

The dilemma of Quaker pacifism in a
slaveholding republic, 1833-1865.

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Ryan P. Jordan

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Dilemma of Quaker Pacifism in a Slaveholding Republic, 1833-1865

Ryan Jordan (bio)

Looking back on the relationship of Quaker meetings to the antebellum abolitionist movement, a Philadelphia associate of Lucretia Mott recounted how the abolitionist "crusade against the slaveocracy" was disliked by most Friends: Quakers in general believed "that the antislavery missionaries were stirring up strife, [and] that the preaching of hate, even of a most hateful thing, was not according to Friends' principles." While many members of the religious society admired activists such as Mott, they still remained skeptical regarding her approach to ending slavery. The writer continued, "Certainly Lucretia Mott did not intend to incite John Brown to invade Virginia and shoot half a dozen people, and then be hanged," but the "mission" of the abolitionists was nonetheless "a mistake, however good their motive," because the movement seemed to compromise with violence.¹

The unidentified comments of this Philadelphia Friend reveal how many leaders and members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) feared violent revolution around the slavery issue long before Abraham Lincoln, the Union army, and slaves did in fact unleash a second American Revolution in 1863. The proper means and ends of emancipation nagged at the conscience of many Friends for several decades before—as well as during—the Civil War. Many Quakers discovered how supporting African American freedom could **[End Page 5]** open up serious contradictions in the church's critique of state-sanctioned force. Would efforts to speak up for African American rights draw Friends into violent confrontations with mobs or slaveholders, especially if they lent clandestine support to the Underground Railroad? Was it possible for members of the new American Anti-Slavery society to avoid calling on slaves to use force to free themselves, or to simply defend their freedom once it was achieved? Finally, could pacifism be defended even at the cost of apparent support for "copperhead" Democrats and other anti-emancipation forces during the Civil War? These were some of the issues confronting Quakers who were trying to discern the political meaning of their pacifist and antislavery religious beliefs during the period from 1830 to roughly 1870.²

In the mid-nineteenth century, approximately 200,000 American Protestants belonged to various branches of the Society of Friends (Quakers). Although Quakers adhered to a congregational organization of churches, groups of meetinghouses recognized leaders, so-called weighty Friends, who exercised disciplinary and advisory power through the regional Yearly Meetings, that numbered as many as fourteen by 1840. Not surprisingly, the largest Yearly Meetings existed in the traditional Quaker stronghold of Pennsylvania, as well as in the states to which Pennsylvanians migrated, namely Ohio and Indiana. But smaller numbers of members of the church could be found from New England, to North Carolina, to Iowa.³

Although they possessed differing theological views, all Quakers possessed distinctive pacifist and antislavery convictions, convictions that represented a rejection of human government in anticipation of the government of God. These ideas had once brought nothing but trouble to the "peculiar people," largely because of their anarchic implications. But they maintained their pacifism, and they constituted the largest—and arguably the first—church to disallow slaveholding in the late eighteenth century. Even as the Society of Friends was rocked by dissension beginning with the theologically liberal **[End Page 6]** preaching of Elias Hicks in the 1820s (Hicks and his followers then established separate meetings of Friends called "Hicksite"—their opponents were the self-styled "Orthodox"), all of these "Quakers" continued to claim allegiance to the teachings of the seventeenth-century founder of the church, George Fox. Quakers possessed a common cultural inheritance of struggle against the world: a famous example of this had occurred in the 1750s, when leading Pennsylvania Quakers exchanged political power for pacifist principles during the French and Indian war.⁴ Nineteenth-century arguments over the divinity of Christ, or over the extent of Quaker involvement in the "benevolent Empire" of missionary and Bible societies, could not erase that peculiarly Quaker, dissenting attitude toward human government. Whether they lived on the fringes of traditional Quaker territory (such as upstate New York or North Carolina) or within the city of Philadelphia, all those who...

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RYAN JORDAN

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1. “M.J.D.,” undated letter, in *Slavery Misc. MSS*, Swarthmore Friends Collection, Swarthmore, Pa.



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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