

Transition (1661 – 1695): Persecution & Gospel Order

A chapter from the book *Quakers and Capitalism*
by Steven Davison

Introduction

For some early Friends, George Fox himself in particular, the Lamb's War never ended. They continued to perform 'signs', to assail established religion with condemnation and critique, to testify to the second coming of Christ in rather apocalyptic terms. But with the Restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1661 and the demise of the Good Old Cause of Puritan rule things changed. People changed. Even Fox changed. Their tone changed, the 'tactics' of the movement changed, their expectations changed. Early Friends toned down their rhetoric, moderated their confrontational approach to the establishments of both church and state, and began to wonder whether the inbreaking of Christ's kingdom was immanent after all.

In *New Light on George Fox and Early Quakerism*, Richard Bailey gives us a rough statistical measure of this retreat from the Lamb's War in a chart showing incidences of 'signs' performed by Fox and other Children of Truth gleaned from a general survey of contemporary sources. It shows a dramatic fall-off directly following the James Naylor affair in 1656 and thereafter, except for a noticeable spike of activity from Fox in the 1670s. Bailey claims that this surge in miraculous signs by Fox reflected the internal 'politics' of the movement: Fox was keen to reestablish himself as the preeminent charismatic leader after coming out of prison at a time when James Naylor was finally beginning to experience rehabilitation among Friends and was reemerging as the only serious challenger to Fox's exalted position. Here's that chart:

Date	Miracles (mainly Fox)	Visions (mainly Fox)	Going Naked (excluding Fox)
Late 1640s	Numerous	Numerous	
1650 - 1655	17	Numerous	7
1656	0	0	Simpson active
1657 – 1658	2	4	0
1659 – 1660	Numerous	2	Numerous
1670 – 1679	24 (all Fox)	13	0
1680 – 1689	11	1	0

The Naylor incident was the first blow to the Children of Truth's initial apocalyptic fervor, an event so sensational and so universally well known in an England that was still quite regional in its consciousness and institutions, and so threatening in the way that it raised questions about Quaker beliefs, which were, in many ways, blasphemous in truth, that Quakers had to respond. Outwardly, they responded in ways that distanced themselves from Naylor's actions and words, which they increasingly characterized as flowing from emotional excess and the unhealthy influence of his followers, and as a distortion of their true beliefs (even though Naylor and Fox and many other Friends actually *agreed* about the beliefs that had led Naylor to act in such a way). Fox himself had been tried twice for blasphemy and convicted once. Charges of blasphemy were brought several more times, but Fox's acquittal in the second trial had been so deftly argued by Judge Fell, one of the three judges hearing the case, and Fox himself, that future attempts to try Fox for blasphemy foundered before they came to court. Most magistrates recognized that the case had decisively established a precedent in the reading of the law's language—a loophole, really—that was insurmountable, so long as Fox remained extremely careful in how he expressed himself—which he did. Meanwhile, inwardly, the Children of Truth began to focus for the first time on the need for discipline, for processes and structures that would allow for control of behavior that were guided by a theology of eldership that retained Christ as the source of their authority.

Then came the Restoration and the end of the Puritan experiment in a theocratic government. The return of the monarchy and the backlash against Independents that followed released forced Friends to accelerate their retreat, clarify their position in ways that would protect them from possible annihilation, and redirect their apocalyptic energy. In this crucible of increasing external heat and internal pressure, Quakerism mutated. The transition took about a generation. The transformation was profound—it went deep, it was widespread, and it was complete and long lasting. The result was a full retreat from the apocalyptic vision of total social revolution in the second coming of Christ and a redirection of spiritual energy. They increasingly confined religion to private life and to the meeting as self-contained and inward-looking community that turned its back on the world outside—with one momentous exception. At the same time as they withdrew from the rest of the world, Friends increasingly turned their faces and their extraordinary energy outward toward the world of business and commerce, finance and industry.

The forces of transition

I see three forces driving faith into the private sphere during this transition period. One was external, another internal. A third—the most important—was both. To wit:

- ✧ external persecution, both legal/political and economic, especially through fines and distraintments;
- ✧ internal gospel order—the adoption, if not imposition, of processes and institutions for discipline;
- ✧ integral overwhelming financial success, the phenomenal and (in the face of such intense economic persecution) paradoxical and miraculous accumulation of tremendous wealth and economic power, *coincident* with the vigorous hegemonic rise of capitalism as the new engine for creating wealth. (Actually, as we shall see, this was no coincidence.)

External forces—persecution

‘Capitalism’ as Max Weber defined it in his landmark book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* barely existed until the early 1700s. Land-based wealth and the manorial system that produced and controlled it had been gradually collapsing since the Reformation, but the basic elements of the new capital-based economy were not yet fully in place. Moreover, the peerage class still leveraged their land-based economic power into effective political power until King Charles I lost his head.

The spirit of this new capitalist economy was born with the rise of Puritanism. It came of age with the Civil War in England amidst the social forces for freedom, experimentation and reversal of fortunes that it unleashed—that is, just as George Fox was beginning his ministry in the late 1640s. Just then, capitalism’s puberty—the physical ability to reproduce itself—came on with a vengeance. And it began to flex its muscles, as adolescent males will do.

Capitalism [fr Latin *caput*, head]: an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods and services that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.

Distraintment: the seizure and detention of the goods of another as pledge or to obtain satisfaction of a claim by the sale of the goods seized.

Let’s, for a moment, think of the “spirit of capitalism” as an actual angel. Many 18th and 19th century Friends believed in a “spirit of the meeting,” an angel that mysteriously embodied the unique character and personality of each Quaker meeting. They got the concept from the second and third chapters of the *Book of Revelation*, which records letters written (by Christ) to the angels of seven churches in Asia Minor. Quaker ministers sent to help troubled meetings would sometimes worship with the meeting before talking about the issues involved in order to commune with the angel of the meeting first, for an ‘unbiased’ read of the meeting’s problems.

Walter Wink, in his books on the Powers, has given us a modern sociological framework for translating the angel theology of Christian scripture into modern terms.

Following his lead, I find it useful to think of “the spirit of capitalism” as the spiritual force of the economic system—the way it attracts true believers and almost religious faith in markets; the way it “possesses” individual thinkers and whole nations with its demands, values and ideas; the way it has made a god of material prosperity, growth and progress; the way it defends itself, resisting obstruction and reform, often with violence. Giving capitalism spiritual quasi-personhood this way holds it in a new light. It puts handles on an abstraction, just as conferring quasi-personhood on the legal entity of the corporation gives us handles on its regulation. So whether or not we take seriously the idea of a forceful, quasi-sentient spiritual identity or dimension of capitalism, at the least, it’s a useful metaphor.

At the end of the 17th century, the fledgling angel of capitalism well understood that, to survive and thrive, it had to be free to operate *without moral restraint*, notwithstanding its parentage in the “Protestant spirit.” Puritans were useful, almost necessary, as midwives. They were acceptable as nurses. But they were smothering as tutors. Capitalism needed to banish God from the social and political sphere in order to fully mature as the engine of wealth it became in the 18th century. It needed to replace the covenant theology that led Puritans and Quakers to seek a society ordered by God’s law with *contracts*, with secular instruments that ordered markets free from the distorting influence of religion.

Revelation could no longer lead to revolution, as it had for the early New Model Army and for early Quakers, as well. The spirit of capitalism needed social and political *secularism* to thrive. It needed to

- ✧ exploit ‘resources,’ not a ‘creation’ that belonged to some other god besides itself;
- ✧ yank workers free of both land and community and make them ‘employees’ and then pit them against each other for wages; Digger or Leveller egalitarianism could not be tolerated; neo-feudal social structures, on the other hand, were useful, if not actually necessary, in the new social relations of owner and worker;
- ✧ pursue technological innovation free of religious ideology;
- ✧ shape profit and growth into objects of ultimate worth (“worship” = worth-shape); and to
- ✧ create markets through contracts—no utopias through covenants.

Translated into the peculiar milieu of 17th century Quakerism, the spirit of capitalism needed Friends to abandon their apocalyptic commitment to total social transformation through the triumph of the Lamb. What capitalism really needed at this moment was a community steeped in the Protestant ethic but exorcised of the theocratic impulse. History soon obliged. For reasons mysterious, the lightning bolt fell upon Quakers, with shocks to their apocalyptic vision that steered Friends away from public confrontation on social issues and toward the socio-religious spirit of *laissez-faire* that capitalism required.

The persecutions

The restoration of Charles II to the throne of England (1660) closed the door for good on the high expectations that had animated the Lamb's War and the apocalypse of the Word. Too much had been invested in Cromwell and the Puritan vision of covenant-based polity. When these vehicles broke down, the apocalyptic Quaker vision dissolved with them.

Although Charles himself opposed the enactment of many of the persecutory acts, and then unsuccessfully tried to thwart their enforcement with declarations of indulgence in 1662 and 1672, he could not control the new mood of a reactionary parliament or all the mechanisms of the state. State persecution of Quakers followed immediately after his accession to the throne. All the acts of persecution against Friends carried financial penalties or had dire indirect economic consequences. Some were primarily financial in their effect—and in their motivation. In fact, the persecutions represented a financial feeding frenzy that unleashed local authorities upon Quaker property and assets.

The Clarendon Code—statutes passed to enforce the Church of England

Two of the statutory persecutions came under the Clarendon Code (1661-1665), four acts passed during the ministry of Edward Hyde, first earl of Clarendon, to crush Dissenters. Like Charles, Clarendon himself opposed the acts, but rigorously enforced them once they were enacted.

The Corporation Act of 1661

The Corporation Act effectively restricted public affairs to members of the Church of England. It provided that no one could be elected to any office relating to the government of a city or corporation unless they had received the sacrament of "the Lord's Supper" from the Church of England within the previous twelve months, swore an Oath of Allegiance and Supremacy, swore belief in the Doctrine of Passive Obedience (the Doctrine held that divinely appointed order in heaven and earth applied to the political and social order, requiring obedience to hierarchies of earthly authority culminating in the King, as a religious obligation).

The Conventicle Acts of 1664 and 1670

The Conventicle Act prohibited more than five people over sixteen years old from attending a religious meeting that was not conducted according to the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*. The first Conventicle Act threw over two thousand Friends into gaol in the first two months alone [Gwyn 263] By 1670, "it seemed as if the Cavalier Parliament had finally taken note of the economic vitality of dissenters," [Gwyn 298] and the second

Conventicle Act targeted Quaker wealth by adding stiff fines. In the ensuing fifteen years, the state collected £48,000 from Friends at a time when workers considered ten pounds a good *annual* wage and five pounds bought passage to America. [Gwyn 298] The state also fined offenders for resisting tithes and not attending parish services.

The Quaker Act of 1662

The heart of the Clarendon Code as it applied to Friends, though, was the Quaker Act, which made it illegal to be a Quaker. For first and second convictions, the Quaker Act levied fines for resisting oaths as a religious principle, in print or public speech, or in practice, and for meeting for religious purposes in groups larger than five other than a household. The sentence for a third conviction was “transportation,” banishment to a penal colony.

Test Act of 1673

Finally, the Test Act applied strictures similar to the Corporation Act to higher education, barring anyone who did not testify to basic tenets of the Church of England from attending all state- or church-supported educational institutions. The universities remained Anglican and required an Oath of Allegiance until 1871. This forced Friends to see to their own education and channeled the entire community’s human resources into areas where degrees and oaths were not required; that is, away from government, law, the church and all the institutions they interpenetrated, and into *commerce*, preferably commerce with each other.

Oath taking

Simply forcing Quakers to take oaths, which were required for a great many political and economic acts, proved efficient as a tool of economic assault. The state considered refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance to be treason, and the convicted offender forfeited his or her estate and was imprisoned for life or at the king’s pleasure.

Besides providing a tool for economic predation and religious persecution through forced oath taking on arbitrary pretenses, the Oath of Allegiance laid a barrier between the Children of the Light and much normal commerce. The state required the oath for

- ✧ civil suit to recover debts;
- ✧ doing business with customs or excise;
- ✧ defending titles to property;
- ✧ giving evidence in court, even in your defense;
- ✧ voting, in some cases; and

- ✧ defending yourself in ecclesiastical courts against attempts to collect tithes or church-rates.

Friends refused to take oaths because Christ had explicitly forbidden it: “but I say to you, *swear not at all*,” reads Matthew 5:34 in the Sermon on the Mount. James 5:12 reiterates the commandment in nearly identical terms. Both passages follow up with a prescription that permeates Quaker literature of the period: “let your yea be yea and your nay be nay.” Herein lies the roots of what we now define as the central testimony of integrity, and early Friends applied it specifically and rigorously to business ethics, as we shall see. [research Cooper pamphlet]

Distraintment

Because Friends often refused to pay these fines, the state often *distrainted* Quaker goods, taking two or three times the value of the fine in the form of trade goods, tools, and other items in their business or household. The officers in charge not infrequently destroyed what they did not take.

The consequences of economic persecution

Relief from these burdens came only—and only partially—in 1689 when parliament passed the Toleration Act. ‘Affirmation’ was allowed in lieu of oath taking in 1696. Thus, for nearly thirty years, the state bled the wealth out of Quaker communities as a weapon to crush or at least marginalize the movement. The economic toll staggers the imagination. The state seized an estimated £1.125 million by 1700 in tithe fines alone. That was enough money to comfortably support 125,000 people for a year. A fairly careful audit of Quaker losses made in 1833 for the period between 1700 and 1829 came up with another £903,625 total in tithe fines, and this was after the persecutions officially ended. [*Quakers in Science and Industry*]

To the direct financial losses through fines and distraintments, we must add the indirect losses of property destruction and imprisonment. Altogether, we’re talking about huge sums, a vampiric drain on the movement’s resources year in and year out that was sustained for decades. One wonders how the movement survived.

Instead, the constant heat and hammering against the anvil of the law forged an extremely strong, resilient economic culture. Social bonding at the molecular level of Quaker families turned them toward each other for mutual support as catastrophic losses took individuals and their families down. The political and public heat tempered Friends’ political activism, while the constant re-immersion in the cool waters of corporate worship annealed their religious conviction. Instead of destroying the movement, the persecutions strengthened it.

Internal forces—gospel order

If Friends believed that God was forging a new tool through these persecutions, they found the *shape* God intended in the faith and practice of gospel order. As *faith*, gospel order meant submitting the lived life—both the live of the individual and the corporate life of the community—to the order of the gospel. By this, Friends meant discerning the ordering wisdom of Christ himself, not simply a rigid application of rules found in the gospels. As *faith*, gospel order meant taking Christ at his word in John 15 and taking responsibility for being Christ's *Friends* and actively, faithfully submitting to his commandments.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. John 15: 12-17

As *practice*, gospel order meant several organizational innovations that George Fox began introducing soon after he was released from prison in 1666. He was responding to the external pressures that began with the Restoration and which his own imprisonment had prefigured. But he was also responding to the internal crisis that these pressures precipitated. And these pressures had been building since James Naylor's catastrophic trial for blasphemy in 1656.

The Naylor Affair—1656

James Naylor plunged Quaker testimonial life into its first major crisis when he entered Bristol mounted on a donkey while his 'followers' strewed boughs before him and sang hosannas, in a provocative redramatization of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The action directly manifested Quaker second-coming apocalypticism in the most extreme form and the state reacted with equally extreme repression. Naylor's appalling act of blasphemy reinforced public fears about Quaker motives, confirmed their sense of Quaker extremism, and focused the vigilance and violence of the state on the fast-growing movement. Naylor's flogging, branding, tongue-piercing, and stint in gaol provided sanction for further repression by the authorities and increasing outbursts by mobs against the rest of the community.

For their part, leaders within the movement reacted with increased vigilance over Quaker conduct. The Naylor affair marks the beginning of the impulse toward *gospel order*, toward regulating behavior through internally applied disciplines that were rooted in the same religious experience and ideology of Christ as the Inner Light and Guide as was worship. This impulse took a while to mature into institutional structures, like monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings, advices and queries, and written faith and

practice documents. But the Naylor incident generated a hailstorm of pastoral epistles and visitations focused on behavioral control. These efforts soon focused specifically on oversight of ‘public ministry,’ the evangelistic outreach that had until then been mostly free of constraint, radical in perspective and confrontational in tone.

The *community* turned inward at this moment and asked itself some questions: How far do we go in our pursuit of the Lamb’s War? How do we prevent this from happening again? How do we recognize when someone walks contrary to Truth and what do we do about it when they do?

Soon, the additional external forces of persecution would further justify this inward and controlling corporate impulse and raise the ante for public ministers.

Gospel order

Following the Restoration and the insurrection of Fifth Monarchy Men in 1661, the government jailed George Fox and most of the rest of the Quaker leadership. He was imprisoned again for refusing to swear an oath in 1664 and released in 1666. He emerged from prison this time with a heightened sense of the movement’s vulnerability and a vision for *processes* that would protect the movement’s momentum and integrity in the face of the absence and, ultimately, loss of its leaders, and for *structures* that could guide and correct errant members—or expel them.

Accordingly, Fox began bringing groups of Quakers “under gospel order” by establishing monthly meetings for men and women and, ultimately, quarterly and yearly meetings. Simultaneously, Friends institutionalized the guidelines for disciplining members that they found in Matthew 18:15-20, a three-step process for engaging those who were “walking disorderly.” This process for disciplinary intervention relied ultimately on the spiritual-moral authority of the new monthly meetings when gathered in worship under Christ’s ordering.

These institutional forms of gospel order—the 3-step process for discipline, and the various levels of meetings with their respective authorities and responsibilities for oversight—provided an all-important structure for the support and correction of Friends in their personal lives, including their business lives. In essence, gospel order crystallized the Protestant ethic, as practiced by Friends, into concrete social forms and processes in ways that made the community the perfect vehicle for the rise of capitalism, *a la* Weber.

The turn to commerce

As we said in the section on the social class of the Publishers of Truth, the majority of the very earliest Friends were yeoman farmers or trades people. Especially in the North of England, where the movement was born and was, by the 1660s, still strongest, most Friends were farmers, and most raised dairy cattle and sheep as a secondary investment. Many were actually pastoralists primarily.

The distraintments and imprisonments hit these folk very hard. Distraintments and fines wiped out their cash reserves, making it impossible to buy seed for the next season or make it through the lean times just before harvests and shearings. Imprisonment often removed farmers from their holdings over the narrow time-windows that were critical for agricultural work. Officers executing distraintments often destroyed farm implements, which farmers found it difficult to replace when their cash surpluses had just been seized.

Thus, the persecutions systematically drove these folk out of agricultural business and off their farms. So they turned to the wool-related trades. They already knew the wool industry, its economy, its technologies and its people, at least locally, because they had been wool suppliers. They had connections with the market towns, including lines of credit. This flood of Quaker farmers into the wool trade transformed the industry. Virtually overnight and practically by accident, the English wool trade came under Quaker influence, if not dominance. By the end of our transition period, Quakers had become a movement of *merchants* and trades people, rather than farmers and trades people, and they found themselves at the heart of the industry—textiles—that would serve as the bridge from commercial capitalism based on trade to industrial capitalism based on manufacture.

At the same time, the explosive growth of traveling ministry among Friends reinforced the trend toward commercial livelihoods. Owning a shop or some other commercial business unburdened the minister from all the constraints that flowed from the farmer's intense ties to land and animals. These early ministers explicitly modeled their practice on St. Paul, whose tent-making business allowed him to go anywhere and set up shop while he worked among his fold.

Furthermore, all this traveling provided significant economic and competitive advantage. As we shall see, one of the biggest advantages Quaker merchants enjoyed over their competitors was fresh, reliable news about business, prices and markets in other parts, and a lively, secure network of contacts extending even to the colonies.

The covenant crucified

Thus Friends emerged from this first major transition period in their history as the beneficiaries of an extraordinary—one could say miraculous—and paradoxical transformation of fortunes. On the one hand, they were bled economically by persecutions that drained them of a fortune that was truly staggering, almost inconceivable, in proportion to their numbers and compared to the resources of common people of the day. Yet they emerged from the persecutions quite well off and poised to become one of the most powerful economic communities on the planet. Internally, they mutated under these pressures, becoming much more cohesive as a community through decades of mutual aid, forced isolation and the adoption of gospel order. And they had struck a bargain with the social order that closed the door on radical public engagement under the apocalyptic vision of the Lamb's War while opening the door on vigorous engagement with capitalism, the world of private commerce, finance and industry.

Friends had withdrawn from mainstream religious, political and social life, but they threw themselves headlong into building the capitalist economy that was just then maturing in its commercial phase based on trade. And, in their creative hands, capitalism soon would launch its new industrial phase based on manufacturing using new technologies for energy and materials, production and transport, and new structures for private finance and social organization.

Doug Gwyn has brilliantly described this period in his book *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism*. This quote sums up the essential elements of this interdependent relationship with capitalism:

Hugh Barbour observes that *Quaker pacifism* [emphasis is Gwyn's], the most salient political feature of Friends after 1660, served as a force for the beginnings of multi-party politics in England. The abiding presence of a loyal opposition limiting itself to the force of persuasion was perhaps most clearly embodied in the Restoration by Friends. The nonviolence of dissenting Quakers and Baptists, willing to stand and suffer the wrath of an arrogant regime, eventually helped impress religious and political toleration upon the English national conscience. Indeed, though religion and politics were being factored out from each other during this period, the question of toleration had to be worked out on both fronts. Multi-party politics developed hand-in-hand with religious pluralism. This very costly accomplishment may be the most substantial contribution of the Quaker revolution to its wider society. It is a great, sacrificial gift to Anglo-American culture.

Nevertheless, the peace England made with Friends was not the integrative *shalom* of the covenant of light, but a *separate peace* [emphasis is Gwyn's]. God was finally granted a certain dominion in human conscience—but it was an absolute defined in relative terms. God's dominion was bracketed out of the emerging social contract, recontained within a subjective reality of personal morality and religious opinion. Friends were finally pardoned on the basis of "good behavior"—their peaceful politics and burgeoning economic vitality. Meanwhile, their covenant of light, along with its God of history, were "carried away captive" on the currents of capitalist expansion. (pages 334-335)

"The movement to *sacralize* all life was inverted, becoming the movement to *secularize* all life" [emphasis is Gwyn's; page 289].

With both feudal custom and radical politics on the run, social contractarian theory finally came into its own. No longer could society be shackled by agreements handed down from antiquity or by covenants from heaven. Society was to be regulated by all parties contracting according to self-interest, through the possession of certain universal rights that could never be alienated from the individual. Nevertheless, the liberal contract was far from being settled among "all parties." The overwhelming numbers of the poor were excluded. So were women, religious dissenters, and non-whites. [page 287]

Thus began two centuries of what I call the “double culture” period. In return for religious toleration, Friends abandoned the apocalyptic vision of a social order redeemed in a new religious covenant. Their retreat was nearly total. They turned inward. They withdrew from virtually all spheres of public encounter and mainstream social and political engagement. Their signature practices of hat honor and plain speech now served to mark them as peculiar rather than to challenge the social status quo. They closed all the doors to the world outside—but one.

In the world of business and commerce, science and industry, they channeled huge amounts of creative energy. They built the capitalist economic system—not quite single-handedly, but no community played a larger role in shaping capitalist culture as it emerged in the early 18th century. They shepherded commercial capitalism based on trade into the explosion that was *industrial capitalism*, a new economy based on manufacture. The industrial revolution would have taken place without Friends—but it didn’t. In time, they also helped transform industrial capitalism into a consumer economy, one based on the mass production of goods designed for mass consumption by a burgeoning middle class. In the process, they became fabulously wealthy, as do all who build a new economy.

The next chapter details why Friends were so successful and how they remade the world, after all.