, Friends played no role in this process – since they had been disenfranchised.

Friends assumed that the same kind of gradual processes by which they had freed their slaves could work for the rest of the country. After all, during the Revolutionary era by various means the states had provided gradually to eliminate slavery in the North, and many Southerners complained about the institution. In the New Republic, Quakers would found manumission societies in North and South, petition state legislatures and Congress to end the slave trade, defend the rights of freedmen and women, and seek to educate and make the Negroes respectable so that the Southerners would see that
abolition would bring no threat and that free labor by white and black would bring prosperity. For those who saw no future for blacks in America, like Quaker Paul Cuffee, colonization of Africa would be good for all concerned. When North Carolina Friends found that their legislature would not allow newly freed men and women to stay in the state, the Yearly Meeting took ownership until they could ship the blacks to Indiana or Pennsylvania or, later, to Liberia or Haiti.\textsuperscript{15} In the New Republic many Friends supported colonization, but the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, dominated by Friends, refused to endorse the work of the American Colonization Society and insisted that those who were to leave America had to agree. Neither Pennsylvania nor North Carolina Friends would support forced exile of unwilling slaves or freedmen. In the meantime, American Quakers would cheerfully support the activities of British Friends in working for Parliament to end first the slave trade and then slavery. Before 1830, even the most radical antislavery Friends including Elisha Tyson in Baltimore, Thomas Garrett in Wilmington and Edward Hopper in Philadelphia, who openly distorted or defied the law to help runaway slaves, remained in unity with their meetings.\textsuperscript{16}

IV.

The Society of Friends, as a series of autonomous yearly meetings in Great Britain and America who shared religious beliefs, social concerns, and visiting ministers,
ceased to exist in 1827.\textsuperscript{17} Not only between but within each yearly meeting conflicting groups laid claim to the mantle of true Quakerism and charged their opponents with betraying the heritage of Fox, Penn, and Woolman. The Orthodox charged the Hicksites with being unduly influenced by Unitarians and rationalists; the Hicksites countered that the Orthodox had surrendered to evangelical Anglicans and Presbyterians. The quietists in both meetings accused their opponents of throwing over traditional Quaker emphases on stilling the will and being a distinct sect in order to join voluntary societies founded upon intellectual and creaturely activities.\textsuperscript{18} From our perspective, we can see that each of these charges had a basis in fact. All claimed to be preserving the essence of Quakerism and sought to hold together the remnant of those who agreed with them while engaging in ecclesiastical billingsgate and disowning opponents. The result was that every fundamental belief and practice of the Society of Friends was now open to being reinterpreted: the Inward Light, sense of the meeting proceedings, the practice of discipline, the peculiar customs of dress and speech, and, of course, the social testimonies – including anti-slavery.

Garrisonian abolitionism posed an additional threat to the unity of Friends. Like Friends, Garrison wanted moral suasion, not political action and was less interested in the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} H. Larry Ingle, \emph{Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation} (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986) is the best account of the events leading to the schism.
\textsuperscript{18} Quietist opposition to Quakers joining outside societies existed before the split. In 1832 John Wilbur travelled to England and soon after published “Letters to a Friend, on Some of the Primitive Doctrines of Christianity” complaining about the evangelicalism of Joseph John Gurney and influence of outside organizations. Printed in \emph{Journal of the Life of John Wilbur ... with Selections from his Correspondence} (Providence, RI: Whitney, 1859). Lucretia Mott complained that elders were trying to suppress any preaching about abolition in meetings in 1834. \textit{Letters of Lucretia Mott}, p. 28
\end{flushright}
economic consequences of slavery than the evil of the institution. Also both agreed, at least in theory, in making a distinction between the immorality of slavery and the individuals who owned slaves. Garrison also wanted no compensation to owners for freeing those who should never have been enslaved. Friends had never paid compensation to members who freed slaves, though they had allowed those with children to free them after reaching maturity. Even Garrison’s radical step of allowing women to speak in meeting with men and women present should not have upset Friends as much as others, since for centuries they assumed women could be ministers. Friends also agreed with Garrison’s support of political rights for the free black community in Boston and initially with the free produce movement. So there could have been continuing close cooperation between radical abolitionists and those Friends, mostly Hicksites, who supported the creation of the American Abolition Society in 1834. Yet by 1840 all the major yearly meetings, except for the emerging Progressive Friends, had closed their doors to abolition lectures, and soon several prominent abolitionists had either been disowned or resigned from meeting. In 1843 Indiana Yearly Meeting divided with the minority of activist antislavery Friends forced out.

---


20 The Indiana Yearly Meeting schism is not discussed in this paper because there were no theological issues involved in this separation. Two articles by Earlham Professor Thomas Hamm and his students show that economic and social differences did not correlate with those who stayed with the Orthodox body versus the more radical antislavery Friends. “‘A Great and Good People’ Midwestern Quakers and the Struggle Against Slavery,” Indiana Magazine of History, 100, No. 1 (March 2004), 3-25 and “Moral Choices: Two Indiana Quaker Communities and the Abolition Movement,” Indiana Magazine of History, 88 (June 1991); Ryan Jordan, “The Indiana Separation of 1842 and the Limits of Quaker Anti-Slavery,” Quaker History, 89 (Spring 2000), 1-27
Why did most Friends repudiate the abolitionist movement associated with either Garrison or Theodore Weld? Those who left the meeting, including Arnold Buffum, William Bassett, Abby Foster Kelley, and Levi Coffin, said it was politics, the close identification of businessmen, several of whom imported cotton from the South, with the Whig Party.\(^21\) Even if this explanation works for some Orthodox Friends, it seems to apply less to the Hicksites, who tended, at least in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland, more likely to be farmers rather than bankers or cotton manufacturers.

Unfortunately for historians, those who denounced Quakers’ alleged timidity were more likely to leave a written record than those who stayed within the meeting. Still, there are some valuable sources, the sermons and letters of the New York Hicksite minister, George Fox White, the journal of Edward Hicks, who did not submit his manuscript to overseers of the press before publication, the letters of Lucretia Mott and John Greenleaf Whittier, a couple of editorials in *The Friend*, and some broadsides issued by Yearly Meetings.\(^22\) Because of the geographical and theological diversity of Friends in this period, generalizations about motivations should be carefully made. I intend to show only the theological reasons why Eastern traditional Quakers – Hicksite and Orthodox –


\(^{22}\) *The Friend* (Philadelphia), VI, 1833, #41, p. 324; VII,12/19, 1835, 88; vol. XVI, 8/19/1843, 374-5; *An Address to Members of the Yearly Meeting of Philadelphia* (1852).
distanced themselves from the radical abolitionists. My thesis is that the same
theological emphases that gave early Friends the confidence to oppose slavery could now
be used against radicals. Lucretia Mott and John G. Whittier endorsed and worked for
Garrisonian abolition and yet stayed within the meeting. How did they manage? One
reason is that both rejected the quietist sectarian principles that the meetings used against
radical antislavery.

Garrison’s tone and content went against Quaker practices. He sounded more like
Benjamin Lay than John Woolman, strong on denunciation rather than persuasion, a
prophet rather than a healer. Even though his motto, “immediate emancipation” had
originated with a British Quaker, Friends advocated gradual emancipation – preparing the
enslaved for freedom. Samuel Janney, a Virginia Hicksite, who published his thoughts
on abolition in newspapers throughout the 1840s, laid out the steps that should be taken:
free discussion in the South, repeal of laws requiring manumitted slaves to leave
Virginia, education of blacks, prohibiting the domestic slave trade, beginning a post-natal
emancipation plan, a period of adjustment between slavery and total freedom, and
compensation for slaveholders to be derived from the sale of Western lands. In
addition, Garrison – partially by necessity – addressed his tracts to the North, and when
the South stopped debating the subject, advocated disunion. Most Friends did not believe

---

23 Opposition to radical abolitionists could come from Friends who supported the
American Colonization Society. Quietists who opposed Friends joining the abolition
societies for theological reasons also opposed colonization societies.
24 The language Garrison used was no more intemperate that what Orthodox and
Hicksites were saying against each other. Mott and Whittier, who defended Garrison’s
strong speech, insisted that the slavery was so evil that only strong denunciations would
shake Americans from their complacency.
1977, 74; Ryan Jordan, Slavery and the Meeting House, 29
disunion would help the slaves and thought that such a disruption would lead to war. A war to preserve the union or to free the slaves would violate the anti-war testimony and create more animosity, not improve the lives of the enslaved. Garrison’s advocacy of non-resistance seemed to be similar to the Friends’ peace testimony, but the harmony was superficial, for it was based upon reason rather than the example of Christ, did not entail suffering, and seemed more like anarchism than pacifism. In addition, Garrison was not a church member and his denunciations of the churches could be construed as an attack upon Christianity.

To quietist Orthodox and Hicksite Friends, Garrisonian abolition was a creaturely activity, based upon human intelligence and activism rather than silent waiting for God’s prompting. Quakerism required isolation from the world’s people; it was primitive Christianity revived, not another denomination, and its traditions were not human discoveries but insights from God. Not just abolition societies, but Bible Societies, higher education, missionary organizations, and political parties should be shunned by Friends. Elias Hicks long before the schism had voiced displeasure at Friends joining outside organizations and William Bacon Evans, an influential Philadelphia Orthodox Friend at the time of the 1827 schism, later supported Rhode Island quietist John Wilbur against evangelical Joseph John Gurney. Quietist Friends constituted a substantial minority, perhaps a majority, of both Philadelphia Yearly Meetings.26 The initial

26 John Wilbur was disowned by New England Yearly Meeting in 1843, causing a split there; a Wilburite split in Ohio Yearly Meeting occurred in 1854, and Philadelphia Orthodox almost split in 1855 and stayed together in 1857 only by suspending communication with all other yearly meetings. Philip Benjamin, *Philadelphia Quakers in the Industrial Age 1865-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1976 shows the persistent of quietism, centered in Arch Street Meeting, through the 19th century, ix,
decisions to close meetinghouses to abolitionist lectures came from both Philadelphia organizations and then was seconded by other American yearly meetings.\textsuperscript{27}

Quietist weighty Hicksite Friends including Edward Hicks, John Comly, Benjamin Ferris, and George Fox White correctly saw abolitionists like Lucretia Mott as undermining traditional Quakerism.\textsuperscript{28} Lucretia Mott in beliefs seems closer to Theodore Parker than John Woolman, more romantic than either evangelical or quietist.\textsuperscript{29} She claimed William Penn was a Unitarian like other early Friends who camouflaged their belief in mysticism, saw humans as perfectible, spoke in Unitarian churches, and read the Bible for insights rather than as God’s truth. She favored ending disownment for marriage out of unity, sought to reform the discipline, supported the movement against Sabbath observance, and was openly anticlerical. She did not stop associating with Orthodox Friends, including Whittier, and entertained in her home Unitarians including William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker. Her pacifism was a combination of Quaker sectarianism and the non-resistant movement but, unlike Garrison, she remained consistent during the Civil War. Even if women had gained the suffrage, she would not have voted. She also preached abolitionism in meetings for worship, and, in letters, denounced the quietist ministers and elders as attempting to resurrect Orthodoxy among the Hicksites. She attended but never joined the Progressive Friends of Kenneth Square

\textsuperscript{27} Review of ‘An Address’ Respecting Slavery Issued by the Yearly Meeting of Friends, Held at Lombard Street, Baltimore, 11\textsuperscript{th} Month, 1842, 1-8.
\textsuperscript{28} Edward Hicks, \textit{Memoirs of the Life and Religious Labors of Edward Hicks} (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1851), 136, 175,181,190, 228, 231,242, 251.
and scandalized Genesee Yearly Meeting by going to schismatic Waterloo Meeting.
Like the Congregational Friends of Ohio and New York who abolished all discipline, her
religion was an immanent Christ wedded to reform. Yet as a weighty Friend, she
continued to wear plain dress and speak plain language, supported the Free Produce
movement, defined abolition as a moral rather than a political movement, did not vilify
slave-owners in her speeches, and supported educational reform. She counseled Abby
Kelley not to resign from Quakerism and complained that the radicals who left meetings
became narrow.  

As clerk of the Hicksite Philadelphia Yearly Meeting women’s meeting and with
the support of the members of Cherry Street Meeting, Mott had sufficient authority and
followers to resist attempts to disown her and remained a controversial minister with
certificates for traveling in the ministry to the Midwest and New York. While she was
untouchable because she was unwilling to choose between abolitionism and Quakerism,
the quietists in Philadelphia and elsewhere had sufficient support among ministers to
close meetinghouses to abolitionist lecturers, and the reforms she advocated, except for
the founding of Swarthmore College, did not occur until long after the Civil War.

We don’t know the actual numbers of those Hicksites who opposed and those
who supported abolitionist activities. John Comly, clerk of yearly meeting and unofficial
leader of the Hicksites from before the separation until his death in 1850, did not mention
antislavery in his 600 page published Journal, but his comments on speaking about

---

30 Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer (Urbana:
University of Illinois, 2002), on Garrison’s language, 51-53; on Abigail Kelley and
leaving meeting, 47-48, 106; on reforming discipline, 106, 136, on Bible, 107, 233; on
her religious beliefs, 108; on abolitionists, 21, 281,35-6, 153;on Unitarians, 92,107, 179;
on Whittier, 39, 72, 75, 110.
secular subjects in meeting, the peace testimony, and the Inward Christ prove that he was a quietist Friend – a follower of John Woolman, and neither rationalist nor romantic in theology.  

Lucretia Mott’s letters show how much she desired but that she could not count on Comly’s support for abolitionist activities.  

More outspoken was New York minister, George Fox White, whom Mott thought insane but whose preachings attracted a large and receptive crowd who filled the Cherry Street Meeting house to capacity even in the heat of a Philadelphia summer. In one sermon, so long that even the perspiring scribe taking down his words had to stop in the middle, White denounced Quakers’ joining with outsider organizations, including antislavery groups. Yet White also endorsed the Free Produce Movement and saw himself as favoring abolition.  

White and Mott saw each other as promoting a disunity that would lead to another schism among Hicksite Friends.

The quietists among the Orthodox Friends in Philadelphia and New England had similar reservations about Garrisonian abolition. Whittier remained a Friend in good standing, attending New England Yearly Meeting as a delegate, escorting Joseph John Gurney from New York to New England and Joseph Sturge to Washington. He was also on one occasion eldered by New York Friend John Mott, allegedly for trusting too much

---


32 Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott, 101-2, 122,161

33 Selected Letters of Lucretia Mott, 22, 59-61, 67, 72m 91-94, 103, 109. Radical abolitionists seem to have enjoyed baiting George White. For example, Correspondence between Oliver Johnson and George White (New York: Oliver Johnson, 1841). Sermon by George F. White. . . Delivered 10Mo.8th, 1843 . . At Cherry St. Meeting (Philadelphia, 1843), Sermon by George F. White . . . Delivered 12 Mo. 10th, 1843 . . at Cherry Street Meeting (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1843); Correspondence of Moses Pierce with George F. White, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore. White insisted that God in his providence allowed evils, like drunkenness and slavery, and man should not interfere. How much of his anti-abolitionist stance was based on racism is difficult to assess, but he argued that immediate abolition would result in the destruction of the Negroes in America, an analogy to what he believed was happening to the Native Americans.
for intellect. Yet one would not know that he was a Gurneyite Quaker from his writings, perhaps the reason Rufus Jones thought so highly of him. The outward atonement, the virgin birth, the inerrancy of the Bible – these Orthodox doctrines play no role in his published prose writings, poetry, or in his letters. His essay on the Bible and slavery insisted that if the Bible had supported slavery, then it would be in error but, of course, it didn’t. He was careful not to criticize in his published writings Orthodox Quaker beliefs, but there is considerable evidence that he regarded all religious dogmas and language as symbolic – pointing to deeper truths. He wanted to be a Quaker, but not a “sectarian Quaker.” He disliked an arrogant clergy that he associated with the Puritans and their descendents, but opposed Garrison’s open attack upon Christianity.

Whittier remained all of his life a mystical Quaker; that is, he was convinced that all could have an inward experience of God and that God guaranteed a moral order in our world and eternal life after death.

“Christianity is the ultimate – the highest possible ideal. . . . I believe in the divine efficacy of His (Jesus) life and its consummation of sacrifice; and I regard the record of His precepts and example as the true text-book of the reformer.”

Whittier disliked creeds, theology, and formalism. He wrote poems based on the Mahabarata and termed a hymn of Brahmo Somas “a remarkable religious development” and “a fresh revelation of the Divine Spirit upon the human heart.”

Call him not heretic whose works attest
His faith in goodness by no creed confessed.
Whatever in love’s name is truly done
To free the bound and lift the fallen one
Is done to Christ.\(^\text{34}\)

In summary, Whittier was a most unusual Gurneyite Quaker.

Whittier shunned religious disputes, but not political or moral controversy, and his criticism of New England Friends’ decision to close meetinghouses to abolitionists remained in private letters sent to close friends. He was so reticent in person, that his biographer records that there were only three public speeches in his life, none in Quaker meetings. He associated with antislavery Hicksites, including the Motts, wrote a positive letter to the Progressive Friends, and deplored the break up of the antislavery societies, for which he blamed Abby Kelley and Garrison. Like Mott, who saw his beliefs as between Hicksite and Orthodox, he supported many reforms including women’s rights and working men’s rights, but unlike Mott, he wanted them kept separate from antislavery, which he argued had enough difficulties by itself. Even after New England Friends opposed antislavery societies, Whittier worked with Joseph John Gurney and Joseph Sturge who advised Orthodox Friends that they should join such organizations and work for immediate abolition. Associating with such weighty English Friends protected Whittier from censure from other Friends. Like Mott, Whittier had serious disagreements with the conservatives in meeting and, like her, he never criticized them in print, but often in private letters. Unlike William Bassett, Oliver Johnson, Abby Kelley, and those who criticized Friends in print or to outsiders, Mott and Whittier observed the letter of the Quaker testimony about not exposing the differences among Friends in print. They refused to choose between Quakerism and abolition. As Whittier phrased it, “I mean to be a Quaker as well as an abolitionist.” Mott agreed.

Unlike Mott and Garrison, Whittier was always interested in politics. He began as a strong Whig and a fan of Henry Clay, but antislavery ended his political career and
from then on he made abolition the sine qua non for his support. If as William Bassett charged, New England Quaker leaders who disdained outside organizations at the same time worked for the Whigs, Whittier’s endorsement of the Liberty Party in 1840 and later denunciations of Clay and Webster and maneuverings for Charles Sumner showed the consistency of his politics. For Whittier, Garrison’s non-resistance seemed too close to anarchism and against the Quaker peace testimony and his call for disunion as naïve because the Union was the best mechanism to end slavery. To summarize, in the meeting for worship, Whittier was a mystic stilling the will and experiencing God directly, but any quietism ended at the meetinghouse door. (In later life he criticized the holiness and pastoral emphases among Guerneyite Friends). However, he agreed with other Guernseyites in his support for education and in joining societies for good works.  

Like Edward Hicks whose hero was George Washington, Whittier was intensely patriotic, as proven by the poem “Barbara Fritchey,” and in the 1860s became a supporter of Abraham Lincoln. Like Edward Hicks, a minister in a society that disliked painting, Whittier remained a weighty Friend in a religious society that saw stories and poetry as at best frivolous. Hicks put his religious fervor, Quaker history, and vision of the good society into paintings of the “Peaceable Kingdom;” Whittier put his religious fervor into abolitionist editorials, Quaker history, and spiritually-inspired poems. In some ways Hicks and Whittier were very alike, but it was for the best that they never met.

V. Conclusions

There was a fundamental difference in the discussions of slavery before 1755 and after 1830. In the early period not all agreed that slavery was evil and should be ended; after the Revolution all Friends opposed slavery and the debate was over the best tactics to use to persuade Northerners and Southerners to end it and the role of Friends in joining outsiders. In the eighteenth century Friends in cosmopolitan centers like Newport Rhode Island and Philadelphia had joined with others in library and philosophical societies and the early manumission and prison reform movements. Antislavery societies in the Middle West, New England, North Carolina, and Britain had used meetinghouses. Still, Elias Hicks disliked Friends’ joining in the new voluntary organizations and preferred that Friends create their own societies.

In the aftermath of the schism, Friends’ views of abolition societies depended upon their understanding of the experience of the Inward Light, nature of the Church, and the enclosed garden life. The response of all bodies of Friends to the fear that they might be wrong was to become more rigidly assertive that they had not outrun their spiritual gifts. If the Light could be known only through a long period of silence and could be easily overcome by worldly activity, then associating with others for religious/moral reform was like studying theology as a way to know God. It glossed over the inherent corruption in all purely human endeavors. So Friends should separate from such worldly activity, make their perspective on slavery known, and trust in the providence of God to convince others of the truth. Associating with Presbyterians, Congregationalists,
Methodists, and Unitarians in antislavery societies threatened the purity of Friends and the unity of the meeting. The religious foundations of Quaker antislavery before 1755 were used against the radical abolitionists after 1830 - the peace testimony, a distrust of politics, a way of living marked by “peculiar” customs, the purity of the meeting as the only true Church, the way one experienced the Light. Quietists among Orthodox and Hicksites wanted to preserve what they saw as a traditional Quaker “guarded” way of life. They did not realize that their definition of “guarded” was a new creation reacting against a major transformation in American social and religious life. The quietists offered a way of escaping the turmoil of Quaker divisions and recalled the people to the customs they remembered from childhood. Because of the way clerks assessed the sense of the meeting, quietists in Hicksite and Orthodox Yearly Meetings could marginalize the abolitionists. One difference between the quietists and the few radical abolitionists who stayed in the meeting is that Whittier and Mott believed that they were revolutionizing Quakerism by concentrating on what they defined as its spiritual essence. For those who were not quietists, but believed in the anti-war testimony, the mob violence and social disorder that often accompanied abolitionist lecturers was a prefiguring of a more deadly war that would result from opposing slavery. In addition, those evangelical Friends whose belief in stability, business, and the Whig Party might be threatened by irritating the South would join the quietists in a respectable antislavery witness while shunning all radicals.

In retrospect, their various reactions to antislavery crusaders show the difficulty of Friends to find a way to oppose and reform entrenched social systems that are radically
evil and seemingly not susceptible to quiet spiritually-inspired discourse. In the 1850s Quakers stood apart from the violence of Bleeding Kansas and Harper’s Ferry. Northern racism and Southern intransigence made the future appear bleak. Friends could not comprehend why even a state with as few slaves as Delaware, that had forbidden selling slaves out of state in the 1789, could not take one more step and end slavery, even when during the war Lincoln offered compensated emancipation far above the market price.36

Because of their religious beliefs, the normal response of Friends to extreme evil they cannot stop is to offer as an alternative aid to the victims: the Underground Railroad, the freedman in the Civil War and Reconstruction, war victims in World War I and II, Jews in the 1930s, refugees from World War II, draft resisters and peasants over Vietnam. Quakers as individuals and organizations still advocate following William Penn’s advice: “Let us see what love can do,” and if love doesn’t succeed, because we refuse to assert that killing people is the way to peace and justice, we have no alternative strategy but to trust in the sometimes inscrutable providence of God.

J. William Frost, Emeritus, Swarthmore College