

# Quakers: The Enlightenment's Atlantic Connection<sup>1</sup>

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During the Enlightenment period, many thinkers promoted ideas of natural rights. These rights, they argued, were shared by all regardless of their race or religious creed, and were vested in each individual at birth. While the spread of such Enlightenment ideas was certainly fostered in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries through the dissemination of texts written by such thinkers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine, many of the principles that inspired recognition of natural rights had been shared on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean by an organization known as the Religious Society of Friends. Members of this religious association, more commonly known as Quakers, were highly mobile, traveling widely within the British Empire, and so were able to spread the idea of natural rights internationally through their public opposition to slavery.

This research will argue that the Quakers were integral to the spread of Enlightenment ideas. By fostering a belief in natural rights through their advocacy campaigns, the Quakers were an important intellectual and social connection between Britain and its colonies. Had the Quakers not fulfilled this vital role in exchanging ideas about human nature, the abolition of slavery might have been an even more protracted and difficult process. This examination of the trans-Atlantic activism of the Quakers will help to inform future discussion regarding how Enlightenment ideals developed and traveled around the world.

The role of the Quakers in promoting Enlightenment ideas also runs counter to dominant narratives regarding the Enlightenment in the literature that has since been produced by scholars. For example, Grayling identifies religion and superstition as the most prevalent barriers to human progress, writing that, "in the historical Enlightenment, one major target of freeing the mind of man was the opposition to religion, and the form that the struggle took was anti-clericalism."<sup>2</sup> Another scholar, James Dybikowski, clarifies that Enlightenment forces were most directly opposed to and by clericalism, the notion that religious leaders and institutions should wield considerable power and influence over the broader society. As Dybikowski puts it, "anticlericalism is not anti-Christianity, but the notion of 'priestcraft' offered freethinkers a story of how Christianity sustained itself when its rational credentials were as weak as they claimed."<sup>3</sup> Given the role of the Quakers in promoting Enlightenment ideals, which will be discussed in further detail, Dybikowski's assessment has greater relevance to the Quakers as they were a religious community that actively promoted Christianity but were at the same time largely opposed to clericalism. Illustrative of the Quakers' anticlericalism, Quakers do not have a formal clergy per se and

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony C. Grayling, *The Britannica Guide to the Ideas that Made the Modern World: The People, Philosophy, and History of the Enlightenment* (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2008), X.

<sup>3</sup> James Dybikowski, "The Critique of Christianity," in *The Enlightenment World*, eds. Martin Fitzpatrick et al (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 47.

there are no priests to lead meetings of a particular Quaker group.<sup>4</sup> As such, the Quakers demonstrate that the intellectual and social undercurrents of the Enlightenment were more complex than a simple struggle between religion and rationalism but that there were many different interest groups at work who represented both religious and rationalist elements to varying degrees.

George Fox, a founder of the Religious Society of Friends, traveled as a missionary to Barbados in 1671. While there he attracted controversy among the English settlers by "...beginning a discussion of the morality of perpetual bondage and its effects upon the enslaved and the enslavers..."<sup>5</sup> This controversy was compounded when Fox began preaching to African slaves, extending the possibility of conversion to Christianity.<sup>6</sup> For the English settlers, this was unconscionable as the slaves were presumed to lack souls and so were without hope of religious salvation. Fox, however, argued that all humans had souls, were eligible for baptism, and so were capable of attaining salvation. This is not to say, however, that Fox was an ardent abolitionist. "Fox never addressed the institution of slavery – why it existed, the morality of the slave trade or perpetual slavery. His significant advance was in treating the enslaved as fully human, deserving decent treatment which would facilitate a necessary conversion."<sup>7</sup> Even prior to his arrival in Barbados, George Fox produced a document in 1657, entitled *A Letter of Caution to Friends beyond the Sea that have Blacks and Indian Slaves*, in which he stopped short of explicitly condemning slavery but did emphasize the equality of all human beings, regardless of race.<sup>8</sup>

When George Fox died in 1691, he left the Quakers no official creed. However, the encounter with slavery in Barbados had a lasting effect on the movement. Furthermore, Fox's travels had bestowed upon the Quakers an organizational structure that covered much of Great Britain, extended across parts of Western Europe, and stretched out to encompass much of the North American colonies.<sup>9</sup> It was within this global network that an intense debate was held on the nature of slavery and whether this institution could be considered compatible with Christian theology. In many respects, the format of these Quaker meetings were somewhat similar to the famous salons held among the nobility and intelligentsia of France later in the eighteenth century, as individual Quakers within a given area would meet in a home to discuss various theological and philosophical issues without clear leadership or a particularly established agenda.<sup>10</sup>

Although George Fox had begun to raise the issue of slavery in London and later in Barbados, it was in Philadelphia where some of the strongest advocacy initiatives first emerged. Minutes from a meeting of the Quaker Society in Philadelphia in August 1698

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Grag, *The Quaker Community on Barbados: Challenging the Culture of the Planter Class* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 153.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Frost, "Quaker Antislavery: From Dissidence to Sense of the Meeting," *Quaker History* 101, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 13.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Taylor Merrill, "The English Campaign for Abolition of the Slave Trade," *The Journal of Negro History* 30, no. 4 (October 1945): 383 – 384.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783 – 1807* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1997), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Stanley Holton, *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory, and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1800-1920* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 86.

read, "It is the sense of this Meeting that all masters of families among Friends do endeavour to bring their Negroes to the public Meetings of Worship on first days, and those that do not come to Meetings, may be restrained or prevented from Meeting together in companies."<sup>11</sup> This is not an abolitionist position in itself, but it does reflect an attitude of equality that had not generally emerged elsewhere in society, whether among religious or non-religious groups.

The debate that took place in Quaker meetings culminated in decisive action as early as 1727. At that year's annual meeting of the Quaker Society in London, a resolution of censure was passed against any Quakers participating in the slave trade. "Successive resolutions (1758, 1761, and 1783) threatened and provided for expulsion of members of the sect who persisted in the traffic or abetted it even to the extent of selling or providing any supplies for slave ships."<sup>12</sup> What had begun in Barbados with Fox's missionary work had now firmly taken root in London where the local Quaker Society became the movement's largest. As such, the resolution of censure in 1727 served as inspiration to Quaker associations all throughout the British Empire, prompting similar resolutions elsewhere in Britain and even in the North American colonies. For example, "In 1758 the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting also barred Quaker slaveholders from church leadership, and in 1776 it disowned them from membership. In colonies premised on slavery, the Quakers became the lone denomination to seek abolition systematically."<sup>13</sup> By the time of the American Revolution, a consensus had clearly been formed internationally within the Quakers.

This growing determination to oppose slavery among the British Quakers, as well as among their North American counterparts, seems to stem from the frequent visits of leading Quaker figures in Britain to the North American colonies where they were more readily confronted by what slavery entailed. Writing in 1808, Thomas Clarkson, a prominent abolitionist, argued, "...that the Quakers knew more about the trade and the slavery of the Africans, than any other religious body of men, who had not been in the land of their sufferings."<sup>14</sup> By Clarkson's own admission, the unique situation of the Quakers as travellers was an important factor in the movement's decision to vigorously oppose slavery. Missionaries of other denominations would spend longer periods abroad and oftentimes positioned themselves on what they perceived to be the 'frontier' of Christendom, which limited their exposure to slavery and their opportunities to share experiences with other members of their religious denomination in Europe. The frequent travel of the Quakers, particularly between the North American colonies and Britain, ensured a great deal of exposure to the practice of slavery, while the format of Quaker meetings encouraged the free exchange of experiences and ideas between members of the movement.

As the resolve of the Quakers to fight against slavery was strengthened by successive resolutions from the Society in London, the movement began to explore the role print publications could play in the spread of ideas. In 1754, John Woolman, a prominent Quaker

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<sup>11</sup> "Philadelphia Monthly Meeting Minutes, August 28 1698," in *The Quaker Origins of Antislavery*, eds. William J. Frost (Norwood: Norwood Editions, 1980), 73.

<sup>12</sup> David T. Huw, "Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century: Transatlantic Activism and the Anti-slavery Movement," *Global Networks* 7, no. 3 (July 2007): 370.

<sup>13</sup> Merrill, 358.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, vol. 1 London: R. Taylor & Co., 1808), 129.

and journalist in New Jersey, published a text entitled, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. After witnessing plantation slavery on visits to Virginia and North Carolina, Woolman produced this text in an effort to familiarize readers with the moral and religious objections to slavery raised among the Quakers.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after completing the work, Woolman set about disseminating it and the arguments the text contained. "He submitted it to the Yearly Meeting, which so warmly approved that it paid for the printing and sent the book to every Yearly Meeting in America as well as to London."<sup>16</sup>

This was only the first of many texts to make its way from America to London in the trans-Atlantic exchange of ideas about the role of slavery in society. Anthony Benezet, a French-born Quaker in Philadelphia, who formed the world's first official anti-slavery organization – the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage – also wrote a popular text entitled, *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes*. Originally published in Philadelphia in 1760, the Quaker Society in London ordered a reprint of 1,500 copies in 1767 under the advice of their counterparts in Philadelphia. "These pamphlets were designed for presentation to Members of Parliament. Previous to this action all efforts had been confined to eradicating the practice of slavery and the slave trade within the Quaker body."<sup>17</sup> This was a crucial development in the role of the Quakers during the Enlightenment period. The reprinting of Benezet's text perfectly demonstrated the international nature of the movement, as a text by a French-born American Quaker was used to lobby British parliamentarians. Furthermore, the Quakers had also made an important step in moving the discussion of the abolition of slavery into the mainstream political discourse of Britain. This was achieved, much like the spread of other Enlightenment ideas, through the use of the printing press.

The usefulness of the printing press was not lost on the Quakers. Following the 1767 reprinting in London of Benezet's first text, the Quaker Society in Philadelphia arranged in 1768 to print another 1,500 copies of another book by Anthony Benezet on the subject of slavery, this time entitled *Some Historical Account of Guinea*.<sup>18</sup> These copies were disseminated widely in the North American colonies in the hopes that slaveholders or those apathetic toward the slave trade might come to recognize the shared human nature of the slaves and thus oppose the practice of enslaving Africans. These large-scale campaigns of pamphleteering began with works by Woolman and Benezet but then continued as other Quakers contributed important works to the growing body of literature on slavery, its immorality, and its economic inefficiency. In 1784, another pamphlet, entitled *The Case of Our Fellow Creatures, the Oppressed Africans*, was presented to the British House of Commons the same year of its publication by the Quaker Society in London.<sup>19</sup> The year after, another pamphlet by Joseph Woods, a British Quaker, was distributed widely under the title, *Thoughts on the Slavery of the Negroes*.

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<sup>15</sup> Junius P. Rodriguez, *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopaedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 457.

<sup>16</sup> Daisy Newman, *A Procession of Friends: Quakers in America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), 70 – 71.

<sup>17</sup> Alan M. Rees, "English Friends and the Abolition of the British Slave Trade," *Quaker History* 44, no. 2 (Autumn 1955): 76.

<sup>18</sup> Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> John Ady, *The Case of Our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans* (London: James Phillips, 1783), 4 – 5.

Woods' 1785 pamphlet condemned the institution of slavery and its supporters in the clearest terms yet. As the text declares, "the end cannot justify the means. It never was intended that the gospel of peace should be propagated by the violation of every tender connection, by compulsion, and by fraud."<sup>20</sup> In many respects, this was the culmination of the critiques of slavery presented by Woolman, Benezet, and other Quakers. *Thoughts on the Slavery of Negroes* incorporated some of the moral and economic arguments against slavery with a strong religious rebuke to all those who professed to be both Christian and in support of slavery. This indicates a greater acceptance within mainstream society of Quaker views regarding slavery as Woods was comfortable to appropriate the religious authority to say slavery violated 'the gospel of peace', rather than straying from the religious themes so as not to offend those of other denominations.

Amid the successes of Quaker pamphlets in both Britain and America, the movement's advocacy efforts quickly became well organized by the 1780s. In 1783, the Quakers issued a formal petition to the British Parliament for the first time, calling for an end to the slave trade, though not yet for an end to the institution of slavery itself. That same year, the London Society formed a standing committee for the sole purpose of coordinating anti-slavery advocacy and distributing abolitionist texts, which proved to be integral to the dissemination of the aforementioned texts produced by British Quakers in 1784 - 1785.<sup>21</sup>

This flurry of activity in London may have been once again inspired by the interaction across the Atlantic. The American Revolution created new opportunities to end the slave trade and so Quakers in the North American colonies had begun to step up their abolitionist efforts in the 1770s and 1780s. In the summer of 1772, the Virginia Yearly Meeting had prepared an Address to the King asking that the slave trade be ended and that manumissions be made legal throughout the British Empire.<sup>22</sup> As it eventually became clear that the North American colonies would not eventually be reconciled with Britain, the American Quakers increasingly turned their efforts toward lobbying the continental assemblies to support the abolition of slavery or the slave trade. In some cases, these efforts were successful as some of the assemblies within the newly created United States of America saw the connection between the natural rights for which they had been fighting and the natural rights which had been denied slaves for so long. This notion that all human beings possessing certain unalienable rights was expressed perhaps most clearly by the aforementioned Quaker John Woolman in 1754, "If I purchase a man who hath never forfeited his liberty, the natural right of freedom is in him."<sup>23</sup> In 1788, Joseph Woods shared with other members of the Quaker Society in London copies of Acts adopted in Massachusetts and Rhode Island prohibiting the slave trade, and the standing committee on slavery directed him to publish copies of these Acts in the *Morning Chronicle* in order to ensure the British public were aware and might once again consider the slave trade's

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Woods, *Thoughts on the Slavery of the Negroes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: James Phillips, 1785), 27.

<sup>21</sup> John Oldfield, "Britain and the Slave Trade," in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. H.T. Dickinson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006): 493.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Jennings, "The American Revolution and the Testimony of British Quakers Against the Slave Trade," *Quaker History* 70, no. 2 (Fall 1981): 100.

<sup>23</sup> John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, (Philadelphia: James Chatten, 1754), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade*, 52.

abolition.<sup>24</sup> Later that same year, a copy of a similar Act adopted in Connecticut was forwarded to the Quaker Society in London.

Unfortunately, the Quakers were unable to convince the assemblies of those states where slaves were greater in number. The abolition of the slave trade by Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut set an important precedent but did not generate the momentum that would have been necessary to achieve abolition in Virginia or North Carolina. Not to be discouraged, however, the Quaker communities of the new United States continued to campaign openly, not only for the abolition of the slave trade, but also for the emancipation of slaves in those states where the slave trade was particularly well-entrenched.<sup>25</sup> The independence of the United States also necessitated a shift in strategy insofar as the trans-Atlantic slave trade was concerned. While previous efforts could be directed toward London alone as the British government determined the legality of the purchase, trade, and retention of slaves. With much of Britain's North American colonies no longer beholden to British laws, abolition now required simultaneously convincing Americans to oppose the purchase of slaves and the British to cease facilitating the supply of the same. In order to remind the British Quakers of the urgency with which slavery had to be opposed on both sides of the Atlantic, the Philadelphia Society addressed a letter to their counterparts in London in 1782, even before the peace treaty ending the American Revolution had been signed.<sup>26</sup>

The abolitionist victories obtained early in Massachusetts and elsewhere in the United States, taken together with the texts produced by American Quakers in the 1770s and 1780s as well as the 1782 letter from the Philadelphia Society, inspired continued efforts toward the abolition of the slave trade in Britain.<sup>27</sup> Through the work of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, a group primarily consisting of British Quakers, the Slave Trade Act was finally passed in 1807. This measure did not abolish slavery itself, but the British Parliament did prohibit the slave trade through the Act and set out strict penalties for anyone engaged in the purchase and trade of slaves. Thomas Clarkson, an Anglican who had collaborated with the Quakers on the drive toward the adoption of the Slave Trade Act, described the influence the Quakers had exerted upon his own beliefs in his pamphlet, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. In this text, he wrote that, "animated by the example of the Quakers, the members of other sects began to deliberate about adopting the same measure."<sup>28</sup> He refers repeatedly in the essay to the leadership role of the Quakers in the effort to bring about the abolition of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic, indicating the significant impression Quakers had made on Thomas Clarkson and his beliefs.

As has been demonstrated here, the Quakers played a prominent role throughout the Enlightenment period in spreading ideas of equality. Following the experiences of George Fox in Bridgetown, the newly established Religious Society of Friends entered into a

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<sup>25</sup> Ryan Jordan, "Quakers, 'Comeouters,' and the Meaning of Abolitionism in the Antebellum Free States," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 590.

<sup>26</sup> Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 110.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London: James Phillips, 1786), IX.

profound exchange of views on the institution of slavery, developing clear arguments in favour of slavery's abolition on moral and economic grounds. The sophistication of this debate matches those of philosophers considering moral and epistemological issues in other European capitals during this historical period.

But the introduction of George Fox's experiences in Barbados to other Quakers in London was only the first of many trans-Atlantic exchanges fostered by the trans-Atlantic movement. What followed was a century of exchanges, in which the Quaker Society in London would at times take leadership while at other times the Quaker societies of North American colonies found themselves at the forefront of the abolitionist movement. The petitions to the British Parliament inspired the American Quakers to vigorously lobby the continental assemblies as the United States took shape. This in turn motivated the final push in Britain which saw the adoption of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. The interconnectedness of these achievements by the Quakers illustrates how the movement remained close despite being separated by the Atlantic Ocean.

As the Anglican abolitionist Thomas Clarkson wrote, it was only through this trans-Atlantic nature that the Quaker movement found itself at the forefront of the abolitionist cause. Without that Quaker link, abolitionists would have been left to struggle in isolation from one another. Though the Quakers did not as readily facilitate the exchange of Enlightenment ideas about scientific knowledge, the spread of ideas about natural rights was a crucial contribution to the social and political phenomenon we know today as the Enlightenment.

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