Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology
Volume 6, Issue 1
ISSN 2380-7458

John Woolman and the Practice of Truth

Author(s): Leonard McMahon
Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020): 78-100.
Published by: Graduate Theological Union © 2020
Online article published on: December 12, 2020

John Woolman and the Practice of Truth

Leonard McMahon
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT: This essay suggests that what made the Quaker reformer John Woolman such an inspiring figure was his rigorous insistence upon the truth of his conscience. Employing Michel Foucault's analysis of the classical Greek concept of parrhesia (truth-telling), I argue that this pursuit of truth was met by a community uniquely suited to heed such an extraordinary voice. Truth-telling in the classical period was developed into a fine art and a "technology of the self," according to Foucault. My interest in applying a nontheological lens here is to democratize Christian spirituality by detailing the everyday practices of truth that led Woolman to become a reformer in his spiritual tradition and the bearer of a life with political, social, and economic implications for American society.

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 6, No. 1

In 1884, poet John Greenleaf Whittier identified a singular moment within a singular life, one that signaled the beginning of the end for slavery among the Society of Friends.
[1] In the nineteenth century, when Whittier was writing, Quakers were fractious and beset by differences but almost everyone revered the

[1] John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), 9-10. From Whittier's introduction: "In the year 1742 an event, simple and inconsiderable in itself, was made the instrumentality of exerting a mighty influence upon slavery in the Society of Friends. A small storekeeper at Mount Holly, in New Jersey, a member of the Society, sold a negro woman, and requested the young man in his employ to make a bill of sale of her. On taking up his pen, the young clerk felt a sudden and strong scruple in his mind. The thought of writing an instrument of slavery for one of his fellow-creatures oppressed him. God's voice against the desecration of His image spoke in his soul. He yielded to the will of his employer, but, while writing the instrument, he was constrained to declare, both to the buyer and the seller, that he believed slave-keeping inconsistent with the Christian religion. This young man was John

eighteenth-century abolitionist John Woolman (1720-1772). So, Whittier chose to lift up this life for reverence, penning a moving "Introduction" to the eighth edition of Woolman's *Journal*, in the hopes of galvanizing his peers under a common banner.[2]

Woolman was a good choice for the Quakers to rally behind to recover their antislavery and anticapitalistic unity.[3] The value of asceticism and moral conviction was impressed upon him at an early age—he received a vision from God as a young boy and from then on resolved to stand apart from his peers and to purge himself of "vanities." He developed an unusually deep sense of empathy in his youth: after he had killed a robin during some childish high-jinx, and then felt forced to do the same to her helpless young, he was tormented by it and decided that was last of such impishness. As an adult, he refused to help sell slaves after doing so once, as a young apprentice under orders from his supervisor. Though he had a mind for business and was likely headed for a comfortable life as a merchant, he eschewed this penchant for a tailor's life so that most of his time might be dedicated to itinerant ministry.[4] He also lived into his fellowship with the oppressed by avoiding the typical comforts of his day while traveling.[5]

John Woolman was born in New Jersey in 1720, lived near Philadelphia, traveled throughout British North America, and then to

---

Woolman. The circumstance above named was the starting-point of a lifelong testimony against slavery."

[2] Ibid., 49. Writing in 1871, Whittier ends his introduction on an insouciant and expectant note: "I leave the book with its readers. They may possibly make large deductions from my estimate of the author; they may not see the importance of all his self-denying testimonies; they may question some of his scruples, and smile over passages of childlike simplicity; - but I believe they will all agree in thanking me for introducing them to the Journal of John Woolman."

[3] The use of "capitalism" in this essay is an attempt to capture the prescience of Woolman's economic analysis. Mercantilism was the mode of production at the time, and, in fact, the negative consequences of this system are what prompted Adam Smith to advise against it in his *Wealth of Nations* in 1776. However, with the Triangle Trade in full swing by the mid-eighteenth century, one could see a global proto-capitalism, and I claim this is what Woolman presaged as morally deleterious.

[4] Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman*, 52-65. See also, William Jolliff, "The Economy of the Inward Life: John Woolman and Henry David Thoreau," *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*, *New Series*, 15 (2007): 100-03.

[5] He traveled to England in steerage, for instance. Also, he refused the free, comfortable accommodations typically offered by fellow Quakers during his visits, and instead either stayed in the servants' quarters or, when that was infeasible, insisted on paying for his housing.

England, where he died from smallpox in 1772. Besides abolitionism, his anticapitalistic legacy, among Quakers and Americans generally, is felt in various protest and peace movements, then and now, such as the Free Produce movement that advocated for goods not produced by slave labor, much like our environmental and fair-trade concerns today. As early as 1762, Woolman protested slave labor by refusing to buy or wear goods produced by it. By 1826, Free Produce began to catch on, and stores sprang up advertising only goods "free" of slave labor. The Free Produce Society was founded in 1827 in Philadelphia. And, in 2003, the ecumenical John Woolman College of Active Peace was founded to translate Quaker teachings into public policy.

Abolition of slavery and admonitions against the corruptions of early modern capitalism were his major efforts. Woolman traveled extensively to preach and convince his fellow Quakers that slavery was an apostasy against the "primitive harmony" desired by God that Quakers, being Radical Reformers, found in the Book of Genesis. Slavery, however, represented only the most outrageous apostasy of an emerging global capitalist system. Modern capitalism was just getting started, with the British Industrial Revolution's far-reaching changes occurring from about 1760 to 1840. Woolman subscribed to the labor theory of value and had a prescient understanding of the global supply chain and means of production. A hundred years before Marx he would write about the economic pressures leading people to pursue pleasurable goods he called "superfluities." These inordinate desires propped up a system of exploitation rooted in evils like slavery. Furthermore, he had an almost Aristotelian outlook that dictated a person would flourish only when working in moderation. Too much (slavery and overwork) and too little work (capitalistic owners) warped a person's being away from God's will.

By 1787, due to both Woolman's peripatetic preaching and the revivalist intensity of the First Great Awakening, slavery was officially proscribed within Quaker society. Coupled with the gradual process towards consensus within Meetings, Woolman's emphasis on conscience and choice led individual Quakers to a new moral personhood. This was a more substantial identity than simply following a moral commandment or achieving moral perfection, efforts stressed in the Baptist and Puritan

communities. John Woolman literally embodied for Quakers the realization of a radical identification with others. His "pure" example is credited with leading the Quakers to become first religious group in America to officially and collectively stand against slavery, though he was by no means alone in this effort.[6]

Woolman scholarship has tended to render him as a gratifying example of American individualism. But, as Margaret Stewart has pointed out, this is an incomplete view. His real contribution was, paradoxically, resistance to the individualism of his time by insisting on a personal and conscientious choice to not identify with white supremacy. A product of the false asceticism of the American frontier, white supremacy suppressed nature in favor of "civilization," projected nature onto "the Other," and led whites to embrace a sham individualism that, in reality, was a collective illusion (co)dependent on the economic exploitation of people of color.[7] Woolman, via conscience and empathy, saw through this to a substantive, "unsympathetic" critique of slavery and to a unique universalism that opposed a strict individualism.[8] In other words, his uniquely American selfhood allowed him to become a new, uniquely communitarian American individual, something quite different from the narrow individualism of his time. This "empathetic unselfishness" was both a result of the American ethos and a refashioning of it over and against the attitudes of his day.[9]

I argue in this essay that John Woolman achieved his impressive social justice legacy by living out an understanding of self-forged in a significant way by his encounter with the truth and reality of the British imperialism during the eighteenth century. I claim that Woolman's encounter with conscience meant for him a dedication to truth, and this meant owning up to the realities of slavery and global capitalism as agonists to Christian living. It is this dedication to truth, to reality, that is

---

[6] Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657-1761* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), see especially chapters 2 & 3.

[7] Margaret E. Stewart, "John Woolman's "Kindness Beyond Expression": Collective Identity vs. Individualism and White Supremacy," *Early American Literature* 26, no.3 (1991), 259-61.

[8] Ibid., 269-71.

[9] Ibid., 272-73: "[Woolman's] resulting self-definition was thus endemically American, growing as it did out of the specific conditions of Woolman's time and place…[He] was 'part of a tradition of [American] individualism' by resisting that tradition and affirming an alternative."

reflected in his fearlessness as he doled out moral advice to his fellow Quakers

Using the Foucauldian analysis of *parrhesia*, or "frank speech," or telling the truth to oneself and others, I argue that Woolman's social critique was the result of a rigorous insistence upon the truth and reality of the American context. Borrowing Foucault's analysis of parrhesiastic self-writing as a "technology of the self," I will draw from Woolman's *Journal* and other writings examples of his honest self-disclosure and biblically rooted teaching as instances of his wrestling with the plain truth of the moment as he saw it. *Parrhesia* may be thought of as a game of sorts, a flowing relationship between parties not a competition but a strategic effort between teacher and student, between interlocutor and ignorance, between one who holds fast to the truth while helping another to do the same.

Playing a "truth-game" with his fellow Quakers, Woolman sought to bring Christian witness to bear upon the full reality of colonial capitalism and slavery. I aim to show how his sojourns provided the material context for this moral evolution. His travels often brought him into contact with slaves and slaveholders, dignified and free native people, and well-meaning but soft-stepping fellow Quakers. Not only did taking seriously the black presence among the Quakers mean actually *seeing* the very people who function, or are supposed to function, invisibly on the plantation; not only was his heart moved by the sight of slaves, and that he was prone to weeping over them, and at times avoided them because his mind could not reconcile the dissonance between Christian ideals and real life; but by allowing himself to absorb the reality of suffering by paying attention to slaves, the very act of confronting this material reality functioned as an *ascesis* for Woolman, a deep surrender to the judgment of his conscience. Unlike many (though not all) of his fellow Quakers, this early exposure to being judged by the Inner Light, by Truth, begins for Woolman a process of pursuing reality no matter how inconvenient it is. Seeing through false notions of the Quaker self no matter how precious they are, Woolman learns to surrender to God no matter how uncomfortable it might make him.

Quaker Abolitionism

There is a tendency within Quaker scholarship to view Woolman heroically and romantically.[10] But it is important to remember that he was one voice among many. Antislavery efforts among the Quakers did not begin with Woolman; there were others, beginning in the late 1600s, who argued and demonstrated against slavery and tried to dramatize the suffering of slaves. Indeed, some of these early figures were relentless about dissuading fellow Quakers to give up slavery and suffered disownment as a result.[11] Woolman's father, Samuel, was himself moved to oppose slavery, but having seen the punishment visited upon these early abolitionists, decided to play it safe and avoid the topic altogether. For him, though, silence was not consent but a tacit refusal to be circumvented by the moral limitations of his fellows. John was close to his father, and this explains in part his relatively slow road to radicalism.[12]

In fact, compared to these more dramatic figures, Woolman's incrementalism might be thought of as tepid.[13] But this would be unfair. When it came to slavery Woolman was playing the long game of persuasion rather than one of shock or fear. Like a good pastor, he favored unity within the Meeting and community above all else, and so he spoke reservedly, plainly but firmly, in the common diction of Quakers, with slaveholders, north and south, Quaker and non-Quaker alike. Woolman might be more accurately regarded as the Jesus to Lay's John the Baptist: someone challenging yet tactful and comprehensive in his critique. Someone who came later to smooth out the rough edges of an earlier, more radical figure. His general diplomacy and sensitive personality, his

---

[10] Fritz Oehlschlaeger, "Taking John Woolman's Christianity Seriously," *Renascence* 48, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 193. The author suggests that Edwin Cady, in his volume *John Woolman* (New York: Twayne, 1965), wants to "canonize Woolman's *Journal*…as 'American scripture.'"

[11] Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 350. Benjamin Lay was considered a "martyr" by some Quakers because he resisted the plutocratic tendencies of more urbane Quakers with his dramatization of the suffering of the enslaved. In 1738, during the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, he stabbed a bladder of berry juice and let it gush out to illustrate the shed blood of slaves. He was disowned not long after, thus earning him martyr status.

[12] He even shared a manuscript of his journal with his father before the latter died, and he records that his father felt satisfied knowing that his antislavery concerns would be carried on by his son.

[13] Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*, 100.

reticence in the presence of other Friends during his travels, his waiting for the opportune moment to confront slaveholding Quakers, his hesitation to publish his writings on poverty and slavery without the patronage of senior members—these were not equivocations but in part tactical decisions made with a larger goal in mind.[14] To be unafraid of reality, of truth, was the point of Woolman's spirituality but his expression of it was a slow, steady burn rather than a roaring fire.

My hope is that a Foucauldian perspective is a useful means of understanding, emotionally, the democratic, anticapitalistic potential of this spirituality. I argue this is so because Foucault's late-in-life concerns with freedom, governmentality,[15] and the relation of the self to the self can provide us with a "microcosmic" analysis of Woolman.[16] Via such analysis we can observe Woolman via inference: if a classical source counseled a particular practice of, say, correspondence for the specific reason of building up the capacity to tell the truth, then perhaps, by comparison, we can infer what letter-writing is capable of instilling in any sincere person. Such an analysis is postmodern not only because Foucault is generally regarded as such (a designation he resisted) but also because it involves the analysis of subjectivity and the formation of a self under modern conditions of power. Foucault revives *parrhesia* to remind us that it is the pursuit and not the definition of truth that matters, and that it certainly mattered in antiquity.

Another benefit to working with *parrhesia* is to speak about the moral and ethical effectiveness of truth-telling and yet avoid the inexhaustibility (and exhaustion) of theological terms. The hope is to "democratize" what many see as virtuoso spirituality. Woolman's reputation and the scholarship surrounding it have slowly reached iconic status. One online commentator refers to Woolman's *Journal* as "one of

[14] Ibid., 351. Anthony Benezet was an Overseer and a member of the Philadelphia Meeting. He was a popular antislavery crusader and published many tracts along these lines; he was also responsible in part for the publication of Woolman's *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* in 1754.

[15] Foucault coined this neologism to grasp the impact of laws and customs on behavior: the regulation of the self in accordance with external, often subtle, pressures.

[16] By "microcosmic," I mean his inner world, his relationship with himself, can be revealed by reference to Foucault's exploration of classical spiritual practices.

the deepest texts in the world" and compares him to Tolstoy.[17] Such celebration is not unfounded, of course, but I would like to make Woolman a more realistic example to emulate.[18]

Applying a nontheological lens to Woolman may illustrate how he and anyone can be authoritative and heroic in relationship to the truth. Woolman's inspiring example of conscience is not inimitable but achievable via a certain set of practices. His distinctiveness is the result not only of God's grace (this cannot be forgotten!), but also a search for truth, the fruits of which anyone (not only the blessed) may enjoy and demonstrate.

In terms of methodology, in addition to comparisons with classical spirituality, I will also use document analysis to access primary sources (journals, autobiography, correspondence).[19] I argue that these sources provide more than historical data; they are examples of spiritual exercise themselves when seen from the classical perspective.[20] Thus, these can be

[17] John Woolman, "A Plea for the Poor," accessed April 10, 2017, http://www.umilta.net/woolmanplea.html.

[18] To do this, I draw from Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995). My claim is that Woolman's activities are resonant with Western spirituality practices dating back to antiquity. According to Pierre Hadot, during the transition from a classical to a Christian world, God is introduced into the classical spiritual exercises and this shifts attention away from the self to a new referent. Over the early centuries of the Common Era, classical exercises became more theological and less clinical, as the motivation to exercise oneself became otherworldly rather than this-worldly. Michel Foucault and Hadot are largely responsible for the recovery of classical philosophy "as a way of life." Hadot claims pagan spirituality and practices transform over eight centuries (roughly 400 BCE to 400 CE) into Christian spirituality. Classical concerns with freedom and the relationship of the self to itself via the truth (parrhesia) become theological concerns about one's relationship to God. It is this relationship to God that animates Woolman and his spiritual practices.

[19] Francis X. Clooney, "Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989–1995)," *Theological Studies*, 56 (3): 521–50.

[20] Document analysis is a historical method that seeks to know the subject via several basic questions posed about the subject's documents: who the document's author and intended audience were; what it says about the society in which it was written; why it was written; what was the author assuming; and what does it say to the reader are some of the questions offered in the method. The purpose here is to give as full a picture of the document as possible so that its content may be taken critically and not merely "at face value." Historical analysis is in fact built into the documents method. The basic facts of Woolman's life are helpful for answering some of the questions of document analysis. Knowing, for instance, that Woolman traveled to England, visited Native Americans, and held various mercantile occupations would come naturally from reading his journal, but it is helpful to have it corroborated by a general history of Quakers during the time, and in fact such history might suggest opportunities for further research. What degree of personal contact did colonists have with slaves during this time? Did Woolman ever have occasion to speak with a slave at length, giving him a first-person narrative to work from? Having an overarching view of Quaker life can help "flesh out" document analysis, as a "historical insurance policy" of sorts in case anything is not evident from the documents in hand.

analyzed via comparison to the same phenomena in pagan examples from Seneca, Plutarch, etc. A letter from Woolman may be seen in direct comparison to a letter from Seneca, but whereas Seneca wrote in full awareness of the exercise he was undertaking, Woolman may not have written as purposefully.[21]

Parrhesia (para/pan: "all" + rhesia: "speech") is an important concept to clarify. It is an ancient Greek "mode of veridiction," or the practice of truth-telling, or simply "frank speech." Foucault claims it is one of four ways of relating to and disclosing truth and reality (alethia) within the ancient world.[22] *Parrhesia* develops in its meaning over eight centuries, and initially it represented telling the truth to another person, sometimes well, sometimes poorly (both possibilities are worth revisiting later). Eventually it developed into a practice of telling the truth to oneself, and this is where the various exercises arise, such as journaling and correspondence. *Parrhesia* could be practiced by anyone so it is difficult to trace its origins; it shows up across many classical sources. It seems to have begun organically within Greek society, and examples may be found throughout the centuries in the commentary of scholars such as Socrates ("the gadfly"), Seneca and Plutarch.[23]

Slowly there develops an "aesthetics of the self" within the Greek world, a collection of spiritual exercises that create and cultivate the self by determining and refining best practices for personal and social intercourse.[24] The practices may be thought of as "technologies of the self" that became adopted and adapted into Christian spirituality and church life (*alethurgy*)[25]. From late antiquity through the end of the medieval era, the

[21] While this possibility does not negate the psychological and spiritual effectiveness of the exercise of letter-writing, nevertheless both Foucault and Pierre Hadot decry the loss of the intentionality found in the classical era. These exercises were designed to "design" a person; they were, they argue, supposed to create a person for whom truth was lived out in daily life.

[22] Foucault.info, "The Meaning and Evolution of the Word "Parrhesia," last updated October 24, 1983, https://foucault.info/parrhesia/foucault.DT1.wordParrhesia.en/.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Foucault.info, "The Practice of Parrhesia," last updated November 14, 1983, https://foucault.info/doc/documents/parrhesia/foucault-dt4-praticeparrhesia-en-html.

[25] A/leth/ia may be paraphrased as "the condition of having no stone covering one's vision of things as they really are." Heidegger used this word in *Being and Time* (1927) to mean "reality"; a/leth/urgy may be read as "the work of removing the stone, thus uncovering things are they really are." *Alethia—reality--literally means un-covering or un-concealment, or recollection, seeing things as they are, neither forgetting nor allowing delusion to manifest.*

church, with its focus on Christian virtue, becomes the arbiter of these practices. After this time, these modes remain barely visible underneath the various subjectivities that inhabit modernity (the normal, the mad, the sexually deviant, the criminal, etc.).

There were four modes of truth-telling, or relationships to truth, in the ancient world, modes that one might perceive as social roles. No ranking of roles is implied, but there may be conflict between them as they represent sometimes starkly different ways of relating to truth. All were socially necessary, however, and throughout history a person or group could embody multiple modes at any given time.

The *prophet* indeed spoke truth, often to power. The key here, though, is that one spoke Someone's or Something's Truth. In the ancient world, this person spoke for Fate; in the Jewish and Christian worlds, this person spoke for Yahweh or God. The point is that, though bold and often socially risky, the truth spoken was not entirely one's own, and this lent an air of assurance, clarity, and abdication of ultimate responsibility.

The *sage* spoke the truth of wisdom. Intellectual acumen and precision of doctrine formed the basis for this presentation of truth. This was the philosopher, the professional learned man or school; Epictetus and the Stoics, for example. For Western religious, this person would be the theologian. The point is that this mode spoke to the intangible truth of reason, came with professional responsibility and was often organized as a distinct social function.

The *teacher* spoke of practical truth, or the techniques of various practical professions. Medicine, science, craft, politics, rhetoric, law – someone had to master and pass these skills down the next generation from the good of society. Professional, often certified by a guild, the teacher was in effect a technocrat, and a healthy society needs competent technocrats. For the religious, this would be the church professionals: secular priests, administrators, professors in various fields, etc.

The *parrhesiast* spoke truth to anyone and everyone, often to power. The difference here, though, is that this truth was the person's own, and involved deliberate risk, both interpersonal and social. The only warrants for this truth were conscience ("thoroughly known") and conviction ("thoroughly proven") and these lay solely within the person.

Thus, this always involved a play of opposites: insecurity, anxiety and fear alongside purposefulness, deliberation and care. Over time, the perfection of this skill was seen by some (Epictetus) as a technique though this was more to emphasize the great care necessary to perform it correctly. Done wrongly, the consequences could be dire, not only to the speaker but to the one spoken to and by extension (if, say, the recipient were the king) to the whole of society. In fact, the very reason for becoming a parrhesiast was to benefit the other person, and society at large. One did not engage in frank speech for professional benefit. There was no accreditation program and it was open to anyone; hence quality quickly became a concern. Nor was *parrhesia* useful for personal aggrandizement, since it was unlikely to help one "win friends and influence people." It is a paradoxically selfless and self-conscious act.[26]

No one is excused from frank speech, and in the political arena the parrhesiast plays a heroic, necessary and ultimately beneficial role by telling the emperor he has no clothes. This seems identical to the role of prophet but recall that the prophet speaks explicitly in Another Voice. The parrhesiast speaks in her own: I alone have the conviction that something is wrong, and I am willing to risk the rejection of friend, family, community and society by speaking openly about it.[27]

Of course, as mentioned, the mere possibility of openness early on created a problem of quality. Herein laid the problem for democracy itself, one that emanated from the very freedom that made democracy so precious. The freedom of citizens to speak their minds was a good thing but it resulted in both bad and good orators. The good parrhesiast was the citizen who could tell the unselfish truth in a world of truth-speakers, everyone with their own version, crowding the marketplace of ideas. The presence of the marketplace therefore held always the possibility for the demise of democracy itself, as the common vulgar opinion of freedom

[26] What, exactly, does *parrhesia* "sound like"? For Foucault, in the premodern West, the role of parrhesiast is played by the confessor or spiritual director within the church. It becomes institutionalized by the time of the medieval era, as a spiritual duty of the priest to the dutiful parishioner. In the modern secularized West, this role morphs into that of the psychological professional. A therapist is there to see and tell what is not easily seen and told. In the ancient world, this role was left vague and undetermined. In any era, the parrhesiast speaks because something is vitally wrong and yet not seen by the other person or persons.

[27] The hermeneutical difference is as slight and as great as the difference between the phrases "I believe God says…" and "God says..."

became simply the freedom to do and say as one pleases regardless its relationship to truth. Clearly, there are parallels to today when things such as "alternative facts" become legitimate within certain segments of the population, and an elected official is celebrated as a "truth-teller" for flippantly spouting off on social media.

In such a space, truth becomes relative, and *parrhesia* may become a threat to the democracy that gives it life, as fascistic and tyrannical voices rise among the fearful and reactionary. Plato's distrust of the masses is familiar for this very reason. His distaste for mass opinion was palpable; though his aristocratic sensibilities might not suit us today, they do point the way past the self-concerned to the civic-minded parrhesiast, the one who makes the health of the *polis* her priority. The good parrhesiast speaks truth not only to the king but also the people, to democracy itself. For this reason, Aristotle, Foucault says, incorporated *parrhesia* into his ethics:

> The word is also used by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* [Book IV, 1124b28], not to characterize a political practice or institution, but as a trait of the magnanimous man, the megalopsychos. Some of the other characteristics of the magnanimous man are more or less related to the parrhesiastic character and attitude. For example, the megalopsychos is courageous, but he is not someone who likes danger so much that he runs out to greet it. His courage is rational [1124 b7-9]. He prefers aletheia to doxa, truth to opinion. He does not like flatterers. And since he looks down on other men, he is "outspoken and frank" [1124 b28]. He uses parrhesia to speak the truth because he is able to recognize the faults of others: he is conscious of his own difference from them, of his own superiority. So you see that for Aristotle, parrhesia is either a moral-ethical quality, or pertains to free speech as addressed to a monarch. Increasingly, these personal and moral features of parrhesia become more pronounced.[28]

Furthermore, Foucault suggests,

[28] Foucault.info, "Parrhesia and The Crisis of Democratic Institutions," last updated October 31, 1983, https://foucault.info/doc/documents/parrhesia/foucault-dt3-democracy-en-html.

> For you see that the difference between the good and the bad orator does not lie primarily in the fact that one gives good while the other gives bad advice. The difference lies in this: the depraved orators, who are accepted by the people, only say what the people desire to hear. Hence, Isocrates calls such speakers "flatterers". The honest orator, in contrast, has the ability, and is courageous enough, to oppose the demos. He has a critical and pedagogical role to play which requires that he attempt to transform the will of the citizens so that they will serve the best interests of the city. This opposition between the people's will and the city's best interests is fundamental to Isocrates' criticism of the democratic institutions of Athens."[29]

Despite the aristocratic tinge, the point is that the good parrhesiast, the one possessed of *megalopsychos*, of magnanimity, is the one who will confront fellow citizens and challenge their fetishization of democracy at the expense of the body politic. This kind of courage is what gives *parrhesia* its countercultural, iconoclastic reputation. This is a person who is not afraid to offend even her friends. *Parrhesia* is not, therefore, a good career choice but may be celebrated by fellow truth-loving souls, during one's life if fortunate.

Woolman literally embodied the reality of this kind of truth-telling. He is perceived as peculiar by his contemporaries and stands out for his plain manner of dress, even among his fellow countercultural Quakers. Ever conscious of his effect on people, he dressed and acted so for a reason: many Quakers in England and America were enjoying a solidly middle-class, less radical lifestyle (for instance, they owned and made enough, to have need of and purchase, slaves). Many were merchants and landowners, craftsmen and traders. Quakers were enjoying some of the fruits that come from no longer being officially persecuted, as once was the case in England (relief came from the 1689 Toleration Act), and America seemed so expansive they did not have to worry much about stepping on many establishment toes through economic competition. So many began

[29] Ibid.

to relax their standards, in terms of dress and enjoyment of material luxuries.

But always there were the naysayers, and along comes this itinerant minster who is not satisfied with the eradication of slavery. As if abolition were not heretical enough, Woolman made a point to connect and critique all British and American imperialism, of which slavery was one peculiarly horrible aspect. Woolman averred against conspicuous consumption generally, and his definition of it went beyond even that of that of Robert Barclay, a contemporary of William Penn. Barclay's recommendation for achieving proper simplicity and plainness was for Quakers to aspire to a "low ratio of means-to-consumption."[30] This rudimentary formula was meant to help Quakers calculate how to live in a market society, and still retain their special distinctiveness. This kind of calculative thinking, however, seemed to Woolman and others like hedging against God, and more importantly His Wrath.[31] It was bound to fail, he argued, and so why tempt God's Wrath by engaging in spiritual brinksmanship?

Unfortunately, even Barclay's easy advice was being drowned out by the temptations of insider status and means. Woolman's response of radical simplicity was not entirely foreign to some Quakers, however. In the 1750s and 1760s, especially after the Seven Years' War, many Quakers were dubious about the morality of the British Empire and their role in it.[32] As the slave trade ramped up to keep pace with global trade in sugar, tobacco, cotton, rum, and the fineries that complement these basics, Quakers began to feel that their enjoyment of these things came at a cost; a cost not borne by those who enjoyed them nor by those Quakers whose entrepreneurship made a fortune from their production and sale.

Woolman joined the growing chorus of these voices who sought to correct the course of Quaker life by returning its roots--the outsider status distinguished by an ascetic and austere lifestyle ("plainness"). The urge to go back to basics meant, however, that one had to tell the truth about the situation, and that another had to hear and submit to it. This was the

---

[30] Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 338-89.

[31] Many thought the Seven Years' War was punishment for falling off from the righteous path, since it was so disruptive to the commercial life of many Quaker merchants and traders.

[32] Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*, 7-8.

parrhesiastic game played by Woolman and other Quaker reformers within their own communities. That he played this game well is attested to by his lasting influence.

Practices of Truth

Parrhesia is a rigorous mode of self-disclosure, a praxis trading in honesty, and the practices associated with its cultivation were highly recommended in antiquity. *Hupomnemata* is a reflective engagement with truth; it along with correspondence and general self-writing were but some of the many practices advisable to perfect the art of discerning and delivering frank speech. In terms of Woolman's spirituality, various kinds of self-writing (journals, autobiography, epistolary, edifying notes, etc.) survived as ways of speaking frankly about oneself and even thrive to this day.

When his writings are placed within the fuller classical-to-Christian tradition of spirituality, Woolman is clearly a parrhesiast, one who recorded the unadorned reality of his and Quaker life in his *Journal*; he even referred to God and God's Wisdom as "Truth" in both this and *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* and *A Plea for the Poor*.[33] These last two texts reflect his efforts at *hupomnemata*. His relationship to truth, mastered on the personal level as an itinerant Quaker attuned to the stirrings of the Inner Light, demanded simultaneously to be heard publicly. These writings reflect an urgent call to justice as if the whole world were at stake (which for Woolman it was):

> My heart is affected with sorrow while I write on this subject, on account of the great injuries committed against these Gentiles [slaves] and against their children born in captivity. Had the active members in civil society when those injuries were first attempted united in a firm opposition to those violent proceedings, had others in a selfish spirit attempted the like afterward and met with a firm opposition, and been made to do justice to the injured persons till the prospect of gain by such unrighteous proceedings appeared so doubtful

[33] John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, Intro., https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=main;view=text;idno=N05781.0001.001; John Woolman, "A Plea for the Poor," chap. 3.

> that no further attempts had been made—how much better had it been for these American colonies and islands?[34]

Woolman took personal responsibility for society, capitalism and slavery. Despite not owning any slaves, he could see his role in the larger system, a viewpoint which forced him "into a close and laborious inquiry whether I, as an individual, kept clear from all things which tended to stir up or related to wars, either in this land or in Africa; my heart was deeply concerned that in future I might…keep steadily to be the pure truth, and…walk in the plainness and simplicity of a sincere follower of Christ."[35]

Woolman's spirituality, then, is akin to Antony's. Foucault sees Antony as the earliest Christian adopter of pagan spiritual exercises, particularly *hupomnemata*.[36] This is important because it illustrates the roles frank speech and self-confrontation, revelation and witness, play in the spiritual journeys of certain social reformers whose lives delight many. Anthony in the end became a public minister, healer, and teacher able to discourse with the professional learned of his day. His rigor, honesty, and large-heartedness were the result of a private spirituality rooted in the discipline of always telling himself the truth. A spirituality that was at first solitary eventually becomes social. One tantalizing avenue for further research is to confirm this two-tiered transformative process in the life and writings of other highly regarded spiritual figures.[37]

---

[34] John Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 270.

[35] Ibid., 129.

[36] The earliest Christian endorsement of self-writing is found in Athanasius's *Life of St. Anthony*. Anthony claims that self-writing has the salutary effect of keeping the demons at bay, by confessing, as it were, one's self to an imaginary other. Secret places where the devil might lodge cannot survive the glare of such revelation. Self-writing leads to the development of the "witness self," the ability to step back and see one's thoughts and feelings plainly, without evasion, is a significant reason for engaging in meditation. The untrained mind, as the Buddha is reported to have said, is the source of the worst unhappiness; meditation and self-writing train the mind and bring the emotions into awareness through the habit of parrhesia. Specifically, such a *habitus* burns away the fears of the ego, and thus one becomes courageous, bold, and willing to risk for the sake of oneself, another, and society.

[37] Effective social reform is the natural result of the cultivation of a self that embodies frank speech. We often think of reformers as prophets, but I argue they are blends of the prophetic and parrhesiastic, and that the latter tends to be occluded by popular notions of religion as authoritarian. Parrhesia functions more as criticism than pronouncement. It involves danger, risk, responsibility. It emanates from a place of inferiority. The prophet bears this more lightly because of his blessed assurance, but, moved by suffering and injustice, the parrhesiast has little to no such assurance and is, we might say, more existential about the matter.

The role of the interlocutor, or *basanos*, either imaginatively or in the form of another person or persons, or some textual example of truth (i.e. the Bible), is, according to Pierre Hadot, "of capital importance. It is what prevents the self-revelation from becoming a theoretical, dogmatic expose, and forces it to be a concrete, practical exercise. For the aim is not to set forth a doctrine, but rather to guide the student towards a determined mental attitude. It is a combat, amicable but real."[38] "Combat" here means struggle. Inner struggle that leads to revelation and then more struggle. It is the only fight worth fighting, that of philosophy as a way of life. Hadot continues, "[T]he point is worth stressing, for the same thing happens in every spiritual exercise: we must *let* ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and convictions. This means that we must dialogue with ourselves, and hence we must do battle with ourselves."[39]

And, "To emerge victorious from this battle, it is not enough to disclose the truth. It is not even enough to demonstrate it…What is needed above all is dialectic, which demands the explicit consent of the interlocutor at every moment. Dialectic must skillfully choose a tortuous path…in order to admit an unforeseen conclusion."[40]

An "unforeseen conclusion" is where Woolman desires and for him this was always the gospel, the good news. The unforeseen means there is a sense of the unexpected at work in spiritual exercise. Surprise, even shock, at the truth of something unexpectedly opposite is a necessary part of spiritual growth.

Woolman speaks of this as a continuous openness to the stirrings of the conscience, even in his last years: "I was now under great exercise of mind, and my tears were poured out before the Lord with inward cries that he would graciously help me under these trials. In this case, I believe my mind was resigned, but did not feel clearness to proceed; and my own

[38] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 91. A *basanos* is the other person necessary for the encounter between self and truth, a place to work one's way to truth in relationship. It may be dialogical (spoken) or dialectical (unspoken). The *basanos* was a touchstone, a dark metal used to test the quality of other metals, making it a perfect metaphor here for slaves. It later became the word for torture to gain the truth from someone. Foucault refers to Demosthenes as the *basanos* for Alexander, the inferior speaking truth to the superior. In the same way, black people, as slaves in colonial America, act as a *basanos* for Woolman, telling him about himself, shaming him into renunciation of the outcomes of their labor.

[39] Ibid., 91.

[40] Ibid., 92.

weakness and the necessity of divine instruction was impressed upon me."[41] For him, the good news is that of always being open to being surprised by conscience.

The high value placed on conscience is unique to Quaker life. Puritans and Quietists of the time also advocated a renunciation of the self and openness to the moving of the holy Spirit to allow for a collective identification with others, but for them God remained external, something to surrender to and follow. Quakers, however, felt God on the inside: He was immanent in every person as the "Inner Light" of conscience and this existential difference made it possible for them to prioritize conscience and to "singly attend to" the light of God in the human mind.[42] This means that a person could be shaped by conscience into a new person insofar as she or he chose to respond to it. If it was worked for and allowed to overcome self-concern and self-congratulation, then one could lean upon the strength of one's convictions. This strength was the confirmation that God would never mislead, and that conscience was rightly discerned. This view of conscience mirrors that of the classical parrhesiast: the truth of one's conviction comes only after one has risked telling it.

Social Reform

Merely declaring, prophetically, that truth demands X without being willing to risk one's life for it (in all manner of ways) is not *parrhesia* and does not yield the quality of social critique found in Woolman's essays. One of the fruits of truth-telling is the ability to perceive more deeply than others than grand causes and effects of what, daily seem trivial. Part of the growing disquiet among Quakers concerned their role in global capitalism, and Woolman expressed his dismay that abstract market forces often stained the human soul by warping social relations. Compare this:

> We may reflect on the condition of the poor, innocent man, who by his labour contributes toward supporting one of his own species more wealthy then himself, on whom the rich

[41] Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, 158.

[42] It is fundamentally a higher, more positive theological anthropology, one that leans away from Augustine while remaining tethered to him (as we might expect from Radical Reformers).

> man from a desire after wealth and luxuries lays heavy burdens. When this labourer looks over the means of his heavy load, and considers that this great toil and fatigue is laid on him to support that which hath no foundation in pure wisdom, we may well suppose that there ariseth and uneasiness in his mind toward those who might without any inconvenience deal more favorably with him. When he considers that by his industry his fellow creature is benefited, and sees that this man who hath much wealth is not satisfied with being supported in a plain way—but to gratify a wrong desire and conform to wrong customs, increaseth to an extreme the labours of those occupy his estate—we may reasonably judge that he will think himself unkindly used.[43]

And this:

> To comply with demands which are not equitable is afflicting to a well-disposed mind, and for a man in power to demand service of another without proposing an equitable reward appears to me to have the spirit of persecution in it. Upright men labouring in temporal affairs have in view to do good thereby; they labour because they are convinced it is their duty. But where labours; not equitably due are required of them to gratify the covetous, luxurious, or ambitious designs of others, this lays conscientious men under great difficulty. If they comply not, they are liable to punishment, and if they do that which they believe is not right for them to do, they wound their own souls.[44]

With Karl Marx, nearly a hundred years later:

> A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products

[43] Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, 243.

[44] Ibid., 267-68.

> of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.[45]

Woolman perceives the truth of that which is "imperceptible." The new relationships forming in society because of the spread of capital spell moral harm for owners and workers alike. Workers suffer in mind and body, not the least because

> People much spent with labour often take strong drink to revive them. Were there more men usefully employed and fewer who eat bread as a reward for doing that which is not useful, then food or raiment would, on a reasonable estimate, be more in proportion to labour than it is at present.[46]

But owners fare no better, and are even worse off, because they lack the impetus to see what is wrong with the system:

> Wealth desired for its own sake obstructs the increase of virtue, and large possessions in the hands of selfish men have a bad tendency, for by their means too small a number of people are employed in things useful; and therefore they, or some of them, are necessitated to labour too hard, while others would want business to earn their bread were not employments invented which, having no real use, serve only to please the vain mind.[47]

The mind and soul of both the worker and owner of capital are distracted by that which is invented by the "vain mind." In theological language, such things are considered *idols*, and what Woolman is proposing is a recollection of the Christian self of both worker and owner. The worker seeks an idol in drink and other escapes from the anxiety of either insecurity or overwork. The owner is enamored by the idol of himself as the source of all things wondrously produced by his market ingenuity. His

---

[45] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy* (Lawrence, KS: Neeland Media, 2011), 44-45.

[46] Woolman, "A Plea for the Poor," chap. 6.

[47] Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, 238.

vanity is perceiving his longevity as stemming solely from capitalist, entrepreneurial effort and not from a life of the True Spirit:

> To treasure up wealth for another generation by means of the immoderate labour of such who in some measure depend upon us is doing evil at present, without knowing but that our wealth, thus gathered, may be applied to evil purposes when we are gone. To labour too hard or cause others to do so, that we may live conformable to customs which Christ our Redeemer contradicted by his example in the days of his flesh, and which are contrary to divine order, is to manure a soil for the propagating an evil seed in the earth.[48]

Conclusion

Whittier is right to praise John Woolman so highly and extensively.[49] Woolman's fascination with Truth led to his rigorous insistence upon it in his life; and such a life yielded an "empathetic unselfishness" that in time grew stronger and more courageous with his every visit, greeting, handshake, and sermon within his community. Truth-telling became Woolman's *habitus*: the various practices he engaged in, especially writing his *Journal*, reinforced his convictions against slavery and the mass economic system sprouting up to support it. If we imagine going up against an Apple or Amazon today, we can appreciate the courage of the abolitionists among whom, on both sides of the Atlantic, Woolman counted himself. But Woolman was an exceptional example of the breed. Soft-spoken yet firm, he literally embodied the ideals of his tradition as a beacon for fellow Quakers. Posthumously, his Cause became their cause, and the world became better, sooner, because he had lived in it.

Leonard McMahon is currently pursuing his doctorate in political theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. He holds a MA in Religious Studies

[48] Ibid., 247.

[49] Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman,* 4. Whittier is up front about his revelatory motives: "After all, anything like personal eulogy seems out of place in speaking of one who, in the humblest self-abasement, sought no place in the world's estimation, content to be only a passive instrument in the hands of his Master; and who, as has been remarked, through modesty concealed the events in which he was an actor. A desire to supply in some sort this deficiency in his Journal, is my especial excuse for this introductory paper."

from UC Santa Barbara and an MDiv from Harvard Divinity School. His interest is in strengthening civic engagement, and he works to bring divergent citizens into democratic conversation. Like Tocqueville, his argument is that religion, when properly framed, can foster the necessary habits of democracy.

Bibliography

Angell, Stephen W., and Pink Dandelion, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Cady, Edwin. *John Woolman*. New York: Twayne, 1965.

Carey, Brycchan. *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657-1761*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012.

Clooney, Francis X. "Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989–1995)." *Theological Studies* 56, no. 3 (1995): 521–50.

Foucault.info. "The Meaning and Evolution of the Word "Parrhesia." Last updated October 24, 1983. https://foucault.info/parrhesia/foucault.DT 1.wordParrhesia.en/.

_____. "Parrhesia and The Crisis of Democratic Institutions." Last updated October 31, 1983. https://foucault.info/doc/documents/parrhesia/ foucault-dt3-democracy-en-html.

_____. "The Practice of Parrhesia." Last updated November 14, 1983. https:// foucault.info/doc/documents/parrhesia/foucault-dt4-praticeparrhesia-en-html.

Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995.

Jolliff, William. "The Economy of the Inward Life: John Woolman and Henry David Thoreau." *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*, *New Series*, 15 (2007): 91-111.

Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy*. Lawrence, KS: Neeland Media, 2011.

Oehlschlaeger, Fritz. "Taking John Woolman's Christianity Seriously." *Renascence* 48, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 191-207.

Plank, Geoffrey. *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

Stewart, Margaret E. "John Woolman's "Kindness Beyond Expression": Collective Identity vs. Individualism and White Supremacy." *Early American Literature* 26, no.3 (1991), 251-75.

Woolman, John. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. Edited by Phillips P. Moulton. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989.

_____. *The Journal of John Woolman*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884.

_____. "A Plea for the Poor." Accessed April 10, 2017. http://www.umilta.net/ woolmanplea.html.

_____. *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, Intro. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=main;view=text;idno= N05781.0001.001.