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David L. Jones

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# “HANGING AS A FLAG”: MARY DYER AND QUAKER HAGIOGRAPHY

DAVID L. JOHNS

## INTRODUCTION

Governor Endicott: “You will own yourself a Quaker, will you not?”

Mary Dyer stiffened. “I am myself to be reproachfully called so.”

The jailer exclaimed, “She is a vagabond!”

Governor Endicott continued, “The sentence was passed upon you by the General Court and now likewise; you must return to the prison and there remain until tomorrow at nine o’clock; then from thence you must go to the gallows, and there be hanged till you are dead.”

Mary Dyer did not flinch. “This is no more than what you said before.”

Governor Endicott: “But now it is to be executed; therefore prepare yourself tomorrow at nine o’clock.”

Mary Dyer: “I came in obedience to the will of God to the last General Court desiring you to appeal your unrighteous laws of banishment on pain of death; and that same is my work now, and earnest request, although I told you that if you refused to repeal them, the Lord would send others of his servants to witness against them.”

Governor Endicott: “Are you a prophetess?”

Mary Dyer: “I speak the words that the Lord speaks in me and now the thing has come to pass.”

Governor Endicott: “Away with her! Away with her!”

Led through the streets sandwiched between drummers...Mary Dyer walked to her death....Some of the followers...[pleaded] “Mary Dyer, don’t die. Go back to Rhode Island where you might save your life. We beg of you, go back, go back! Go back and live!”

Raising her voice above the hammering of the drummers, she said, “Nay, I cannot go back to Rhode Island, for in obedience to the will of the Lord I came, and in His will I abide faithful to death.”

...close to Frog Pond by the great elm tree in Boston Commons, the drums were quieted and Captain John Webb spoke up. Turning to the agitated crowd in justification, he said, “She has been here before and had the sentence of banishment upon pain of death and has broken the law in coming again now. It is therefore she who is guilty of her own blood.”

Mary Dyer spoke in contradiction, “Nay, I came to keep blood-guiltiness from you, desiring you to repeal the unrighteous and unjust laws of banishment upon pain of death made against the innocent servants of the Lord. Therefore, my blood will be required at your hands who willfully do it.” “But, for those who do it in the simplicity of their hearts, I desire the Lord to forgive them. I came to do the will of my father, and in obedience to this will I stand even to death.”

As her neck snapped, the crowd stood paralyzed in the silence of death until a spring breeze lifted her limp skirt and it billowed in response. General Atherton cracked the silence, “She hangs like a flag,” he said. A chorus of voices repeated, “Ay, she hangs like a flag.” And one strong voice continued, “She hangs like a flag for others to take example from.”<sup>1</sup>

“She hangs like a flag for others to take example from.”

In this article I propose to examine Mary Dyer but not in order to further our understanding of her as a historical figure. Rather, using her as a model and an occasion I intend to look at the *theological question of religious regard for the saints* and ask whether Quakers possess a *notion of sainthood* and a *hagiographic tradition* (since it is unlikely that one exists apart from the other). Far from being a Roman Catholic question, any tradition that functions according to, or in conversation with, a formative narrative is a tradition that is potentially guided by human lives. At its best, this is precisely what the saints are and how their memory functions in practical terms. And while the Scriptures, the language of the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures have all been formative for Friends since their inception, I contend that there has been an implicit (if not actually explicit) notion of the saints operative within the Religious Society of Friends.

Narrative approaches to the Christian life may be built upon the story of the Scriptures, of course. However, an important narrative approach to the moral life, it seems, is an examination of lives that embody, or more theologically—*incarnate*—the values embraced and pursued. Lives of heroic virtue have provided, and continue to provide for Quakers, a narrative for structuring community life and for initiating neophytes into the faith. Hagiography in both its general and in its particularly Quaker expressions functions *as example* by establishing a pattern of faithfulness. It is an *incarnationally contextualized* expression of holiness. Since the first Christian saints were the *martyrs*, it makes sense to begin a discussion of Quakers and the saints with Mary Dyer: the most famous of Quaker martyrs.

### MARY DYER AND QUAKERISM

It is clear that like the first proclamation of the Easter message the message of Quakerism in America is linked inexorably to women. Ann Austin and Mary Fisher, the first Quakers in Boston, arrived in July of 1656. They came not to settle nor to colonize but to preach as they had in Barbados, and as Fisher had with Elizabeth Williams, to the students at Cambridge University. Of course, the Boston magistrates were well aware of this troublesome sect, the Quakers, and promptly jailed Fisher and Austin and sent them back to Barbados as quickly as possible. Apparently, the greatest threat posed by these women, and a threat that was to be confirmed as legitimate later in the Boston magistrates' protracted difficulty with Mary Dyer, was the disruption of a kind of civil order that was characterizing the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Soon laws were passed penalizing ship captains for even transporting Quakers to Boston.

Anne Hutchinson, like Roger Williams, succeeded either by accident or design in infuriating the Puritan leadership of Boston. Hutchinson was convinced of Puritan thought by John Cotton. However, while most of the New England Puritans would say with Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, and Peter Bulkley, that human beings could prepare their hearts for the moment of the Spirit's regenerating work and that this "preparation for grace" was an essential stage in the order of salvation, John Cotton stressed the gracious and even arbitrariness of God's regenerative work. Hutchinson

admired Cotton and eventually with her family followed him from England to the New World (he in 1633, they in 1634).

Hutchinson was an articulate supporter of Cotton and the *Covenant of Grace*; she was an equally outspoken critic of the *Covenant of Works*. At Cotton's request, she held meetings in her home attracting many women and even the newly elected governor, Sir Henry Vane. These meetings became successful to the point of concern for ministers and magistrates alike. Somewhere during this period Mary and William Dyer migrated to New England and settled in Boston.<sup>2</sup> Anne and Mary became friends rather quickly and Mary became a regular participant in the so-called "Antinomian" gatherings. But Hutchinson was cast out of the Boston Church in 1638 for "infecting" others with her "erroneous and dangerous" opinions and for engaging in activities not "fitting for her sex." How might she have been regarded had she sided with the *Covenant of Works*? Obviously, Hutchinson's theological convictions carried political significance; however, it appears that the activities troubling Governor John Winthrop and others were theological, and perhaps even pastoral. Even her words as she left the Boston Church after being cast out carry a more clearly theological tone: "The Lord judgeth not as man judgeth. Better to be cast out of the church than to deny Christ." Apparently, "denying Christ" here would have meant not recognizing revelations that came to her, not acknowledging her giftedness to speak to the gatherings at her home, not affirming grace over works. I call attention to this because the scene is quite different in the case of Dyer, where her activities are more clearly direct and intentionally confrontational acts challenging laws and decisions. As Hutchinson was banished from the Boston Church, the trial ministers having turned their backs on her, Mary Dyer grasped her hand and walked with her from the church, thereby further identifying herself publicly with Hutchinson.

From here we can sketch an outline of Mary Dyer's travels and activities essentially as follows:

Dyer moved from Boston with Hutchinson to Newport, Rhode Island. In 1643 Hutchinson, along with her entire family (save one daughter), was murdered in an Indian attack. Seven years later (1650) Dyer traveled alone to England and remained there for several years. While in England she became involved with the Seekers and finally with Friends, spending a brief time at Swarthmore Hall with Fox himself. Thus, her spiritual journey consisted in a move

from Puritanism, to antinomianism, to Seekers, and finally to Friends. Dyer returned to Boston in 1657 and was imprisoned due to her affiliation with Quakers. She was released into the custody of her husband, who had to promise that she would not preach and that she would leave the colony.

Just prior to her return, the General Court of Massachusetts had passed its first anti-Quaker law preventing Friends and their books from entering the colony and extending a fine to ship captains who transported Quakers to Boston (1656). Ineffective in stemming the immigration tide, the court passed additional legislation: first, legislation that imposed heavier fines and the cutting off of ears and boring of tongues for “repeat offenders” (1657). Finally, in 1658 a law was passed that banished Quakers from Boston “under pain of death.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1659 Dyer learned of two Friends imprisoned in Boston, so she returned in order to visit them. She was aware of these new measures but intentionally defied them. She was imprisoned but was soon released with the others (September); they were warned that should they ever return to Boston they would be executed. Dyer returned to Boston a few weeks later and was imprisoned. Her 18-year-old son begged for his mother’s life, and an agreement was made. Dyer would be taken to the gallows and would watch her companions die. She would then be given a reprieve at the last moment, and so it was. In October 1659 she first watched William Robinson die. Next, Marmaduke Stephenson was hanged. These two had traveled to Boston to “bear witness against the persecuting spirit existing there.” With the noose around her own neck, Dyer was reprieved and given 48 hours to leave Boston, never to return. After she returned to Boston yet again she was condemned to die on May 30, 1660, and was indeed finally hanged on June 1.

A tenacious commitment to challenging unjust laws? A death wish? An antinomian disregard for law and civil order? A desire for or a sense of call to martyrdom? Whatever the case, the impact of her memory far outlived the immediate reach of her actions: precisely the function of saints.

## THE MESSAGE AND MYSTERY OF THE SAINTS

Recognized saints have existed for thousands of years and they appear in traditions other than Catholic Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Anabaptists have long recorded stories of early Christian martyrs and accounts of their own martyrs from the 1520s through 1660 in the massive collection, *The Martyr's Mirror*, resulting in a type of reverence for those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of faith.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the "Order of Saint Luke" (established 1946), a liturgical renewal movement within the United Methodist Church, has published a calendar of saints to be used as "part of a cycle of prayer" or as a "devotional volume for personal or corporate use."<sup>6</sup>

Elevating persons to sainthood in Catholic Christianity is no mere quaint practice of the past. During the pontificate of John Paul II more people have been beatified and canonized than the combined total for all the other twentieth-century pontificates, including for the first time the beatification of a Native American<sup>7</sup> and the canonization of a Jewish convert who died in the Nazi death camps.<sup>8</sup> Now, some twenty years into his pontificate, he has beatified eight hundred persons and has canonized two hundred and seventy-nine (from Pius X [1903-1914] to John Paul I [33 days in 1978] the total of beatifications was 79 and the total of *canonizations* was ninety-eight).<sup>9</sup>

But why should such efforts be made? What roles do the saints play within theology and religious life, and how valuable are those roles? And, considering Mary Dyer, does the Religious Society of Friends have a notion of sainthood, despite its eschewing of hagiographic traditions? Does it possess or exercise its own hagiographic tradition, and what, if any, would be the significance of establishing such a claim?

In the biblical texts the words *saint* and *saints* (variations of *hagioi*, Greek, or *sanctus*, Latin) appear one hundred and one times, sixty-two of these occurrences are found in the New Testament texts, primarily in the Pauline and the deutero-Pauline writings. The word appears in the book of Revelation more frequently (thirteen times) than in any other book. In the Pauline material *saints* is used in the salutation as the preferred title for the faithful in four out of the seven uncontested letters (Romans, I and II Corinthians, and Philippians) and in two of the remaining six "contested letters" (Ephesians and Colossians). The way in which the word is used is indicative of an early Christian position concerning all the faithful.

Its use in Philippians 1:1a is typical:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,  
*to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi...*

And from Romans 1:7a:

To all in Rome who are loved by God  
*and called to be saints...*

The designation “saint” is applied to all the faithful indicating both *what they are* AND *what they are called to be*.

However, before the end of the first century of the Christian era, the designation “saint” was increasingly attached to those who died for the faith: that is to say, the *martyrs*. These women and men were revered as models of faithfulness, whose lives pointedly asked: “How far are you willing to go?” This nearly exclusive identification of the saints with the martyrs began to decrease after the toleration and eventual acceptance of Christianity in the Roman Empire, although martyrs continued to inspire, and at least in the case of the Donatist controversy [fourth century], to provide a formidable critique.

The book of Acts records the martyrdom of Stephen. It is important to note that this narrative in Acts 7 is remarkably parallel to the structure of Luke’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This becomes an important model for subsequent Christian accounts of martyrs as well. Preceding the execution is a trial, which becomes a moment of Gospel proclamation that the “Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God” (Lk. 22:69). Stephen declares: “Look...I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). Both Jesus and Stephen cry out in the midst of their sufferings during the actual execution for divine forgiveness for the executioners: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34); “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60b). Thus, to the very end, the martyr is one whose faith holds steady, and who, even in dying unjustly, blesses.

This is curious. Ruth Plimpton has written a popular but detailed biography of Mary Dyer. In her telling of the story, as Dyer stood trial she affirmed that she had come to Boston to “do the will of God” and that she had come to save them from “bloodguiltiness ...because of the unrighteous and unjust laws.” When asked whether she was a prophetess she answered: “I speak the words that the Lord



speaks in me and now the thing has come to pass...” but she was cut off and taken away. At the place of execution she exclaimed: “Yea, I have been in Paradise several days and now I am about to enter eternal happiness.” And to her captors she said: “But, for those who do it in the simplicity of their hearts, I desire the Lord to forgive them.”<sup>10</sup> It appears that a pattern similar to the Lukan is operative here.

John Stratton Hawley offers some insight in understanding the theological significance of the saints to Christian faith. He uses three terms: “example,” “fellowship,” and “aid.”<sup>11</sup> These characterizations are taken from the Vatican II document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* 51:

Let the faithful be taught, therefore, that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the intensity of our active love. By such love, for our own greater good and that of the Church, we seek from the saints “*example* in their way of life, *fellowship*, in their communion, and *aid* in their intercession.”<sup>12</sup>

I will discuss briefly the second and third first and then return to the saint as “example.”

*Fellowship.* The notion of sainthood is closely related to community. The saints together comprise a *communio sanctorum* in which they are for the faithful that “great cloud of witnesses” of which the writer of the Hebrews speaks. “The term ‘communion of saints’... has two closely linked meanings: communion ‘in holy things (*sanc-ta*)’ and ‘among holy persons (*sancti*).’<sup>13</sup> They are God’s family, a divine society giving nourishment to the living faithful who may actually commune with them. They are a *communio* in that the living faithful may look to them as ones who have experienced the human condition fully as human beings. They are a *communio* in that they bridge time, past and present. John Coleman notes that

The conviction is that in their heavenly state the holy dead remain concerned that we walk a path similar to theirs in our fragile lives. This sense of a past that continues to live serves to enlarge and vitalize the present and to impregnate it with drama and possibility....As the letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 11:1-4) indicates, the possibility of our becoming saints hinges on there being saints before us.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the saints form a fellowship, a *communio*, a family, which together draws the living faithful toward their vocation of becoming saints, that is, preparing to be *like* and *with* them—a *communio sanctorum*.

*Aid.* The second word Hawley uses to characterize the saints is “aid.”

Prayer and petition constitute a major element in any ethnology of religion. Their aim is often not only what we would normally consider greater moral adequacy but greater well-being in general, for the hearers of these prayers are persons, not principles. As living beings they potentially superintend a greater range of behavior than that designated by “ought.”<sup>15</sup>

The saints have long been regarded as ones who intercede on our behalf and to whom we may pray. *Lumen Gentium* 49, for example, affirms that “those in heaven are more closely united with Christ, they establish the whole Church more firmly in holiness, lend nobility to the worship which the Church offers on earth to God, and in many ways contribute to its greater upbuilding.”<sup>16</sup>

We may now return to *Example*. Hawley notes that “example” may be understood as either “an instance, an illustration, a case in point,” or as a “paradigm that sets the shape for a series of imitative phenomena that follow in its wake. It is a model, a prototype, not merely an example but an exemplar.”<sup>17</sup> In the first instance, the saint is the one who exemplifies the virtues that are known and embraced by the Christian community. The saint may embody a particular virtue or perhaps several, but always she or he will be regarded as an example of holiness. This view of saint-as-example, according to Hawley, is a *deductive* conception of sainthood. In other words, the saint achieves his or her status because she or he simply exemplifies those things that are generally taught and accepted. The virtues and qualities that the saints embody thus precede them.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Hawley speaks of an *inductive* conception of sainthood. “[The saints] can be seen as models, persons from whom one can learn patterns of life for which no principle or code can serve as an adequate representation.”<sup>19</sup> He sees this inductive conception as being more important in appreciating the centrality of saints. As an exemplar the saint not only *does* but *is*, not only is this a matter of *praxis*, but also of *ontology*. Thus, rather than simply being a model of a faithful follower of particular moral codes, the saint as exemplar

becomes the *Christopher*, the one who carries Christ. It is more than the saint's actions that are critical for the living faithful, it is the saint's entire way of being in the world; through the saint's *imitatio Christi*, the saint re-presents Christ. This role, it should be noted, is not associated with an office, it is not assured by an ecclesial imprimatur, nor is it conferred upon the saint.

St. Paul's remarks to the Corinthian Christian community may sound presumptuous given contemporary moral ambiguity but he captures the essence of the saint's life and relationship to the living faithful: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."<sup>20</sup> The "presumptuousness" of this claim is what makes it interesting. Clearly, the impact of his statement is all the more stunning in our own time that is so given to moral relativism. However, St. Paul's words are a necessary (and I would hope, sufficient) corrective to the ever tempting allure of Pelagianism. The Pelagian error ought continually to be rejected not only because it was rejected by conciliar decision at Ephesus in 431, but because it fails to acknowledge adequately our radical dependence upon grace, upon the historical tradition, and upon the saints. Whether it appears in the "rugged individualism" form, the "autonomous self" form of Enlightenment rationalism, or even an ostensibly pious form of holiness that accentuates moralism over the Holy Spirit, Pelagianism would have us think that we are alone. "Be imitators of me..." is a reminder (sometimes a painful one at that!) that in matters of Christian faith and in living holiness, we are not innovators or leaders as much as we are followers. Hawley continues by arguing that

Their personhood was the crux of the morality they taught—often implicitly rather than discursively—and what they sought to imitate and perfect was no specific aspect of the life of Jesus, as in later understandings of the *imitatio Christi*, but the unfallen Adam that waits to be rediscovered within us all. They were not examples typifying aspects of the whole, they *were* convincingly the whole....<sup>21</sup>

The saints are icons of Christ ("eikon," Greek, an *image of* or *window to*). It is a *life* that becomes supremely important, not disembodied ideals or principles, but a life. That the saints are offered for imitation is clear from the prayers offered at Mass on their respective feast days. Of course, it is true that some prayers among the "Proper of Saints" focus more upon the particular saint's *intercessory work* for the living faithful as is apparent in the Marian prayers.

However, many of these prayers identify an exemplary virtue and call the living faithful to an *imitatio sancti*. Many examples could be cited. One prayer goes beyond the others. This prayer is offered on October 4, the Feast Day for St. Francis of Assisi:

Father,  
you helped St. Francis to reflect the image of Christ  
through a life of poverty and humility.

*May we follow your Son  
by walking in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi,  
and by imitating his joyful love....*<sup>22</sup>

This prayer affirms that one may actually follow Christ by walking in the footsteps of St. Francis and by imitating him. There are two important assertions being made in this strikingly simple but theologically profound prayer. First, the prayer asserts that the saint, in this case Francis, has so closely followed the way of Jesus that to follow the saint is to find oneself following Christ. Is this not the implication of St. Paul's remark in I Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ?" The second assertion is that holiness of life, sanctity, is *attainable* because it *has been attained already* by the saint; therefore, we may in confidence walk in the footsteps of our brother, Francis of Assisi. The saint exists as a flesh-and-blood symbol of hope for the living faithful as surely as she or he stands as a challenge.

Stanley Hauerwas summarizes this position by stating

Christianity is a training in following a person, we can learn to "grow in the way" only by watching how others have learned to follow that person. Therefore, attending to the lives of others is not, as it is for other forms of ethics, simply one way among others by which we learn to grow morally. Rather, attending to the lives of the saints is for Christians the means of moral growth on which all other aspects of the moral life depend.<sup>23</sup>

## FRIENDS AMONG THE SAINTS, OR SAINTS AMONG THE FRIENDS?

There are at least three major examples in Friends literature that indicate a notion of sainthood at work. The first example is evident in the writings of L. V. Hodgkin (Holdsworth, 1869-1954). In 1917 Hodgkin published *A Book of Quaker Saints*. Apart from its

intriguing title, the book has enjoyed a healthy publication record. Published in London by T.N. Foulis in 1917, it was reprinted the following year. In 1922 it was reprinted again by Macmillan. It was reprinted again in London by Longman, Green and Company in 1949, and once more in 1972 by Friends Home Service Committee. Even an abridged version was published by Macmillan in 1936 with the title, *A Little Book of Quaker Saints*.

Hodgkin wrote the book with children in mind and her concern reflects the ideas of saints as “fellowship” and “example.” Their *humanness* is a comfort. “In this book are written the stories of some of the Saints who did not know that they were saints at all: they thought they were just ordinary men and women and little children, and that makes them rather specially comforting to us, who are just quite ordinary people too.”<sup>24</sup> These Quaker saints serve a *pedagogical* function as well by instructing the young (“of various ages”<sup>25</sup>) in the virtues embraced by the Friends community.

One might be able to dismiss this book as an anomaly if the pattern were not so frequently repeated. Friends General Conference has recently published *Quakers on the Move*. Books of this sort are not rare in the Religious Society of Friends. Story books (*Obadiah the Bold*, Elizabeth Fox Howard’s *Brave Quakers: A Quaker Story Book for Young Children*, et al.), Betty Hockett’s Life Story Mission Series (several titles, Evangelical Friends International), and even coloring books (*Color Me Quaker*, Friends United Meeting). Written for children, these books retell the Quaker story through the life stories of those who are worth imitating. The adult crowd may consider Elfrida Vipont’s *A Faith to Live By* or David Lambert’s *The Quiet in the Land: Some Quaker Saints Challenge Us Today*.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, consider the 1996 *Worship in Song* hymnal from Friends General Conference. While I have some theological and liturgical difficulties with this work, it is rare to find a church hymnal with hymns speaking of figures other than God, Jesus, or biblical characters. This recent hymnal, however, includes songs about Margaret Fell, George Fox, John Woolman, the Valiant Sixty, and Lucretia Mott.<sup>27</sup>

The second example I would call to our attention is the *memorial*. In the memorial the life of a deceased Friend is remembered. This remembering is certainly a corporate remembering as the memorial is read at a Yearly Meeting session. But the memorial extends beyond the transient moment of an annual business session by being *in print*.

Not every deceased Friend is memorialized in this manner. While it would be preposterous to suppose that anything like a formal canonization process takes place in the Religious Society of Friends, nevertheless, some selection work definitely takes place. Who and why? Who indeed is exemplary? While the term “heroic virtue” is not commonplace in the Quaker lexicon, I wonder whether this criterion, or something akin to it, is at work in this process. And, is this *anamnesis* a recognition of the enduring presence of that Friend in the continuing life of the Religious Society?

Like the example from the prayer on St. Francis’s day mentioned above, the mid-nineteenth-century *A Brief Memoir of Elizabeth Fry* concludes: “Such was the close of a life eminently dedicated to the service of God. To follow the example of which it sets before us must involve many a sacrifice of vain inclination and selfish desire: but how infinitely blessed is this course of Christian devotedness!”<sup>28</sup>

The third example I offer that is suggestive of a type of sainthood is the phenomenon of the *journal*. The journal is a spiritual biography (to some degree *auto*-biographical) recording the spiritual insights, ministry, and travels of select Friends. The journal is, I think, the major (although not the exclusive) theological genre in Quaker literature. Here again, there is not a journal for every deceased Friend; why for some and not for others?

The unpublished journal often was placed in the care of the meeting that *prepared it* for publication. Howard Brinton notes that this process was sometimes disastrous, however well-intentioned. Committees would omit portions of the journal if deemed non-representative of the community’s ideals, thus making the journal, in some respects, less a pristine expression of the spiritual experiences of a weighty Friend and more a pedagogical tool for the formation of character and ideas within the group.<sup>29</sup> Even so, the journal presents the ideals of the community of Friends, not in abstraction, but in flesh and blood.

William M. Thompson in his book *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology*, enumerates several benefits to theology and to the Church when there is a serious conversation with the saints.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most obvious benefit of consulting the saints is that they embody an *experiential element of faith* that is sometimes missing from theology. This “experience” is a richly varied experience that is not at all limited to sense experience. “Experience knows many levels, including

that of openness to and communion with the Divine Mystery.”<sup>31</sup> The presence of the saints in theological reflection “warms” theology to the lived and to the concrete, it opens theology to the human and to the incarnated and to the Incarnation. It is this lived experience (and openness to new experience) that gives depth and authority to the saint’s words. The saint has not only drunk deeply from the springs of spiritual life, but she or he has done so with such intensity that his or her life becomes (embodies) the radiance of the life that is lived in it. It is a vision of the Christian life that is *lived*, it is a notion of Truth that is *embodied*.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the attention to experience that the saints provide for theological reflection, the saints also embody a kind of *praxis* rooted in deep spiritual commitment and sensitivity. This focus may serve as a corrective to a theology whose propensity is toward theory and abstractions. The saints take theological reflection to a practical level. The saints have been engaged in society, they have incarnated Christ to the poor and the forgotten, they have worked for the alleviation of suffering, they have rebuilt the (C)church (as in the case of St. Francis of Assisi). Thompson writes: “In the most general sense, the saints and mystics provide us with a specifically Christian notion of praxis which is deeply aware of the God-dimension of praxis, avoiding and/or enriching some modern reductive notions of praxis.”<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Thompson suggests that in utilizing the saints in theological reflection, they provide for the theologian an “appropriate” and a “critical” mediation. Theology is ever concerned with responsible and adequate ways of “contributing toward the contemporary actualization of the Christian tradition.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, theology is concerned with making the Christian tradition alive in and for a particular time. To do this theologians must be about creative dialogue between the Church’s tradition and the contemporary situation. “Appropriate” mediations are those mediations that assist in articulating the community’s self-understanding as it is given in the tradition, its texts and heritage. “Critical” mediations are those that attempt to “correct inadequacies in the community’s self-understanding, precisely for the sake of the community and its tradition. Expressed in a theological idiom, the Jesus Christ event requires of us that we be open to a correction of our community self-understanding precisely if we are to remain faithful to it.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the saints reflect an “appropriate” mediation as those who actually embody the

tradition; they are living mediations bringing to life the dynamic interplay between the human situation and the received tradition. And, the saints are a “critical” mediation calling for correction, greater clarity, and development of the tradition, again as living mediations, ones who have become aware, awake, conscious.<sup>36</sup> “We return from the lives we have examined to our own lives; the examiners become the examined, and our claim upon our ‘saints’ becomes their many-sided claim upon us.”<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of Mary Dyer’s protests may be questioned. One more Friend, William Leddra, was hanged (1661) before the “under pain of death” law was repealed in 1661. Even after the cessation of hangings in Boston the *Cart and Tail Law* (the *Vagabond Act*, 1661) was passed and continued until 1665, and whippings continued for another dozen years (until 1677). Is it likely that Edward Burroughs, George Fox and Christopher Holder would have eventually approached the King about the persecutions in Boston? Would Charles II have ended the religious persecutions in Boston without Dyer’s sacrifice? Probably, but not necessarily so.

Please do not misunderstand, I am not suggesting the Religious Society of Friends formalize a canonization process. The saints are quite capable of capturing our imagination apart from any formal process of recognition or ecclesial endorsement. What I am suggesting is that a notion of the saint, one whose life is lived with heroic virtue, one whose life is exemplary, a person according to whom we model our own lives, whose life we commend to our children and to our neophytes, this sort of person indeed exists in the tradition and the literature of Friends, and importantly so. Ironically, what I am suggesting is that a hagiographic tradition exists even among the at-times ecclesiastical iconoclasts.

Yet, why should we be surprised. According to Stanley Hauerwas:

Like any skills, the virtues must be learned....For the Christian, morality is not chosen and then confirmed by the example of others; instead, we learn what the moral life entails by imitating another. This is intrinsic to the nature of Christian convictions, for the Christian life requires a transformation of the self that can be accomplished only through the direction from a master.



The problem lies not in knowing *what* we must do, but *how* we are to do it. And the how is learned only by watching and following.<sup>38</sup>

On Boston Commons and otherwise, it is well-said of Mary Dyer: “She hangs like a flag...for others to take example from.”

## NOTES

1. Ruth T. Plimpton, *Mary Dyer: Biography of a Rebel Quaker* (Boston: Branden Publishing Company, 1994), 186-188 [selections].
2. The two were admitted to Boston Church on December 13, 1635.
3. Arthur J. Worrall, *Quakers in the Colonial Northeast* (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 1980), 9-15.
4. John Stratton Hawley includes several essays on saints in various religious traditions in his edited book, *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); On Islam, 36-51, 127-143, on Hinduism, 52-72, on Confucianism, 73-86, on Judaism, 87-108, on Buddhism, 111-126, on Hatian Vodou, 144-167.
5. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or, Martyr’s Mirror of the Defenseless Christians: Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, from the Time of Christ to the Year A. D. 1660*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 10th ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975).
6. Clifton F. Guthrie, ed., *For All the Saints: a Calendar of Commemorations for United Methodists* (Akron, OH: Order of Saint Luke Publications, 1995), 1.
7. Kateri Tekakwitha. Although beatified by John Paul II June 22, 1980, she was declared venerable on January 2, 1943, by Pius XII.
8. Edith Stein. This decision met with protest from many Jewish groups both when Stein was beatified on May 1, 1987, and when she was canonized on October 11, 1998.
9. Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn’t, and Why* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 120 (also, 116-120); Anne R. Carey and Sam Ward, “Papal Imprint,” *USA Today*, 26 January 1999, News section.
10. Plimpton, *Mary Dyer*, 186-188.
11. Hawley, *Saints and Virtues*, xiii-xxiv.
12. LG 51; *The Documents of Vatican II*, 84. The emphasis is mine.
13. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 948.
14. John A. Coleman, “Conclusion: After Sainthood?” in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J Hawley, 208.
15. Hawley, *Saints and Virtues*, xx.
16. LG 49; *The Documents of Vatican II*, 81.
17. Hawley, *Saints and Virtues*, xiii.
18. *Ibid.*, xiv.
19. *Ibid.*, xiv.
20. I Cor. 11:1 (NRSV).

21. Hawley, *Saints and Virtues*, xv.
22. *Sacramentary*, 649. The emphasis is mine.
23. Stanley Hauerwas, “Ethics and Ascetical Theology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 61 (1979), 98.
24. L. V. Hodgkin, *A Book of Quaker Saints* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 17.
25. *Ibid.*, vii.
26. Elizabeth Fox Howard, *Brave Quakers: A Quaker Story Book for Young Children* (London: Bannisdale Press, 1957), Elfrida Vipont, *A Faith to Live By* (Philadelphia: Religious Education Committee, Friends General Conference, 1962); David Lambert, *The Quiet in the Land: Some Quaker Saints Challenge Us Today* (London: Epworth Press, 1956).
27. Hymns 195, 219, 255, 270, 272, 281.
28. *A Brief Memoir of Elizabeth Fry* (Philadelphia: Association of Friends for the Diffusion of Religious and Useful Knowledge, 1858), 94.
29. Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Journals: Varieties of Religious Experience Among Friends* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1972), xi-xii.
30. William M. Thompson, *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).
31. *Ibid.*, 53.
32. Herein is a place for specifically Quaker theological reflections and contributions to the wider theological conversation.
33. Thompson, *Fire and Light*, 58.
34. *Ibid.*, 59.
35. *Ibid.*, 60.
36. “It is perhaps the most dramatic way in which the saints help us keep the tradition moving and intersecting with contemporary experience...occasionally the saint’s depth of experience and sensitive openness to new experiences qualifies him or her for a discovery of a genuinely ‘new’ aspect of the Christian revelation.” Thompson, 62.
37. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International), 171.
38. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 115, 131. The emphasis is in the original.