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# 'This Is Our Testimony to the Whole World': Quaker Peace Work and Religious Experience

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**Abstract:** Quakers express their faith by refraining from war, often actively opposing it. In modern Quakerism, this is known as the 'Peace Testimony'. This commonly has a negative and positive construal: it is seen as a testimony against war, and as a testimony to the possibility and goodness of peaceful lives. This paper offers an account of how these aspects of the Peace Testimony are unified in and grounded on a corporate experience of being led by God into a way of life that renders war unthinkable. My goal is to make sense of Friends' activism in light of their religious experience and to introduce some ideas from Quaker practical theology to philosophers and theologians more generally. I begin by considering the role of what Rachel Muers calls 'negative testimony' in Quaker peace work, arguing that we risk misunderstanding this work if we do not see the unity of the Peace Testimony's negativity and Friends' positive peace-making endeavors. I then turn to the Testimony's ground, which I claim can be nothing other than an experience of direct revelation. I conclude by arguing that prominent objections to pacifism, such as Elizabeth Anscombe's, hold little weight against the Peace Testimony.

**Keywords:** Quaker; pacifism; religious experience; Society of Friends; ethics of war; revelation



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## 1. Introduction: The Peace Testimony

Members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) corporately express their life of faith by refraining from participation in war, and often by working actively to oppose it. Since the consolidation of their religious society in the seventeenth century, Quakers have protested various forms of fighting. They have conscientiously objected to military conscription, engaged in civil disobedience directed at war and its preparation, and supported processes of reconciliation and recovery. In modern Quakerism, this corporate expression of faith has become known as the 'Peace Testimony'.

Quaker testimonies describe features of a common shape of life. Communities of Friends have constructed different lists of testimonies that characterize their faith and practice (a paradigmatic list can be found in [New England Yearly Meeting of Friends 1985](#), p. 32). However, central testimonies are largely held in common. These include testimonies to peace, the equality of all before God, the ways in which a faithful life simplifies tasks and possessions, stewardship of creation, care of one's fellows in community, truthfulness, and integrity.

These are not beliefs per se, nor are they values that all Friends have agreed to try to realize in their lives, a contract on which membership of the Society would depend. Rather, specific testimonies are qualities of life that extend from a holistic Quaker life (*QFP* 24).<sup>1</sup> They are seen as the characteristic results of a testimonial life, which witnesses to the truth as Friends see it, grounded in Quaker practices and religious experience ([Dandelion 2010](#), p. 15). Specific beliefs about peace or equality have their life—if they do—amidst these practices and this experience, in the Quaker form of life.

The Peace Testimony was canonically first expressed by the Quaker community in a declaration to Charles II upon the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 (or at the start

of 1661 in the Gregorian calendar, which Friends were not yet using). In this declaration, Friends affirm that:

Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all. All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world. (*QFP* 24.04)

This declaration—rejecting ‘all outward wars, and strife, and fightings’, and announcing this rejection as a ‘testimony to the whole world’—builds on ideas expressed by Margaret Fell, an early Quaker leader, in June 1660. In a letter to Charles II, she states that Quakers “are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity” (*QFP* 19.46). They live in such a way that war is not an option.

This testimony against war has sometimes been considered the outcome of Friends’ failure to spread their faith as they wished prior to the monarchy’s restoration. Mary Fisher’s 1658 mission to Sultan Mehmed IV did not result in his joining Friends, nor was John Perrot’s and John Luffe’s audacious mission to Pope Alexander VII terribly successful. Although Friends made advances throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland, and into the British colonies, the monarchy’s restoration was widely seen as a symbol of defeat. It would become more than symbolic with escalating persecution, and it clearly signaled that Friends needed to find ways to sustain themselves beyond the apocalyptic fervor of the 1650s.<sup>2</sup>

The Clarendon Code re-establishing the Church of England’s predominance was passed between 1661 and 1665, effectively prohibiting the corporate activities of the young Religious Society of Friends. From this perspective, it is little wonder that the Peace Testimony is seen as an attempt to reassure Charles II of Friends’ loyalty and peaceable intentions. There may be some truth to this. Fell certainly wrote to Charles in view of the suffering she rightly thought Friends would undergo after the restoration, and the declaration quickly followed Venner’s Rising, an attempted coup by a small group of nonconformists from whom Quakers urgently needed to differentiate themselves.

Still, the Quaker testimony is understood by Fell and the 1660 declaration to be rooted in a common form of life: that of ‘a people that follow after those things that make for peace’. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that cases of Quaker conscientious objection precede the 1660 declaration and Fell’s letter. Peter Brock reports a 1658 case in Maryland. If objection to military service among Quakers existed in the American colonies by the late 1650s, it seems highly plausible that this sentiment was already widespread in Britain, well before the 1660 declaration ([Brock 1992](#), p. 42).

The common life in which the Peace Testimony is rooted is itself founded on and characterized by a set of common practices and experiences. Quakers worship together in gathered silence, waiting until they feel God’s presence among and within them. Out of this silence, any Friend who feels so called may stand and speak what is on their mind. In this form of expectant or waiting worship, Friends share in a set of experiences. Perhaps foremost among these is the experience of what Friends identify as being ‘led’ by God (this terminology probably comes from Romans 8:14). This is an experience of direct revelation to each Friend, and it is connected to the experience of other human beings as having ‘that of God’ in them, from which they too may speak.<sup>3</sup> Others can surprise us by disclosing the divine, as that which graces them, in sharing in silence and speech. Embedded in Friends’ austere manner of worship, this experience gives rise to the Peace Testimony. For Friends feel that they are directly led by God into a way of life in which war is not on the table, in which they could not possibly war with ‘that of God’ in their fellows.

The Peace Testimony is commonly construed in a negative and positive light. Negatively, it is a testimony “against bearing arms and fighting” (*QFP* 24.05). Positively, it is a testimony to “demonstrate ourselves to be the real followers of . . . the peaceable Saviour”

(ibid.). Quakers do not only deny warring with outward weapons. They positively attempt to bring about the 'peaceable kingdom' here on earth.

This paper offers an account of how the negative and positive faces of the Peace Testimony are rooted in a corporate experience of being led by God into a way of life that renders war unthinkable.<sup>4</sup> Part of this is an experience of other people as spiritual equals; others are seen as able to give voice to the divine, to be instruments of God's grace and peace. Quakers' longstanding witness for economic equality is an expression of this. Friends are led to see people as equals, and this leading comes through fellowship and others' speech.

I begin by focusing on the Peace Testimony's negative construal as a testimony against war (Section 2). I consider the early Quaker insistence that Friends take up the 'Lamb's War', a nonviolent struggle against whatever leads into fighting, in the context of Rachel Muers' work on the place of rejection and denial in Quaker practical theology. Section 3 aims to clarify the relationship between Friends' testimony against war and their positive peacemaking efforts. I argue that their denial of war and peacemaking are two aspects of the singular peaceful quality of the Quaker way of life, given the world's contingent violence and suffering.

Section 4 turns to the Peace Testimony's ground. Some theologians and historians have argued that this testimony rests on Friends' doctrine of the inward light, according to which all people are inwardly enlightened by 'something of God'. Each person can attend or neglect this indwelling light, but it is there no matter the beliefs they avow. Grounding the Peace Testimony on this doctrine would amount to grounding it on a distinctive vision of human sanctity. This is favored by some of the testimony's vocal advocates. But I think there is reason to reject it. Instead, I argue that the Peace Testimony is a direct consequence of what Friends see and experience as following God's leadings.

The spiritual dignity of others as God's creation doubtless provides a rationale for peace, one happily communicable to non-Quakers. It is no surprise that this is made out to be the Peace Testimony's ground when its advocates seek a paraphrase intelligible to those outside Quaker practice. However, I claim that an understanding of this itself depends on Friends following divine guidance, a state I characterize as 'Friendship'.<sup>5</sup> I endeavor to show how the Peace Testimony describes one aspect of Quaker lives witnessing to the world when they are rightly led by God: when they are the lives of 'Friends of Truth', as early Quakers called themselves.

The final section (Section 5) examines a particular argument against pacifism, and so *prima facie* against the Peace Testimony, expressed by Elizabeth Anscombe. For Anscombe, pacifism is a false and harmful doctrine. It sets up a hypocritically ideal standard, blurring the line between killing in general and murder in particular. I contend that Anscombe's argument has little grip on the Peace Testimony. Friends should not be seen as holding a doctrine called 'pacifism', against which Anscombe argues. They should rather be seen as living what I call a 'peace ethic', which they take to result from obedience to direct revelation. It is not the result of argument from solid premises to principles, which early Friends might chasten as 'created reason'. Friends reject the primacy of Anscombe's form of argument in this terrain; they do not just deny her conclusion. The Peace Testimony is a way in which God exhibits himself in Friends' lives, not a precept they take up.

I conclude by considering the explanation offered by the British Quaker Helen Steven of her authority to hold a demonstration for peace in the Faslane Submarine Base in 1985. That explanation clarifies peace as an aspect of the Friendly life, one witnessing to what Quakers see as truth in a world dominated by barbaric war. The paper's upshot is an explication of Quaker thought about war which aims to make sense of the shape of Friends' activism in light of their religious experience. It also aims to introduce ideas from Quaker practical theology to philosophers and theologians more broadly.

## 2. Negative Testimony and God's Leadings

Phyllis Mack's account of the role of women as 'ecstatic prophets' in seventeenth-century Quakerism begins with Jane Ashburner, a Friend who in 1655 proclaimed to the rector of Aldingham before his congregation, 'I am come to bid thee come down, thou painted beast'. Mack comments:

The woman who spoke (or rather screamed) those words called herself a 'Friend', a member of a religious society whose adherents repudiated all outward distinctions of wealth, rank, and political power and affirmed the existence of a pure divine light in the heart of every human being. The Anglican priest whom she attacked called her a 'Quaker', one of a group of religious fanatics who shouted, quaked, prophesied, and otherwise attempted to undermine the precarious social order of mid-seventeenth-century England . . .

During the movement's first decades, Quakers enacted their experience of salvation in a highly public arena—in streets, marketplaces, churches, fields, and prisons—and they did this through flamboyant public gestures: symbolic signs, charismatic preaching, and martyrdom. (Mack 1992, pp. 1–2)

Jane Ashburner was not alone in her 'flamboyant public gesture'. Beginning in the Midlands and spreading out in all directions, Friends made a name for themselves by engaging in public acts of witness: interrupting church services to preach; 'going naked as a sign' of their return to a prelapsarian state or of their society's naked errors (see Pennington 2021, pp. 14–16; Carroll 1978); engaging in audacious missions to the Ottoman Sultan, the Pope in Rome, and the New World; refusing to partake of social practices such as 'hat honor' to superiors, use of titles, and oaths; and denying what George Fox, an early Quaker leader, pejoratively called the "preaching up of sin" by Calvinist ministers (quoted in Dandelion 2016, p. 7).

The irony is that Friends' practices and liturgy were hardly flamboyant. They gathered silently to await what they took to be God's words on the lips of their fellows. They viewed communion as this collective gathering, with all other liturgical forms stripped away (see Dandelion 2005 for discussion). Scriptural justification for this was found in Revelation 3:20, where Christ speaks of inwardly supping with those who open their doors to him. It may have been surprising that Quakers' troublesome public witness extended from their quiet, rather mystical form of worship. But at least as shocking to the Anglican establishment was the fact that anyone attending Quaker meetings for worship, women and children included, were permitted (indeed encouraged) to minister as they felt God speaking to them; this was shocking to other dissenters. It would have been scandalous if anyone told Aldingham's rector to 'come down, thou painted beast'. It was surely more shocking that a woman said this, with no special claim but her faith and spiritual equality in the eyes of other Friends.

The flamboyant gestures Mack identifies testify to Quaker repudiation of an unjust social order rife with violence and inequity. They were part of what early Friends called the 'Lamb's War'. I now want to lay out the idea of the Lamb's War in the context of Rachel Muers' work on 'negative testimony'. I will then characterize Friends' rejection of violence as a form of negative testimony and argue that this negativity is inseparable from positively leading a peaceful life.

The Lamb's War was a nonviolent struggle against a society which, to a Quaker eye, obliterated the inward light potentially illuminating the conscience of every human being. Early Friends anticipated success in their missions. They did not construe themselves as a mere sectarian alternative but hoped their ways would become the world's ways. As Brock puts it, they "expected they would win the world for their beliefs", and that all people "might win redemption" or be perfected "through the Light set by God within them" (Brock 1992, p. 41). People just had to be awakened to this. So, Friends "engaged with truly extraordinary energy", not to mention audacity, "in what they called the Lamb's War to bring this conversion about" (ibid.).

For all its boldness, the Lamb's War was not violent. It rejected the violence seen to characterize the life of the world. Friends have long witnessed against violence, warning against that which enables people to war against each other; sometimes these attitudes and other sources of interpersonal conflict are likened to "seeds of war" (QFP 23.16; Woolman 1971, p. 255). Friends have been convinced that peace must be worked for in this world, not awaited in the next. The Lamb's War describes this work to build God's kingdom, first in the hearts of others and by nonviolent means, first by holding the present to account. In this sense, talk of the Lamb's War is best grasped in the context of what Rachel Muers identifies as "the significant weight accorded throughout Quaker history to negative testimony" (Muers 2015, p. 55). One longstanding example of this is Friends' testimony against 'all bloody principles and practices', which formed a key part of the Lamb's War.

Muers points out that "Quakers had a wide range of traditions of refusal" (ibid.). Friends refused to swear oaths because the Gospels on which they would have sworn said that one should always speak truthfully (Matt. 5:33–37). This made Friends easy to imprison, as they would not swear the oaths necessary for trials to proceed. They rejected tithes and were arrested for not paying them. They denied practices reinforcing social distinctions, such as hat honor and titles. After some time, they denounced the slave trade and drummed slaveholders out of their meetings. They refused to fight, to lie or barter, to silence their testimony, to observe holidays marking some days as holier than others, to participate in "vain traditions" without spiritual purpose (Fox 1952, p. 36), to ornament their homes and meeting houses, and so on. Many of these traditions of rejection continue to characterize Friends today. Even where these have changed, Friends have mostly maintained what they take to be their spirit.<sup>6</sup> So, for example, even though plain dress no longer renders Quakers a 'peculiar people', the testimony to simplicity—the rejection of needless frills and convolutions—which grounded this practice remains alive for Friends.

As Muers makes clear, Friends do not merely object to war, tithes, and needless trimmings in principle. They actively witness to this objection or see this action as this objection, and they do not just object on the basis of some (potentially secular) principle. Their traditions of denial are "traditions of action, or perhaps non-action", structuring how Friends shape their lives in responding to experiences of divine leadings (Muers 2015, p. 55).

Consider again the wording of the declaration to Charles II, with an eye toward its negativity and framing of rejection:

All bloody principles and practices we do *utterly deny*, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, *for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever* . . . and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will *never move us to fight and war against any man* with outward weapons, *neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.* (QFP 24.04, emphasis added)

To drive home their point, the Friends appeal to Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3: "Nation *shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore* (emphasis added)". By my count, the declaration contains ten rejections or refusals, including Isaiah's and Micah's, in the space of two paragraphs. All this denial, the Friends say, is to be understood *as* their testimony to the world. It is a refusal that speaks positively of something they felt they had rediscovered: the truth of the genuinely Christ-led life.

Lloyd Lee Wilson sees the Peace Testimony as "not simply a denunciation of the violence that is war", but as a "positive declaration that a more fundamental change has taken place in the individual that makes war irrelevant" (Wilson 1993, p. 167). The 1660 declaration indeed sets up Friends' denunciation of war as the positive declaration of a life in which war does not show up as an option in practical deliberation. Refusal *is* Friends' testimony to the world about this life. Denunciation itself points to another way of going on together, one without violence. Early Friends hoped this way would sweep the world.

A somewhat earlier statement of Quaker commitment to peace makes this abundantly clear. When George Fox was in Derby jail in the early 1650s, the commissioners proposed to make him a captain in the Commonwealth Army, no doubt to secure his loyalty. "I told them", Fox reports, "that I lived in virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars . . . I was come into the covenant of peace that was before wars and strifes were" (quoted in Jones 1984, p. 281). Rufus Jones identifies this as "a kind of life which eliminates the instincts and dispositions that lead into war" (Jones and Commission No. 1 of the Conference of All Friends after the War 1919, p. 9). Elsewhere, he identifies it as "the life of the Spirit" (Jones 1984, p. 282). The refusal to take up arms extends from and points to this life, where war has no occasion.

It is true that Quaker refusal has historically set up a boundary between Friends as a 'peculiar people' and 'the world's people'. This has sometimes been enshrined in civil law. In many countries, Quakers can affirm instead of swearing oaths in a court of law and can become conscientious objectors in the face of military conscription. They can marry outdoors in Britain. Sometimes, Muers notes, it can seem that the main rationale for Friends' negative testimony is the construction and maintenance of this separation from the world (Muers 2015, p. 56). Negativity has functioned to construct a boundary between the Religious Society of Friends and the world's people, but also between the individual's life in the world and their primary business of attention to God; perhaps this felt necessary because Friends never sought to live in separated communities.

Unsurprisingly, the construction of a boundary between Friends and the world for the boundary's sake can become spiritual legalism, much like the maintenance of plain dress traditions among Anabaptists. This has happened in Quaker history, when strict norms came into force to keep Friends from 'the fashions of the world'. Such norms often seem to have remained in force for the upkeep of Quaker peculiarity.<sup>7</sup> In 1696, toward the end of her life, Margaret Fell warned the second generation of Friends, many of whom had not known the first generation's experiences of conviction and persecution, not to become too enraptured by "the observation of outward things" and the apparent need "to be all alike outwardly" (QFP 20.30). For, Fell reminded them, "it's the spirit that gives life", not forms or laws. The idea here is that a separation from the world, among and within Friends, stands in need of justification. It is not self-justifying. This is not to say that boundaries between Friends and the world are to be disparaged, but their legitimacy depends on the spirit impelling Friends to distinguish themselves from a world contingently not structured according to 'gospel order', not right with God.

In my view, the distance between Friends and the world, embodied by the Quaker liturgy of silent waiting upon God, makes room for Friends to hear and follow God's leadings. This was the main rationale for the Peace Testimony in 1660: 'the spirit of Christ . . . will never move us to fight'. Obedience to this then furthers and sustains room made for direct revelation. So, Quaker peculiarity is contingent, reflecting the state of a world where God's leadings in each conscience are not recognized or obeyed. The Peace Testimony results from this peculiarity in that it results from Friends following leadings, and it reaffirms this peculiarity in that the world does not recognize such leadings. However, peculiarity is not maintained for its own sake. If the whole world recognized God's leadings and saw war as incompatible with this life of recognition, Quakers would not be peculiar. There would be no problem with that, far from it. There was not a general understanding among Friends that they would always be peculiar, as there was among, e.g., the Muggletonians and Shakers.<sup>8</sup> Given the achievements of early Quaker missions, the Society's present size might surprise those evangelizing Friends.

Furthermore, if Friends were not experientially led to a peaceful life, there would be no Peace Testimony. That too would be fine; it would be God's will. Friends simply claim that peace happens to be, in their consistent individual and collective experience, God's will, so it must be lived. If this makes Friends unfashionable, the attitude goes, so be it.

Muers sees a link between Friends' negative testimony and other aspects of Quaker theology and spirituality. These include a tendency to engage in apophatic theology or

disdain academic theology as an enterprise detached from the everyday lives and voices of the faithful; silent worship, often interpreted kenotically; and frequent praise of self-abnegation. This link can lead one to overstate the sense in which Friends' negative testimony is *negative*, is merely a rejection of how things stand, as if it lacks a positive view of how things should stand.

Of course, it is also possible to overstate the positive, as Maurice Webb might be seen to do when he argues that "Quaker witness to war is no negative refusal, no anti-social protest. It is rooted in our knowledge that war but adds to the rising tide of evil and hastens on the dark. Our task is no less than the discovery of war's counterpart" (quoted in [Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 2009](#), LA, 29). The point he drives at is fair enough: the Peace Testimony involves the experimental discovery of a form of life that would put war off the table. However, this task's positivity involves, and is often embodied in, a plurality of refusals. Friends' discovery of war's counterpart should be seen—moreover, probably must be seen, given the world's condition—in their refusal of war and its causes. What I am trying to bring out is the unity of Quaker negative testimony and peaceful living.

Wilson reminds us that Quaker testimonies are the testimonies, or aspects thereof, of *Friends' lives*. They are not values or prohibitions suspended in midair. They are aspects of the lives of Friends who have witnessed to truth through the Society's history. Wilson laments the fact that Friends have lately "treated [their] testimonies as valuable in and of themselves", even though for early Friends "this was not the case: they were naturally-occurring outward signs that a more important and fundamental change had taken place within the individual" (Wilson 1993, p. 163). Testimonies are outward-facing aspects of this change, which early Quakers called 'convincement' (we could liken it to an initial conversion of the heart, beginning with a recognition of the imperfections of one's life). To be sure, it is not that there is a gap between inner convincement of Quakerism's truth and how one's life testifies to this. The point is rather that centering testimonies to peace, simplicity, or equality alone, or treating them as primary, risks missing how they extend from Friends' religious experience (see *ibid.*, p. 164). It risks neglecting how testimony is the outward face of this experience as it works itself out in how Quakers negotiate living in this place and time as Friends. Quaker testimony has a holism which belongs to that of a life. Specific testimonies—only relatively recently compiled into lists—are best understood as aspects of a distinctively Quaker life which can to some extent be discussed in isolation but are not neatly separable from each other or from what it is to testify to the world as a Friend. In this sense, the listed testimonies depend on and are importantly derived from the holistic testimony of a Friendly life.

Muers rightly points out that Quaker theologians, not to mention sympathetic scholars looking in on the Society, have been disconcerted by Quaker testimony's negativity (Muers 2015, p. 57). This has enlivened the worry that peace is upheld for peculiarity's sake, not the reverse. Muers responds by construing Friends' negative testimony as a *double* negation: "a negation of the 'no', a refusal of destruction, a denial of a lie" (*ibid.*, p. 58). It is a peculiar rejection of the world's peculiar condition. This construal highlights the connection between negative testimony and positive visions of another way of life, grounded in Friendship. Negative testimony negates beliefs, institutions, practices, and structures negating the life of attention to God and divine ways. Hence, refusal opens the door to positive visions so far occluded by the world's violence, inequity, ostentation, and exploitation of creation.

On Muers' reading, then, the Peace Testimony calls violence the problem and refuses involvement in it: "it is an attempt to break the destructive cycle rather than perpetuate it" (*ibid.*). The 1660 'no' to violence enables a turn to, and bears witness to, the peaceful life in its positivity. The claim that one is trying to live in accordance with one's experience of God, and that one must therefore stand against falsehoods of life and thought that would militate against this experience, connects the Peace Testimony to other expressions of negative testimony, such as rejecting tithes (see *ibid.*). Understanding violence as negative, Muers

understands negative testimony as doubly negative; this is not mere affirmation, but a negation of negation required to move to affirmation, where affirming peace might do little to counter predominant forces of violence and so little to turn eyes to peace (ibid., p. 59).

Still, the Peace Testimony has an affirmative aspect. Nonviolence's negativity opens the door to peaceful ways of living together. Like other forms of negative testimony, it is rooted in Friends' positive claim to be living according to God's will (at least partially and in this arena) as directly revealed to them in worship.

As the denial of lies, negative testimony can take the form of symbolic or flamboyant acts, as it did for Jane Ashburner and does for modern Friends who glue themselves to motorways for climate justice or plant flowers in nuclear bases for disarmament. But it can also take the form of more everyday acts of "putting oneself on the line against the power of a specific lie, as the first step in allowing the truth to emerge" (ibid., p. 62). This could mean speaking up in town hall meetings to protest investment in fossil fuels, expressing discomfort with an employer's policies, or exhibiting one's vulnerability and isolation as one's nation embarks on a military campaign.

These are all ways of saying 'here I am, here I stand', words recorded repeatedly in the Bible in response to God's leadings (Ex. 3:4; 1 Sam. 3:4; Isa. 6:8), words strikingly absent when God asks Adam and Eve where they are (Gen. 3:9).<sup>9</sup> 'Here I am' can take the form of dramatic action or it can be an expression of unease.<sup>10</sup> It may be seen in the texture of ordinary life. In each case, negative testimony's 'here I am' indicates the character of the life one leads. It is a way to, as Fox urged early Friends, live so that one's "life may preach" (QFP 19.32).

This does not mean that Quakers have an answer to violence that could take the form of a policy. As Jones reminds us, Fox's experiment of "exhibiting a type of life which will finally expel war . . . is not a policy; it is a conviction of the soul" (Jones and Commission No. 1 of the Conference of All Friends after the War 1919, p. 9). The declaration to Charles II may testify to the world, but the Friends who wrote it made clear that they spoke "as to our own particulars" (quoted in Fox 1952, p. 399). Their testimony was prophetic, but they did not have a plan for world peace, except for listening to and heeding the "promptings of love and truth in your hearts", whatever these prove to be (QFP 1.02.1). Muers paraphrases the Peace Testimony's 'here I am' this way: "The true means by which conflicts are resolved in history may take many forms but it *cannot take this one*" (Muers 2015, p. 62). This taking a stand as to one's own particulars is testifying to the world, as the 1660 declaration recognizes. It is an expression of the peace and conviction Friends have found, "a glimpse of alternative possibilities" (ibid., p. 60).

Primarily, then, the Peace Testimony does not register a moral concern about violence, its violation of human dignity, or its societal effects. To live testimonially is to be caught up in the movement of divine truth. It is to live in relationship—Friendship—with God. The Peace Testimony is a description of one aspect of this life, extending from what it is more generally to live as a Friend. It registers, in effect, the Friendly life's peaceful quality. This life leads into the Peace Testimony as expressed (e.g.,) in the 1660 declaration, and that testimony expresses this aspect of Friends' life. The testimony operates as a sort of justification to the world by way of a (contingent) negation of the world's ways. Peace is not fundamentally a value to which Friends ascribe. It is a characteristic of their life as Friends. Testifying to peace is telling the truth about how they are living and the aspirations at home in this life.

For Bonhoeffer, to whom Muers appeals, witnessing to truth means attesting to what early Friends called 'gospel order': the world as it stands in God's sight (ibid., p. 63). Telling this truth is tethered to doing it, living it. What speaks is primarily this doing and living. One's words have their life in and extend from this action and life 'in the manner of Friends'. To live the truth is first to avoid doing falsehood or testifying to it in how one shapes a life. Beliefs about nonviolence or pacifism can rest on this avoidance, but truth is understood as concerning "the basic question of self-orientation": to testify to truth is to enunciate how one orients oneself toward God, other people, society, and nature (ibid.). It is

to talk of one's vision of gospel order—as gained, for Quakers, in silent waiting—in which one tries to live. So, vocal testimony is a “dialogue in progress between faith and action”, as John Lampen has it (Lampen 2012, pp. 17–18). It is a negotiation in speech between one's vision of the Friendly life and the texture of one's life as it has so far been shaped.

Friends have long claimed a form of perfection, as Wilson emphasizes. They have “claimed to be living already in the restored gospel order, and to be enabled by this restoration to live lives of witness and testimony to the power of Christ among us” (Wilson 1993, p. 8). Given this, Friends have claimed to perceive what it would be for the world to exist in right relationship with God, or at least how we might come to this perception over time. This vision expresses itself in a rejection of institutions, practices, and habits of mind that themselves reject or occlude aspects of perceived gospel order (or the process whereby we would come to this perception). Negative testimony is a way one “lives the truth by denying lies”, and it is a denial that extends from seeing and living the truth (Muers 2015, p. 64). Think again of Jane Ashburner, who lived the truth of spiritual equality by denying the rector's superiority, and whose denial of that superiority extended from her vision and embodiment of spiritual equality.

It is key to Muers' account that negative testimony is undertaken over time. Sustained negativity is Friends' fidelity to truth over the long haul and their vigilant endurance in the leadings of God. Muers calls this sustained negativity and endurance—that of conscientious objection, peace vigils, and nonviolent protests—an “extended exercise in not-doing” (ibid., p. 66). With this in mind, she offers a slogan summing up Quaker history and practice: “if you do nothing for a while, things happen” (ibid., pp. 66–67).<sup>11</sup> Of course, this is somewhat facetious. Quaker ‘doing-nothing’ is hardly inaction: recall those peace vigils and protests. Quakers do not do nothing as a matter of principle, for passivity's sake. They merely do not do what would detract from dwelling in the spirit of Christ, which is unchanging and eternal (a point that is made much of in the 1660 declaration).

If inaction is not its own good, this raises the question how Friends know what not to do. I take the only possible answer to be that they know this ‘experimentally’ (see Fox 1952, p. 11), through seeking to discern God's will in communal stillness and by grace. The goal of Quaker peacemaking is to learn what it would mean, experientially and diachronically, to live together peacefully, not knowing initially how the detailed realization of gospel order will look. The peaceful life is the “positive counterpoint” to the negative testimony of nonviolence (ibid., p. 67). Nonviolence opens new possibilities of perception and action that have gone missing in the world's eyes.

The ground of Friends' commitment to nonviolence in the 1660 declaration is not a moral justification for this specific negative testimony, a rationale for saying ‘no’ here. As Muers sees, it's a “more fundamental or implicit commitment—and an affirmation of faith” (ibid., p. 68). This commitment is to be led by the spirit of Christ, which (as the declaration says) “leads us into all Truth” and is “not changeable” (QFP 24.04). Specific ‘concerns’, what Friends call the leadings that impel them to undertake action and witness, issue from and depend on this more general commitment.

Friends stake a claim to nonviolence ‘as to our own particulars’, not as a way of saying ‘you do you and we'll do us’, but because they feel this is a terrain where one must speak for oneself. In their experience, after all, God speaks to the individual conscience and the community gathered and still. In staking this claim for themselves, however, they testify to the world. Answering to how one's life can be truthfully described, as peaceful or violent, means testifying to others. It means letting one's life make a claim on others, ‘letting one's life preach’ (see Fox 1848, and QFP 19.32). This puts others in a position of answerability for themselves in living, where they then must speak for themselves or find ways to deflect; one possible form of deflection from this position's exposure is skepticism about how Friends really know what God tells them, and anxiety about their lack of any third-personal and extra-communal criterion to appeal to.

The commitment that drives the Peace Testimony does not merely express Friends' dedication to their spiritual forebears or a command given to those forebears to beat

their swords into ploughshares, though early Quaker lives continue to witness. It is a commitment to persevere in being led by God, who issued that command, whose spirit is eternally incompatible with war, and who continues to speak to Friends today (Muers 2015, p. 68). This ground links the specific negative testimony against ‘outward weapons’, and the testimonies of the Lamb’s War against the unjust conflicts of seventeenth-century society, with what it is to do, tell, and embody the truth. Muers puts it like this: “Faithfulness to the guidance of the Spirit encompasses *both* the denial of lies and the disclosure through time of truthful ways of living” (ibid.). Or rather, the denial of lies *is* the disclosure through time of truthful ways of living. Nonviolence *expresses* the contours of one aspect of the Friendly life as a whole.

Thus, the Peace Testimony is not to be understood instrumentally. Anyway, it might not seem particularly pragmatic.<sup>12</sup> It results from living in obedience to God’s truth as one is led. This can be a *process*, one we must undertake for ourselves, however long it takes. Friends tell the story of William Penn who, when he began attending Quaker meetings, wore a sword, as was typical for men of his rank. He recognized that this was a peculiar practice among Friends and one day asked Fox about it. Fox did not tell him to remove it, though he could have said that swords contravene Quaker peacefulness. He simply said, “I advise thee to wear it as long as thou canst” (QFP 19.47). Wear it, that is to say, until your conscience rebels against it; all in God’s good time.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The Unity of Negative and Positive Testimony

The Peace Testimony resists instrumental reasoning or grounding. It is not strategic or pragmatic, not the result of moral argument or weighing harms and benefits, and not a political program or policy. However, it is still “going somewhere” (Muers 2015, p. 69). The Peace Testimony’s denial of “death-dealing structures of power” aims at and belongs to Friendship with God; even if, from where we stand embedded in these structures, we cannot yet see how this Friendship might be lived in society nor how gospel order might be realized. What is aimed at, Muers thinks, is just what more ancient Christian ascetic practices have long aimed at: “the reorientation of human loving and willing toward God” (ibid.). Negative testimony’s denial confronts what stands in the way of this reorientation—that without which this reorientation would be, as it were, magnetic.

I mean to argue, then, that refusal of war and engagement in practical activities of peacemaking are inextricably tied together in Quaker practice. This might fruitfully be compared with the identity found in the first piece of advice of the ‘Advices and Queries’ of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends:

Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God, whose Light *shows us our darkness* and *brings us to new life*. (QFP 1.02.1, emphasis added)

God’s light—which shines in each person’s experience of the ‘promptings of love and truth’, sometimes located by Quaker authors in the heart, sometimes in the conscience—does two things here. It ‘shows us our darkness’, and it ‘brings us to new life’. It reveals the extent of the depravity and unhappiness of how we have been living and the ways we are neglecting God’s leadings. And it ushers us into a life of truth, in which we heed God’s leadings, finding spiritual sustenance and even perfection in this. These are not, though, two separate works of God’s light. *In* showing us our darkness, this light brings us to new life. As Fox writes, in minding the light in one’s conscience, which shows “all deceit”, one is guided into that “which cannot lie, nor deceive” (Fox 1831, p. 18). One enters the “power and life of truth” by following the light that discloses one’s darkness (ibid.).

The negative and positive aspects of this council are tied together: to see one’s darkness *is* to enter the resurrection life. The same connection can be seen between the Peace Testimony’s negative construal as a testimony against war and its positive construal as a testimony to the peaceful life Friends are leading. To testify against war *is* to testify to this peaceful life. To see that war needs testifying against is to locate oneself in this life.

Both aspects, negative and positive, seem to me to extend from Friendship. We could think here about the relation between the inward-turning worship of the first Friends and their loud, apocalyptic witness. These were one and the same in that they were expressions or aspects of the same spirituality and the same faith and life-shape. To “[g]ive over thine own willing . . . and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee”, as Isaac Pennington urged Friends to do in 1661, *is* to testify prophetically, because it is to center the spirit that guides Friends into prophetic witness given their society’s condition (*QFP* 26.70).

It is a mistake to pit Quaker ‘quietism’ and dramatic vocal witness against each other, though Friends have sometimes been guilty of favoring one over the other, thereby missing both. Muers argues that there is no obvious or unavoidable contradiction between Friends’ mystical focus on self-abnegation and their public, prophetic negative testimony (Muers 2015, p. 72). I would go further. Each of these supports and confirms the other; both are rightly understood, and come into their own, as rooted in one shape of life (call this Friendship). To deny oneself in favor of ‘the seed’ (the inward light, Christ within), and so to give it room and time to develop in oneself, may not only lead into prophetic witness. It may itself, in our world, *be* a form of prophetic witness: the texture of a life that preaches. To look at things from the other end, prophetic witness can be a form of self-denial, a way to let the inward light take center stage and speak. These are two aspects of what it is to befriend God and live in the truth. Inward transformation and outward witness are unified in the Quaker way of life. So too, big symbolic actions and the texture of everyday existence.

This centers a Christological image: Christ as a guiding friend, an inner seed but still a stranger, necessitating self-development and self-denial as one practice of transformation. The unity of self-denial and self-development mirrors the unity of negative testimony and the ‘new life’ of which ‘Advices and Queries’ speaks. This unity comes to liturgical expression in the Quaker meeting for worship’s consonance of silence and the leadings of God, stillness and prophetic speech (see Muers 2015, p. 76; and Pennington 2021, p. 13). Where the quiet and prophetic, self-denial and self-growth, nonviolence and peaceful living meet, that is a possible vision of incarnation, with these two aspects characterizing and united in the Friendly life.

#### 4. Friendship, Denial, and Prophetic Witness

At this point, a word about Friendship is in order. It seems to me that the core of Quaker faith should be understood as Friendship, where what contemporary Quakers call the testimonies (peace, integrity, equality, simplicity, etc.) can be seen to flow from and describe the leading of a Friendly life.<sup>14</sup> Friendship—with God and so with other people and ourselves—is as good a name as any for the ‘suprasacramental’ life of Quakers (see Johnson 1969, pp. 7–8, where Shaker life is described in this way, and *QFP* 27.43); and of course, it is a name with biblical precedent in both the Old Testament, where God calls Abraham a friend (Isa. 41:8), and the New, where Jesus calls his disciples friends (John 15:14–15).

One of the distinctive features of the perfectionism of early Friends is that it does not claim that we are more than human or can become more than human, not utterly finite or fallible, but just that our all-too-human life might at its core and in its details be made sacramental, pervaded by the grace and friendship of God, and that our relationships with each other, and ourselves, might be made worshipful and perfect in God (see Wilson 1993, p. 179). This may describe a mystical sort of Friendship, but I think it is still friendship as we ordinarily mean it, with God and hence with the human beings God saw fit to create. For Quakers, this is the meaning of Christ’s ‘mystical body’: to be a Friend is to be a member of this body, to own oneself as such, to follow the inner and corporate leadings of God which characterize and shape this Friendship. To do that *is* to deny war (the expression of which will depend on one’s leadings and the contingent state of one’s world and time), which *is* to live peacefully. Not because others against whom one would

war are made in God's image, but because one is a Friend of God and the Friendly life cannot be one of war and strife; it takes away the *occasion* of these things, viz. forgetfulness of God.

To be a Friend, then, is to put war off the table, and to put oneself forward as a testimony to the importance of hospitality and reconciliation, however imperfectly realized. It is to let one's Friendship preach in how one lives before God, among others, and in the depths of one's heart. Friendship describes a shape or texture of life in which certain religious experiences—particularly those had in silent gathered worship—root and find expression in testimony, which in turn characterizes, over the time of a life and of the life of the Religious Society as a body, what it is to lead a Friendly life. The negativity of burning a draft card, and so breaking open a pattern of life and thought, and the positivity of welcoming strangers, and so living differently, are joined here in Friendship. Peace, alongside nonviolence, is a description of Quaker experience. It is a characteristic feature of the sort of life lived in subtraction of the 'occasion of all wars'. A 1774 statement from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, with war fast approaching, brings this out:

Through the influence of the love of Christ in their minds . . . [early Friends] ceased from conferring with flesh and blood and became obedient to the heavenly vision, in which they clearly saw that all wars and fightings proceeded from the spirit of this world which is at enmity with God. (Quoted in Jones 1984, p. 283)

This statement links negative testimony and self-denial ('ceased from conferring with flesh and blood') and peaceful and prophetic witness ('became obedient to the heavenly vision') by means of the spirit that prompts and guides both, the life in which this prompting and guiding go on. That life provides a vantage from which one sees that 'all wars and fightings' run counter to the ways of God. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting identifies the trouble with war as its extension from a spirit 'at enmity with God'.

It is true that war requires the violation of other human beings, though they have God-given dignity. But Friends do not avoid war for this reason. They avoid war because they lead lives in which war cannot figure, lives characterized by Friendship with God (enmity's antithesis). Their avoidance of war is the natural and immediate consequence of leading lives guided by God's spirit as they experience this. More exactly, it is an aspect of this fact. It is not the result of a chain of reasoning beginning with the premise that others are created in the image of God, though Friends might see that reasoning as expressing the horror of war. For Friends, there is no place from which to reason this way. It is redundant for someone already living by the bread of God's guidance.

## 5. Pacifism, Peace, and Fidelity to Conscience

There are, of course, ample arguments against pacifism as a position in the ethics of war. To many proponents of Just War Theory—certainly the most widely held theory of the ethics of war among moral theologians—pacifism may seem ineffective, short-sighted, idealistic, hypocritical, or the result of a misreading of the Gospel injunction to 'put your sword back in its place' (Matt. 26:52). Elizabeth Anscombe warns against the "hypocrisy of the ideal standard" set up by pacifism.

The correct answer to the statement that 'war is evil' is that it is bad—for example a misfortune—to be at war. And no doubt if two nations are at war at least one is unjust. But that does not show that it is wrong to fight or that if one does fight one can also commit murder.

Naturally my claim that pacifism is a very harmful doctrine is contingent on its being a false one. If it were a true doctrine, its encouragement of this nonsensical 'hypocrisy of the ideal standard' would not count against it. But given that it is false, I am inclined to think it is also very bad, unusually so for an idea which seems as it were to err on the noble side. (Anscombe 1981, p. 70)

The pacifist, on Anscombe's view, rightly sees war as bad. However, he wrongly infers from this that one must not fight whatever the consequences, perhaps because he

confuses war's badness as a state of affairs with the badness of participating in war.<sup>15</sup> This sets up as ideal a standard we cannot possibly live up to. If we tried to, 'as to our own particulars' at least, we would allow more harm to be done. This argument has it that encouraging pacifism will just leave evil armed and good weakened. Anscombe also thinks pacifism blurs together the badness of war and the badness of murder in war, which for her are two very different things. We risk losing the particular injustice of unjustifiably killing non-combatants in war. Anscombe's claim against pacifism is, in a word, that it is representative of an unlivable ethic. Moreover, the attempt to live up to it would be disastrous. It is false, because wars can be just (Anscombe appeals to Just War Theory); and it is harmful in its falsity. It is one thing to think we should not do evil that good may come (as Penn reminds us in *QFP* 24.03, just as [Anscombe \(1970\)](#) does, p. 51), but to go to war is not necessarily to do evil, even if war as such is an evil, 'for example a misfortune'.

What should Friends make of Anscombe's reasoning? Are there resources in their tradition for pushing back against it? I should think so. For one thing, the rejection of war does not figure in Quaker thought as a 'standard' at all. It is not a rule or law by which Friends agree to live when they come into membership of the Society. It is rather an outcome or aspect of a way of living with fidelity to God. 'Peaceful' is a description of the Quaker life, not a norm articulated in advance of it.

Bonhoeffer forcefully argues that Christian ethics concerns what it is to do the will of God and how we discern this, not any human standard (see [Green 2005](#), p. 45). Quakers share Bonhoeffer's focus on discernment and obedience. From this perspective, Anscombe's reasoning seems inapplicable. Friends cannot be charged with setting up a hypocritical ideal standard if they do not set up a standard. For Friends, living peacefully is an experiment: the 'holy experiment' of setting up the 'peaceable kingdom'. Penn, for instance, urges Friends to "try what Love will do" (*QFP* 24.03). Pacifism is not a Quaker doctrine. It would be a mistake to equate testimony with doctrines, as I have argued. But Anscombe takes issue with the 'doctrine' of pacifism, and as far as I can see, Friends do not hold this. They have not claimed to. In response to Anscombe's claim that war is bad but it is not wrong to war, Friends do not say, 'in fact it is wrong to war, and here's why'. They say, 'we are leading lives in which the occasion of war has gone missing, lives of peace; come and try it'. They reject Anscombe's style of reasoning (or its claim to primacy) long before it reaches its specific conclusion.

I think it is better here to speak of a 'peace ethic' than 'pacifism', since the latter suggests a particular thesis or doctrine held by Friends. This distinction allows us to see that Quakers are not opposed to all violence *on principle* (as 'pacifist' is usually taken to mean) but deny violence *on God's leading*, which the Society has found through its history to be a leading to live peacefully (Jesus, for what it is worth, discusses peacemaking, not pacifism). The best way to speak of this is to talk of the life that can be described as 'peaceful', whatever one's beliefs or principles, for these have a home (if they do) in one's life. Pacifism is likely to be the view of the person living peacefully. However, the point is the life (which is the site of the reasoning undertaken), not just an assertion of principle to then be embodied and embedded in any particular life. The Peace Testimony is not itself a piece of moral reasoning.

In coming to terms with the First World War, Jones recalls the role of peace in the lives of early Friends, particularly Fox. The Peace Testimony, he points out, "is so fundamental to [Fox's] way of life and so implicit in his gospel that it does not occur to him to analyze it or to buttress it with argument" ([Jones and Commission No. 1 of the Conference of All Friends after the War 1919](#), p. 9). But it seems to me that it is not just the Peace Testimony's fundamentality or obviousness that keeps Fox from analyzing it or arguing for it, as if the peacefulness of Fox's life leads him to neglect the conditions of others, that peace might need to be expressed to them. Instead, I think there is a worry that the sort of argument for the Peace Testimony which would begin with premises shared by Friends and non-Friends and indubitably yield the necessity of war's denial would, in its very form or structure, detract from—would risk neglecting—Fox's actual testimony to peace, the shape this took

in his life, and its rootedness in fidelity to God's leadings. It is not that the sort of argument Jones envisions is latent in Fox's theology but remains to be spelled out by others. This theology instead points to a position from which such argument would in effect be a kind of idolatry, indicative of a lack of faithfulness to God's direct revelation in Friends' hearts.

Jones is right to say that the 1660 declaration offers little more than a statement of God's leading of Quakers' corporate body (*ibid.*, p. 11). They claim to have been led into lives with which war cannot be reconciled, and habits of mind that do not allow for the sowing of the seeds of war. Analysis and argument can be ways to exhibit the texture of such lives, invitations to be confirmed by the voice of God in one's conscience. But they do not ground these lives; God does. If we were to center argument instead of the experience of leadings and the way this is expressed in a life's shaping, we would risk letting the cart pull the horse. That would leave us with nothing but an immobile cart and a sidelined horse.

How do we know that the call of God leads to peace, then, and not into war? After all, some have certainly attributed a call to war to God. We know because openness to the call of God in Friendship *is* (or one aspect of it is) peace.<sup>16</sup> One cannot be a Friend of God and war against creation, nor a Friend of Truth who harms those who may speak and live the truth. The peaceful life is part of—it describes—the Friendly life. How this is to be lived in any concrete situation cannot be decreed in advance. Friends have no guiding doctrine here. That would rob them of the openness and freedom to wake to the claims of God and other people, or else to deflect, which are essential to Friendship. What they have is conscience, experienced as inwardly and directly enlightened by God (Fox 1952, pp. 34, 425). The Peace Testimony's justification must be seen from inside, heard in one's own conscience. It is the Quaker contention that this experience is open to all people, if only they turn inward and attend to the 'still, small voice' that speaks there.

As the 1660 declaration has it, Friends can make recourse to the incompatibility of violence and Friendship with God. They can say that because the spirit which shows this is unchanging, a stand against war—an orientation which says 'no' to it and suffers the consequences come what may—must be part of Friendship.<sup>17</sup> It is then up to Friends, severally and communally, to work this out in living. That is what conscience, attention, and Quaker practices of worship and discernment are for: the outworking of this in real time. The Peace Testimony is part of explicating, and of describing in a glance back at Quaker history, what Friendship amounts to. 'Peaceful' is a name for an aspect of lives led in attention to God and creation, and a way in which this attention has tended to practically work itself out in Friends' lives. The Quaker peace ethic, then, is not reducible to any would-be principle or doctrine of nonviolence. It is simply the result in history of Friends following God's promptings.<sup>18</sup>

The question left open for each Friend is: What can I reconcile with the light by which God illumines the terrain of my and our life, with the proximity to God I call Friendship? To assert a doctrine by which Friends might answer this question would be to preempt God, which is why Fox does not tell Penn to abandon his sword. Many Friends have refused to pay fines for conscientious objection to war (while some members of other peace churches have happily paid these fines) because it would amount to an admission of wrongdoing for obeying the claims of Christ.<sup>19</sup> Instead, such Friends have 'suffered for the truth' (see Brock 1992, pp. 46–48). Other Friends have paid fines as their consciences allow. Some Friends have undertaken alternative service instead of being drafted into the military; the Friends' Ambulance Unit which operated for much of the twentieth century is one example. Others, such as Corder Catchpool, have considered this personally unconscionable and have suffered in prison instead (see Catchpool 1941). There is no blanket doctrine that Friends can apply in these cases, and the Society takes no absolute stance. Instead, Friends must heed the dictates of conscience. There are communal processes of discernment in place to test leadings, including a premium placed on unity as a reflection of divine unity or simplicity. However, this is still a matter of rightly discerning God's will, not of moral inference from solid premises. Clearly, Anscombe's argument against pacifism has no

purchase here, for it has nothing to say to the Quaker insistence on divine obedience over and potentially against the sort of reasoning she employs.

Some have argued that the Peace Testimony is the necessary outcome of a belief in “the brotherhood of all men”, founded on the doctrine of the inward light which enlightens, and so dignifies in the possibility of perfection, all people (QFP 24.08; [Cadbury and Commission No. 5 of the Conference of All Friends after the War 1920](#), p. 4). But this is already to give too much to those anxious about the setting up of a hypocritically ideal standard, and it is to get things the wrong way round. The doctrine at issue—as it is often put, that all people have ‘that of God’ in them, for which we are answerable—is the outworking of following the leadings of God, seeing that God can lead each of us in our singular ways, no matter what else may be said of us. It is the consequence of seeing that each person may befriend God and then find violence impossible and walk in peace (see [Jones and Commission No. 1 of the Conference of All Friends after the War 1919](#), p. 9).

The ‘brotherhood of all’ is part of this, but it is not the main rationale to which the 1660 declaration appeals. That is because this itself is the result of religious experience, of beginning to live the Friendly life, or is a way to get across the openness of this life to all (as seen from within). The 1660 declaration appeals directly to God, from whose leadings we derive the doctrine of the inward light (the possibility of these leadings for all, confirmed experimentally through the life of the Society).<sup>20</sup> The Peace Testimony begins not with a doctrine, not even one Quakers generally subscribe to, but with living ‘in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars’. As London Yearly Meeting put it in 1993: “We look to the Spirit, rather than to prescriptive hypothetical statements. The peace testimony, today, is seen in what we do, severally and together, with our lives” (QFP 24.11). The Peace Testimony is a way in which God shows himself in the lives of Friends, not a standard to meet.

To see this more clearly, consider in closing the case of Helen Steven, a Friend who in April 1984 entered the Faslane Submarine Base (HMNB, Clyde) to hold a demonstration for peace. She was unsurprisingly charged with entering a secured area without the authorization to do so. In her statement to the British High Court after the fact, she speaks to what she saw as her authority to enter the base:

[A]s long as these bases remain, I must continue to act as my conscience guides. My charge is that I entered a protected area without authority or permission. My claim is that I had authority—the authority of my Christian conviction that a gospel of love cannot be defended by the threatened annihilation of millions of innocent people. (QFP 24.27)

Steven appeals to various considerations to express her conviction to an audience largely of non-Quakers: the moral wrong of murdering the innocent, spending on nuclear weapons rather than healthcare and food security, and the inhumanity of past atrocities. But she appeals first and primarily to God, to being led to “create the dream of another way” (ibid.). Her moral reasoning operates in the background, as a form of communication of this dream and the action it demands, but it is not the source of her conviction. Her action is authorized by God, not a chain of reasoning.

Before the High Court, Steven concludes that “[i]f my actions are a crime, then I am guilty” (ibid.). But that is no matter, for she is not interested in the category of crime as the state or any human authority sets it up. Neither was Jane Ashburner. What matters is that Steven is not, as Fox writes, “concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief” (Fox 1952, p. 11). She has been obedient to her conscience as enlightened by God, and that is the main thing. To the accusation that she has set up an unachievable and so dangerously misleading standard, Steven can reply that she has no interest in setting up standards, nor in living up to them. Her interest is in the ongoing revelation of her conscience, in God’s authority, and in faithfulness to that, not in principle per se.

That interest and intimacy, what I have called Friendship, is the foundation of the Peace Testimony. That is just to say that we should understand this Testimony, in what it denies and what it proclaims, as a description of one way in which the common life of

Friends has expressed itself. The ground of this Testimony can be nothing other than the voice of God as heard on the lips or in the conscience of Friends.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> [The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain's \(1995\) Quaker Faith and Practice](#) is an anthology of Friends' writings, alongside statements of the practices and organization of Quakers in Britain, recompiled every few generations as British Friends' 'book of discipline'. I cite this as *QFP* throughout. The numbers following it refers to the chapter (say, 24) and passage quoted (say, .04), as in *QFP* 24.04.
- <sup>2</sup> [Hill \(2016\)](#) presents a reading along these lines.
- <sup>3</sup> This terminology is common among Friends and originates in the earliest Quaker writings. 'Leadings' are inward senses or convictions of being called by God to undertake some action or live in a certain way. Friends probably extracted this from Romans 8:14. 'That of God' refers to God's light in the conscience which, when attended to, leads one into righteousness. Such talk occurs repeatedly in George Fox's *Journal* ([Fox 1952](#)), published posthumously in 1694, as well as in tracts and pamphlets going back to the 1650s.
- <sup>4</sup> This is not a psychological statement: Friends have the psychological capacity to conceive of war, indeed to perceive its actuality. Rather, war is *morally* unthinkable. For Friends, it does not show up as a live option in the moral life, because of how they shape their lives. The thinkable is a moral as well as psychological category. We can say that we cannot psychologically conceive of a round square, but we can also say that we cannot morally conceive of committing genocide (whatever thoughts we are able to form). To call a course of action unthinkable can be to say that it is not 'on the table': it cannot be taken seriously, even though it is a psychological possibility. This raises questions about the relation between psychological and moral thinkability, which will have to be investigated elsewhere.
- <sup>5</sup> I capitalize 'Friendship' when I refer to the Quaker way of life. I use 'Friendly' as an adjective to describe this life, synonymous with Quakerly; 'friendship' retains ordinary usage.
- <sup>6</sup> See the 1656 statement of elders at Balby (*QFP* 1.01) for a common rationale for this maintenance of spirit rather than letter.
- <sup>7</sup> These norms, such as plain dress, typically begin with a spiritual impetus (say simplicity) besides separation from the world or the maintenance of a 'remnant' people. However, over time, such norms are sometimes enforced for their own sake (or for tradition's sake), for the policing of a boundary between Friends and the world. The rediscovery of the spiritual impetus can mean the overthrow or reconfiguration of the norm or its content, as one can see in the movement from plainness to simplicity among many Friends in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (on this change, see [Frost 2003](#)). This dynamic can be seen in other faith communities. For example, Joseph Smith's revelation of polygamy was originally seen as disclosing what is necessary for 'celestial life', for exaltation and divinization (see [Bloom 1992](#), p. 106; [Coviello 2019](#), p. 56). Over time, this set Latter-day Saints apart from the world—a boundary that came to have a life of its own. The cessation of polygamy might be understood as a capitulation to the authority of the state, but it might also be seen as a return to the spirit of the doctrine of exaltation as lived in a particular place and time.
- <sup>8</sup> On the insistent peculiarity of the Muggletonians, who refused to evangelize lest people hear their message and *then* reject it, in the process damning themselves, see ([Lamont 2006](#)), especially pp. 213–28. On Shaker eagerness to be a 'peculiar people' and prize spiritual purity over numbers, see ([Whitson 1983](#)), especially pp. 163, 310.
- <sup>9</sup> Putting oneself responsibly forward by prophetically saying 'here I am' is one of Levinas' central themes, a form of speech and action that he sees as central to the moral life. See, for example, ([Levinas 1984](#), p. 198).
- <sup>10</sup> Vulnerable unease when faced with society characterizes some of the writing of early Friends, and it can be a valuable form of negative testimony: a way to say, 'hold on, what's being said or done leaves something out, or puts what I'd want to say about

how to live off the table before the conversation gets going'. Negative testimony need not always take the shape of argument, the putting forward of theses such as 'war is not the answer'. It can also take the shape of expressions of discomfort, as if divulging the wounds that war effects in one's psyche. Examples of such testimony can be found in Coetzee's illustration of a consciousness wounded by animal consumption in his novelistic lectures *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee 1999), and in Anscombe's expressed desire not to argue with those who think the judicial execution of the innocent is up for consideration, in her paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" (Anscombe 1958, p. 17). In these cases, expressions of discomfort allow the protagonist or author to say, 'hold on a second, I'm uneasy here', and that can be a form of negative testimony as worthwhile as offering contrary propositions.

11 This is reminiscent of a proverb heard in Zen Buddhist circles: 'Don't just do something; sit there!' But here the emphasis is to be heard on 'just'. The point is not to sit there *rather* than doing something, nor to see sitting as failing to do anything (a frequent criticism of those who seek to bring mindfulness practices into activism). The point is that sitting can allow one to reflect on one's actions, to discern and wait for the right way forward, rather than unmindfully pursuing prefabricated courses of action.

12 As the commission called together by the American Friends Service Committee to make sense of the First World War and Quaker responses saw, if one's sight is mainly "fixed upon utilitarian results and achievements, however admirable and high-minded, it will always be possible to apologize for war" (Jones and Commission No. 1 of the Conference of All Friends after the War 1919, p. 1). Instead, the commission argues, one must concern oneself primarily with discerning and following God's will. This may lead to radical changes of the social order, but discernment and obedience are to be the objects of one's focus.

13 Jones comments: "Fox laid down no rules for his followers. He formulated no prohibitions . . . He always left them to 'follow their Light'. He seems to have felt sure that their inward guidance would eventually bring them to 'the covenant of peace'" (Jones 1984, p. 282).

14 Some justification for this view might be found in Matt. 22:37–40, where Jesus identifies the greatest commandment as loving God with all one's heart, soul, and mind. This is the greatest commandment partly because all other commandments follow from or describe this basic orientation to the divine. The second commandment Jesus mentions, to love one's neighbor as oneself, is 'like' the first commandment; it is likewise a basic orientation to the divine (and so to creation), one of love and friendship. All else hangs on this. It is no mistake that a group of people who center this in their lives and community choose to call themselves the Religious Society of Friends, for Jesus makes clear in John 15:14 that those who follow his commandments—love of God and the strangers God has made—will be called his friends.

15 For Anscombe, the problem is not that the pacifist puts some action-type off the table whatever the consequences. After all, Anscombe wants to put murder off the table in this way. The problem is rather that the pacifist puts too much, or the wrong action, off the table: war instead of murder (and murder in war specifically). On Anscombe's view, there is a key distinction between killing combatants in a just war and executing noncombatants in war or waging an unjust war. For Quaker pacifists, though, war as such is unjust; or more exactly, it does not show up as an available option in the Friendly life. I think pacifists need not dispute Anscombe's distinction between the killing of combatants and the killing of innocent bystanders. However, they find the latter objectionable even in its difference and might anyhow wish to query the possibility of innocent non-participation in a nation at war.

16 For an account of knowledge that God is calling, which sees this as necessarily belonging to religious experience and its distinctive authority for experiencers, see (Jones 1948, pp. 84–85). This account could plausibly be extended to knowledge of God's leadings.

17 This is in essence how Jones reads Jonathan Dymond's ethics of war. As Jones interprets Dymond, the life ordered "in conformity with the revealed will of God" is one where "the question of war is determined for us" (Jones and Commission No. 1 of the Conference of All Friends after the War 1919, p. 15). By attending to God's will, one "eradicates the seeds of war in one's daily life", and this process and the exhibition of it and its fruits is the meaning of the Lamb's War with which early Friends were occupied (ibid., p. 16). Jones sets out just how exacting this is, speaking of "the tremendous demands of Christ's way" (ibid.). However, that is just to say that Christianity, on the Quaker view, is something to be lived, not primarily professed (any legitimate profession belongs *in* the Christian life), and so it affects the whole sense of one's relationships, aspirations, pursuits, economic and political efforts, etc. On this view, the reorientation of these spheres before God does not *follow from* leading the Christian life so much as it *is* the leading of this life.

18 As Kelly points out, the claims of Christ are "totalitarian", all-encompassing and definitive (Kelly 1992, p. 21). That is not to say that Friends cannot engage in Anscombe-style reasoning. The moral life is full of concepts and phenomena worth clarifying and reasoning about, just as much as it is full of situations for faithful discernment. But where God prompts one to take up certain concerns or actions, where one discerns God's will (individually or corporately), Anscombe-style reasoning finds its place in clarifying revelation's claims or helping one to apply and practice them. Reasoning's results do not counter the claims of God for Quakers, because the very idea that one could reason one's way out of revelation is inimical to the whole project of expectant worship in which Quakers engage. It is not as if reason's results could come up against revelation's. Reason *as such* is in the business of clarifying or fleshing out revelation, or of filling in where revelation has not been heard. That is not to disparage reason. It is to dignify it in seeing its proper place.

19 For a discussion of how peace churches have navigated state rules for conscientious objectors, see (Brock 1992), especially pp. 41, 46–48.

20 Plentiful justification for this appeal's directness can be found in the writings of early Friends. A paradigmatic example is in Isaac Pennington's letters: "This is our religion; to feel that which God begets in our hearts preserved alive by God, to be taught by him

to know him, to worship, and live to him, in the leadings and by the power of his Spirit" (Penington 1984, p. 157). As Fox puts it, riffing on John 1:9, "Christ was come to teach his people himself" (Fox 1952, p. 98).

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