

**“The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom”:
The Barbadian Origins of Quaker
Antislavery Rhetoric, 1657–76**

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The role played by members of the Society of Friends in the history of the formal abolition movements on both sides of the Atlantic is relatively well known; Quakers were prominent members of both British and American abolition and antislavery societies from their foundation in the 1780s onwards. Rather less well known is the century-long debate that took place within Quakerism as to whether Friends could legitimately own or trade in slaves. The first Quakers of the 1640s and 50s were not automatically opposed either to slavery or the slave trade, and some Friends remained active slaveholders and slave traders into the late eighteenth century. A small number of studies have examined the processes by which Quakers turned away from slavery, but these have tended to focus attention on debates among Friends in the colony of Pennsylvania. There are certainly good reasons for this bias. After its foundation in 1682, Pennsylvania, and its major town Philadelphia, were home to a substantial proportion of the world’s Quakers, a sect which in principle renounced all forms of violent coercion. At the same time, the colony, like most others in the Americas, had a large and growing population of slaves. Added to this was the fact that Quakers had, by the standards of the time, a relatively high regard for open debate and freedom of speech and controlled most of the main political and spiritual arenas in the colony. This confluence of social, economic, and discursive factors is a likely explanation for why antislavery sentiment emerged as an important tenet of Pennsylvanian Quakerism in the mid eighteenth century, and why Quakers from the colony were able to take their views to others, Friends and friends, in both America and Europe from the 1760s onwards.

Only a handful of studies of this process exist and taken together they position Philadelphia as the cradle of Quaker antislavery.¹ But in fact, Quaker thinking on slavery began not in the new world, but in the old, with a letter from England addressed to “Friends beyond sea.” The author of that letter, written in 1657, was George Fox, a major figure in the early Society of Friends—indeed, often thought of as its founder—and the ideas tentatively expressed therein were to be challenged, revised, and finally reasserted by Fox himself in the light of his own personal experience of visiting Barbados in the 1670s. Unlike some visitors to slaveholding colonies, Fox’s firsthand experience reinforced the purely theoretical dislike of slavery he expressed in his early letter. Although he clearly struggled to reach a position on slavery that would be compatible with his notion of righteousness, he just as clearly did not give way to the expediency of accepting the colonial status quo. Perhaps because this personal struggle is so evident therein, no less than because they are the words of a founder, Fox’s writings on slavery would later assume an importance to Quakers that perhaps outweighed what their actual length or content merited. Nevertheless, they were a source of inspiration to many, not least in Pennsylvania, and they have not yet received the critical attention they deserve as important documents of the very earliest stirrings of British abolitionism, as well as the occasion of some of the first defensive proslavery rhetoric as well. Accordingly, this article examines some of Fox’s major writings on slavery in the Barbadian context, paying attention both to the content of those writings and to their form and style. Throughout, I will show how Fox’s views on slavery evolved, first as a theoretical stand on a practice that was taking place far beyond his experience; second, in response to his personal experience of the institution in Barbados; and, finally, retrospectively, after his return to England.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Barbados was one of Britain’s most valuable plantations. Claimed for James I in 1625, and first settled by British colonists in 1627, the island rapidly became an important producer of tobacco, cotton, indigo, and sugar. There were African slaves in Barbados from its inception as a British colony but in the earlier years they were a minority of the island’s population. As Fox

himself demonstrates, with the repeated references to “blacks and tawnies” across his publications on slavery, African slaves worked alongside both Native American slaves and servants and white indentured servants in seventeenth-century Barbados. The transition of the island’s economy almost exclusively to labour-intensive sugar production after 1640 led to a sharp increase in demand for workers. In part, this demand was met by white indentured servants, but the greatest increase in the island’s population came from the importation of African slaves. Estimates suggest that while the African population remained a minority into the 1650s, by the early 1670s Africans outnumbered Europeans by a ratio of three to two. Barbadian planters developed a ruthless attitude towards their slaves, fuelled by the ever-present fear of slave insurrection. An “Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes,” passed in 1661 but amended and strengthened several times between then and 1688, required planters to provide slaves with the minimum in food, clothing, and accommodation, but granted them almost unlimited rights to beat, mutilate, or summarily execute their slaves. By the time Fox reached the island in 1671, both slave and planter lived in a brutalized society dedicated to maximizing the profits of the European few without regard to the rights or happiness of the African majority.²

As we shall see, Fox did not at any time issue an unambiguous call for the end either of the slave trade or of the institution of slavery, but he did insist that African slaves required spiritual care, should be educated in Christian principles, and that they should be treated with a level of respect which, though falling well behind what later generations would find acceptable, was considerably less brutal than contemporary practice. He can thus be described as the first important ameliorative writer on slavery, at least in the English-speaking Atlantic world. Some observers, however, have seen Fox’s writings on slavery as being more than merely ameliorative, and a few have seen in Fox’s writings the moment of inception of the abolition movement. As early as 1808, Thomas Clarkson had noted that Fox “left his testimony against this wicked trade” (1: 110). More recently, in language that betrays more enthusiasm than accuracy, the historian Thomas Drake argued that, although Fox made “only a beginning” in his letter of 1657, nevertheless, the central idea of this letter,

which he called “touchstone to the Truth—finally, more than a century later, freed the Quakers’ slaves” (5).

Treatments of Fox’s attitude towards slavery are bound to be accorded a special place by those who saw antislavery as the inevitable outcome of Anglo-Saxon Protestant liberalism. The less whiggishly minded, however, might note that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of antislavery sentiment nor, in the late seventeenth century, was there any indication that the views of Quakers—or of any other group of dissenters for that matter—would in time come to be much more widely accepted. Indeed, in the late seventeenth century, there was little enough even to suggest that Fox’s very tentative and perilously fragile views on slavery would come to be widely accepted among the Society of Friends. Nevertheless, as Drake points out, the fact that the founder of the Quakers questioned at least some aspects of slavery “lent the weight of authority to Quaker prophets of later generations who spoke out against slaveholding” (7). Although Fox’s words did not unleash an inevitable chain of events, they were nonetheless both suggestive and influential, and certainly presented no barriers to later Quakers whose abolitionism rested on more certain ground.

The central text of Fox’s engagement with slavery is his book *Gospel family-order, being a short discourse concerning the Ordering of Families, both of Whites, Blacks and Indians*, which was published in London in 1676, and which purportedly reproduced a sermon given in Barbados five years earlier.³ This text, which I discuss in detail below, presents the reader with a relatively consistent approach to the question of slavery. It was not, however, the first time Fox had approached the subject. By the time he delivered this sermon, Fox had spent years travelling, first as he grappled with his faith, then to disseminate his views, and later to develop the organization of the newly formed Society of Friends.⁴ He had suffered persecution and had been imprisoned on several occasions, experiences that may have coloured his view of involuntary servitude. Unlike most slaves, however, he had also been released on several occasions; once—from under the threat of execution—at the request of parliament, and once at the request of British Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell (who, admittedly, had had him arrested in the first place).

Barbadian Origins of Quaker Antislavery Rhetoric

Fox and Cromwell would meet several times between 1654 and 1658, and it was also during this period that Fox first turned his attention to slavery in a short letter of 1657 titled “To Friends beyond Sea, that have Blacks and Indian Slaves.” This letter is an important document of the new international phase into which the Society of Friends entered in the 1650s. The first Quakers to settle in the Americas reached the continent in 1656, part of a rapid migration of Quakers to take place over the coming few years (Tolles 9–13). Given the length of time it took news to cross the Atlantic, the letter’s date demonstrates both that Quakers were buying both African and Native American slaves from the outset of their settlement in America, and that Fox must have come to a rapid view of the practice once it had come to his attention. The letter is short enough to be reproduced in full:

Dear *Friends*, I was moved to write these things to you in all those *Plantations*. *God*, that made the World, and all things therein, and giveth *Life* and *Breath* to all, and they all have their *Life* and *Moving*, and their *Being* in him, he is the *God* of the *Spirits* of all *Flesh*, and is no *Respecter* of *Persons*; but *Whosoever* feareth him, and worketh *Righteousness*, is accepted of him. And he hath made all *Nations* of *one Blood* to dwell upon the Face of the Earth, and his *Eyes* are over all the *Works* of his *Hands*, and seeth every thing that is done under the whole *Heavens*; and the *Earth* is the *Lord's* and the *Fullness thereof*. And he causeth the *Rain* to fall upon the *Just* and upon the *Unjust*, and also he causeth the *Sun* to shine upon the *Just* and the *Unjust*; and he commands to *love all Men*, for Christ loved all, so that he *died for Sinners*. And this is *God's Love* to the World, in giving his *Son into the World*; that *whosoever believeth in him, should not perish*: And he doth *Enlighten every Man, that cometh into the World*, that they might believe in the *Son*. And the *Gospel* is preached to every creature under Heaven; which is the Power, that giveth *Liberty* and *Freedom*, and is *Glad Tidings* to every *Captivated Creature* under the whole Heavens. And the *Word of God* is in the Heart and Mouth, to obey and do it, and

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not for them to *ascend* or *descend* for it; and this is the *Word of Faith*, which was and is preached. For *Christ* is given for a *Covenant* to the *People*, and a *Light* to the *Gentiles*, and to enlighten them; who is the *Glory of Israel*, and *God's Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*. And so, ye are to have the *Mind of Christ*, and to be *Merciful, as your Heavenly Father is merciful*. ("To Friends beyond Sea" 117)

Besides the title and the first line, there is little indication that Fox has slavery in mind in this letter. Many of his arguments are relevant to other situations, and could have been applied to Quakers' relationships with a range of other groups and individuals, in England as well as "beyond Sea." But the title and opening line are significant, both in that they specify the subject of the letter, as titles and openings should, but also insofar as they comprise a rhetorical manoeuvre, offering the reader an ostensibly narrow and contingent set of circumstances, but then providing evidence that proves the topic is universal in scope. This universalizing is an important part of the message: God, who "hath made all *Nations of one Blood*," has created only one human family, Fox argues, and all members of this family are equal before the God who created the rain and the sun to rain and to shine upon all his creation and not merely a part of it. This inclusiveness is strengthened by repetition. The word "all" occurs nine times in the first four sentences, and the words "every," and "whole" appear frequently in the remainder of the letter. The repetition strongly enhances the sense that the precepts of the letter apply equally to all human beings, without exception, and that in itself is a powerful argument, both cogently expressed in Fox's homily, and structured into the form and language of the letter itself. Nevertheless, while the letter clearly asserts the equality of human souls, it is far from being a call to emancipate slaves, be they "Blacks," "Indians" or of any other origin. The key sentence argues that "the *Gospel* is preached to every creature under Heaven; which is the Power, that giveth *Liberty and Freedom*, and is *Glad Tidings* to every *Captivated Creature* under the whole Heavens." In other words, the Gospel is available to all, and brings joy to captives, slaves included. While this is reasonably unam-

biguous, and even relatively uncontentious, the same cannot be said of the assertion that the Gospel “*giveth liberty and freedom.*” There are two possible interpretations of this. The first is that the word of God brings spiritual liberty to the individual, freeing them from the burden of sin. This type of spiritual liberty might indeed be “*Glad Tidings*” to captives bearing the weight of their transgressions. A second interpretation, and a far more radical one, is that a true understanding of the Gospel confers freedom on the “captivated.” If this is the case, then captives of all sorts might walk free once they have embraced the light.

There is little evidence that this second meaning is the one that Fox had in mind. Nevertheless, as H. Larry Ingle has pointed out, that did not stop some of the Barbados plantocracy from believing “that by merely meeting with blacks Quakers were ‘endeavouring to make the Negroes rebel.’” This, Ingle has argued, led to Fox realizing that the Quakers’ “stand on the slave question counted most with the island’s powerful elite” (234). More interested in securing the reputation of the Society of Friends than in emancipating the slaves, Fox issued a series of statements that appeared to assert the legitimacy of slavery, while calling for some degree of amelioration. In Ingle’s words:

The lesson was plain: Quakers’ slaves were more law-abiding than those of other Christians. Fox was basically arguing that to Christianize blacks made them more submissive and subservient. In this respect, Fox’s thought reflected a maturing of the slave culture and acceptance of a new view that no contradiction existed between Christianity and slaveholding. Hence Christians might hold slaves, at least for the time being—and that time always retreating into an indefinite tomorrow. (235)

But in fact, the lesson was not plain. Ingle’s biography of Fox deliberately—and sometimes provocatively—challenges overly respectful representations of the spiritual leader. Given his iconoclastic bent, it should come as no surprise that Ingle contests the received notion of Fox as an originator of antislavery sentiment and presents him as more complicit with the plantocracy than many historians of abolitionism—and many Quakers—would find comfortable. Clearly, slavery was not Fox’s priori-

ty but, equally, neither was antislavery a ready-made discourse, available to be incorporated into, or excluded from, Fox's theology. We should not seek, therefore, to compare Fox with later abolitionists, but instead to ask what contribution he made to emerging discourses about slavery and colonization; always recognizing that, like all others, he was only able to imagine those things that could be imagined in his age. As we have seen, he very early on emphasized to Quakers in the colonies the idea that all humans were equally capable of and deserving of receiving the light. More practically, he reminded colonial Quakers that, just as "the *Gospel* is preached to every creature under Heaven" so too "ye are to have the *Mind of Christ*, and to be *Merciful*." In the 1650s, neither of these things were obvious in the minds of many Europeans dealing with African and Native American slaves.

Fox's opportunity to meet with those early colonists arose when he visited Barbados and the British North American colonies between 1671 and 1673 as one of a group of Quakers which included Solomon Eccles, William Edmundson, John Hull, John Stubbs, and several others, many of whom are well-known to scholars of early Quakerism. Sadly, Fox's journal is incomplete for this period, but a partial narrative of the visit has been reconstructed by John Nickalls, working from letters and other documents written by Fox and his party during the expedition. Fox arrived on Barbados in poor health, but soon recovered enough to hold "many and great meetings among the whites and blacks" (Nickalls 609). According to John Stubbs, in a letter written in December 1671, "the truth is freely preached, both to white people and black people. Solomon [Eccles] and I have had several meetings among the negroes in several plantations, and it's like must have more yet" (qtd. in Nickalls 601). Stubbs's description suggests that, for all of Fox's conflation of "*Blacks and Indian Slaves*," the majority of the slaves that Fox's party encountered were of African origin. His description also suggests that that these meetings were racially segregated, but it says little about what was said there, or what the slaves made of Quaker rhetoric and theology. The barest hint of that is offered by John Hull in a letter written the previous month, in which he argues that "the Lord hath and will make [Fox] a choice instrument in his hand for much good unto them, even unto

the blacks as unto the whites, for the blacks (as 'tis said) expect some good by his coming here" (qtd. in Nickalls 597). Clearly, Fox's visit was being discussed among the slaves, and being viewed in some sort of positive light. Although it is likely that we will never know precisely what "good" the slaves expected of the visit, we do know that many of the Anglican plantocracy felt that that "good" would be a rebellion of the slaves. We know this, since Fox felt a need to refute that precise allegation in a letter "For the Governour and his Council & Assembly...in this island," which consists for the most part of theological assertions, but which concludes with an important engagement with the problem of slavery on Barbados.

The letter, which was probably a collaborative effort, starts in combative mood, noting the "many Scandalous Lyes and Slanders" that have been levelled against Quakers, among which are the allegations that Quakers "*do deny God, and Christ Jesus, and the Scriptures of Truth*" ("For the Governour" 65). For the first three pages of this letter, therefore, Fox is concerned to assert the aspects of Quaker belief that were broadly in line with orthodox Anglicanism. Echoing the language of the *Book of Common Prayer*, Fox asserts that Quakers believe that Jesus Christ

Was Conceived by the Holy Ghost, and Born of the Virgin *Mary* ... was Crucified for us in the Flesh, without the Gates of *Jerusalem*; and that he was Buried, and Rose again the Third Day, by his own Power, for our Justification; and we do believe, that he Ascended up into Heaven, and now sitteth at the Right-Hand of God.

That Fox felt it necessary to mount such a vigorous defence of his faith, and to align it so nearly with conventional Anglicanism, attests to the strength of the attacks made on Quakers in Barbados. And yet, Barbados cannot be described as a notable centre of religious faith in the late seventeenth century. The early Quakers aside, few people seem to have come to Barbados seeking religious freedom in the way that Puritans had come to New England, or later Quakers would come to Pennsylvania. Instead, colonists came to Barbados to make money, and this was equally true of the Quakers. Indeed, as David Brion Davis has

noted, economic realities proved to be a continual stumbling block to the development of Quaker antislavery: “the prosperity of Quaker communities in the New World,” he argues, “depended, to a large extent, on slave labour in the Caribbean” (304). Such religious strife as Barbados encountered had therefore more to do with the social and economic ambitions of the island’s plantocracy rather than with their excessive piety. As Hilary Beckles has shown, the island’s Anglican planters

dominated public life and all civic organisations which conferred social status and respectability. In addition, they fashioned social ideologies so as to ensure that elitism was confined to white Anglo-Saxon Anglicans. In spite of an official policy of religious tolerance, Catholics, Jews and non-conformist Protestants were discriminated against and kept away from all seats of political power. (26)

It is in this context that Fox wrote “For the Governour and his Council” and it is not therefore surprising that the letter takes two distinct rhetorical approaches. The first, an assertion of the closeness of Anglican and Quaker theology, can be seen as an attempt to ingratiate Friends with the island’s Anglican elite by appealing to their sense of what was known, familiar, and presumably non-threatening: the Anglican catechism. A second tactic, which comprises the final two pages of the letter, approaches more nearly to the economic base of the conflict between Quakers and Anglicans on the island. Abruptly changing direction, yet retaining the defensive tone that characterizes much of this letter, Fox notes that “another Slander and Lye they have cast upon us, is; namely, *That we should teach the Negars to Rebel*” (“For the Governour” 69). In this, Fox reaches what surely must have been the bottom line. The colony of Barbados was a commercial enterprise, and the majority of the plantocracy had concluded that profits depended on a subservient, brutalized, and emphatically non-evangelized labour force. By contrast, Fox’s Quakers had from the start been enjoined to recognize that “the *Gospel* is preached to every creature under Heaven; which is the Power, that giveth *Liberty* and *Freedom*, and is *Glad Tidings* to every *Captivated Creature* under the whole Heavens.” While the emphasis on

liberty would most likely have been seen by Barbadian Quakers as metaphorical, the emphasis on preaching the Gospel to “every creature” had not been seen in that way. Throughout the 1660s, Friends had offered religious instruction to slaves and, in 1671, Fox himself preached to slaves, as the “Addition” to this letter attests (*To the Ministers* 76–77). Clearly, the planters felt threatened by this and put about the rumour that Friends taught the slaves “to rebel.” Fox’s response is telling, but his rhetorical movement, from outrage, through refutation, to a justification of his policy on the matter does not signal a retreat on the issue. Fox begins by refuting the “slander.” Teaching the slaves to rebel is “A thing we do utterly *abhor* and *detest* in and from our Hearts, the Lord knows it, who is the Searcher of all hearts, and knows all things; and so can witness and testify for us, that this is a most Egregious and Abominable Untruth.” This is a strong refutation of the accusation, rhetorically powerful in its use of repeated words and sounds, its deployment of emphatic tautologies such as “abhor and detest,” and its strong underlying rhythms that conclude with the meat of the matter: that the accusation is an “untruth.” This is a good start, which Fox follows up by explaining to his reader what it is that has really been going on in these meetings

For, that which we have spoken and declared to them is, to exhort and admonish them, *To be Sober and to Fear God, and to love their Masters and Mistresses, and to be Faithful and Diligent in their Masters Service and Business; and that then their Masters and Overseers will Love them, and deal Kindly and Gently with them. ... And that they do not Steal, nor be Drunk, nor commit Adultery, nor Fornication, nor Curse, nor Swear, nor Lye ...* that there are but two Ways; the one, that leads to Heaven, where the Righteous go; & the other, that leads to Hell, where the Wicked and Debaucht, Whoremongers and Adulteres, Murderers, Lyars & Thieves go.

Although the religious rhetoric somewhat obscures it, Fox is offering a contract; if the slaves behave well, and work hard, they will be treated well. The contract works both ways of course: the masters and overseers are entreated to “deal Kindly and Gently” with those slaves who are

“Faithful and Diligent.” Fox’s “model” plantation anticipates ameliorative proposals put forward a century later in sentimental novels such as Sarah Scott’s *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766), and echoed by pro-slavery apologists such as Bryan Edwards in his *History, civil and commercial, of the British colonies in the West Indies* (1793).⁵ Eighteenth-century ameliorative gestures tend to lack plausibility, however, and this earlier example seems no more convincing. One wonders how seriously the slaves took this piece of advice, if it was indeed proffered at the Quaker meetings to which they were invited. While this sort of relationship may well have existed on some Quaker-owned plantations, such plantations occupied only a very small part of the island of Barbados, and slaves would have been able to see plainly enough that the majority of planters did not follow such reciprocal agreements with their slaves, nor did they, in many cases, refrain from debauchery, adultery, and murder. Indeed, in the words of Beckles, “under the 1688 Slave Code, a master could wilfully kill his slave and be liable only to a £15 fine. If, however, his slave died while being punished, and it could be established that no malice had been intended, then there would be no fine under the law” (34–5). Fox’s precepts clearly run counter to the spirit of the emerging Slave Code and to some extent can be viewed as an alternative to it. While it may well be the case that sentiments such as these were inculcated in Quaker meetings, in this letter, written to “the Governour and his Council & Assembly, and all others in power,” the idea of a plantation contract based around the mutual good behaviour of planter and slave seems proposed as a measure ideally to be adopted by the largely Anglican plantocracy, and it is they who appear to be being reminded of the wages of sin, and the promise of life everlasting. In effect, this section is less of a refutation and more of an admonition.

If Fox was addressing the Anglican plantocracy in this paragraph, his next is more explicitly addressed to Quakers, and to those sympathetic to Quakers. His rhetoric shifts again, as does his register, as he moves the scene of his oratory from the public realm of the plantation to the private realm of the family. In the seventeenth century, the understanding was that the head of the family was responsible for the moral welfare of his wife and children, their servants and—in Fox’s view at least—their

slaves. “Now consider, Friends,” he writes, “that its no Transgression, for a Master of a Family to instruct his Family himself, or else, some other in his behalf; but rather, that it is a very great Duty lying incumbent upon them.” Despite its title and opening paragraphs being explicitly addressed to those “in power,” with its appeal to “Friends,” the letter seems now directed towards his own congregation. Invoking the biblical examples of Joshua and Abraham, Fox reminds Friends (and perhaps also the governors of the island) that it is the “Command of the Lord” that heads of households, like Abraham and Joshua, “have a Duty lying upon us, to Pray and to Teach, Instruct and Admonish those in and belonging to our Families.” This established, he slips in the more controversial part of his argument:

Now *Negars & Tawny Indians* make up a very great part of *Families* in this Island, for whom an Account will be required at the Great Day of Judgement, when every one shall be Rewarded according to his Deeds done in the Body, whether they be good, or whether they be Evil.

The letter concludes with familiar reminders about the rewards and punishments of eternal justice, but not until after an important rhetorical manoeuvre has taken place. In this letter, Fox conflates a defence of Quaker practice regarding slavery with an exhortation to Friends and others to extend those practices. To support this, he has substantially built upon his letter of 1657 to provide a theological grounding for his insistence that slaves receive religious instruction. For Fox, the plantation comprised a household and is subject to the same rules of household management that were laid down in the Biblical texts he cites. Failure to obey these rules leaves the head of the household open to the displeasure of eternal justice. Fox does not say that at the day of judgement, God will require an account *from* servants and slaves. Instead, he mentions the “*Negars & Tawny Indians* ... for whom an Account will be required.” In other words, at the last day, slave owners will be held to account *for* the spiritual failures of their slaves and “will incur the Lord’s Displeasure” for not having instructed their household to call upon the name of the Lord. Fox’s text, Jeremiah 10.25, is specific on the point.

Here, Jeremiah asks the Lord to “Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that know thee not, and upon the families that call not on thy name.”

How true is it, then, that in his letter “For the Governour and his Council,” Fox was, in Ingle’s words, “at his conservative best” (235)? How true is it, indeed, that Fox repudiated the radical views that he appeared to espouse in his 1657 letter? The answer, as is so often the case, lies somewhere in between Ingle’s representation of Fox as a man anxious to placate the Anglican plantocracy at any cost, and the earlier hagiographic representations of Fox as the man who began the long march to emancipation. Faced with the politics of a small island that depended on slavery for its profits, Fox clearly toned down his rhetoric. We hear nothing more of the idea that the Gospel “is the Power, that giveth *Liberty* and *Freedom*” emanating from George Fox while he was on Barbados. And yet, we do not hear that he stopped holding meetings among the slaves either, nor do we hear that he abandoned his broadly ameliorative message or his more specific injunction that, since slaves were part of a colonist’s household, then they were in equal need of spiritual care. What we do know is that while in Barbados Fox preached a persuasive sermon that included a lengthy section on the slavery issue. In the words of John Hull, Fox spoke to Barbados Quakers:

About training up their negroes in the fear of God, those bought with their money and such as were born in their families, so that all may come to the knowledge of the Lord that so with Joshua they may say, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord,” and that their overseers might deal mildly and gently with them and not use cruelty as the manner of some is and hath been, and to make them free after thirty years servitude. (qtd. in Nickalls 598–99)

Hull does not mention that Fox felt it necessary to deny any allegations levelled against Quakers about teaching the slaves to rebel, although the absence of such a mention in such a short précis is not in itself conclusive proof. We do, however, have a reasonably detailed idea of the contents of this sermon since it, or something closely resembling it, was reprinted in London in 1676 as a book called *Gospel family-order, being*

a short discourse concerning the ordering of families, both of whites, blacks, and Indians. This explicitly addresses the question of plantation management in a text that represents both Fox's final position on the topic, and his most polished rhetorical approach to it as well.⁶

The book comprises nineteen pages of text, followed by three pages reproducing short extracts from other letters and texts in which Fox had revisited the question. The main body of the text offers substantially the same arguments that can be seen in Fox's earlier writings on slavery, but these arguments are considerably extended, supported by copious evidence from scripture, and accompanied by a persuasive exegesis. Again, Fox takes as his central premise the idea that a plantation is a family. With this in mind he paraphrases—misquotes even—Genesis 17:10–13, conflating the four verses to read “*Every Man-child shall be circumcised in your Generations, and he that is born in thy House, or bought with Money of any Stranger, which is not of thy seed, shall be circumcised.*” Fox reads this as a clear indication that slaves are to be offered religious instruction in the hope that they will come to the light or, in other words, “be circumcised with the Spirit, which the outward Circumcision of the Flesh did type forth” (*Gospel family-order* 3–4). The following ten pages do not add substantially to the core of this argument, but they do provide a great deal of additional scriptural evidence to support it. This can be understood as evidence that may well have been to the taste of an enthusiastic audience in the seventeenth century, but which is likely to enthuse very few in the twenty-first. As John Hull had indicated, Fox referred to Joshua 24:15 (“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”), and he also refers to several articles of the Mosaic Law that enjoin hospitality for strangers.⁷ Thirteen pages—or two thirds—of the book are taken up with this argument, and while the direction in which Fox was moving must have been clear to all present at the meeting in Barbados where this was first articulated, without the benefit of context there is little, other than the title of the book itself, to suggest that this is a tract on the management of slave plantations. Fox's intentions become clearer on pages 13 and 14 of the book, where he moves his argument onwards from merely discussing families and strangers in general to a more

specific analysis of the role played by Africans in the Bible. This discussion, which again shows that, despite the title of the book and the reference to “*Tawnes*,” Fox is primarily concerned with African rather than Indian slaves, contains an uncompromising restatement of his views in the 1657 letter, and to a certain extent returns to its potentially liberationist language:

And so now consider, do not slight them, to wit, the *Ethyopians*, the *Blacks* now, neither any Man or Woman upon the Face of the Earth, in that *Christ* dyed for all, both *Turks*, *Barbarians*, *Tartarians* and *Ethyopians*; he dyed for the *Tawnes* and for the *Blacks*, as well as for you that are called *Whites*; ... And therefore now you should preach *Christ* to your *Ethyopians* that are in your Families, that so they may be free Men indeed, and be tender of and to them, and walk in Love, that ye may answer that of God in their Hearts, being (as the Scripture affirms) all of one Blood & of one Mold, to dwell upon the Face of the Earth. (*Gospel family-order* 13–14)

As in some of Fox’s earlier writings, this passage clearly proclaims the spiritual equality of all peoples, and makes an unmistakable case for the immediate amelioration of slavery, with its call to slave owners to “be tender of and to them.” It also demonstrates Fox’s discomfort with emerging notions of racial difference: by addressing “you that are called *Whites*” he foregrounds the artificiality of distinctions based on colour. A superficial reading might suggest, as with the 1657 letter, that Fox is going somewhat further and demanding emancipation under certain circumstances: slaves who have been brought to the light, he seems to be suggesting, “may be free men indeed.” This is not a reading that is supported by the rest of the text. Quoting from, although not referencing, Deuteronomy 15:12, Fox raises the question of manumission; “And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee.” This is a practice, Fox argues, that “will doubtless be very acceptable to the Lord.” No doubt, but in translating this practice to the plantations, Fox somewhat alters the tariff:

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To close up all, let me tell you, it will doubtless be very acceptable to the Lord, if so be that Masters of Families here would deal so with their Servants, the *Negroes* and *Blacks*, whom they have bought with their Money, to let them go free after a considerable Term of Years, if they have served them faithfully; and when they go, and are made free, *let them not go away empty-handed*, this I say will be very acceptable to the Lord, whose Servants we are, and who rewards us plentifully for our Service done him, not suffering us to go away empty. (*Gospel family-order* 16)

Fox's injunction concerning letting slaves go "empty-handed," taken directly from Deuteronomy 15:12, was an important corrective to the occasional practice of emancipating slaves only at a point in their lives where they were no longer able to labour or to fend for themselves: a practice which was effectively a death sentence. Fox's rhetoric subtly invokes the Golden Rule, reminding his congregation that, as they have servants so in turn they are servants of God, and should treat their servants as they would expect God would treat them. But Fox alters the word of the Mosaic Law, enjoining Friends to let their slaves go free not after six years, nor even after the thirty years that Hull's report of the original sermon suggested, but only "after a considerable Term of Years, if they have served them faithfully." Here, is at last revealed the meaning of the phrase "the *Gospel* is preached to every creature under Heaven; which is the Power, that giveth *Liberty* and *Freedom*, and is *Glad Tidings* to every *Captivated Creature* under the whole Heavens" that is found in the 1657 letter, and its counterpart in *Gospel family-order*, which argues that "you should preach Christ to your *Ethyopians* that are in your Families, that so they may be free Men indeed." Clearly, Fox intends only that spiritual freedom, or freedom from sin, be conferred by the light. Temporal freedom is still very much in the gift of the slave owner, comes only after a long stretch of hard labour, and can be achieved only by good behaviour. While this might have been a crumb of comfort for some lucky slaves, one imagines that few indeed ever came to enjoy the comfortable retirement that Fox gestures towards. Indeed, as Kristen Block has argued, from an

extensive analysis of Quaker wills, manumissions among slaves belonging to Barbadian Quakers in the years following Fox's visit was only marginally, and certainly not significantly, higher than for the slave population as a whole. Fox certainly urged amelioration of sorts, and manumission at times, but he does not at any point come even near to arguing for general emancipation or an end to either slavery or the slave trade.

Gospel family-order nevertheless concludes on a solidly ameliorative note, and with an uncompromising invocation of the Golden Rule. First, Fox argues that certain civil rights and responsibilities be extended to slaves. Principal among these is marriage: "if any of your Negroes desire to marry, let them take one another before Witnesses, in the Presence of God, and the Masters of the Families" (17–18). In the context of a plantation system that made a point of breaking up families and other personal connections, and in which sexual violence was routine, this was not an insignificant demand. Finally, he asks his congregation to:

Consider with your selves, if you were in the same Condition as the Blacks are (and indeed you do not know what Condition you or your Children, or your Childrens Children may be reduced and brought into, before you or they shall dye) who came as Strangers to you, and were sold to you as Slaves; now I say, if this should be the Condition of you or yours, you would think it hard Measure; yea, and very great Bondage and Cruelty.

And therefore consider seriously of this, and do you for and to them, as you would willingly have them or any other to do unto you, were you in the like slavish Condition, & bring them to know the Lord Christ. (18–19)

Fox thus concludes his argument with an appeal to the Golden Rule, an injunction which is inviolable to all those who accept that Africans are "fellow creatures," bound by the rules that govern relationships within the human family—and it is to establish exactly that point that leads Fox to quote so generously from those parts of the Bible that discuss Africa and Africans. But while the argument concludes with the strongest rule of them all, the text itself concludes with a personal moment. It is a moment that helps to establish Fox's rhetorical ethos, but which

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is also a glimpse into the personal difficulty Fox had in reconciling his beliefs about the spiritual equality of races and the necessity of ameliorating slavery, formed in England in the late 1650s, with the reality of a slave plantation as he witnessed it in Barbados in 1671. “Truly Friends,” Fox writes,

Great Troubles I underwent about those Things; yea, sorely was my spirit troubled when I came into the Sense of these Things, which were over my Life, and burden'd my Life very much, to see, that Families were not brought into Order; for the *Blacks* are of your *Families*, and the many Natives of them born in your Houses: I had a sore Burden, and (I say) much Trouble, how that Righteousness might be brought through in the Thing, and Justice and Mercy set up in every Family and in every Heart, that so God might be honoured in every Family...And so I leave these Things to your serious consideration. (*Gospel family-order* 19)

This is a personal statement from a man very much troubled by what he has witnessed, and yet lacking the ability to conceive of what to us is the obvious answer: that righteousness can not be brought through in the thing and thus the thing itself should be abolished. In Fox's age, slavery appeared to most as an unpleasant and unfortunate affair, but no more capable of being abolished than the “Blastings, Mildews, Caterpillars” and other natural phenomena that troubled Fox elsewhere in *Gospel family-order* (17). Fox seems unable rather than unwilling to recognize that slavery is not a natural but rather a socially constructed phenomenon. His response to slavery is within the discourses available to him, and represents perhaps the first serious attempt in the English language to ameliorate the institution. Nevertheless, it is not always certain, nor is it entirely consistent. In his writings on the matter Fox repeats himself, and sometimes contradicts himself, but we can plainly see that through the repeated writing and re-writing of some basic tenets he builds an increasingly sophisticated response to slavery, and an increasingly polished piece of rhetoric. In this, as well as seeing the development of his thought on slavery, we also get a fascinating insight into his creative

process, and into the way he developed both the policy and the theology of the early Society of Friends. And, while Fox's Barbadian texts cannot truthfully be claimed as the start of the Quaker antislavery movement, one glimpses in them the origins of a Quaker rhetoric about slavery that prompted considerable debate among future generations of Friends.

Notes

- 1 The most important studies of Quaker antislavery, all of which focus on Philadelphia, are Drake, Davis, Frost, and Soderlund.
- 2 The best general history of the island is Beckles. A detailed examination of slavery on the island can be found in Handler and Lange.
- 3 The earlier sermon was given at the house of Thomas Rous in Barbados on 21 October 1671 and "was virtually reprinted as *Gospel family-order*." See Ingle 345 n33.
- 4 Most biographies of Fox are sympathetic treatments in the mould of Marsh. Ingle is a more controversial (and certainly less hagiographic) recent biography.
- 5 For discussion of sentimental ameliorationism, see Boulukos and Carey, especially 46–72.
- 6 Fox also produced a book called *To the ministers, teachers, and priests, (so called, and so stileing your selves) in Barbadoes* (np 1672) which develops some of his arguments on slavery.
- 7 Fox's central references are to: Exodus 12:48, Leviticus 24:22, Deuteronomy 5:13, 29:9–11, 31:12, and Jeremiah 10:25. In general, Fox gives chapter, but not verse, and he often conflates verses, misquotes entirely, or gives inaccurate chapter references, suggesting that his citations often came from memory.

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