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Quakers, Protestants, and the Narrative of English Religious Persecution

In early modern England, religious intolerance reigned supreme. There was a pervading hostility towards religious groups that were not associated with the Church of England, and these dissenting religious groups were regularly persecuted for their differing views. While each sectarian group was unique, there are parallels that can be traced between the persecutions that occurred throughout this period. Among these 16th- and 17th-century dissenting groups are Protestants and Quakers, whose responses to persecution are strikingly similar. This essay seeks to trace the commonalities between these two religious groups, with the aim of gaining a more nuanced understanding of religious intolerance in a period hostile to religious nonconformity.

First, it is imperative to understand the distinction between Protestants and Quakers as employed in this essay. Although Quakers are generally classified under the wider umbrella of Protestantism, they are considered as separate groups in this analysis for two primary reasons. First, the time periods examined for the Protestants and Quakers in this analysis is different; this research examines Protestants of the 16th century and female Quakers of the mid-17th century. Second, female Quakers receive special consideration for this analysis because they were singled out and persecuted, even after Protestantism had become tolerated across England; since that is the case, female Quakers' stories diverge from the larger story of Protestantism. Although Protestantism as a whole had achieved wide approbation by the mid-17th century, public sentiment towards Quakers—also a Protestant group—was still low. While there was no longer a significant need for Protestants to gain approval in society, Quakers were still harried and sometimes killed for their beliefs.

The research was conducted by examining the representation of female Quakers in pamphlets from Early English Books Online (EEBO), a database containing digitized primary source archives from the period. Also, quotes from journal articles that relied on primary source documents of Quakers were included in this survey. From there, I reviewed John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* and sought out parallels between Foxe's work and documents relating to female Quakers. Female Quakers were of particular interest for this study because, while all Quakers experienced persecution, female Quaker persecution was more marked. Female Quakers were better known for crossing the boundaries of propriety, mainly because the realm of "acceptable actions" for women was still so small—it was easy to act in unacceptable ways when virtually all actions are deemed unacceptable. The ultimate takeaway from the research is a narrative detailing how persecuted religious groups chose to present themselves in the face of adversity.

When exploring early modern English persecution, there is a certain narrative that transpires. Namely, a religious group engages in socially taboo acts and its members are consequently treated harshly. From there, the persecuted group attempts to build up their approval in the community and, finally, when members of the group are killed for their beliefs, the martyrs embrace a sense of stoicism in their midst of their punishments. This essay seeks to trace that narrative through both Quaker and Protestant accounts from the 16th and 17th centuries.

17th century Quaker women were persecuted for a host of reasons; perhaps most notably, however, they were treated harshly because they resisted convention. Quaker women confused the social hierarchy and engaged in activities that were typically reserved for men, like preaching. In the larger community, preaching was considered as a

job reserved exclusively for men. Quaker tradition, however, dictated that both men and women preach. Quakers contended that “every man and woman [...] be heirs of the gospel” and, hence, both men and women were entitled to spread the word.¹ The pervading religious belief was that women were considered unfit for preaching since, as some dissenters stated, “[W]omen have no souls [...] no more than a goose.”² Since Quaker women regularly led services, their behavior disgruntled the traditional members of society; these counter-conventional Quaker women were deemed “iconoclasts” and “confrontational prophetesses.”³ By preaching, Quaker women were making themselves conspicuous in society, which made them more likely to become a persecuted group. When women challenged the social conventions, namely by working as preachers, they were subject to persecution and fostered disapprobation.

Female Quakers asserted their leadership via women’s meetings, which were held regularly. Although women’s meetings were intended for positive ends, the meetings were negatively received by society, and women had to begin to find ways to portray themselves in the most positive light in order to combat this negative perception. In order to ameliorate these negative opinions of the group, Quaker women emphasized their charitable deeds achieved through these meetings.⁴ One woman expounded on the charitable works accomplished through women’s meetings in a letter, suggesting that “[t]he visiting of sick, ordering nurses[,] [...] & looking unto poor families” were under the purview of these women’s groups.⁵ They believed it was a moral imperative that the

¹ Ingle, H.L. “A Quaker Woman On Women's Roles: Mary Penington to Friends, 1678,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* no. 3 (1991): 589

² Ingle, H.L., “A Quaker Woman On Women's Roles,” 587.

³ Stewart, “From Iconoclasts to Gentle Persuaders,” 112.

⁴ Ingle, “A Quaker Woman,” 6.

⁵ Ingle, “A Quaker Woman,” 587.

“hungry may be fed, the naked clothed, the weak strengthened, the feeble comforted, and the wounded healed.”⁶ They took it upon themselves to care for the weak in society—regardless of religious affiliation—so when Quaker women were ridiculed for holding their meetings, they were quick to remind the public that their meetings were for the benefit of society, in line with the biblical notions of charity.

Despite the positive actions of Quaker women—such as spending time engaging in charitable works—these Quaker women were still looked down on. For instance, one pamphleteer described the women’s meetings and female preaching, musing, “I do greatly desire to hear how they do bear it, that *a young man should refuse to submit to [a Quaker woman’s] Authority*”⁷ (emphasis added), suggesting that although women’s meetings had positive purposes, they encouraged unnatural gender roles. In order to ameliorate their marred reputation, Quaker women strove to fight back with kindness in order to improve their image, since “reproofs & admonitions are [cast] onto those of [the female] sex.”⁸ They suggested that those who treat them poorly would be seen and punished by God, so it was not their place to punish them on earth.⁹ The meetings were filled with similar suggestions on how to handle the negativity from society and hence position themselves as a group that is not radical. By demonstrating kindness and refusing to fight back in return, the women were acting in a submissive and hence more publicly acceptable manner. Furthermore, their strategy was reminiscent of Luke in the Bible, which admonishes believers to “turn the other cheek.” When Quaker women emphasized their charitable acts and took on a submissive role in the midst of

⁶ Anonymous, *A Testimony for the Lord and His Truth* (York: 1668), 6.

⁷ William Mather, *A Novelty: Or, A Government of Women* (London: 1694), 4.

⁸ H.L. Ingle, “A Quaker Woman On Women’s Roles,” 586 – 590.

⁹ Anonymous, *A Testimony for the Lord and His Truth* (York: 1668), 20.

persecution, they were attempting to evoke a sense of pity in the reader. Quakers appeared altruistic by emphasizing their biblical and charitable nature when forgiving their harassers.

In addition to the women's meetings and preaching, female Quakers were subject to persecution due to their plain clothing. Quaker women avoided lace, jewelry, and ostentatious clothing, opting instead for a more toned-down selection.¹⁰ Although the protestant movement in general was against the excesses characteristic of Catholicism, Quakers took this notion further by repudiating extravagant dress. Quaker women deemed fashion "vain and foolish" and "a great inlet to many evils,"¹¹ and their plain style of dress was a conscious effort to eschew any indications of rank. Since clothing denoted social class, no one could tell where a Quaker woman fit within the social hierarchy, which was problematical for England's highly stratified society.¹² Quaker women shunned the "*fashions, customs* [...] of this world; from pride, covetousness, and every sin that separateth from the Lord"¹³ (emphasis added).

The Quaker mode of dress was considered an affront and a "refusal to use conventional politeness."¹⁴ Quaker women were a spectacle due to their outfits, and were teased as a consequence. One female Quaker confessed in her journal that harassment over her dress "cost [her] many tears, [and] doleful nights and days."¹⁵ Still, they continued this tradition of plain dressing as a way to symbolize the shedding of excesses and ostentation that was characteristic of larger society and of other religions.

¹⁰ Stewart, "From Iconoclasts to Gentle Persuaders," 116.

¹¹ Catharine Whitten, *A Testimony for the Lord and His Truth* (York: 1688), 16.

¹² Stewart, "From Iconoclasts to Gentle Persuaders," 116.

¹³ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 116.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 120.

What the sources have demonstrated thus far is that Quakers engaged in behavior that brought them under the scrutiny of society. They challenged convention and were persecuted as a consequence. That is only part of the story, however. These factors were what prompted a more serious level of persecution, and the greater persecution begins to take on a narrative of its own. The narrative consists of trivialization, punishment, and stoicism.

The first element of the persecution narrative is that the persecuted group must be trivialized. Although Quaker martyrs took their rebellion seriously, there was no shortage of people who would readily disparage martyrs' attempts at rebellion. The Quakers' religious goals were trivialized through the jokes and condescending language employed by the wider society; it was one of the burdens of martyrdom. Pamphlets from the period highlight the disconcerting nature of the jokes aimed at Quakers. In one pamphlet, a woman comforted her fellow Quakers who were being teased, saying, "as the Scoffers [...] may scoffe you matter them not, but carry on your work and keep your Weapon in your hand."¹⁶ These women advocated remaining strong in the face of derision. This societal trivialization of religion was a key tactic used to build anti-Quaker sentiment in the community; sentiment that would hasten the persecution of Quakers.

After society trivialized Quaker women's beliefs, it was then easier to persecute them. The second part of the persecution narrative, then, was that the persecuted group must remain stoic in the midst of harsh treatment. Since Quaker women were bold enough to act like men, they were rarely spared punishment because of their gender; their punishments were expected to be commensurate with a man's.¹⁷ One account described

¹⁶ Anonymous, *Yearly Meeting of Women Friends York* (London: 1696), 4.

¹⁷ Stewart, "From Iconoclasts to Gentle Persuaders," 112.

the attacks that Quaker women endured, describing how soldiers “[t]ore the women’s clothes off their backs [...] and some of the foot soldiers put their hands in a most shameful manner under the women’s coats [...] a soldier twice struck a woman, that was big with child, [...] so that she miscarried.”¹⁸ The punishments inflicted on these female Quakers have been characterized as “brutish to the highest degree” and “vile.”¹⁹

Quaker women often lived on meager food rations when imprisoned,²⁰ they contended with the constant threat of death through shipwreck when they traveled to preach, they were subjected to relentless whippings, and they were sometimes even met with the death penalty.²¹ One writer recounted the treatment of Quaker women, stating that three Quaker women were whipped “through eleven towns, with ten stripes apiece at each place, through a length of near eighty miles, in bitter cold weather.”²²

Although Quaker women were subjected to base treatment, one imperative of the martyrdom narrative was that women were required to remain stoic in the face of their punishment. Regardless of their treatment, the women countenanced these tribulations with alacrity, sometimes even singing in the midst of the beatings.²³ The martyrs held a high regard for passivity in the midst of persecution because they believed that passivity was Christ-like; similar to the way that Jesus bared the crucifixion, so must Quaker

¹⁸ Sewel, *History of the Quakers*, quoted in Herbert, “Companions in Preaching and Suffering: Itinerant Female Quakers in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World,” *Early American Studies, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9 no. 1(2011): 89.

¹⁹ Sewel, *History of the Quakers*, quoted in Herbert, “Companions in Preaching and Suffering: Itinerant Female Quakers in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World,” *Early American Studies, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9 no. 1(2011): 89.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 93.

²¹ Stewart, “From Iconoclasts to Gentle Persuaders,” 112.

²² Sewel, *History of the Quakers*, quoted in Herbert, “Companions in Preaching and Suffering,” 87.

²³ Althea Stewart, “Good Quaker Women, Tearful Sentimental Spectators, Readers, and Auditors,” *Prose Studies* 29 no. 1 (2007): 80.

women bear their suffering. It was regarded as an honor to be in this same category as Jesus.²⁴

There was an emphasis on remaining strong in the face of persecution, and Quaker women maintained this stoicism throughout. Quakers used suffering to their benefit; they were glorified in the suffering that accompanied their religious dissent. Each tribulation was considered as “essential and even providential symbols of their faith.”²⁵

Finally, the third aspect of the persecution narrative is gaining the support and sympathy of spectators. Much of the persuasive success of female Quaker martyrdom was predicated on audience sympathy. If a female Quaker was truly a martyr, then the audience members were expected to shed tears, and the accounts of persecutions of the time often follow this script. One Quaker woman recounted the story of her persecution, stating that a witness of the persecution “stood and lookt in at the window, and wept bitterly.”²⁶ This is a notable division; the persecuted Quaker women were expected to avoid tears, but the audience members were expected to cry. The spectators of these Quaker persecutions acquired virtue as “one who compassionately witnesses the torture of a saint.”²⁷

Female Quaker persecution followed a certain narrative, which included engaging in taboo acts, emphasizing positive actions, remaining stoic throughout persecution, and evoking audience emotion. Female Quaker persecution was a story of its own, but it bears resemblance to 16th century Protestant narratives of persecution, such as the stories in John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*. Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* served as a critical text

²⁴ Ibid, 74.

²⁵ Herbert, “Companions in Preaching and Suffering,” 100.

²⁶ Besse, *An Abstract of the Sufferings of the People Call’d Quakers* quoted in Althea Stewart, “Good Quaker Women, Tearful Sentimental Spectators, Readers, and Auditors,” 80.

²⁷ Althea Stewart, “Good Quaker Women,” 80.

chronicling the persecution of Protestants, and it is this staple text that serves as the latter half of this analysis.

John Foxe's book, *Acts and Monuments*, is an omnibus record of the protestant martyrs sacrificed under the English Catholic regime; the book traces notable persecutions throughout recorded history.²⁸ When the Catholic Queen Mary of England passed away in 1558, Queen Elizabeth—a Queen who harbored Protestant sympathies—replaced her,²⁹ and the Church of England became markedly more Protestant thereafter. After Elizabeth assumed the crown, *Acts and Monuments* became a staple text at every church, rising to prominence in the 16th century.³⁰ Since Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* was such a foundational book for the Church of England throughout this period, it likely influenced the later Quaker persecution narratives.

The first element of the persecution narrative is that a religious group must cross some social boundaries. The main reason why Protestants were persecuted was because their religion did not align with the state-sanctioned Catholic religion. However, similar to Quakers, there was an emphasis on plainness and anti-female leadership that hastened their persecution, which is explored below.

Protestantism emphasized plainness; while *Acts and Monuments* was not the only work describing the protestant emphasis on plainness, it does provide early indications of this mentality. With the onset of a Protestant-based Church of England in the 16th Century, the clergy was instructed to remove religious objects that could be construed as unnecessary. Some of the objects sacrificed in this shedding of excesses include shrines, liturgical books, paintings, pictures, shrines, monuments, and candlesticks. The Protestant

²⁸ David Loades. "Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Face of England," *History Today* no. 55 (2005).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

movement was intended to remove each vestige of Catholicism “so that there remain[s] no memory of the same.”³¹ This removal of objects was an effort to cast out signs of rank and emphasize plainness.

Protestants were fighting against the rapacious tendencies of Catholics by taking away Catholics’ incentives for greed—by lowering priest pay and taking away the finery associated with Catholicism, for instance—but they were consequently persecuted; the Quakers, also hostile to the frivolity of religious convention, fought against ideas of excessiveness through their dress. In this way, Quakers and Protestants share a similarity.

While Protestants in general did not adhere to the Quaker emphasis on plain dress, there was a Protestant emphasis on plainness overall, and some early vestiges of this disdain for elaborate rituals can be traced to *Acts and Monuments*. Foxe cites Greek historian Plutarch and invokes the simplicity that is idealized by the Protestants in the story of King Iosias. Foxe describes the “stripping of the altars” that took place when he says that “[King] Iosias pluckt downe the hil altars, cut downe the groues, *and destroyd all monuments of Idolatry* in the temple: the like corruptiōs (corruptions) [...] and deformities of Popish Idolatry.”³² Foxe hearkens back to King Iosias’s ancient story in order to exhibit a sense of continuity; it demonstrates that the Catholics were corrupt in the past and remained corrupt through to their present time. Iosias’s act of taking down the altars and the monuments bears an uncanny resemblance to the “stripping of the altars” that occurred during the Protestant reformation. It seems that the Protestants, then, were emulating the likes of King Iosias.

³¹ Duffy, 480.

³² John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments Online*, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.johnfoxe.org/>. 1583 Edition, Book 9, Page 1319.

The Protestant disdain towards excess continues throughout *Acts and Monuments*. In *Acts and Monuments*, one of the martyrs spoke disparagingly of the corruption inherent in Catholicism, musing that “[i]n steade of the Apostolicke giftes and continuall labours and trauailles, slouthfulnes and ambition was crept in amongste the priestes,”³³ intimating that Catholicism breeds greed and complacency in the top religious figures. This emphasis on minimalism fits within the narrative of persecution: a religious group must engage in taboo acts in order to provoke larger society: by emphasizing plainness and repudiating Catholic excesses, Protestants were setting themselves up for persecution from the Catholic church.

Protestants were not only persecuted for their emphasis on plainness, however. Early indications of a societal disapprobation towards female leadership is present, and sometimes that was a cause for punishment. Society held a negative attitude towards women’s preaching, as expressed in *Acts and Monuments* when Protestant Anne Askew is upbraided for her religious involvement. Askew was questioned by the Bishops Chauncellor, and when Askew recounted the questioning, she stated that the Chauncellor “rebuked me and sayd, [that] I was much to blame for vttring the scriptures. For S. Paul (he sayd) *forbode women to speake, or to talke of the word of God*. I answered him that I knew Paules meaning as well as he, which is in the 1. Corin. 14. that *a woman ought not to speak in the congregation by the way of teaching*”³⁴ (emphasis added). In this quotation, Askew was describing the Catholic intolerance towards female proselytizers. Society was hostile to women who were vocal about their faith, and Protestant women

³³ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments Online*, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.johnfoxe.org/>. 1563 Edition, Book 2, page 138.

³⁴ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments Online*, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.johnfoxe.org/>. 1583 Edition, Book 8, Page 1259.

who preached were swiftly met with societal condemnation, as were Quaker women. What the parallel between Quakers and Protestants in general demonstrates is that an anti-female leadership sentiment was present in society and women who crossed this boundary set themselves up for persecution. The difference, however, is that while female leadership for Protestants in general was low, female participation for Quakers was encouraged and hence quite high. This resulted in a greater level of persecution for Quakers in this regard.

Once Protestants began engaging in socially unacceptable acts, society would subsequently find ways to justify their persecution. For instance, in *Acts and Monuments*, a Pope writes a letter denouncing Protestants, stating that they had “set forth diuerse and sundry conclusions *ful of errors*”³⁵ (emphasis added) and added that their doctrine was “foolish.”³⁶ The Pope made efforts to belittle Protestantism in order to legitimize poor treatment towards them. This trivialization of religion was a key tactic used to build anti-Protestant sentiment and can be connected to efforts to trivialize Quaker ideals.

In keeping with the narrative of persecution, once Protestants were actually persecuted, they emphasized their charitable deeds in order to combat negative perceptions about themselves. For instance, one contributor in *Acts and Monuments* described the deeds of Protestants, stating that “in al this tyme of distres, [the Protestants were] shewing compassion vpon [groups that persecuted them], traueled euery day, some in curing the sycke, and some in burying the dead, which otherwyse of their owne sorte

³⁵ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments Online*, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.johnfoxe.org/>. 1563 Edition, Book 2, Page 141.

³⁶ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments Online*, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.johnfoxe.org/>. 1563 Edition, Book 2, Page 141.

were forsaken.”³⁷ Similar to Luke 6, Protestants were turning the other cheek, caring for the lowest in society, even if they themselves were treated poorly. They were persecuted despite their kindness and generosity towards their persecutors, which garnered reader sympathy and emphasized the protestant adherence to biblical principles of charity. By reminding readers that they were a religious group dedicated to charity, they were able to position themselves as Christ-like and hence make their persecution more tragic.

It is important to note that although female Quakers and Protestants are both charitable, their emphasis on charity was not unique to their religions. The Catholic Church was one of the major charitable forces in early modern England, which suggests that charity was an expectation of religious groups. Still, both Quakers and Protestants attempted to elevate the goodness of their deeds by demonstrating that they act kindly to all, regardless of how they are treated. By engaging in altruistic acts, both groups were attempting to achieve a level of equality with Catholics.

Finally, similar to Quaker accounts of persecution, Protestants embrace stoicism in the midst of punishment and rejoice in the midst of torture, all to evoke audience sympathy. In *Acts and Monuments*, Eulalia, a Protestant martyr, sang “with a bold stomache, neither lamentingly nor yet weepingly”³⁸ while being persecuted. The ability to avoid emotion during persecutions was viewed as a gift from God; the Lord gave his servants the strength to bear their physical struggles,³⁹ and their avoidance of signs of physical pain were interpreted as God’s way of “endorsing” sacrifice.⁴⁰ In line with the

³⁷ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments Online*, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.johnfoxe.org/>. 1570 Edition, Book 1, Page 131.

³⁸ John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs: The Acts and Monuments of the Church, Volume 1*, (London: G. Virtue, 1851), 131.

³⁹ Althea Stewart, “Good Quaker Women,” 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

narrative, spectators in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* were moved by the persecution of the Protestant religious dissenters. For instance, the burning of Protestant John Hooper caused spectators to openly weep.⁴¹ Similar stories of audience sympathy in Protestant persecutions abound. The narrative of martyrdom would be incomplete without this expression of audience emotion, and the tears are considered as signs of virtue "because they are shed out of pure compassion for an innocent victim."⁴² This was a critical aspect of the martyrdom narrative, and this seems to also trace back specifically to the inspiration of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*.

There are clear parallels between the persecution of Protestants and the persecution of Quakers. The reasons why Quakers and Protestants were punished and the expectations of their behavior while being punished can shed light on religious persecution in early modern England. In some ways, the similarities between the Protestant and Quaker persecutions are indicative of a larger cultural representation of martyrdom. It is valuable to consider what elements made up early modern religious persecution and to examine how their themes intertwine. With this information, we can develop a more refined understanding of religious dissent in the early modern era.

⁴¹ Ibid, 76.

⁴² Ibid.

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