

# Quakers' painful choice

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“Quakers are like antiquated virgins,” snapped Tom Paine, Philadelphia’s most impetuous radical. “Unwisely mingling religion with politics, they pleasantly mistake wrinkles for dimples, conceive themselves yet lovely, and wonder at the stupid world for not admiring them.”

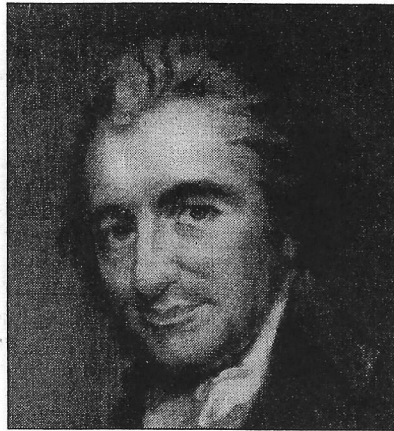
Paine, a fallen Quaker himself, was incensed by the Friends’ refusal to fight in the War for American Independence because of a religious commitment to pacifism. Instead, he sought revenge by criticizing them and writing an incendiary pamphlet titled *Common Sense* to mobilize popular support for the patriot cause.

But Paine’s attempt to define the Religious Society of Friends as a self-centered and cowardly bunch who regretted rather than embraced their neighbors’ patriotism simplifies the complicated circumstances confronting Friends during the American Revolution.

As an American historian and Quaker, I have mixed emotions about the Fourth of July. While I do believe there are some wars that are worth fighting — even dying for — and that the War for American Independence was certainly one of them, I also sympathize with the painful conflict of conviction experienced by my co-religionists of the late 18th century.

Persecuted by the British government for their nonconformist beliefs, Quakers, led by William Penn, relocated to Pennsylvania in the 1680s and dedicated their “Holy Experiment” to the principles of liberty of conscience and nonviolence. For them, a people’s right of self-determination in political affairs was just as important as brotherly love in a socially diverse community.

But the arrival of the French-Indian War forced Friends to choose



Thomas Paine: A fallen Friend.

between those two principles. Unable to reconcile their pacifist convictions with their wartime responsibilities as government officials in a largely non-Quaker colony, Friends, in 1756, withdrew from the Pennsylvania Assembly and made pacifism a fundamental article of their faith.

In 1776, after the Second Continental Congress declared American independence, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the governing body of Friends in Southeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, insisted on unconditional neutrality, purging from membership those who violated the Peace Testimony in any way. While the vast majority of the Yearly Meeting’s 30,000 members remained neutral, 1,276 were disowned for supporting the American Revolution: 758 for joining the Continental Army; 239 for paying taxes in lieu of military service or helping to collect revenues to finance the war; 136 for subscribing loyalty tests; 69 for actively assisting the American war effort; 32 for serving on committees for defense; and 42 for miscellaneous deviations, including watching military drills and celebrating independence.

Among the disowned were: Lydia Darrah, a spy for the Continental Army; Timothy Matlack, clerk of the Second Continental Congress who penned the official copy of the Decla-

ration of Independence; Thomas Mifflin, a major general in the Army; and Betsy Ross, celebrated in national lore as the seamstress of the first American flag.

The compliance of these so-called Fighting Quakers with the patriot cause worsened the circumstances of their pacifist brethren by suggesting that the majority of Friends were Tories, loyal to the British Crown.

That popular suspicion alienated the city’s Friends from their non-Quaker neighbors, who cut both economic and social ties with them. It also led the Pennsylvania Assembly, in 1777, to banish several leaders of the Yearly Meeting, including its clerk, James Pemberton, to Winchester, Va., where they were held for nearly a year under the suspicion of treason.

After the Revolution, Friends lost the tremendous influence they had once exercised in Pennsylvania. But they devoted themselves to an array of humanitarian activities in order to prove their allegiance to the government of the early republic.

Quakers were at the forefront of abolitionism, charity schooling, temperance, and prison reform. So extensive were their activities that President George Washington acknowledged that “there was no denomination among us who are more exemplary and useful citizens.”

Today, it is difficult to relate with the painful choice between patriotism and religious orthodoxy that confronted late-18th-century Quakers. To embrace independence from Britain meant to reject an unconditional article of the Quaker faith. Either decision had severe repercussions on one’s life.

Today, we can take religion — or non-religion — for granted, just like the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that our forefathers so courageously fought for almost 250 years ago. I fear we’ve become the “antiquated virgins” of our time.

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