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# An investigation of Early Modern Quakers' Business Ethics

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### **Abstract**

During the late seventeenth century, when the Atlantic trade experienced unprecedented growth, Quakers emerged as the region's most prominent trading community. Economic Historians credit the group and its business ethics with shaping the economic environment of early modern England and, consequently, its long term economic growth. This paper, however, argues that Friends' business ethics were identical to those of their non-Quaker contemporaries. Using a wide range of both Quaker and non-Quaker sources, including sermons and merchant advice literature, this paper constitutes the first in-depth study of Quaker and non-Quaker business ethics. Having refuted the claim that the community's commercial achievements reflect a unique blend of honesty, reliability, and swift payment of debts, the paper suggests an alternative explanation for Friends' business success.

**Keywords:** Institutions, Business ethics, Religion, Quakers, Economic thought, Early Modern England, Seventeenth century history, Eighteenth century history, Trade, Protestantism

**JEL Codes:** B1, N00, N3

## **An investigation of Early Modern Quakers' Business Ethics.**

Long distance trade in the early modern Atlantic was risky because of the difficulties of information transmission and contract enforcement.<sup>1</sup> This limited the number of business people prepared to enter it. Yet the number of merchants joining the market grew a good deal during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and this trade experienced unprecedented growth.<sup>2</sup>

Economic transformations in the Atlantic in the period would shape British economic development forever, including setting the stage for Britain to become the first country to industrialise. Thus, they lie at the root of present day global inequality.<sup>3</sup>

Economic Historians continue to dispute the details of these economic transformations, however. Recent interpretations include the New Institutional Economists' arguments that new institutions emerged for the enforcement of property rights<sup>4</sup>, as well as Joel Mokyr's theory that enlightenment ideas had a positive impact on attitudes towards science and progress in Britain, leading to technological innovation and thus facilitating industrialisation. Deirdre McCloskey has attributed the economic transformations of the period to an 'ethical change' which began 'in north western Europe a little before and after 1700'.<sup>5</sup>

One group stands out in British commerce in the period McCloskey names: the Quakers. While constituting at most 1.8% of the metropolis' population, Friends accounted for 17.24% of London's export merchants, and 2.4% of its 850 wealthiest merchants.<sup>6</sup> In Philadelphia, North America's largest eighteenth century port, Quakers made up over half of those paying taxes in

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<sup>1</sup> Zahedieh 2010, Ch.2; Nash 2005, p.98; Butel 1999, Ch.6

<sup>2</sup> McCusker and Morgan, 2000; Hancock, 2000; Morgan 2000, pp.36-64; Menard 2000, pp.154-162; Price 1996, Section 1

<sup>3</sup> North and Thomas 1973; North 1981; North 1990; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2002; North and Weingast 1989

<sup>4</sup> Pearson and Richardson 2008; Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2005; Acemoglu and Johnson 2004; Chang 2011; Nunn 2009; North and Thomas 1973; North 1981; North 1990; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2002; Austin 2008; North and Weingast 1989; Banerjee and Iyer 2005

<sup>5</sup> McCloskey 2006, p.16

<sup>6</sup> I arrive at these numbers by comparing the findings of various authors: Perry Gauci compiled a database of London merchants based on tax returns in the 1690s, when wealthy merchants had to pay an extra levy. Simon Dixon (2007) estimated that there were at most 8000 Quakers in London in 1700. Nuala Zahedieh (1999) identified ten Quakers among the 59 leading merchants of the 1686 London port books. See also Jordan Landes (2011). On Quaker success in commerce see Lloyd 1950, Emden 1940, Davison 1964, Grassby 2001, p.70; De Krey 1985, Hoppit 1987, p.15; Walvin 1997, p.207.

excess of £100 in 1769, in spite of constituting at most 1/7 of Philadelphia's population.

Moreover, 12 of the 17 wealthiest Philadelphians at the time were either Quakers or raised as Quakers.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Leslie Hannah has credited the Quakers with helping create 'a climate conducive to rapid economic growth' in early modern England.<sup>8</sup>

The Quakers' commercial success has been widely attributed to their business ethics.<sup>9</sup> These, it has been argued, were distinct in emphasising honesty and a swift payment of debts. A careful review of the literature however, has revealed that scholars who make this case solely analysed Quaker sources. This paper provides the first in-depth comparison of early modern Quaker and non-Quaker business ethics, finding it fails to support a strong distinction. Rather, early modern business ethics constituted a response to the risks involved in long distance trade in an environment which lacked strong state institutions for contract enforcement. These risks were the same for business people independent of their faith. Hence, the behavioural norms Quakers and conformists developed in order to mitigate these risks were also similar.

## I

Religious and ethnic minorities were prominent in early modern trade around the world. Be it Jews and Armenians in Europe and the Middle East, Chinese in Southeast Asia, Muslims in the Indian Ocean, or protestant dissenters in the British colonial and Levantine trades, ethnic and religious minorities have successfully forged and maintained trade routes over vast distances and long periods of time.<sup>10</sup> Economic Historians have identified the network benefits of small groups at work in most of these cases, which allow information to flow and the monitoring of individuals' conduct within the confines of the community. The Jewish Maghrebi traders of the

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<sup>7</sup> Tolles 1948:49

<sup>8</sup> Hannah 2000: 290,3,7

<sup>9</sup> Tolles 1948: 45, 51, 58; Raistrick 1950: 13, 16, 18, 44, 47; Prior and Kirby 1993: 66-68; Walvin 1997: 32, 34, 35; Lloyd 1950: 70, 71; Kirby 1993: 108

<sup>10</sup> De Krey (1985) on Puritans, Huguenots and Dissenters, especially p.102, 76; Bratchel, M.E. (1996); Ojala, J. (1997); Smith, S.(2006); Bouchon, G. (1999); Risso, Patricia (1995); Lovejoy, P.E. (1996); Aghassian, M. And Keram, K. (1999); Hundert, G.D. (1996); Wang, G. (1990); Landa, J. (1981)

medieval Mediterranean benefited from a common identity and networks which were the result of a migration process.<sup>11</sup> English Puritans benefited from their kinship and community ties with New England; and exiled Huguenots benefited from old French ties to the Levant.<sup>12</sup> Quakers constitute an exception in this respect. The literature has argued that their success was based on a communal reputation for honesty recognized among other Quakers and non-Quakers alike, facilitated by their distinct values, which made them particularly trustworthy.<sup>13</sup> Maurice Kirby, for example, argued that ‘The Society of Friends (...) was infused with a strong moral culture which redounded to the advantage of the Quaker businessman in terms of confidence and expectations.’<sup>14</sup> Frederick Tolles argued that ‘Because Quaker businessmen were known to be scrupulously honest, people were glad to deal with them.’<sup>15</sup> Raistrick called their ethics ‘the mainspring of the Quakers’ marvellous commercial success.’<sup>16</sup>

Social theory posits that ethics, including business ethics, are the behavioural expression of norms—expectations shared by a community.<sup>17</sup> Norms are instilled, beginning in childhood, through social networks, kinship groups, clans, or religious or ethnic minority communities.<sup>18</sup> A reputation for trustworthiness suggests that others share or at least appreciate the norms that govern a group’s behaviour. Trust lowers risk in exchange, thus merchants prefer to do business with those they perceive to be trustworthy. Therefore a community with particularly favourable norms regarding the conduct of business will have a competitive advantage in trade.<sup>19</sup> A variety of

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<sup>11</sup> Greif 2006

<sup>12</sup> De Krey 1985, Brenner 1993: 148

<sup>13</sup> Tolles 1948: 45, 51, 58; Raistrick 1950: 13, 16, 18, 44, 47; Prior and Kirby 1993: 66-68; Walvin 1997: 32, 34, 35; Lloyd 1950: 70, 71; Kirby 1993: 108

<sup>14</sup> Kirby 1993: 108

<sup>15</sup> Tolles 1948: 59

<sup>16</sup> Raistrick 1950:13, 44, 48, for the same argument see also Prior and Kirby 1993: p.67, Casson 1993: 44, Nevaskar 1971: 219.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Individuals accept a norm, and others’ right to implement it, if they benefit themselves from others’ abiding by it’ Coleman 1990: 288. His definition states that communities will punish deviations from norms.

<sup>18</sup> Landa 1994: 108, Ogilvie 2011, citing Gambetta and Coleman; Casson 1993: 40

<sup>19</sup> Coleman 1990:106,7

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scholars have attributed honesty, reliability, risk adversity, and the prompt settlement of debts to Quakers.<sup>20</sup>

The comparative literature on the historical development of business ethics is still limited.<sup>21</sup> Max Weber famously argued that Calvinism introduced to Europe a rational, methodical, and controlled thriving for individual economic betterment, including the virtues of reliability, honesty, and punctuality in business, thereby supporting the development of capitalism.<sup>22</sup> His work on the protestant ethic has fuelled scholarly debates for almost a century, incurring a fair amount of criticism.<sup>23</sup> R.H. Tawney argued that Weber underestimated the evolution of Calvinism from community enforced asceticism to highly individualistic cultures encouraging the pursuit of wealth through industry, thrift, and diligence.<sup>24</sup> As he argues, Puritanism gave these virtues ‘a supernatural sanction, [and] turned them from an unsocial eccentricity into a habit and a religion’.<sup>25</sup> More recently, Albert Hirschman argued that early modern philosophers, including Montesquieu and Stewart, proposed the economic virtues of frugality, moderation, work, order and regularity, and individual pursuit of wealth as a means of achieving political stability and that these virtues therefore preceded Calvinism. While Weber might propose that Calvinism pioneered the idea of diverting humans’ ‘passions’ towards the individual pursuit of wealth, Hirschman locates this in an earlier source.<sup>26</sup>

While certainly influenced by Calvinist and Puritan ideas, Quakerism in fact rejected their core belief in predestination. Instead they emphasised individual agency as the route to salvation.<sup>27</sup>

Seventeenth century Quakers aimed at radical religious and political reform, propagating a highly

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<sup>20</sup> Tolles 1950: 51-58; Raistrick 1950: 44, 48; Prior and Kirby 1993: 67,8; Walvin 1997: 32, 34; Lloyd 1950: 70,1  
Raistrick 1950: 44; Emden 1940: 13-25; Nevaskar 1971:130,136,219

<sup>21</sup> Abend (2014: 15) traced the concept of business ethics’ back to c. 1850 and equally found that there has to date been almost no research on the topic.

<sup>22</sup> Weber 1958

<sup>23</sup> Tawney 1926; for more recent studies dealing with Weber’s theory see for instance Dudley 2001; Woessman and Becker 2009

<sup>24</sup> Tawney 1926:111, 115, 227, 272

<sup>25</sup> Tawney 1926: 272. He added Puritanism’s aversion against gambling, swearing, excess in apparel, self-indulgence in eating and drinking.

<sup>26</sup> Hirschman 1977: 71, citing Montesquieu *Esprit de lois*, V, p.7

<sup>27</sup> Peters 2005:2

participatory form of worship. They believed that all humans ought to aim at leading life according to Christian principles. For Friends the Holy Spirit is more important than the scriptures, and it may speak through anyone. This belief led them to abandon rituals in worship as well as clergy and all hierarchy within the community of believers. However, I argue that these doctrinal differences do not support the existence of a distinct Quaker ethic that explains their business success.

## II

The main body of Quaker sources analysed for this paper are the London Yearly Meeting's annual epistles sent to the Monthly Meetings all over the Atlantic World. The London Yearly Meeting (LYM) was the main governing body of the Society of Friends in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; in addition to annual meetings gathering representatives of local and regional meetings, the group instituted quarterly regional meetings and monthly local meetings.<sup>28</sup> The annual meeting declared in 1681 that the yearly epistles would be read out in regional quarterly meetings.<sup>29</sup> These epistles provide information on the situation of the community, persecution and growth, rules of conduct in all aspects of life, from worship to marriage to church administration to business. They survive for almost every year since 1675 and the LYM continues to produce them to this day.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the epistles, I analysed several early Quaker writings. These include two works by early Quaker leader and founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn, 'No Cross, no crown', and

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<sup>28</sup> There were earlier instances of large gatherings (conferences) of Friends, but the LYM's establishment in 1675 marked the first such formal institution. Its purpose was to deal with 'church affairs and records, representing Friends throughout (...) a country and recognised as having spiritual (and some temporal) authority' (Milligan 2007: 593; Braithwaite 1955). Decisions rendered at the Yearly Meeting governed decisions made at regional Quarterly Meetings, which in turn had authority over and were made up of representatives of monthly meetings of an area, which in turn represented local meetings for worship in their area.

<sup>29</sup> Epistle 1681: 12. I have no evidence as to the degree to which this was carried out. Copies of the epistles are included regularly among the London monthly meetings' minutes and there is no reason to doubt that they were distributed far and wide.

<sup>30</sup> Epistles from the period 1677–1681 are the only ones that do not survive. *Quaker faith & practice: the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, consists of extracts of the LYM's annual epistles. It was first put together in manuscript form in 1737 and from 1782 onwards has been updated, based on the epistles, and continues to publish regularly. Today it is called Britain Yearly Meeting.

‘Advice to his Children’ as well as the works of the political economic thinker John Bellers.<sup>31</sup> The final Quaker source I consulted was three pamphlets the early Friends produced advocating for religious and political reform in the 1650s—the only three that address business ethics—early Quaker leader George Fox’ 1658 ‘Warning to all merchants in London and such as buy and sell’, his 1674 ‘Line of righteousness,’ and ‘A brief and serious warning of such as are concerned in commerce and trading, who go under the profession of ‘Truth’ by the Quaker minister Ambrose Rigge, first published in 1678.<sup>32</sup>

To study non-Quaker business ethics, I analysed two types of sources, the first of which is sermons by both Anglicans and non-conformist ministers.<sup>33</sup> Both formed major parts of the early modern book trade.<sup>34</sup> The majority of sermons dealt with practical subjects, including Christian life and doctrine. Surprisingly few stipulated how to conduct business in a Christian manner.<sup>35</sup> My methodological blurring of the distinction between the sermons of Anglican and moderate nonconformist ministers reflects the fact that numerous Anglican clergymen were ejected from the church as a consequence of the restoration of 1660.<sup>36</sup> As Dixon states, the sermons the two groups published were ‘similar in content, published in similar books by the same printers, [and] sold by the same book sellers’.<sup>37</sup> Dixon concludes, and I agree, that marketing likely made few distinctions. Hence the sermons quoted in this paper will only be identified as to the background of their authorship. While the date of these sources’ first publication is often unclear, making it impossible to make a distinction between different periods in comparing them to Quaker

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<sup>31</sup> Fox 1658, Rigge 1678, Penn 1669, 1682, Bellers 1695; the limited number of extant Quaker sermons don’t deal with business related topics.

<sup>32</sup> Kate Peters(2005: 48) has demonstrated that the hundreds of pamphlets the early Friends produced in the 1650s were used strategically for reform; ministers distributed them across the country.

<sup>33</sup> Quaker sermons differ from other sermons in several respects. First of all, very few were printed. Quaker preaching was meant to be spontaneous; there was no clergy and lay people were to speak during Quaker meetings if they were moved to do so by God. While 74 sermons survive for the period 1671-1700, mostly by eminent Quaker leaders, none of these deal with business-related topics. See Graves 2012

<sup>34</sup> Printed sermons were available in a wide range of prices, from two penny chapbooks to expensive folio editions. Some were bestsellers, others printed at the expense of their authors. While some sermons were edited and altered for publication after being preached and some had never been preached, they were widely circulated and therefore reflect community norms. R. Dixon 2011: 460, 476

<sup>35</sup> Sermons frequently responded to contemporary political events (Francis 2012: 10).

<sup>36</sup> Francis 2012: 13, R. Dixon 2011: 473

<sup>37</sup> R. Dixon 2011: p.471



sources, all of the sermons I analyse were publicly available in print in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

My second non-Quaker source is merchant advice manuals. From 1470 to 1820, about 12 000 commercial advice manuals were published in Europe, emerging as an important genre after the restoration.<sup>38</sup> Some authors advertised their books for use in writing schools, but others explicitly addressed merchants and tradesmen, and the kind of behaviour the authors considered conducive to success in trade.<sup>39</sup> Daniel Rabuzzi argued that they ‘attempted to infuse their readers with values and a rationale to go along with the techniques required by a given task’.<sup>40</sup> While the secondary literature argues that most authors claiming to be merchants probably were not, and these manuals do not present a source for actual merchant conduct, I present them as evidence of the reading public’s expectations of merchants’ behaviour.<sup>41</sup>

I analyse the challenges these sources identify for business people. I compare the remedies they propose and the arguments and evidence they use for support. I compare how they illustrate their points, the metaphors they use, and the verses of scripture they reference.

### III

My analysis reveals that Quaker and non-Quaker sources emphasised the importance of keeping promises, in particular the diligent settling of debts. The existence of limited formal institutions for contract enforcement made maintaining a reputation for trustworthiness and risk adversity vital for traders. Both groups of sources reflect these conditions.

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<sup>38</sup> Rabuzzi 1995: 170; Glaisyer 2011: 104: In England, ten such texts were published in the first decade of the century, and 72 in the last.

<sup>39</sup> These manuals include advice and instruction to readers regarding accounting, bills of exchange, letter writing, dictionaries of commercial terms, details of coaches and fairs and general business affairs, such as procedures at a custom house, Glaisyer 100-103; Rabuzzi 1995: 175

<sup>40</sup> Rabuzzi 1995: 171

<sup>41</sup> Most probably were not: Glaisyer 113, evidence of the reading public’s perception of merchants’ behaviour: Rabuzzi 1995: 170-5

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Early Quaker leader George Fox warned all those engaged in trading to ‘keep out of debts (...) Go not beyond your estates, lest thy bring yourselves to trouble, and cumber, and a snare’.<sup>42</sup>

Later Quaker writings on debts are basically repetitions of this doctrine. Quaker minister Ambrose Rigge in his 1678 pamphlet warned Friends not to borrow what they wouldn’t be able to repay. Penn advised, “Be sure to draw your affairs into as narrow a compass as you can, and in method and proportion, time and other requisites proper for them.”<sup>43</sup> LYM epistles referred to the settlement of debts first in 1692, warning that

‘the payment of just debts be not delayed (...) nor any to overcharge themselves with too much trading and commerce beyond their capacities to discharge a good conscience towards all men: and that all Friends concerned be very careful not (...) to break their promises, contracts, or agreements, in their buying and selling...’<sup>44</sup>

This advice is repeated in similar wording 26 times until 1797.

Non-Quaker sources were similar. Church of Ireland dean of Down and writer Patrick Delany deemed ‘the duty of paying debts: a duty of as great consequence to the wellbeing of society, as any other whatsoever; as comprehending under it one great and important branch of commutative justice’.<sup>45</sup> He also admonished carelessness in contracting and discharging debts, and argued that as trade is inter-linked, ‘the failure of one man here may affect many others in the remotest regions of the earth.’<sup>46</sup>

N.H.’s ‘Compleat Tradesman’ of 1684 exemplifies the merchant advice literature’s approach to debt. It advised its readers ‘not to engage in too many businesses, lest so many Irons burn, nor in

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<sup>42</sup> Fox 1674.

<sup>43</sup> Penn 1682: 21

<sup>44</sup> Epistles 1692, p.50; 1703, p.84 refers also to not defrauding the government; 1708, p.97; 1724, p.138; for biographical information for Delany and all other authors cited see Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online.

<sup>45</sup> Delany 1747: 240

<sup>46</sup> Delany 1747: 250

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too great Affairs, lest thy loss prove Irreparable...'<sup>47</sup> Equally, dissenter Daniel Defoe warned traders 'not to launch out in adventures beyond the compass of their stocks; and withal, to manage those things with due wariness'.<sup>48</sup>

Both groups of authors quote scripture to support their arguments. Rom xiii.8, 'Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another, hath fulfilled the law' appears frequently in both Quaker and non-Quaker sources, which interpret it as an exhortation to pay financial debts diligently and punctually, while the only way to repay our neighbours' love is to love them back ever more abundantly. Fox referred to this verse when warning, 'all of what trade or calling soever, keep out of debts; owe no man anything but love.(...) For a man that (...) runs into debt, and lives highly of other men's means; he is a waster of other men's [goods] and a destroyer.'<sup>49</sup> Similarly, non-Quaker Delany referenced the same verse in a 1747 sermon, as did Anglican theologian Berriman in a 1763 sermon, reminding readers that 'debt of love or charity can never be discharged'.<sup>50</sup>

Notably, Quakers and non-Quakers alike warned of debt's danger to lenders as well as borrowers. Both drew attention to the well-being of the innocent families of men who borrow or lend who might be harmed by the breaking of debts.<sup>51</sup> The 1710 LYM epistle, upon 'considering the great suffering that hath been brought (...) by divers (...) breaking their words, promises, and obligations, to the great injury of others, by not paying their just debts in due time' referred Friends to Fox' epistle on the matter, which was to be read at meetings as they 'may see occasion.'<sup>52</sup> In 1755 it warned that 'An eager desire after riches hath ruined many, by pushing them in the pursuit thereof upon dangerous attempts...the utter loss and ruin of many persons and their families...'<sup>53</sup> Presbyterian minister Edmund Calamy similarly noted that 'they that will

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<sup>47</sup> N.H.:78

<sup>48</sup> Defoe 1738:.viii; see also Berriman 1763:2 27; Delany 1747: 240

<sup>49</sup> Fox 1674

<sup>50</sup> Berriman 1763: 227, 244

<sup>51</sup> Epistles 1702: 82

<sup>52</sup> Epistles 1710: 102f.

<sup>53</sup> Epistles 1755: 245, 1755, similar 1778: 328

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be rich (...) expose their families as well as themselves'.<sup>54</sup> The reverend William Scott emphasised the danger of dying and leaving one's families in the difficult situation of settling one's debts.<sup>55</sup> William Fleetwood, Bishop of Ely in 1718, equally emphasised this point.<sup>56</sup>

Religious and secular writers of the period, including Quaker sources, agree that debts had to be paid and that borrowers must avoid activities that might endanger their ability to settle debts. They also concede that merchants did not always heed this advice, agreeing in general that the temptation of material gain, covetousness, led businesspeople to take inappropriate risks. Authors of all denominations appear of the same mind, expressing their concern about this violation of the tenth commandment, 'Though shalt not covet' in the same ways. Most cite 1 Tim vi. 9-11, which warns that

'They that will be rich, fall into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil; which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.'

Quaker and non-Quaker sources alike refer to this passage more than any other from the bible. Moreover, they understand the term 'covetousness' in the same two ways, as the desire for other people's possession, and the pursuit of material gain without moderation. Presbyterian minister John Abernethy defined covetousness as 'an immoderate desire of worldly possessions in whatever way they are to be acquired, even supposing it should be without injustice of any kind.' Quaker leader William Penn explained it to be the 'desiring of unlawful things' and the 'unlawfully desiring of lawful things.'<sup>57</sup>

These discussions raise the question, urgent in the rapidly commercialising society of seventeenth and eighteenth century England, as to where the line was to be drawn between covetousness and

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<sup>54</sup> Calamy 1709: 11

<sup>55</sup> Scott 1773: 7

<sup>56</sup> Fleetwood 1718:7

<sup>57</sup> Penn 1669: 194. See Ephes. 5.3.5.; 1 Tim 6,9,10

ambition as an acceptable drive for personal betterment. Religious leaders of all denominations discussed the matter frequently in their writings, and arrived at the same conclusion: honest, hard-working individuals were entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour. However, ambition became covetousness when they endangered the common good or the well-being of others.<sup>58</sup>

Abernethy distinguished between ‘moderate industry’ and ‘the exorbitant passion which is properly called covetousness.’<sup>59</sup> John Bradford, Church of England clergyman and Independent minister, emphasised that gaining wealth through lawful methods and hard work was acceptable, even to a degree greater than required to answer one’s own necessities, if it promoted the well-being of Society as a whole, ‘as honest trade and commerce will do’.<sup>60</sup> Presbyterian minister David Lamont explained that ‘Industry, or proper application to business, does not constitute covetousness’.<sup>61</sup> Anglican clergyman Henry Stebbing argued that ‘it makes a very essential Difference in this case, whether a Man gathers wealth by honest or dishonest means.’<sup>62</sup>

Quaker sources are similar. Penn added ‘unprofitably with-holding the benefit’ of goods, i.e., hoarding, to his definition of covetousness.<sup>63</sup> LYM emphasised that industry is ‘praise worthy’ and ‘indispensable’ but that Friends should be ‘redeemed’ from ‘the desire of great things, and the engrossment of the time and attention’. The same epistle describes covetousness as ‘common, destructive cause (...) of many particulars of deviation’.<sup>64</sup>

Quaker and non-Quaker writings as well as religious and secular sources discuss luxury and extravagance versus plainness. The 1750s and 1760s saw broad public debate in periodicals, books, sermons, and pamphlets on this topic.<sup>65</sup> Early in the 1750–1770 period, authors describe it

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<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of these debates in both the Middleages and Early Modern period see Tawney 1926

<sup>59</sup> Abernethy 1731: 316; see also Enfield 1782; Lamont 1780: 131; Stebbing 1759: 78-94, 80;

<sup>60</sup> Bradford 1720: 21; also Wheatland 1739: 43; Foster 1744: 183,4, quotes verse on p.186; see also Calamy 1709: 4,5

<sup>61</sup> Lamont 1780: 130

<sup>62</sup> Stebbing 1759: 85

<sup>63</sup> Penn 1669:194 See Ephes. 5.3.5; 1 Tim 6,9,10

<sup>64</sup> Epistle 1797:383

<sup>65</sup> Sekora 1977: 66

as a ‘common current vice’, and potentially a threat to the state.<sup>66</sup> Scholars have argued that the debate was connected to the expansion of trade, especially in luxury goods, and increased consumerism.<sup>67</sup> In the early eighteenth century luxury was regarded as sinful, but as Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger describe, it ‘gradually lost its former associations with corruption and vice’.<sup>68</sup> Denunciations of luxury declined in Quaker and non-Quaker sources alike beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, reflecting Berg and Eger’s description that by this point luxury was regarded as a sign of ‘production [and] trade’ that had a ‘civilising impact’ and benefited the country.<sup>69</sup> An economic and nationalist perspective replaced the traditional moral perspective.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, fewer goods were defined as luxuries by 1800; reading and education, for example, had gone from luxuries to necessities.<sup>71</sup>

The sources consulted for this paper reflect the currency of this debate, but they do not relax in their condemnation of covetousness. They argue that people live beyond their means in order to afford luxuries and therefore borrow more than they could hope to repay and engage in risky business transactions. Hence, they regarded being modest and plain in one’s life style as a way of meeting the challenge of covetousness. Penn, for example, warned in his ‘Advice to his children’ to ‘avoid pride as you would avoid the devil, remembering you must die, and consequently those things must die with you that could be any temptation to pride; and that there is a judgment follows, at which you must give an account both of what you have enjoyed and done.’<sup>72</sup> In references spread throughout the period, the epistles mentioned pride, luxury, and extravagance 32 times between 1688 and 1798, referencing ‘outward habits and fashions,’<sup>73</sup> ‘words, ways,

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<sup>66</sup> Sekora places the peak of the controversy in the period from 1753 – 1763, Sekora 1977: 64-66. Hunt (1996: 50) also found that luxury was ‘routinely condemned in the eighteenth century’.

<sup>67</sup> Langford 1998: 577; Berg and Eger 2002: 11

<sup>68</sup> Berg and Eger 2002: 7

<sup>69</sup> Berg and Eger 2002:7; Important in this development was Mandeville’s 1705 ‘Fable of the Bees’, which depicted trade and luxury as both vicious, and beneficial to the nation (Berg and Eger 2002:10). He introduced the argument that consumption, in spite of its negative image, was beneficial to the well-being of the nation, through increasing demand and thereby trade, which caused great controversy (Sekora 1977: 65-7).

<sup>70</sup> Corruption in turn was linked to negative elements including national debt, stock-jobbing, and the moneyed companies, Sekora 1977: 64, 113.

<sup>71</sup> Berry 1994: 125

<sup>72</sup> Penn 1682: 42

<sup>73</sup> Epistle 1688: 329 ‘excess apparel and furniture’; 1703: 85

fashions and customs of the world'<sup>74</sup> and the 'glittering gaiety of this vain world'.<sup>75</sup> In 1734 LYM issued a particularly long epistle regarding the 'Vain fashions and corrupt customs of the world'.<sup>76</sup> In 1763, it warned the affluent not to get carried away 'into pride, indolence, and extravagance' as this had led to debts and ruin.<sup>77</sup> In 1768 it reprinted and distributed Quaker minister Ambrose Rigge's 1678 epistle quoted above warning tradesmen not to borrow in order to finance an expensive lifestyle.<sup>78</sup> Delany of the Church of Ireland warned that a 'spirit of extravagance' and living above one's fortune was dangerous.<sup>79</sup> Defoe named extravagant living as a frequent cause for tradesmen's financial ruin.<sup>80</sup>

Authors of various denominations likened covetousness, luxury, pride, and vanity to a highly contagious illness. Penn called it 'A disease as epidemical, as killing: it creeps into all stations and ranks of men; the poorest often exceeding their ability to indulge their appetite; and the rich frequently wallowing in those things that please the lusts of their eye and flesh, and the pride of life...'<sup>81</sup> The 1709 epistle described pride as a 'leprosy'.<sup>82</sup> The epistles use the metaphor again in 1773, warning of luxury as a 'spreading contagion'.<sup>83</sup>

Non-Quakers used the same language. Thomas Mun called luxury a 'general leprosie' in 1664.<sup>84</sup>

Calamy's sermon from the same year termed covetousness 'a fatal contagion', which loosened 'all

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<sup>74</sup> Epistle 1712: 107

<sup>75</sup> Epistle 1704: 87; 1718:122 'Growing evil of pride'; 1719:124; 1721:129 together with covetousness; 1724: 137 'pride in apparel'; 1739:185

<sup>76</sup> Epistle 1734: 166, similar content in 1735: 170; 1736: 174; 1737: 178; 1738: 180 including bible reference Rom. xii.2; 1747: 213; 1755: 245; 1771: 301 'fantastic dresses'; 1781: 339; 1789: 364; pride 1715: 112; 1717: 119 refers to epistle of 1715. The 1732 epistle lamented that 'the simplicity, and distinguishing plainness of our holy profession is too much lost among us, respecting language, apparel, and behaviour' (1732:160); See also epistles 1720: 128; 1727:145 together with extravagancy; 1721: 129 together with pride; 1741:194; 1754: 240; 1798:385 quotes William Penn, "The trimmings of the vain world could clothe the naked one"; for instance 1719: 124; 1735: 170; 1736:174; 1789: 364; 1798:385.

<sup>77</sup> Epistle 1763:273

<sup>78</sup> Epistle 1768

<sup>79</sup> Delany 1747: 243-45

<sup>80</sup> Defoe 1726: 87

<sup>81</sup> Penn 1669: 218, also: 1669: 206 'the covetous man is 'a disease to the body politick, for he obstructs the circulation of blood'.

<sup>82</sup> Epistle 1709: 99

<sup>83</sup> Epistle 1773: 311

<sup>84</sup> Mun 1664: 180

the bands of society (...) introducing general confusion'.<sup>85</sup> In 1710, chaplain Laurence Hacket in a sermon to the Levant company merchants, called pride a 'tumour'.<sup>86</sup> Charles Brent in a 1728 sermon before a merchant audience in Bristol referred to the love of money, i.e. covetousness, as 'an evil disease'.<sup>87</sup> Defoe called 'Expensive living (...) a kind of slow fever (...) fatal and sure to kill' in 1727,<sup>88</sup> which the reverend Richard Steele repeated two decades later in his 1747 'Religious Tradesman'.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, London Magazine in 1758 diagnosed luxury as a 'pestilence' which had spread throughout the nation.<sup>90</sup> Lamont in 1780 likened covetousness to 'the dropsy of the soul, which, like one in the body, is not to be cured by drink, but by temperance.'<sup>91</sup> It is unclear where this metaphor was derived from. None of the authors refer directly to scripture when using it, nor to any other texts. While it may till have been biblical, disease and epidemics were every day occurrences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The metaphor may therefore have simply been an obvious one to use which readers would easily understand due to their personal experiences.

In addition to the metaphorical evils of contagion and disease, Quakers and non-Quakers list financial ruin, fraud, tax evasion and smuggling, conflict about financial obligations and negligence of the Christian duty of charity as consequences of covetousness. Richard Grassby argued that seventeenth century writers routinely blamed bankruptcy on extravagance.<sup>92</sup> Up to the seventeenth century, public opinion held that bankrupts defrauded their creditors of their property. Legal changes in the beginning of the eighteenth century for the first time recognized that bankruptcy need not be culpable, and allowed for the discharge of bankrupts. These changes

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<sup>85</sup> Calamy 1709: 6

<sup>86</sup> Hacket 1707: 31

<sup>87</sup> Brent 1728: 20

<sup>88</sup> Defoe 1727: 111

<sup>89</sup> Steele 1747

<sup>90</sup> London Magazine 27:223, May 1758, cited in Sekora 1977: 65

<sup>91</sup> Lamont 1780: 141; Lamont also used the analogy of the sick human body to explain the danger covetousness possessed for society: 'A man is covetous, when his heart is set upon keeping money. Money is to the world what blood is to the body. When the blood circulates properly, the body is in health; when it flows irregularly, the body is in pain: so when money circulates with sprightliness, the world prospers; when money stagnates, the world declines.' Lamont 1780: 135.

<sup>92</sup> Grassby 1995: 288



were accompanied by an extensive public debate on credit and bankruptcy, which was carried out in pamphlets and newspapers.<sup>93</sup>

The earliest instance in the sources consulted here appears in a Quaker source, when the 1727 LYM epistle ties expressed its hope that Friends ‘may be preserved from the two extremes of covetousness on the one hand, and extravagancy on the other; the latter of which has been the occasion of the failings of some among us, in the non-payment of their just debts’.<sup>94</sup> The 1754 epistle identified ‘the ruinous consequences of an earthly, ambitious spirit, pushing men forward, in the pursuit of greatness, upon hazardous attempts, which have too often issued in the fall and ruins of themselves and families’.<sup>95</sup> In 1767 LYM stated that Friends ‘unwilling to lessen their standard of living have incurred bankruptcy’.<sup>96</sup> In 1771 LYM discussed how ‘divers[e] instances of scandalous failures have of late appeared amongst some in profession with us’.<sup>97</sup>

Non-Quaker authors’ references to bankruptcies resemble those of Quakers. Calamy’s sermon on bankruptcy, is titled ‘A sermon at the merchants lecture in Salter’s Hall, Upon occasion of the many late bankrupts’.<sup>98</sup> He argues that it is those ‘that will be rich’, i.e. those succumbing to covetousness, who will make use of ‘tricks and projects, and crafty undermining arts’ and as a consequence are most likely to become bankrupts.<sup>99</sup> William Bishop of Ely’s 1717 sermon on ‘The justice of paying debts’ named ‘the late failures of some eminent citizens’ as the occasion for this sermon.<sup>100</sup> Bradford in a 1720 sermon titled ‘The Honest and dishonest ways of getting wealth’ equally referred to recent ‘disorder and confusion’ caused by an ‘irregular pursuit’ of

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<sup>93</sup> Carlos et al 2013:3,4. Hoppit 1987: 19, Carlos et al 2013: 13

<sup>94</sup> Epistle 1727: 145

<sup>95</sup> Epistle 1753: 240,1; also 1746; 1759: .259,60; 1759 reproduced in 1786: 353; also 1781: 337,8; also 1783:345; for this verse see also 1740: 191, related not to financial ruin but ‘fall from your own stedfastness’, also Epistle 1793: 374,5

<sup>96</sup> Epistle 1767: 289

<sup>97</sup> Epistle 1771, see also Epistle of 1781: 337,8, 1783: 345

<sup>98</sup> also Bradford 1720: 3; Sheridan 1720; Milbourne 1709: 4

<sup>99</sup> Calamy 1709: 3, 4

<sup>100</sup> Fleetwood 1717

wealth, probably referring to the South Sea Crisis.<sup>101</sup> Defoe explicitly referred to the South Sea calamities as an example for the consequences of an imprudent conduct of business.<sup>102</sup>

Both Quaker and non-Quaker sources invoked Psalm 69:2 which reads 'I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.'<sup>103</sup> In his 1678 pamphlet, for example, Ambrose Rigge warns Friends against 'pride, ambition and luxury, and launching out unto unwarrantable trade to support them', using the same metaphor:

'There are some amongst us (...) [who] have launched from the Rock which is firm and sure, into the Great Sea of Troubles and Uncertainty, where some have been drowned, others hardly escaping, and many yet labouring for the Shore, with little hopes of coming at it; who have not only brought themselves in Danger of suffering shipwreck, but have drawn in others, and have endangered them also...'<sup>104</sup>

Writing in the commercial advice literature, Steele warned his readers to 'launch out no farther than you can feel ground under you', elaborating that 'pride or covetousness are usually the motives to these hazardous enterprises.'<sup>105</sup> Defoe compared a tradesman's overtrading to 'a young swimmer going out of his depth; when help does not come immediately, 'tis a thousand to one but he sinks, and is drown'd'.<sup>106</sup> The reverend William Scott argued that extravagance and luxury was leading men to 'plunge headlong into engagements immense, distant and dangerous.'<sup>107</sup> These images of dangerous waters used in Quaker and non-Quaker sources bore the same message about extravagance.

Quaker and non-Quaker sources alike condemned fraud. Among Quaker sources, for example, Fox admonished the London merchants for their 'deceitful merchandize, and cozening, and

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<sup>101</sup> Bradford 1720: 3

<sup>102</sup> Defoe 1726: 48

<sup>103</sup> From the Horse's Mouth: Oxford dictionary of English idioms, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition: deep water

<sup>104</sup> Rigge 1768

<sup>105</sup> Steele 1747: 46

<sup>106</sup> Defoe 1726: 47, similar quote p.48; also Supplement to Tradesman: 'ocean of business' p.3

<sup>107</sup> Scott 1773: 2

cheating, and defrauding one another'.<sup>108</sup> Alluding to the sermon on the mount, he appealed to them to 'keep to yea and nay to all people in their common occasions, for whatsoever is more than these, cometh of evil'. Fox' warning was wordy and angry, and he painted the local practice of trading in the darkest colours, claiming that 'this City hath a name and a bad report of deceitful Merchandize'.<sup>109</sup> Equally, the LYM epistles repeatedly warned Friends 'not to defraud or wrong any, in any way of commerce, trade, trust, or dealing'.<sup>110</sup> They are particularly concerned about Friends 'defrauding their creditors of their just debts, and not performing their word and promise'.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, Unitarian minister William Enfield explained that 'The seller defrauds his neighbour, when he takes advantage of the ignorance or mistakes of the purchaser, or makes use of arts to impose upon his judgement.'<sup>112</sup> Wilson listed 'false weights and measures; oppressing the poor; buying or selling of stolen goods; using oaths and lies to deceive those with whom they deal' as examples of fraudulent practices.<sup>113</sup> Church of England clergymen Richard Fiddes and Alurad Clarke, as well as Wilson, whose denomination could not be identified, condemned taking advantage of others' ignorance, oversights, negligence, or drunkenness in commercial transactions.<sup>114</sup>

Quakers and non-Quakers alike reference subjects' relationship to the government in condemning fraud. Obedience to authority had been a common element in business ethics since the middle ages.<sup>115</sup> They describe smuggling and tax evasion as fraud committed against the government, referring to Mathew 22:21: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Fox 1658: 1

<sup>109</sup> Fox 1658: 1,2

<sup>110</sup> Epistle 1709:99

<sup>111</sup> Epistle 1729: 150; 1735:171

<sup>112</sup> Enfield 1782: 57,8

<sup>113</sup> Wilson 1781: 32

<sup>114</sup> Fiddes 1720; Wilson 1781:25,26, 37; Clarke 1736: 360

<sup>115</sup> Moor 1998: 15

<sup>116</sup> In the biblical context the verse constitutes Jesus' response to the question of whether he ought to pay taxes to the Emperor. It summarizes the relationship between secular and Christian authority.

Penn argued that covetousness led men to abuse and defraud the government. They might do so 'by concealing or falsifying the goods they deal in: as bringing in forbidden goods by stealth; or lawful goods, so as to avoid the payment of dues, or wonting the goods of enemies for gain; or that are not well made, or full measure; with abundance of that sort of deceit.'<sup>117</sup> The topic also appears eleven times in the LYM 1693-1786. The 1693 epistle, for instance, reminds Friends that they are subjects of 'Caesar's kingdom', and therefore ought to pay their 'taxes, tribute, &c.'<sup>118</sup> In 1703 LYM explicitly advised Friends to 'avoid all indirect and unwarrantable methods, in trade and merchandize, by which the government may be defrauded of its due'.<sup>119</sup> In 1709 it specified not 'to put any abuse on the government, by endeavours to diminish any of the customs, excise, or any other publick civil dues.'<sup>120</sup> In 1719 LYM added that the buying and selling of 'goods reasonably expected to be run' was forbidden.<sup>121</sup> The same warning reappeared in 1733, saying again, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's".<sup>122</sup>

Loyalty to the sovereign and obedience to secular and religious authorities remained an important theme in sermons in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well.<sup>123</sup> They equally emphasised the importance of paying taxes and customs, also referring to the payment of Caesar's dues. The Vicar John Gilbert, in a 1699 sermon 'on the sin of stealing custom and the duty of paying tribute', refers to 13.Rom.7.v 'Render to all their dues, tribute to whom tribute, custom to whom custom.' He defined custom as meaning 'the legal taxes which are appointed for the support of the government, under which we live, and enjoy protection and safety' as well as the 'tax laid upon trade'. He also explicitly referred to 'Caesar's dues.'<sup>124</sup> The anonymous sermon "The rights of Caesar": published in Edinburgh in 1795 referenced the biblical quote throughout, defining the

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<sup>117</sup> Penn 1669: 202; Penn 1682: 53

<sup>118</sup> Matt.xvii.27, xxii.20. Rom xiii, 6,7; Epistle 1693: 56

<sup>119</sup> Epistle 1703: 84, again in 1709: 99

<sup>120</sup> Epistles 1709: 99

<sup>121</sup> Epistles 1719: 123; see also 1721: 130

<sup>122</sup> Epistles 1757: 251; 1762: 269,70; 1786: 353. The epistles also frequently quote Matt.xx.ii.21 on this matter: 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's' (1733: 163; 1693: 56; 1734: 167; 1736: 175).

<sup>123</sup> for instance Chishull 1716, Cleaver 1676, Payne, 1718

<sup>124</sup> Gilbert 1699: 3

‘things that are Caesar’s’ as all taxes intended for the maintenance of government, and for the benefit of the country as a whole. It emphasised the importance of obedience to authority in all things, as the only true authority is of God, and all earthly authority stems from him.<sup>125</sup> The sermon on ‘The sinfulness of buying run-goods’ by the Anglican deacon William Unwin, while not explicitly referring to Caesar, made the same arguments, emphasising that the government required revenue for its maintenance and offices, and that ‘by purchasing run goods, you wrong the public body’.<sup>126</sup>

Quaker and non-Quaker sources both give advice on the avoidance of covetousness, emphasising risk aversion in business. When LYM in 1788 recommended Friends steer clear of ‘extensive schemes in trade’ and ‘fictitious credit to support them’ it most likely referred to the practice of using accommodation bills.<sup>127</sup> Hoppit ascribed the post-1770 financial crisis to ‘the extensive use of credit, in the form of bills of exchange and accommodation notes’, and the LYM writer was likely aware of this cause.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Steele recommended tradesmen ‘to a frequent inspection into the state of his affairs’.<sup>129</sup> Equally, Gisborne argued that ‘It is one of the first duties of an upright trader to keep accurate accounts; and by means of frequent and sober inspection to be at all times master of the situation of his affairs.’<sup>130</sup>

Moreover, Quakers and non-Quakers alike warned against joint securities. In 1771 London Yearly Meeting indirectly quoted the Bible when admonishing Friends: ‘Be not thou one of them that strike hands, or of them that are sureties for debts. If thou hast nothing to pay, why should he take away thy bed from under thee?’<sup>131</sup> Defoe used the same terminology, warning his readers

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<sup>125</sup> A friend to peace and good order, 1795.

<sup>126</sup> Unwin 1773: 10; he was governor of London’s Christ’s Hospital School. See also Berriman 1763: 224 and Gisborne 1797: 244. William Berriman was an Anglican theologian, Thomas Gisborne the Elder an Anglican clergyman and author.

<sup>127</sup> Epistles 1788: 361

<sup>128</sup> Hoppit 1987: 131-3; the crisis years were 1772, 1778, 1793, 1797

<sup>129</sup> Steele 1747: 40

<sup>130</sup> Gisborne 1797: 245-7. Accounts were important evidence during bankruptcy proceedings: Safley 2013: 9; Coquery 2013: 52-71

<sup>131</sup> Epistles 1771: 304, Prov.xxii.26,7; the same epistle also warns of ‘circulating a fictitious kind of paper credit’, probably accommodation bills.

of 'striking hands with a stranger'.<sup>132</sup> Hayley, Anglican minister and one time chaplain to the Levant Company, equally warned his audience of using 'sureties'.<sup>133</sup>

Finally, Quakers and non-Quakers described the appropriate conduct of insolvent debtors in similar terms. Four LYM epistles in the second half of the eighteenth century emphasize that debtors should live frugally, and, if ever able, to repay the remainder of their debts.<sup>134</sup> Reverend Scott's 1773 Sermon on Bankruptcy condemns those who lived luxuriously after being discharged:

'Dungeons and prisons with bread and water were made for such people, and not such soft confinements, in these days, as the law allows them; nay, even encourages them to spend their creditors spoil and booty, with ease and luxury!'<sup>135</sup>

Defoe advocated for repayment, saying 'how glorious a testimony is it to the fame and character of the man' when he repays his debts, even after his creditors had lost hope,<sup>136</sup> and Steele writes that 'reason and justice require the full payment of your debts whenever you are able, even though your creditors, considering your indigent state, may accept of what your present abilities allow'.<sup>137</sup> Thus, the sources consulted do not suggest the creditor of a Quaker took on less risk than the creditor of other English citizens of the day.

Quakers and non-Quakers also show no significant difference in relation to the threat posed to merchants' reputation through defamation. While the issue rarely appears in sermons, there is extensive evidence that defamation was a primary concern across early modern English society, with the link between words and reputation the basis for frequent litigation.<sup>138</sup> About one third of

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<sup>132</sup> Defoe 1726: ch.9, see also Steele 1747: 45

<sup>133</sup> Hayley 1687: 7

<sup>134</sup> Epistles 1752: 232; 1759: 259f.; 1769: 297,8

<sup>135</sup> Scott 1773: 23

<sup>136</sup> Defoe 1726: 197, similar quotes on pp.169-174, 196

<sup>137</sup> Steele 1747: 73,74; see also Gisborne 1797: 255

<sup>138</sup> Sharpe 1980: 170; Gowing 1996: 112; an example of a sermon against defamation is Foster 1744: 167, He warns against bearing false witness, spreading scandalous reports without evidence, and tale-bearing. It emphasised that false tales may destroy a man's reputation and 'lessen his credit'. Hence, its content is in accordance with the concerns conveyed in the epistles.

suits entering the York Chancery court in the 1630s, a third of those entering the Consistory court in the 1590s, and the overwhelming majority of those entering the Chancery at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were for defamation.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, in defamation suits, plaintiffs seemed to favour ecclesiastical over common law courts. The defamation was considered a 'breach of Christian charity'.<sup>140</sup> The Biblical source for norms against defamation is the ninth commandment, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.'

Penn warned the Friends, "Have a care of reflectors, detractors, backbiters, that undervalue and undermine brethren behind their backs, or slight the good and wholesome order of truth for the preserving things quiet, sweet and honourable in the church."<sup>141</sup> The LYM epistles warn of defamation and 'back-biting' regularly from 1692 to 1760. Various biblical quotations appear in these warnings, such as "Though shalt not go up and down as a tale bearer among thy people" (Lev.xix.16) and "He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour" (Psal.xv.3). In 1719 the LYM explains that defamation could lead to 'division and discord' and 'weaken love and unity, and many times injure the reputation of the innocent'. Eight epistles between 1719 and 1760 emphasise the importance of verifying information about a person's character before repeating it.<sup>142</sup>

## IV

This article has demonstrated that Quaker business ethics resemble those of broader English society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Simon Dixon shows that Quakers were well-integrated and active members of British society.<sup>143</sup> The similar language choices of Quaker and non-Quaker sources reflect this integration, as does their concern with the same contemporary developments concerned their readers. Both groups' business ethics reflect the rapid commercialisation of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. They constitute a response to the

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<sup>139</sup> Sharpe 1980: 170; see also Gowing 1996:112 on increase of slander litigation in 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>140</sup> Sharpe 1980: 180

<sup>141</sup> Penn 1682: 13

<sup>142</sup> Epistles: 1719: 125; also 1721: 130, 1726: 142; 1727: 145, also four further instances 1738-1760.

<sup>143</sup> S.Dixon 2007

risks inherent in trade and an attempt to solve the fundamental problems of exchange. As all traders faced the same risks, their business ethics were also the same. Accordingly, both groups advertise the same virtues of honesty, reliability and risk adversity and warn of the same vices, particularly covetousness. What is more, Quaker and non-Quaker authors employed the same images to illustrate their arguments, and cited the same scripture passages to justify their prescriptions. Such profound similarities suggest that, contrary to what has been argued in the literature, Quaker business ethics were not distinct.

Yet even if the content of their business ethics was identical, Quakers may have applied their standards with more vigour. In this context much has been made of the Quakers' refusal on religious grounds to swear oaths. Some historians have argued that this forced them to demonstrate a high level of trustworthiness to obtain credit.<sup>144</sup> Others however have shown that by the time the Friends' denomination was founded in the seventeenth century, swearing an oath to obtain credit had fallen out of favour.<sup>145</sup> Still, Quakerism in the seventeenth century was new and radical.<sup>146</sup> It was aimed at reforming a society Friends perceived to be corrupt to the core. Many Friends endured persecution, incarceration and, in some cases, even death for propagandizing their beliefs. It is therefore possible that early Quakers lived their principles with more steadfastness than their contemporaries who had not joined a new religious reform movement. They took values of honesty and reliability more seriously, as they had just volunteered for a movement that propagated these. In combination with its emphasis on active religious participation through its rejection of predestination and clergy in favour of individual agency and lay ministry this may have led Friends to adhere more strictly to ethical norms in the conduct of trade. It is therefore possible that the first generation of Quakers, consisting of newly converted believers, indeed acted more honestly than many of their non-Quaker contemporaries. This may have resulted in the evolution of a reputation for honesty which in turn translated

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<sup>144</sup> Braithwaite 1955: 139, 446; Vann 1969: 90, 189; Hatton 1993:37; Jones 1921, Vol. I: 166

<sup>145</sup> Spurr 2001; also Muldrew 1999: 310; Hill 1964: 328,9; Sommerville 1992: 141; Shapiro 1983: 186

<sup>146</sup> Reay 1985



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into a competitive advantage in trade. Even if this was the case, however, this reputation cannot be credited to the content of Friends' ethics.

There may also be other explanations Quakers' sustainable commercial success. I suggest that the formal structures for the gathering, verifying, and disseminating information between congregations across the Atlantic world as well as in continental Europe played an important role. Quaker congregations everywhere were in constant communication with each other as well as with central organs in London. They exchanged letters and visitors. They outfitted travelling lay ministers with certificates witnessing their good characters, as well as individuals moving or travelling abroad. Arriving in new places, Friends would be taken in by the local Quaker community. This was an invaluable way of making contacts and building trust. Nothing on this scale and level of organisation existed for other religious communities of the day. Further research may demonstrate that this was what truly distinguished Friends from others, and thus provided the key to their commercial success.

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