



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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English Quakers campaign for freedom of religion, 1647-1689

Time period notes: Start date is when George Fox, commonly believed to be the founder of Quakerism, first had a vision that "there is one, even, Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition."

End date is the English Parliament's passage of *The Toleration Act of 1689*.

(1647)

1600's

to: (1689)

1600's

Country: England

Location Description: *England*

Goals:

The Quakers wished to be able to freely practice their religion in England.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 063. Social disobedience
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 177. Speak-in
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 063. Social disobedience

- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 177. Speak-in
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 063. Social disobedience
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 177. Speak-in
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 063. Social disobedience
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 177. Speak-in
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 063. Social disobedience
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 177. Speak-in
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 063. Social disobedience
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 177. Speak-in
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 180. Alternative communication system

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 013. Deputations
- 022. Protest disrobings
- 052. Silence
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- English innovators and members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

George Fox; Margaret Fell; Francis Howgill

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Other groups of the Nonconformist Movement

Involvement of social elites:

King Charles II, Oliver Cromwell

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Francis Howgill
- George Fox
- Margaret Fell

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Due to the loose nature of the movement, it is hard to define when various groups and leaders entered this campaign.

Segment Length: *Approximately 7 years*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Government of England, Church of England

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Arrests; beatings; whippings; starvation; physical abuse in prison; deaths in prison

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The English Parliament passed The Toleration Act in 1689, which granted Quakers religious freedom in England. Quakerism lasted throughout the movement and is still practiced today in England and around the world.

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) emerged in England in the late 1640's among those who challenged the standard doctrine of the Church of England. Quakerism began as a sect whose members believed that there was a piece of God within every person and that everyone could communicate with God directly. This was a radical view for the time. Out of this belief, Quakers developed a strong sense of equality and believed that every person could be a minister. George Fox (1624 - 1691), a young, slender, Englishman of meager upbringing, is often credited with being the one to found this new religious society. Starting in the late 1640's, Fox traveled around England, acquiring support for what he called "a great people to be gathered".

Fox was an engaging, lively individual, who did not hesitate to speak his mind, even when it would get him in trouble with the English establishment. He quickly drew support and a rapidly growing following. Taking Fox's actions as examples, other converts quickly started to follow in his footsteps and travel around England, spreading the Quaker message. Based on their belief of equality that all people, regardless of gender or status, were equal under God, Quakers refused to adhere to many social norms in England, such as taking off their hats in church or when approaching someone of an equal or superior social status. Quakers also opposed war and would not swear oaths in court, asserting that they always spoke truthfully. In general, the English government and the Church of England misunderstood the Quakers and their actions, and Quakers, along with other

religious groups that were not part of the establishment (Nonconformists), suffered from religious persecution.

One of George Fox's most avid supporters, Margaret Askew Fell, became another one of the movement's strongest leaders. Using her wealth and high social status, Fell converted her home at Swarthmoor Hall in England into a communications center for Quakers around the world. She supported ministers, including Fox, as they traveled throughout England and beyond to spread the message of Quakerism. Most of those who traveled went from town to town in England converting people to Quakerism and establishing Quaker meetinghouses - plain, simple structures where Quakers would worship. These individuals are known more recently under the collective name the "Valiant Sixty."

The English establishment often harshly persecuted the Quakers with long imprisonments, starvation, beatings, whippings, and other forms of punishment. This form of religious domination was common in England at that time, and the government used this tactic of oppression to try to silence not just Quakers, but other Nonconformists as well who opposed the traditional religious and civil authority. Fox himself was imprisoned at least eight times as he challenged the social order of the day. These early leaders and ministers of the Religious Society of Friends served as spiritual guides for their new religious community, holding meetings and publishing leaflets. Fox wrote prolifically about his beliefs, taking advantage of the recent end of censorship in England, and encouraged his followers to do the same.

One of George Fox's followers, Francis Howgill, became yet another leading preacher among early Friends. Prior to his alignment with Fox in 1652, Howgill had been a leader in the Separatists Movement, another group within the Nonconformists umbrella. He joined with Fox in 1652 and started the Quaker London Mission in 1654, along with Edward Borrough. Howgill published pamphlets on Quakerism. He was imprisoned for life for refusing to swear the Oath of Allegiance to the Church of England.

Starting in 1662, the English Parliament began passing a series of laws whose sole purpose was to silence the Quakers. The first of these laws was "An Act for preventing mischiefs and dangers that may arise by certain persons called Quakers and others refusing to take lawful oaths," commonly known as "The Quaker Act of 1662". This act made it illegal for Quakers to worship together. Many members of the Religious Society of Friends reacted to these laws by holding meetings for worship in secret, but others continued to meet openly and faced the ongoing persecution. Quaker meetings organized to support their members who were imprisoned or fined for their beliefs and actions, and they often cared for the children of those who were in jail. The Quaker Act also made it illegal for people to refuse to swear the Oath of Allegiance to the Church of England.

Two years after the Quaker Act was passed, the English Parliament passed the Conventicle Act, which restated that no other religious meetings could take place except those carried out by the Official Church of England. Parliament passed another Conventicle Act in 1670. These three Acts resulted in the arrests, punishments, and imprisonments of thousands of Friends in England. Parliament passed the Five Mile Act in 1665, which prevented Quakers from forming their own townships. Parliament was not only targeting Quakers, but also others in the Nonconformist Movement.

Through it all, Quakers continued to openly practice their religion. They met for worship in their meetinghouses, and they drew attention to themselves by articulating their beliefs during speeches and sermons on the streets. Fox would often stand outside steeplehouses and preach loudly, so that people inside the church could hear. These actions by the Quakers resulted in more imprisonments, but from within and without prison walls, Quakers continued to practice.

Stemming from their belief that everyone possessed a divine spark, Quakers would often approach those who they may have thought to be their enemies and try to befriend them. Two examples are Oliver Cromwell, an authoritative figure in the Church of England, and King Charles II. Both George Fox and Margaret Fell met with these two on multiple occasions, befriendng them and pleading for religious freedom. Their efforts paid off, and on one occasion, King Charles II pardoned 500 Quakers. In all, it is estimated that over 11,000 Quakers were imprisoned in England in the second half of the Seventeenth Century and 243 died in jail.

The manner in which some Quakers practiced their religion went beyond the loose boundaries that Fox and Fell had set. In 1656,

James Nayler, a prominent English Quaker, rode his horse into Bristol naked, imitating Christ. Historian Harold Loukes notes that as a result, "[Nayler] was sentenced to be pilloried, whipped through the streets, to have his tongue bored through with a hot iron and to be branded on his forehead with a 'B', for Blasphemer. Then he was to be sent to Bristol, tied backward on a horse, whipped in the marketplace, and finally imprisoned in solitary confinement. The cruel sentence was carried out in full, and Nayler lay in prison for years, struggling back through his shame and suffering to the true vision from which he had fallen."

Most Quakers did not actively seek arrest, but others went out looking to be arrested because it was a way to "witness" their faith. Their other methods of resistance, such as refusing to use proper titles and wearing simple dress, were also sometimes more for their own benefit than to provoke those who were persecuting them. If the English government locked one of their meetinghouses and barred them from entering it, Quakers would simply meet outside. They did this so they could continue to worship as well as to show the English government that they would not stand down.

After many years of struggle and persecution, the English government finally conceded to the Quakers' demand for religious freedom. Parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689, which repealed the earlier anti-Quaker laws and allowed Friends to freely and openly worship together.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Quakers were influenced by the teachings of Jesus and by their perceptions of direct communication with God. This movement influenced other movements for religious freedom in Europe and the English Colonies in America.

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Additional Notes:

This case was originally researched and written by Sophia Naylor, 18 April 2010.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Carl E. Sigmond, 01/04/2012

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