

POLITICAL OBLIGATION AND CIVIL DISSENT IN QUAKER THEOLOGICO- POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Today most Friends know intuitively that Quakers have been one of the most important political forces in American history. When scholars assume, as, for example, Caroline Robbins has, that Quakers may be “safely neglected” in the study of Anglo-American constitutionalism, Friends chuckle and shake their heads.¹ Yet, although their actions have been well documented—their vital role in securing religious liberty, abolition, and women’s rights—the Quaker contribution to the ideas and political processes of the American polity has remained unarticulated. My purpose here is to give a brief overview of the seventeenth-century origins of the Quaker theologico-political thought and civic engagement.²

The most tangible political legacy of Quakerism is the theory and practice of civil disobedience.³ To many this may seem obvious, but the scholarship on civil disobedience almost invariably begins with Thoreau, with Quakers receiving only a cursory nod for their abolitionism. But the practice was fully developed by Quakers almost two-hundred years earlier. Moreover, they actively disseminated their theory and practice of it well beyond their Society since then. In fact, Thoreau, though not actually a civil disobedient himself, drew on Quaker ideas of dissent.⁴

The much less obvious contribution of Quakerism to American political culture is the theory behind the civil disobedience. For a program of disobedience to be legitimate and effective, it must properly be understood as the by-product of something larger. Any coherent theory or methodical practice of dissent—whatever form it may take—it must be preceded by and premised on a political theory that reveres the constituted polity. In other words, there is no such thing as dissent in anarchy. As my title suggests, the Quaker contribution to American politics hinges on two important ideas: first, obligation, that is, the duty to respect and obey the fundamental constitution of the polity; and second, dissent about policy, which means to disagree with established laws and norms and, perhaps, to disobey them. Quaker civil dis-

obedience exemplifies these concepts and practices. Indeed, it was the Quakers' theologico-political theory of a civil constitution that allowed the idea and practice of civil disobedience to arise. For the next few pages I will outline the Quaker theory of constitutionalism and explain how civil disobedience was the logical outgrowth of it. My intention here is not to present new information about Quaker theology, but rather, to fit what we know about it into a new framework that lets us consider Quakerism from another angle—a political one.

Quaker political thought and action came directly from their experience of the origin, form, and function of an ecclesiastical constitution and appropriate behavior within the faith community.⁵ In fact, in most cases, there is little difference between their ecclesiastical theory and their political theory. Therefore, for the purposes here, Quaker theology and church government may be considered interchangeably with their political theory and the corresponding structures.

LEGAL DISCERNMENT

The early Quakers' unique understanding of a constitution grew from their casuistic epistemology of fundamental (i.e. divine) law. Understanding divine law was both an individual and group effort. At first, the individual's job was to discern God's law through the Light. In his political treatises, William Penn called this process of knowing God's law *synteresis*.⁶ This process was a markedly different view from other political philosophers of the day who held that the law of nature—as opposed to divine law—was known through reason. Thinkers such as Locke were expressly opposed to the idea that man could know law through an inner Light.⁷ Quakers, by contrast, believed that all other ways of knowing were creations of man, and thus secondary. These included Scripture, history, custom, and reason. Ideally, these things should comport with the Light—they should be based on it—but because they were of man, they could be fallible, corrupted, and contradictory. In other words, the spirit was never contradictory, but man's interpretation of it could be. Thus, secondary guides should be tested against the Light, and if there were a discrepancy between them, the Light was to be obeyed. This way, man adhered to the “living spirit” of God's law rather than the “dead letter.”

The process of legal discernment began in the individual's relationship with God, but it did not remain a solitary one. The Light in each individual must be combined with others to form a coherent under-

standing of God's will. Quakers were thus compelled to seek each other out and worship as a group. This group constituted an informal society, one that was governed directly by God without the use of man-made structures. The unity in the Light was a sacred bond that constituted the meeting and allowed them to discern God's fundamental law and follow the order it prescribed. The communal aspect of Quakerism was thus as important as the individual aspect.

THE ORIGINS OF GOVERNMENT

Quakers believed that man in the state of nature, or prelapsarian man, as they would have understood it, had need of government well beyond the purpose of protecting individual rights. Contrary to other views on the origins of government, which considered it a "necessary evil," designed primarily to "Terrifie evil-doers," Penn asserts, "They weakly Err, that think there is no other use for *Government*, than *Correction*, which is the coarsest part of it: Daily experience tells us, that the Care and Regulation of many other Affairs, more soft and daily necessary make up the greatest part of *Government*."⁸

Thus the need for government should not be seen as a failure on the part of man to fulfill God's will, but rather as part of a providential process. Robert Barclay explained that God "hath gathered and *is gathering* us into the good Order, Discipline, and Government" of Christ.⁹ It is not a discrete event with a beginning and an end, but an on-going process in which the fundamental constitution and government are formed early by God and then, as the need arises, are solidified in divinely ordained but man-made structures. Accordingly, in the late 1650s, Fox, along with other leaders, began to organize local meetings around England.

The overarching purpose for establishing government was to preserve the unity of the meeting. Unity was crucial for several reasons—to discern the law; to facilitate charitable works; protection from atomizing forces from within; and protection from destructive forces from without. As Penn said, "Our Civil Union is Our Civil Safety."¹⁰ The two most pressing concerns of Friends who saw the need for church government were the discernment of the law and the "scattering" tendency of the doctrine of the inward Light. While Quakers were still functioning under the direct governance of God, without a formal church government, they soon encountered the problem of where authority lay; in other words, whose interpretation of God's law should

prevail: the individual's or the group's? The rapid growth of Quakerism combined with the enthusiasm of some members, threatened to disunite the meeting. Some Friends challenged what was becoming the standard interpretation of how the meeting should function and what defined a good Quaker.

THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS

With the need for government identified, Fox and other leading Friends moved to solidify the authority of the church government through new structures. Barclay argued that not only is government as such ordained by God, so too is the form it should take and the processes by which it should function: the “order and method.”¹¹ The “order”—the governmental structure—was to be something like a federal system with governing bodies organized hierarchically and geographically. Local meetings met monthly and quarterly, and they were themselves governed by a strong central body that met annually, and to which the local bodies sent representatives.

The “method” of governance—the decision-making process—was also divinely ordained, and Quakers saw it as one of the most important components of their faith. They believed that a particular process must be followed if God's Truth were to be accurately discerned. Decisions were to involve both individual and communal efforts, and they were to be made according to specified procedures. The Quaker emphasis on spiritual equality has led some to see the meeting as a pure democracy, but that is to misunderstand the Quaker genius.² It is true that all men (that is, all *people*) were created (spiritually) equal in that all had the equal opportunity to receive, discern, and express God's Light in their consciences. But all persons have not received equal measures of the Light, nor did they have equal powers of discernment, or facilities of expression. There was a definite hierarchy of giftedness and weightiness that members were admonished to respect. Barclay explained that God gives “unto ever member a measure of the same Spirit, yet divers, according to the Operation, for the Edification of the Body.”¹³ Thus, while every member of the meeting had a voice, not all voices had equal weight. We might consider this system a *representative* democracy with the participatory element determined by a sort of aristocracy of spirit.¹⁴ In other words, there was an element of liberty in the meeting, but it was far from the liberal democracy we know today. Equality of access to the divine will does not imply equity of its discernment.

In theory, this division of insight and abilities, however, would create a surprisingly equitable distribution of power when functioning within a unified meeting. While the preponderance of the power to decide the direction of the meeting lay with the weighty Friends and the majority of the members, there was an obligation incumbent upon the whole meeting to respect the voice of the dissenting minority. Since the goal of the meeting was to come to a unified sense of God's will—which was the only way to understand it correctly—and because God might give any individual member, no matter his or her worldly standing, a clearness that he had not bestowed on the others, all voices needed to be reckoned with according to their weight. Thus when an impasse was reached at a crucial juncture, rather than run roughshod over the dissenting members, the body of the meeting would try to convince the dissenters of their understanding. In *theory*, there was no spiritual oligarchy or democratic despotism in a Quaker meeting.

Of course, as the meeting grew and individual members had variant interpretations of the Light, disagreement became more frequent. A schism known as the Wilkinson-Story Controversy demonstrated the tensions.¹⁵ In 1675 a number of Friends separated from the Society under protest that the new meetings were conducted under a spirit of outward (that is, man-made) authority and that there was too much control over the behavior of individuals. They saw Fox as someone who was “over-driving, imposing, lording over Men's Consciences, setting up in the Church another government then that of the Spirit.”¹⁶ This dissent threatened to disunite the movement.

But dissent in itself was not an undesirable element of the discernment process. Indeed, it was a critical part of the Quaker meeting as a way to the Truth. The Truth, explained Barclay, might be “divers in its Appearance,” and if the dissent “layeth not a real Ground for Division or Dissension of Spirit, Fellow Members ought not only to bear one another, but strengthen one another in [it].”¹⁷ For Quakers, bringing the Light of Truth to the community through dissent was a form of proselytizing. There was a special commission placed with the individual to follow Christ's example and “[give] Witness to the Dispensation of the Gospel.”¹⁸ They ought not to remain silent.¹⁹ Progressive revelation necessitated openness to variant interpretations of the Light; because God might speak through anyone, all voices must be heard.

However, as important as Truth-seeking was, it was not more important than the unity and harmony of the meeting. Indeed, because the discernment of Truth was also a communal effort, it was inextrica-

bly bound with the preservation of the fundamental constitution of the polity. Quakers therefore had a sense of political obligation of the highest order. As Barclay asserted, “The Honor of Truth [was] prostrated by Divisions.”²⁰

Therefore, just as it was incumbent upon the majority to hear dissent as a way to the Truth, the dissenter was equally obliged to follow a prescribed method to preserve the unity. This process was based on the peace testimony, which was the conviction that God’s creations must not be harmed or destroyed. In this case, this meant the divinely constituted polity. The dissenter must first purify his motives and approach the meeting in humility as Christ’s agent. If, however, the meeting does not hear him at first, he must then exercise, as Barclay said, “Forbearance in Things, wherein [the others] have not yet attained; yet . . . [the dissenter] must walk so, as they have him for an Example.” Although some individuals may have a more advanced understanding than the group, in time, Quakers believed, God would eventually reveal the Truth to all.²¹ If still there was no unified sense, the matter must be put aside for the time being so as not to jeopardize the fundamental unity and harmony of the polity. Dissent thus should be a process of persuasion and conviction, not coercion. The difficulty came when the dissenters did not respect the process and asserted their interpretation of the Truth in a disruptive way. The wrong and right ways to dissent are best exemplified in the abolitionism of Benjamin Lay—who called Quaker slave-owners apostates and was eventually disowned—and John Woolman—who waited patiently, persuaded gently, and played a major role in instituting the anti-slavery testimony among Friends.²²

CODIFICATION OF THE PRINCIPLES—THE WRITTEN CONSTITUTION

Now that we have a sense of how the polity was constituted and the processes that animated it, we come to the written constitution. In 1669 as the Quaker leaders worked to establish the central church government, Fox, acting as a representative of the body, drew up the first Discipline of the unified meeting. The Discipline was the Quakers’ ecclesiastical constitution. Its title is *Canons and institutions drawn up and agreed upon by the General Assembly or Meeting of the Heads of the Quakers from all parts of the kingdom . . . January 1668/9, George Fox being their president*. Very much like the civil constitutions that were

being written at this time, it was a statement of the origins and purpose of the Quaker meeting and codification of the divine law that Friends had discerned collectively and transcribed thus far.

According to Friends, this constitution and its government was, because of its origins in a divine process of discernment, perfect in its fundamental elements and therefore sacred. William Penn said that “Government is sacred in its institution and end.” Because it was sacred, it was perpetual. Barclay explained how the constitution arose from the “method” of the meeting. The creation of the Discipline was a case in which “the Judgment of a certain Person or Persons in certain . . . is infallible” and for this reason, it was appropriate for this General Assembly to “pronounce it as obligatory upon others.”²³ But—and here is the crucial point—he also says that the infallibility of this judgment “is not because [these men] are infallible, but because in these Things, and at that Time they were led by the infallible Spirit.”²⁴ Therefore, in so far as the written constitution was in keeping with the spirit, it was perfect and perpetual. If aspects of it were not discerned in the right spirit, however, they would not be binding. Quaker political theorist Isaac Penington wrote that “He who is of counsel with the Lord, may know what he intends,” but *man* must be wary of becoming “the great Introducer” of bad laws.²⁵ This meant that the written constitution was not a static thing. It was a living entity, flexible and amendable to remain in keeping with the spirit. It was a secondary guide like Scripture—as Barclay said, “a Declaration of the *Fountain* but not the *Fountain* it self.” Likewise, Penn said, the civil constitution is “not the *Original* Establishment, but a *Declaration and Confirmation* of that Establishment.”²⁶ Therefore, “Seasons and Times,” explained Barclay, “do not alter the Nature and Substance of Things in themselves; though it may cause Things to alter, as to the Usefulness, or not Usefulness of them.”²⁷ In other words, although the fundamental law embodied in the constitution was eternal, changes in the written document might be necessary in order to apply the law as times changed and as God gave man greater clearness of his will.

The flexibility of the Quaker constitution is evidenced in its evolution from the seventeenth to the late-eighteenth century. The 1669 Discipline was sixteen pages long; by 1798 it was 135 pages. Over the years it was rewritten and expanded, and it evolved to include a preamble that stated more clearly the purpose of the Quaker meeting, new laws that governed, its clarification or amendment of old laws, and features to make it more useful as a reference tool for members, such as a table of contents and an index.²⁸ But, as testimony to the infallibility of

the Spirit's leading the original General Assembly, despite some administrative changes over the years, the essence of it remained the same, including the very language used.

Quakers transferred their understanding of an ecclesiastical theory to the civil sphere virtually wholesale and treated the civil polity as the meeting writ large. But other Englishmen did not share their vision of the constitution.²⁹ In the English government there was no peaceful, methodical process for changing a constitution and limiting an oppressive government. People believed either that the government had a right to impose its authority and that they must submit regardless of the injustice, or that if the government overstepped its bounds it could be overthrown through revolution. In the seventeenth-century, Quakers felt governmental oppression more acutely than most; their persecution is well-documented. But they were not satisfied with either of these theories of government. With their understanding of a constitution that was both sacred and amendable through peaceful means, they originated a process of dissent that limited government while demonstrating a strong sense of political obligation to the structures and principles that bound the polity together. Quakers wrote the first civil constitution with an amendment clause.³⁰ Before this, however, they engaged in civil disobedience and other forms of peaceful dissent.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Three hundred years later, the steps that Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated for civil disobedients were exactly the same methods used by Quakers to publicize their testimonies and combat their persecution. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (April 16, 1963), King laid out the specific directives for undertaking an effective program of civil disobedience. "In any nonviolent campaign," he explained, "there are four basic steps." The first, he says, is the "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist." This was the very reason why Friends organized the Meeting for Sufferings, effectively a legal advocacy group. The second step is attempted "negotiation" with the authorities. According to the Quakers' critics, "[N]o people upon the Earth, seek more to the Higher Powers, than they do; it would be too tedious to recite the many Petitions, and Addresses to the Parliament, from the beginning for This, That, and the Other Favour."³¹ Here we see that there is clearly not a "withdrawal" from government, as some scholars have claimed, but a more intimate engagement with it.³² Third, there

must be a process of “self-purification” to be sure the dissenter is acting from disinterested motives. For Quakers, this was an on-going process, and a main function of the meeting for worship. Then comes the “direct action”—the actual breaking of the law—where Quakers would, as King described, “present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community.”³³ Friends considered themselves to be the “First Publishers of Truth” as they physically protested unjust laws. King goes on: “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored.” But of course, for King, as for the Quakers, it was more than this. “One who breaks an unjust law,” King emphasized, “must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.”³⁴ Passive acceptance of punishments, and indeed martyrdom, was a very important part of early Quaker testifying, as it was for King. It was no coincidence that King learned much of his theory of civil dissent from Quakers.³⁵

Quaker thought and practice was an apparent contradiction for their contemporaries. They simply could not categorize Friends’ behavior into familiar groupings because they had never seen anything like it before. They did not understand the meaning of a people who in the same breath could say to the king that “[Quakers] never sought to detract from thee, or to render thee and thy Government odious to the people,” and yet that “it is not lawful for any whatsoever, by virtue of any authority or principality they bear in the government of this world, to force the consciences of others.”³⁶ This was a new understanding of government and civic engagement. It was a form of popular participation rooted in a collective understanding of the form and function of government. Quakers needed to have a tremendous amount of faith in the English constitution and its prescribed legal system for them to have embraced it so. They somehow knew that the remedy for the ills came from the same source as the cause; the constitution merely needed reform. Their detractors did not yet understand that civil disobedience, as disruptive as it can be, is based on a strong sense of political *obligation* and a deep respect for the constitution of the state. The Quakers, wrote a cynical critic, “repeal, not verbally, yet virtually, so far as their Power reaches, all Acts of Parliament which suit not their *Light Within*.”³⁷ This detractor, however, did not go far enough. Gradually, over many decades, Quakers did, in fact, succeed in *actually* repealing many of the laws that did not agree with their understanding of the

Light. Bearing witness to the Truth evoked conviction beyond a small movement and came to have an impact upon liberties of conscience within the larger society as well.

Most historians date the origins of this concept of a perpetual, yet amendable constitution at the American founding. Yet it is clear that the idea was in circulation among Friends in their ecclesiastical polity and in the civil polities in which they moved. It animated and defined Quaker political engagement from the English Interregnum until today. Some political historians have called the character of King's non-violent protest "distinctive."³⁸ While his role in bringing this form of dissent into the modern American consciousness should not be underestimated, the precedent for that distinction clearly belongs to the Quakers.

NOTES

1. Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 222.
2. This article is a synopsis of some of the main ideas in the (forthcoming) book *A Scared Institution: Quaker Constitutionalism and the Origins of American Civil Disobedience*. A more detailed discussion of Quaker political theory, also from this work, may be found in "The Quaker Theory of Civil Government," *History of Political Thought* (forthcoming, winter 2006).
3. Because this term is often misunderstood and misused, a few words are necessary by way of definition: Civil disobedience is a non-violent, public transgression of the law. The disobedience is conducted out in the open with the aim to highlight unjust laws, to educate the public about the injustice, and to persuade the public peacefully of the need for formal change in the system. For a more detailed discussion of civil disobedience in a Christian context, see James F. Childress, *Civil Disobedience and Political Obligation: A Study in Christian Social Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
4. See William H. Herr, "A Thoreau: Civil Disobedient?" *Ethics* 85:1 (1974), 87-91; and Daniel Walker Howe, *Henry David Thoreau on the Duty of Civil Disobedience: An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 21 May 1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). On the Quaker influence on Thoreau, see James Duban, "Thoreau, Garrison, and Dymond: Unbending Firmness of Mind," *American Literature* 57 (1985): 309-17. 310-11.
5. To be clear, I am using the word "constitution" throughout this essay as it was used in the early modern period, that is, to be synonymous with "government."
6. William Penn, *The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience* (1670), 23; and William Penn, *England's Present Interest Discover'd* (1675), 1.
7. John Locke, "Essays on the Law of Nature" in *The Second Treatise of Government* in *The Selected Writings of John Locke*, ed. Paul E. Sigmund (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 173.
8. Penn, *First Frame of Government*, in *The Papers of William Penn* eds. Dunn and Dunn, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981-87), 2: 212. Cf. Paul A. Rahe,

Republics Ancient and Modern: Volume Three: Inventions of Prudence: Constituting the American Regime (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 32-33.

9. Robert Barclay, *Anarchy of the Ranters and other Libertines* (1676), 9. Emphasis added.
10. William Penn, *One Project for the Good of England, that is, Our Civil Union is our Civil Safety* (1679).
11. Barclay, *Anarchy*, 14.
12. In fact, George Fox wrote explicitly against democracy, which was not seen by Anglo-Americans as a desirable form of government until the early nineteenth century. See George Fox, *A Few Plain Words to be considered by those of the Army, or others that would have a parliament that is chosen by the voices of the people, to govern three nations. Wherein is shewn unto them according to the Scripture of Truth, that a parliament so chosen are not likely to govern for God and the good of his people* (1661). Neither did William Penn advocate social leveling or democracy. See Melvin B. Endy, *William Penn and Early Quakerism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).
13. Barclay, *Anarchy*, 3.
14. We might compare this to the idea of a “natural aristocracy” put forth by the framers of the American Constitution, by which the most virtuous members of the polity would naturally rise to positions of leadership.
15. Another clear example is the difficulties that arose with James Nayler.
16. John Pearson, *Anti-Christian Treachery Discover'd and Its Way Block'd Up . . .* (London, 1686), preface.
17. Barclay, *Anarchy*, 58.
18. *Ibid.*, 1.
19. *Ibid.*, 56-57.
20. *Ibid.*, 20.
21. *Ibid.*, 55-56.
22. For a discussion of these two men, see Gary B. Nash and Jean Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 49.
23. It is quite interesting to note the parallel between the content and purpose of Barclay's *Anarchy* and the *Federalist Papers*. Both were written to explain to a reluctant audience the necessity and propriety of the new government and why it was about to be imposed upon them, whether they were fully convinced or not.
24. Barclay, *Anarchy*, 69.
25. Isaac Pennington, *A Considerable Question About Government* (1653), 5-6.
26. William Penn, *England's Present Interest Discovered* (1675), 29.
27. Barclay, *Anarchy*, 24.
28. The Books of Discipline from these periods may be found in the Quaker Collection at Haverford College. See also “Institution of the Discipline,” *Friends' Library: Comprises Journals, Doctrinal Treatises, and Other Writings of the Religious Society of Friends*, eds. William Evans and Thomas Evans, 14 vols. (Philadelphia: J. Rakestraw, 1837-1850), 1: 109-41. 112.
29. For works on the British constitution, see especially Charles McIlwain, *Constitutionalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1947); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); Glenn Burgess, *The*

- Politics of the Ancient Constitution: An Introduction to English Political Thought, 1603-1642* (University Park: PA: Penn State Press, 1992).
30. See Penn's *First Frame*.
 31. Francis Bugg, *A Retrospective-Glass for the Quakers* (1710) republished in *A Finishing Stroke: Or, Some Gleanings, Collected out of the Quakers Books . . . Whereby The Great Mystery of the Little Whore is farther Unfolded* (London: 1712), 490.
 32. Garry Wills, *A Necessary Evil: A History of the American Distrust of Government* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), *passim*.
 33. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham City Jail* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1963), 4.
 34. *Ibid.*, 7.
 35. His greatest mentor was Bayard Rustin. See John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). See also the two *QRT* issues dedicated to the work of King, including connections with Friends: issue #s 67 (1988) and 103 (2004).
 36. Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (London, 1678), xxii. See also Penn, *England's Present Interest Discovered*, 35.
 37. Francis Bugg, *The Pilgrim's Progress from Quakerism to Christianity* (London, 1698), 38.
 38. Willis, 289.