

Penn inspired by Reformation in creating his Holy Experiment

By William C. Kashatus

In this year's 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther's proclamation that liberty of conscience is the proper basis for religious life holds special meaning here in Pennsylvania.

Not only did the commonwealth's founder, William Penn, suffer persecution for his Quaker beliefs, but he expanded the meaning of liberty of conscience to include political life and established a colony dedicated to it.

According to legend, on Oct. 31, 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian scholar and priest, nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. He was protesting the selling of indulgences, or payments to the Catholic Church to reduce punishment for sins, the buying and selling of clerical privileges, and the accumulation of substantial wealth by the Church while many Germans were starving.

Luther believed that such practices interfered with genuine repentance and discouraged people from giving to the poor. He also challenged the Catholic doctrine that salvation can only be achieved by following the sacraments and rituals of the Church. Instead, Luther, inspired by Romans 1:17, insisted that the individual could achieve salvation simply by having faith in a loving and merciful God.

After being excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1521, Luther stood trial, and stated publicly that he "could not accept the authority of the Pope" because his "conscience was captive only to the Word of God." It was wrong, he believed, to act against one's conscience in religious matters.

With unconditional obedience to religious and political authority the norm, Luther's proclamation that liberty of conscience was the proper basis for religious life was considered subversive. But that belief laid the foundations of Protestantism, and the many religious denominations that evolved from it, including the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers.

Quakers believe that each person possesses a divine spark, or Inner Light, which allows direct communication with God, eliminating the need for clergy. Friends also chal-



The statue of William Penn atop City Hall is silhouetted by the solar eclipse on Aug. 21. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

lenged the doctrines of the Anglican Church, as well as the social conventions of 17th-century England, by refusing to doff their broad-brimmed hats in the presence of royalty, to swear oaths in a court of law, or to join the military. Charged with treason or blasphemy, nearly one-third of Britain's 50,000 Quakers were persecuted for their beliefs.

Penn sought to provide a refuge for Quakers and the other persecuted peoples of Europe when he established his New World colony of Pennsylvania. He made liberty of conscience the cornerstone of his "Holy Experiment," a society based on the Quaker principles of religious toleration, participatory government, and pacifism.

Like Luther, Penn suffered for his fierce convictions, serving a two-year prison sentence for preaching his Quaker beliefs.

During his incarceration, Penn wrote "The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience" (1670), which argues that "liberty of conscience" is not "a mere liberty of mind" but the freedom to "exercise" religion. Penn insisted that civil restraint and religious persecution carry an "evident claim of [civil] infallibility" and "enthrones man as king of conscience."

Unlike Luther, who limited liberty of conscience to the Christian religion, Penn included it in the political realm. Blending religious principle with contemporary politi-

cal theory, he drafted a "Charter of Liberties" for his colony that guaranteed "a voice in government, the right of trial by jury, and the liberty of conscience."

Pennsylvania's first constitution of 1682 organized the government into three parts: a governor, a provincial council, and a bicameral legislature, elected by freemen, in which the upper house drafted legislation and the lower house approved or rejected it. Thus, Penn not only established the principle of popular sovereignty, but also the separation of powers and the right to worship. These innovations were adopted by the Framers of the U.S. Constitution a century later.

Penn and Luther were less concerned about changing history than addressing a desperate need. Luther wanted to reform the Catholic Church from within and Penn, to provide a sanctuary for religiously and politically persecuted people. Each was a man of faith confronted by the same spiritual dilemma: how to establish a personal relationship with God that was consistent with their convictions, morals, and needs.

What truly distinguished their examples, however, was an unyielding search for truth and the moral courage to act on that truth once they discovered it.

Who says that history can't be inspirational?

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