

THE ETHICS OF SOCIAL PROTEST: JOHN WOOLMAN (1720-1772)

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Organised protest, as a means of drawing attention to one's own or other people's grievances, is no new phenomenon. But in recent years, in most parts of the world, its use has become much more common. Many religious people, including Christians, have become involved in protest, whether by participation in groups varied in religious, philosophical and political outlook, or as members of groups and as individuals promoting a particular religious cause. Thus, on the one hand Christians have shared with others in protest organised by CND; on the other hand, Christian women have joined together to protest against the refusal of church authorities to allow the ordination of women to the priesthood. Protest can, of course, take many forms, e.g., writing letters to newspapers, marches, demonstrations and sit-ins. It can be legal or illegal; it may be violent or non-violent.

The protest movement has received a good deal of attention from secular writers, for it raises questions of interest to students of politics, sociology and psychology.¹ In Christian circles, the protest movements have generated a certain amount of literature, especially on pacifism and non-violence.² But little effort has been made to explore the theme of protest in relation to theology and theological ethics. Yet there is no shortage of material in the tradition of Christian protest which might be appropriated not

¹ See, for example: M. Useem, *Protest Movements in America*, Indianapolis, 1975; W. Gamson, *Strategy of Social Protest*, Homewood, Illinois, 1975; Richard Rubenstein, *Rebels in Eden*, Boston, 1970; A. Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements*, Englewood Cliffs, 1973; J. H. Skolnick, *The Politics of Protest*, New York, 1969; G. R. Lakey, *The Sociological Mechanisms of Non-Violent Action*, M.A., University of Pennsylvania, 1962; ed. David R. Weber, *Civil Disobedience in America: A Documentary History*, Ithaca and London, 1978 (includes Woolman); D. Kowalewski, "The Protest Uses of Symbolic Politics", *Social Science Quarterly*, lxi (1980), 95-113.

² Cf., W. R. Miller, *Non-Violence: A Christian Interpretation*, New York, 1964; P. Regamey, *Non-Violence and the Christian Conscience*, London, 1966; Paul Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, New York, 1961.

only historically, but also theologically and ethically, to nourish contemporary reflection on this theme. By and large it would probably be correct to suppose that the leadership and the main body of adherents of the principal Christian denominations have little sympathy for protest. It would be judged the activity of extremists. It would meet the accusation of wordliness and shallowness, of lacking spiritual roots, of being more concerned with politics than with religion. Yet only a slight acquaintance with the tradition of Christian protest yields, in many cases, evidence of profound moral insight and vision. Be that as it may, both in the past and today, urgent questions arise about the theological and ethical justification of protest; these cannot be set aside.

In this article I shall draw upon some aspects of the life and thought of the 18th-century American Quaker, John Woolman,³

³ The following books and articles partly or wholly devoted to Woolman's thought are relevant to the theme of the article. A fuller listing is not necessary here. J. G. Whittier's Introduction to his edition of *The Journal of John Woolman*, Boston, 1871; Paul Rosenblatt, *John Woolman*, New York, 1969; Edwin H. Cady, *John Woolman*, New York, 1965; Reginald Reynolds, *The Wisdom of John Woolman*, London, 1948; W. T. Shore, *John Woolman: His Life and Our Times*, London, 1913; Ernest E. Taylor, *The Challenge of John Woolman*, London, 1916; David Duncan, *John Woolman*, London and Manchester, 1871; Henry J. Cadbury, *John Woolman in England: A Documentary Supplement*, London, 1971; Reginald Reynolds, *John Woolman and the Twentieth Century*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 96, Pennsylvania, 1956; Ann Sharpless, *John Woolman: A Pioneer in Labor Reform*, Philadelphia, 1920; Henry S. Canby, *Classic Americans*, New York, 1931; Joseph Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilisation 1606-1865*, 3 vols., New York, 1946; John E. Jacoby, *Le mysticisme dans la pensée américaine*, Paris, 1931; Llewellyn Powys, *Thirteen Worthies*, New York, 1923; G. M. Trevelyan, *Clio, A Muse and Other Essays, Literary and Pedestrian*, London, 1913; F. Davidson, "Three Patterns of Living" in ed., Charles L. Sanford, *Benjamin Franklin and the American Character*, Boston, 1955; William A. Christian, Sr., "Inwardness and Outward Concerns: A Study of John Woolman's Thought", *Quaker History*, lxxvii (1978), 88-104; Phillips P. Moulton, "John Woolman (1720-1772): Exemplar of Ethics", *Christian Century*, lxxxix (1972), 984-86; Phillips P. Moulton, "John Woolman's Approach to Social Action—as Exemplified in Relation to Slavery", *Church History*, xxxv (1966), 399-410; Phillips P. Moulton, "The Influence of the Writings of John Woolman", *Quaker History*, lx (1971), 3-13; John M. Gessell, "John Woolman and the Holy Experiment", *Anglican Theological Review*, xxxvii (1955), 111-19; Muriel Kent, "John Woolman: Mystic and Reformer", *The Hibbert Journal*, xxvi (1928), 302-13; Dagobert D. Lewis, "John Woolman and the Brute Creation", *Friends Intelligencer*, cv (1948), 235 f.; Paul H. Douglas, "Two Eighteenth-Century

whose protest against slavery and war deserves careful attention in its theological and ethical features. More than this, Woolman goes a significant part of the way to creating a unified structure of belief, feeling, thought, worship and action which succeeds in marrying theology, ethics, spirituality and politics. Thus, in his case, protest can hardly be dismissed as shallow or naïve. In exploring these aspects of him, I shall further argue that his relative success in dealing with the theme of protest springs from his far from unsophisticated integration of traditional Christian belief with some of the axioms of the 18th-century Enlightenment. This integration is of more than historical interest. It must be central to the presuppositions of any contemporary Christian social thought that would actually engage with political realities.

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John Woolman's life⁴ (especially his part in the campaign against the Quaker ownership of, and trade in, slaves) and his writings (especially the *Journal*)⁵ have evoked fervent respect and

Philadelphians: Benjamin Franklin and John Woolman", *The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, liv (1952), 131-38; Frederick B. Tolles, "John Woolman's List of 'Books Lent'", *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association*, xxi (1942), 72-81; Jean A. Perkins, "The European Reception of John Woolman's Journal", *Quaker History*, lxi (1980), 91-101; Thomas E. Terrell, "John Woolman: The Theology of a Public Order", *Quaker History*, lxxi (1982), 16-30; W. F. Altman, "John Woolman's Reading of the Mystics", *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association*, xlvi (1959), 103-15; John S. Lask, "John Woolman: Crusader for Freedom", *Phylon*, v (1944), 30-40; R. E. Spiller, "John Woolman on War", *Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, v (1941), 60-91; G. David Huston, "John Woolman's Efforts in Behalf of Freedom", *Journal of Negro History*, ii (1917), 126 ff.; M. W. Davis, "The Connatural Ground of John Woolman's Triangle", *College Language Association Journal*, ix (1965), 132-39; Thomas Werge, "John Woolman", in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 31, *American Colonial Writers 1735-1781* (1984), pp. 274-90; W. Forrest Altman, *John Woolman's Reading*, Ph. D., Florida State University, 1957; Rufus M. Jones, "Evidences of the Influence of Quietism on John Woolman", *Friend's Intelligencer*, cv (1948), 131 ff.

⁴ See A. M. Gummere, *The Journal of John Woolman*, with a Biographical Introduction, London, 1922; Janet Whitney, *John Woolman, Quaker*, London, 1943.

⁵ In this article I have used Phillips P. Moulton's critical edition *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, New York, 1971, cited hereafter as *Journal*.

admiration not only among Quakers, but much more widely too. He was, and is, regarded by many as a person of rare spiritual quality. By some, even higher claims are made: "the man who, in all the centuries after since the advent of Christ, lived nearest to the divine pattern".⁶ Coleridge could write: "I should also despair of that man who could peruse the life of John Woolman without an amelioration of heart".⁷ Charles Lamb observed: "The only American book I ever read twice, was the 'Journal of Edward (John) Woolman', a quaker preacher and tailor, whose character is one of the finest I ever met with".⁸ Again, Coleridge exclaimed: "Oh that in all things, in self-subjugation, unwearied beneficence, and unfeigned listening and obedience to the Voice within, I were as like the evangelic John Woolman".⁹ Crabb Robinson claimed that "his whole existence and all his passions were love!".¹⁰ And Woolman's *Journal* has been described as the "sweetest and purest autobiography in the language" and as a "literary masterpiece".¹¹ Rosenblatt mentions the *Journal* in the same breath as Augustine's *Confessions* and the *Imitation of Christ*.¹²

But many of these lavish tributes, though sincere, contain a certain mawkishness and imply a rather frozen piety. Woolman is brought to the front of the stage and is bathed in light; but the background is lost and the other actors are shrouded in obscurity. Much of what has been written about him until recent times, through no fault of the authors, can now be seen to lack knowledge of the historical, political, literary and theological context. Notable advances in Woolman scholarship make possible a far more realistic theological and ethical appropriation of the theme of protest.

Firstly, recent historical scholarship on early colonial America in general, and on politics and Quakerism in particular, have provided a better framework in which to set his life and activity

⁶ Whittier, op. cit., p. 3.

⁷ S. T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed., Griggs (Oxford, 1956), i. 302.

⁸ E. V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb* (2nd end., London, 1905), ii. 264.

⁹ S. T. Coleridge, op. cit., iii. 156.

¹⁰ Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence* (London, 1869), ii. 266.

¹¹ William Ellery Channing, quoted in Whittier, op. cit., p. 2.

¹² Rosenblatt, op. cit., preface. Cf., Robinson (op. cit., ii. 271), "a book which exhibits a Christian *all love*", and Emerson (quoted in Hintz, op. cit., p. 26), "I find more wisdom in these pages than in any other book written since the days of the Apostles".

in its public aspect.¹³ Richard Bauman's *For the Reputation of Truth*, though by no means attracting universal scholarly approval, is an example of the kind of *political* analysis which can situate Woolman in the intricate political struggles in Pennsylvania between Governor and Assembly, within the Assembly, and between religious and other groups outside the Assembly. Similarly, some of the detailed research which has taken place since Drake's important *Quakers and Slavery in America* has done much to clarify, complicate, and leave unresolved questions about the history of slavery and emancipation in pre-revolutionary America.¹⁴ Some time-honoured "facts" about the slavery issue are called into question which serve to make uncertain the character and extent of Woolman's contribution. Again, recent research has clearly pointed to, but has not resolved, questions about the different attitudes and involvements of the Quaker community in the slavery question; the picture is far from simple. In this connection, it is far from obvious exactly what role Woolman played in the councils of the Quaker community. But, all in all, it can be safely asserted that his life and ministry were spent in a highly volatile and complex politico-religious milieu. This recognition is important for a realistic assessment of his protest. Stable judgements of success or failure are not easy to come by in his case, which is itself a theological factor of some consequence.

¹³ See, for example: Edwin B. Bronner, *William Penn's Holy Experiment: The Founding of Pennsylvania 1681-1701*, New York, 1962; A.J. Worrall, *Quakers in the Colonial North-East*, Hanover, New Hampshire and London, 1980; Hermann Wellenreuther, *Glaube und Politik in Pennsylvania, 1681-1776*, Köln, 1972; Alan Tully, *William Penn's Legacy: Politics and Social Structures in Provincial Pennsylvania 1726-1755*, Baltimore and London, 1977; John E. Pomfret, *The Province of West New Jersey, 1609-1702*, Princeton, 1956; Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, New Haven, 1950; Wallace N. Jamison, *Religion in New Jersey: A Brief History*, Princeton, 1964; Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture*, New York, 1960; Richard A. Bauman, *For the Reputation of Truth: Politics, Religion and Conflict among the Pennsylvania Quakers, 1750-1800*, Baltimore, 1971; D.J. MacLeod, *Slavery, Race and the American Revolution*, Cambridge, 1974; Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810*, London, 1975; Sydney V. James, *A People Among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century America*, Cambridge, Mass., 1963.

¹⁴ E.g. articles and dissertations by Darold D. Wax, Gary B. Nash, Merle Gerald Brouwer, Roger Bruns, Wayne J. Eberly, and Anne T. Gary, cited in the

Secondly, a body of detailed research on the different genres of early Quaker literature and their relationship to the wider stream of Puritan spiritual literature has proved illuminating, not only in relation to Woolman studies in general, but to the theme of this article in particular.¹⁵ We can see more clearly where and how the Quaker journal differed from other journals, and we can analyse where and how Woolman's *Journal* differed from, and was similar to, other Quaker journals. By his time the journal was an established and even stereotyped genre; in his hands it achieved a remarkable theological, literary and spiritual sophistication. It was, *inter alia*, a literature of protest. But more recent scholarship has also suggested that the individual journalist's writings serve as the expression of the self-understanding of the Quaker community, a theological interpretation of its action in the world, a sacramental statement of God's action through the Society in history. The *Journal* is not therefore simply the record of an inward journey; it has a far more comprehensive aim.

Thirdly, the earlier secondary literature gives an impression that Woolman had a simple faith and little "theology" in the modern sense of the term. More recently, careful and thoughtful attempts have been made, in the face of admittedly meagre evidence, to discover and identify his theological outlook and to work out the theological influences exerted upon him by earlier Quakerism, by the Christian tradition, and by his Quaker and non-Quaker contemporaries. The outcome of all this enquiry is not very precise. Some sources can be asserted with confidence, e.g., his dependence upon the Bible, not least upon the Old Testament prophets. There is also a profound debt to Fox, Howgill, Penn,

valuable article "The Origins of the Quaker Crusade against Slavery: A Review of Recent Literature" by J. William Frost, in *Quaker History*, lxvii (1978), 42-58.

¹⁵ Jackson I. Cope, "Seventeenth-Century Quaker Style", *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, lxxi (September 1956), 724-54; Howard W. Hintz, *The Quaker Influence in American Literature*, New York, 1940; John Morris, *Versions of the Self: Studies in English Autobiography from John Bunyan to John Stuart Mill*, New York, 1966; Josephine K. Piercy, *Studies in Literary Types in Seventeenth-Century America 1607-1710*, New Haven, 1939; Daniel B. Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*, Princeton, 1968; Luella M. Wright, *The Literary Life of the Early Friends 1650-1725*, New York, 1932; Owen Watkins, "Some Early Quaker Autobiographies", *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, xlv (1953), 65-74. See also an earlier article, Kate W. Tibbals, "The Speech of Plain Friends", *American Speech*, i (1926), 200 ff.

Barclay and others in the Quaker tradition. But an attempt has been made closely to link him with 18th-century and earlier mysticism. That he knew, and that his spirituality was moulded by, William Law, Jacob Boehme and the *Imitation of Christ* is beyond doubt. Altman's thesis *John Woolman's Reading* is a masterly attempt to trace influences and connections.¹⁶ But in the final analysis the venture is speculative and lacks direct evidence. I suspect that Woolman has not been done justice as in some sense a theological *pioneer*. Moulton asserts that "theologically Woolman stood in the main stream of the Christian evangelical tradition. His doctrine was orthodox".¹⁷ In some respects this may be so; but it is probably too one-sided and cautious a judgment. The integration of traditional Christian and 18th-century Enlightenment doctrines (to which I have referred and which I shall discuss in more detail below) suggests that he challenged, as well as affirmed, the "main stream". But he is theologically self-restrained, possibly reflecting his general desire to avoid vanity. Many of the early Quakers attacked what they held to be the pretences of theological learning, but in fact engaged in endless theological dispute; Woolman was *not* of that company.

Fourthly, biographical study of Woolman owes much to the labours of Amelia Mott Gummere and Janet Whitney, neither of whom was a professional historian.¹⁸ In both writers there is evidence of excessive biographical speculation and an insufficiently critical attitude to historical sources. Recent writers on Woolman have remained heavily dependent upon Gummere and Whitney. Although recent research (as we have noted) has assembled much new background information, the study of sources for his life is probably not complete.

Paul Rosenblatt, Edwin Cady, and Phillips Moulton devote considerable attention to Woolman's anti-slavery activities. In spite of the excellence of their literary exegesis, they have not gone beyond a narrow focus on Woolman to add to our knowledge of his role in Quaker meetings or to describe with any accuracy the crucial events of the 1750s.¹⁹

In particular it is frustrating that so little is known of Woolman's dealings with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. We also lack any

¹⁶ See above n. 3.

¹⁷ Moulton, *Journal*, Introduction, p. 11.

¹⁸ See above n. 4.

¹⁹ Frost, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

real sense of the comparative impact of others upon the events of these years. How, for example, is Anthony Benezet's anti-slavery campaign, which extended beyond Quaker circles, to be measured in relation to Woolman's?²⁰ Historical study of Woolman's protest is therefore inhibited by these and other gaps in our knowledge. Only new research can respond to these problems, provided that further source-material exists.

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The present article concerns itself primarily with the way in which Woolman's ethical life and thinking combined to fashion a distinctive understanding of protest. To explore this theme, proper attention must be paid to the four areas of scholarly advance and ambiguity mentioned above. That said, such advance and ambiguity both illuminate and darken our understanding of Woolman. On the one hand they serve the salutary purpose of dismantling earlier false constructions of the man and his times, mainly by affording us a fuller sense of context. In particular the Quaker school of historical writing, with its lusty views of providence in history, has to be set among other kinds of historical perspective. On the other hand, a search for what some may hold to be more objective handling of the historical material must not cause us to lose sight of Woolman's home in the Society of Friends. For his Quakerism was fundamental to his spiritual, theological, ethical and political convictions. A birthright Quaker, Woolman (as far as can be seen) never significantly deviated from Quaker thought and practice except to radicalise it, as an author was scrupulously loyal to Quaker patterns of centralised censorship, and was faithful to the spirit of Quaker institutions. It can in fact be argued that some Quaker writing on him coming from a later and more cautious Quakerism did *less* than justice to the vitality of his Quaker faith.

Woolman was born in 1720, the grandson of a John Woolman

²⁰ Cf., George S. Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet*, Philadelphia, 1937; Roger Bruns, "A Quaker's Antislavery Crusade: Anthony Benezet", *Quaker History*, lxx (1976), 81-92 and "Anthony Benezet's Assertion of Negro Equality", *Journal of Negro History*, lvi (1971), 230-39; Nancy Slocum Hardwick, *Anthony Benezet: Eighteenth-Century Social Critic, Educator and Abolitionist*, Ph.D., University of Maryland, 1974.

who had emigrated from Gloucestershire to West New Jersey in 1678. By the 1720s many Quakers in Pennsylvania had become well-to-do merchants, but the dominant Quaker culture of West New Jersey was very different. Living at this time as the majority denomination and largely dependent, whether directly or indirectly, upon agriculture, this was possibly the most conservative Quaker community of all in colonial America. It was not, however, a question of poverty, rather of relative prosperity. John Woolman senior left in his will two hundred acres of prime land on the banks of the Rancocas near its junction with the Delaware. John Woolman's father, with a family of ten children, had a plantation, a substantial river-bank house, and was a master weaver with his own looms. Nonetheless, as part of that Quaker community the way of life was simple—plain dress, plain food, plain language. Though as a schoolboy and adolescent Woolman had access through family friendships to well-off families in Burlington and Philadelphia with well-stocked libraries, and to contemporaries who were receiving a sophisticated education, he received an education which was more practical than intellectual. The primary means of receiving Quaker culture at this time was through the home.²¹ At the age of twenty-one he began to work for a shopkeeper in Mount Holly and he became an apprentice tailor. After a period of religious doubt and uncertainty, he began a Quaker public ministry at the age of twenty-two. This led to a regular pattern of religious journeyings, typical of the Society of Friends in this era, in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, New England, North Carolina, Long Island, and, of course, in England in the last year of his life. In 1746 he became an independent tailor and merchant; he married in 1749. His journeys probably first drew to his real attention the plight of negro slaves. His first publication on the subject *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* came in 1754. In 1755, at the time of the war against France, he adopted a consistent pacifist position, censuring the complicity of Quaker members of the Assembly; he went in person to the Governor, Morris, to urge peace and opposed the war tax and conscription. In 1758 he ceased to trade as a merchant, confining himself for his living to

²¹ Cf., Thomas Woody, *Early Quaker Education in Pennsylvania*, New York, 1920; Jack D. Marietta, "Quaker Family Education in Historical Perspective", *Quaker History*, lxiii (1974), 3-16.

tailoring and fruit-husbandry. He was heavily involved in pleading the slaves' cause at all levels of Quaker meeting, having comprehensive access by virtue of his membership of the ministers' and elders' meeting of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. After that Yearly Meeting made its historic decision against slave-owning in 1758, he was much involved in visiting individual slave-holders. In 1763 he undertook a dangerous journey to visit Indians at Wyalusing. This visit must be seen against the background of the complicated and treacherous dealings of both American and French colonial governments with various Indian tribes which was one of the most shabby outcomes of the colonial experiment. The Society of Friends, in fact, emerged with a good reputation and an almost clear conscience in its pacific and honest dealings with the Indians. Woolman's visit marked the beginning of an institutional response, never entirely satisfactory, of the Society to the Indian question.²² The remaining years of his life see him as, outwardly, an increasingly strange, eccentric, isolated and preoccupied figure, perhaps more outside the mainstream of events than at any time in the previous fifteen years. Yet it was a time of considerable literary activity. The *Journal*, which had been begun around 1756, was revised and re-revised around 1770. *Considerations on Keeping Negroes: Part Second* appeared in 1762. *A Plea for the Poor* was written c. 1764, his *Considerations on Pure Wisdom and Human Policy* appeared c. 1768, *Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind* was published in 1770, and five brief essays were written during his voyage to, and travels in, England in 1772.²³ He sailed for England in May 1772, attended the London Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders, where he spoke with "Simplicity, Solidity and Clearness"; he travelled northwards, observing, visiting Friends and attending Meetings. He died of smallpox in York in October 1772. It had been a many-sided life and ministry. During his fifty-one years of life Woolman had been farmer, merchant, tailor, amateur surveyor, amateur lawyer, school-teacher, writer and Quaker minister.

A study of his life (of which only the briefest details are mentioned here) is of central importance for an understanding of the presuppositions, grounds and nature of his protest. It is also

²² Cf., Rayner W. Kelsey, *Friends and the Indians 1655-1917*, Philadelphia, 1917.

²³ For the visit to England see Henry J. Cadbury, *op. cit.*

one of the chief points of entry to his theological understanding. For him, believing, thinking, doing and being belong together.

On the other hand, it is possible to overstate his "simple faith" and "uncomplicated witness" in a way which fails to do justice to his distinctive theological vision. Against the argument which I shall develop, I face the objection that I credit him with too subtle a theological mind and too schooled a theological sensibility. This objection, though understandable, rests upon a point of view which *underestimated* the range of his human experience and failed to perceive the acuity of his intellect. He was not, *pace* Whittier, "a poor, unlearned working man", "an illiterate tailor" or "a man unlettered".²⁴ Duncan too, in his otherwise sensitive Manchester lecture published in 1871, was mistaken in observing that Woolman had "confined notions of trade, and lived within a very confined circle of associations ...". "He was a shopkeeper ... he lived a narrow life".²⁵ It is more accurate to follow Dorfman, who acknowledges that Woolman came from a family of "a middle station between riches and poverty", that "he was by no means a poor man, for he had inherited some lands and he acquired other property in his shopkeeping days and even had an apprentice later". Further, Dorfman claims: "John Woolman's world was not narrow".²⁶ Similar misunderstandings about Woolman as a writer must be corrected. He was "an artist; and he worked like one in his revisions of his manuscripts, in his search for the right word, in his attention to technique".²⁷ "He was not an unlettered and untutored writer". It may be that some of the misconception arises from a neglect of his other writings because of a concentration upon the *Journal*. If the *Journal* appeals little to theory, the other writings appeal a good deal to theory, but to personal experience too. This combination of theory and experience as both witnesses to the Light is a distinctive feature of his theological outlook. It is correct to observe that Woolman's was not a *speculative* intellect and it may be that the severely practical nature of Quaker child education directed the lines of his subsequent intellectual development.²⁸

²⁴ Whittier, *op. cit.*, pp. 2, 3, 34.

²⁵ Duncan, *op. cit.*, pp. 26, 35.

²⁶ Dorfman, *op. cit.*, pp. 196 f.

²⁷ Rosenblatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 f. But see H. M. Jones, *Belief and Disbelief in American Literature* (Chicago and London, 1967) that the *Journal* belongs to "religious classics of the second rank" (p. 13).

²⁸ See above n. 21.



I now go on to examine directly some of the key aspects, the integration of which serves to provide the theological vision upon which Woolman's understanding of protest rests. Most Christian and Quaker interpretations of him have tended to suggest that his theological outlook was entirely determined by earlier Quaker, Puritan and traditional Christian sources. These interpretations do not pay heed to the extent to which he was also a child of the American version of the 18th-century European Enlightenment.

Woolman moved through the world a man of reason, a man of the Enlightenment whose voice, however different the accent, was contemporaneous with the voices of Voltaire, Rousseau, Paine, and Franklin. The supreme voice, the voice within, was divine reason; but divine reason was, after all, reasonableness. Woolman could turn to it for motion and direction.²⁹

This fusing of world-views becomes evident as several pairs of concepts are explored. The first of these is *divine transcendence* and the *created order*.

The *Journal* begins: "I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the goodness of God".³⁰ The impulse to write of his experience of the goodness of God itself comes from God. Some commentators have discerned a strongly mystical tendency in him, though such a judgement is probably bound up with the extent to which Quakerism is or is not perceived as a mystical religion. Certainly, concrete evidence of his reading in the mystics, apart from references in his published works, is found in a list of books owned and loaned by him.³¹ The list includes two books by William Law, Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation*, the mystical dialogue *Desiderius*, sermons by John Everard, and writings by Boehme.

What Woolman knew of the 18th-century Quietists is a matter of some dispute. It is far from easy to establish what came to him from Quaker and what from other sources. But, without trying to be too precise, it is probably correct to see in him some signs of the Quietist strand of 18th-century mysticism. He constantly draws

²⁹ Rosenblatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 66 f.

³⁰ *Journal*, p. 23.

³¹ Tolles, "John Woolman's List of 'Books Lent'", *op. cit.*, pp. 74 ff.

attention to the need for the submission of heart, intellect and will to God.

I was taught to watch the pure opening and to take heed lest while I was standing to speak, my own will should get uppermost and cause me to utter words from wordly wisdom ... ³²

But his “mysticism” was not tempted in the direction of pantheism; the God who spoke in human inwardness was the transcendent God utterly different from the world and the self.

But if the self has painfully and regularly to learn submission to this transcendent God, there is nothing passive in the effort which must be made to cleanse and purify, to keep clear, the human channels in the self through which God’s will can be known. This is a constant theme of the *Journal* and provides the motivation for many of his decisions and actions. It is in this connection, for example, that he pursues the principle of “right livelihood”, which led him in 1756 to restrict his business activities.

The increase of business became my burden, for though my natural inclination was toward merchandise, yet I believed Truth required me to live more free from outward cumbers, and there was now a strife in my mind between the two; and in this exercise my prayers were put up to the Lord, who graciously heard me and gave me a heart resigned to his holy will. ³³

There is evidence to suggest that he had the ability, the resources and the acquaintance to have achieved significant success in business. The decision to limit this activity as a means of controlling his natural desires shaped the rest of his life. It was an act of submission to clear the way for the action of the transcendent God within. But this submission could never be achieved once-for-all; it was a constant effort to live in the spirit of truth, to “keep down to that root”. Here the Quaker concern for simplicity is seen to relate primarily to submission to God, to “what promotes and what hinders ... (a person’s) compelling search for the Kingdom”. ³⁴

It seems, therefore, that Woolman stands for a fairly extreme type of theological transcendentalism which would withdraw him

³² *Journal*, p. 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁴ *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (London, 1972 imp.), section 434.

from the world's affairs. In fact, this is not the case; instead, it is integrated with a strong social concern. Three theological strands connect with each other to bring this about.

Firstly, Woolman argues that as the self moves to encounter the divine Light within, so that very encounter stimulates the desire to turn towards others. Two quotations illustrate this:

From an inward purifying, and steadfast abiding under it, springs a lively operative desire for the good of others.³⁵

... as the mind was moved on an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible being, on the same principle it was moved to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world; that as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal and sensitive creatures, to say we love God as unseen and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life, or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself.³⁶

Secondly, he uses the traditional Quaker belief in the indwelling light, the universal presence of God in all.

But, thirdly, he also uses the Enlightenment beliefs in tolerance, and in the universality and equality of reason. This leads, for example, to a striking religious and denominational tolerance.

I found no narrowness respecting sects and opinions, but believed that sincere, upright-hearted people in every Society who truly loved God were accepted of him.³⁷

Again he employs an Enlightenment tenet as a way of appealing for conduct of love and goodness towards all.

If I purchase a man who hath never forfeited his liberty, the natural right of freedom is in him. And shall I keep him and his posterity in servitude and ignorance?³⁸

Liberty was the natural right of all men equally.³⁹

So in these ways the axioms about God and humanity are held together.

The second pair of concepts is *sin* and *social evil*. A central feature of Woolman's inwardness is his lively sense of sin in the relationship of the self to the transcendent God. The *Journal* bears

³⁵ *Journal*, p. 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

constant witness to this, sometimes even to the point of suggesting neurosis. After an occasion when he spoke wilfully and inadvisedly in meeting for worship, he was "afflicted in mind some weeks without any light or comfort".⁴⁰

He was acutely aware of spiritual difficulties and hindrances in his ministry with people. But for him the reality of sin does not remain inward and spiritual; it is extended to the state of society, above all to the divers forms of human oppression which he observed with his own eyes. Thus he is able to move from standard Protestant utterances about sin as an inward reality to a practical and pragmatic account of sin in the collective experience of oppression. So, too, the notion of "redemption" is used to signify not only individual salvation, but also in the social context:

to labour for a perfect redemption from this spirit of oppression is the great business of the whole family of Christ Jesus in this world.⁴¹

Like some of the Enlightenment thinkers, he can look back to a primordial state on earth when all was harmony in society; now this social harmony has been shattered. To restore it, he envisages a transcendental religion and a religion of humanity indissolubly linked.

The third pair of concepts is *self-analysis* and *analysis of society*. I have already drawn attention to Woolman's view of the importance of inward, spiritual self-analysis. This is carried over into a theological analysis of society. At first sight, in, for example *A Plea for the Poor*⁴², he appears to be offering political and economic analysis. But this is only secondarily so. It is rather a theological-ethical analysis of the political and economic state of his society. Here he advances beyond the social testimony of the early Quakers. They certainly drew attention to several prevalent social evils; he presents a systematic analysis of social evil. He held that the early idealism of Penn's holy experiment had given way to materialism and complacency. Consistently with the Quaker frugality of West New Jersey and with his own concern for right livelihood, he saw love of wealth as the key to the social analysis. Here he was critical of the weakness of the prevailing Quaker testimony about wealth. The Society advised against superfluity

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 262.

⁴² Moulton, *Journal*, pp. 238-272.

and extravagance, it is true; but it rarely offered specific advice or criticism to its members, as it was only too willing to do in other, lesser matters.

In attributing so central a place to the problem of wealth, Woolman was not alone; nor was he necessarily the most radical. John Churchman said of those who delighted in treasures that they were of the "church of anti-Christ".⁴³ For Woolman the effects of excessive wealth were experienced in war, slavery, usury, excessive rents, overwork, drunkenness and cruelty to animals. Though much of his critique reflects the social message of the Old Testament prophets, the spirit of systematic analysis and the mood of practical social transformation spring from the Enlightenment and speak in tones similar to those of Franklin.

The fourth pair of concepts is *inward avoidance of sin* and *outward keeping away from oppression*. We have already seen how seriously Woolman regards human sin, which silts up the channels through which God might otherwise communicate his will, and equally how serious for Woolman is the evil of social oppression in its many forms. His response to social evil is at once negative and positive. Woolman saw the pressing need for both individual and corporate disengagement from situations or activities which were directly or indirectly bound up with social evil. In particular, this involved a disengagement from superfluity because of its relation to the desire for wealth, which in turn lay at the root of oppression. His own withdrawal from merchandising, mentioned earlier, falls into this category. Again, there were several different motives behind his decision in 1761 to give up the wearing of dyed clothing. But one of these was that dyes were made by slave labour;⁴⁴ thus the wearer of dyed cloth was indirectly implicated in the use of that labour. Likewise in 1770, after much searching of conscience, he decided not to go on a visit to the West Indies because the ship which would take him there was inevitably implicated in the slave trade.⁴⁵

What was desirable on a personal level was also a collective responsibility. Woolman belonged to the group of radical Quakers who wanted the Society to advise its adherents to withdraw from the holding of political office in the Assembly. He was convinced

⁴³ Cited in Jack D. Marietta, "Wealth, War and Religion: The Perfecting of Quaker Asceticism 1740-1783", *Church History*, xliii (1974), 232.

⁴⁴ *Journal*, pp. 120 ff.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 155.

that the constant compromise required by such office-holding was incompatible with the Quaker peace testimony. In one sense at least, he was correct. In the run-up to the events of 1755, the Quakers in the Assembly had been able to parry the demands of the Governor and his allies for more effective defence policies. In particular, the Assembly had direct orders from the Crown defining the amount of military aid which the colony should pay to the Crown. Though it was clear that this levy (£20,000 in 1754) was for the defence of the colony, the Quaker members, in agreeing to payment, took shelter behind the fiction that it was a payment to the King, who could do whatever he liked with it.

The fifth pair of concepts concerns the relation of *belief* and *action*, *ontology* and *history*, specifically the relation of Christology to the behaviour of protest. The Quaker emphasis upon the Light within, the Christ within, created theological problems about the connection between the traditional Christological formulations and the historical Jesus. It is not surprising that Quaker Christology has been accused of docetist tendencies. Woolman does not involve himself in Christological controversy; nor he does he question the divinity of Christ. But in the spirit of the Enlightenment he is notably preoccupied with Jesus as a moral teacher and with our behaviour as imitative of him. Some examples of this are found in his reflections during his passage to England. Thus: "where parents and tutors ... may example them in the Truth as it is in Jesus"; "here Christ is felt to be our Shepherd, and under his leading people are brought to a stability"; and "Oh, that all may learn of Christ who is meek and low of heart! Then in faithfully following him, he will teach us to be content with food and raiment without respect to the customs or honours of this world".⁴⁶ A long passage in the *True Harmony of Mankind* about the humility, compassion and forgiveness of the Crucified One concludes:

Now this Mind being in us, which was in Christ Jesus, it removes from our Hearts the Desire of Superiority, Worldly Honour, or Greatness; a deep Attention is felt to the Divine Counsellor, and an ardent Engagement to promote, as far as we may be enabled, *the Happiness of Mankind universally* [my italics].⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 174 f., 167.

⁴⁷ In ed. Vidda D. Scudder, *The Journal and Other Writings of John Woolman* (London and New York, 1922), p. 190.

This kind of preoccupation with the giving and receiving of *example* sheds light on the place of positive action in Woolman's protest, compared with the disengagement mentioned above. At the level of inwardness, the spiritual life is seen as a seed planted by God in all human beings. This has to be received submissively; it is a gift from God not a human achievement. But it is a matter of human responsibility to foster the seed's growth. This is the doctrine of responsibility which justifies human activity. "Great reformation in the world is wanting"⁴⁸. So the concern for slaves and for the poor is not for the sake of one's own spiritual growth but is activated by loving concern for them. "Many slaves on this continent are oppressed, and their cries have reached the ears of the Most High!" "In infinite love and goodness he hath opened our understandings from one time to another concerning our duty toward this people, and it is not a time for delay".⁴⁹ This desire for a radical restructuring of society reflects the Enlightenment's rejection of the *anciens régimes* and the intention to build new patterns of society.

The single, integrated theological vision to which these five pairs of concepts bear witness is reflected in a remarkable way in the *Journal*. The *Journal* is a sacramental expression of the experience of God. Woolman's actions in the *Journal* are symbolic events which refer to the action of God towards oppression. The *Journal* conveys to the Quaker community the victories of the Inner Light in the self, in others, in the critical issues of that society. Just as it is always a struggle to keep the way clear for the Light, so for Woolman the writing of the *Journal*, with the constant correction and purification of language, represents an attempt to keep the way clear for effectual sacramental expression. The use of specialised Quaker vocabulary relates the *Journal* to the defining experiences of persecution and liberation of the early Quakers, and thus to the dying and rising of Christ. But, mixed in, as we have seen, are allusions to a religious-humanist vision which belongs to the 18th century. For all its apparent plainness, the *Journal* is theologically a highly sophisticated document, what has been called "a Christian vision embodied in a well-developed and formularised Christian poetics."⁵⁰

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⁴⁸ *Journal*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵⁰ Rosenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

In conclusion I want to consider briefly how Woolman's theological vision was embodied in practice. To capture this at all involves listing a series of aspects which make up the single coherent, existential vision. Taken singly, each aspect does not seem all that remarkable; taken together, they reveal something of the depth and vitality of the vision. These aspects are not here set out in any particular order; they do not form a sequence.

1. Woolman's protest was *modest* in scope and in self-advertisement. For really the Christian is the channel of *God's* protest.

2. His protest, in the final analysis, exhibits great *optimism* and confidence about humankind. Progress is possible because of the universal Light of reason.

3. So he does *not criticise harshly* or reprove fiercely because (a) violence of any kind only produces passions, resentments and calamities (b) the slave owner possesses the same Light within as the slave and thus should be respected.

4. In making his protest Woolman relies heavily on *reasoning*, on persuasion, on convincing the slaveowners that they can help themselves to a true understanding.

5. His protest is widely accepted as full of *integrity*; the man and his message are one. For in commending the plight of the slaves and the poor, he goes a long way, actually and symbolically, towards sharing their condition.

6. This integrity is grounded in his *worship* which is the constant spiritual source of his protest.

7. As humans have to labour hard and ceaselessly to provide conditions under which the Seed within might develop, so Woolman's testimonies against war and slavery are *steady, long-term, consistent, relentless*.

8. He uses a *variety of forms* of protest. But his preferred form is the individual human encounter.

9. He is *not unduly preoccupied about successful consequences* to his protest. He is often content to have his say and then to go away. In part this represents his submission to the Divine will; in part it represents a confidence that as long as the climate for change was assiduously prepared, the change itself would be assured by the Divine wisdom.

10. In the reasoning which formed part of his protest, he was not loath to *correct* what he believed to be misunderstandings or distortions of the Biblical tradition.

11. Thus, he did not rest his case, in his protest, upon parts of the Christian tradition but on the *central message of the Gospel*. Protest is a divine calling, for it is *God's* protest about slavery, poverty and war which must be heard.

12. Clearly, he agonised over his calling, feeling extremes of emotion—confidence and fear, trust and apprehension. There is a deep sense of ambiguity as well as of moral clarity, a deep sense of personal insufficiency as well as a theological and rational hope for the future of the human condition.

In investigating the bearing of Woolman's understanding of protest for the contemporary world, we should note as the central feature that the act of protest is no spontaneous surface phenomenon. It is deeply rooted in personal experience of God both in the internal and the external world, in the analysis of sin and moral evil, in fundamental moral claims about universal human rights, in a conviction of the progressive reality of individual and social salvation in this world, in the life, witness and worship of a particular religious community (Quakers) which itself in early days in England and in colonial America had experienced severe persecution, out of which a social testimony had directly grown. For Woolman the theology and ethics of protest were not a footnote or an addendum to the Christian Gospel; they were part of the exposition of the Gospel itself.