John Woolman and the society of slave owners

To provide interested readers with more context about John Woolman, his spirituality, his testimonies and the radical ways he applied his faith to his own life, I quote an excerpt of Dorothee Sölle's book *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance (Augsburg Fortress, 2001).*

*A more modern, more unprepossessing name for this process of the soul that renounces possessions by becoming naked is "simplicity". In the spirituality of Quakers, simplicity means a reduction of material needs, abhorrence of luxury, simplification of lifestyle, and, correspondingly, a different relation to gainful employment. The testimony of Quakers to simplicity demands that one live out of one's divine center, unencumbered by any hindrance, trusting that our loving already looks after our needs. This somewhat awkward description of freedom comes from a Quaker handbill and declares that freedom consists in responding in holy obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit who arises from the depth of silence and prayer.*

*The diaries of eighteenth-century American John Woolman … are, in their very closeness to day-to-day life, a testimony to the "and" in the subtitle, "mysticism and resistance". In the spirit of mystical experience, he describes this relation to possessions and to letting oneself be given over to the Spirit. On account of his life*

*of divestment and modesty, Woolman was called the Quaker saint. He was an unassuming, relatively little-educated tailor from New Jersey who at times appeared somewhat odd. He was a third-generation American from a family who had fled from England when Quakers were persecuted there. Following his father's wishes, Woolman began to work for a shopkeeper who had bought two Scottish "servants": at that time, Scottish prisoners of war in England were sold as slaves. One of them fell deathly ill and "being delirious, used to curse and swear most sorrowfully, and after he was buried I was left to sleep alone the next night in the same chamber where he died. I perceived in me a timorousness. I knew, however, I had not injured the man but assisted in taking care of him according to my capacity, and was not free to ask anyone on that occasion to sleep with me". The fear of the twenty-one-year-old of this "test" is clearly apparent in the entry composed fifteen years later. This was Woolman's first encounter with slavery, with the kind of ownership that is ready to walk over dead bodies. Shortly afterward, he had to write a bill for his employer that concerned the sale of a young black person. Woolman, a rather inward-oriented and shy young man, told the man making the purchase, himself a Quaker, that slaveholding was a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion. When another of the Friends asked him to prepare the ownership certificate for a black female slave, he refused. These questions to be put to*

*slave-owners about their sense of justice and their way of life would occupy Woolman for his entire life.*

*In the year 1800 there were still almost 1,300 slaves in the state of New Jersey; in Wollman's youth around 1740, there were far more than that. Slavery was as normal, even among many Quakers, as driving a car is now. Slavery was questioned as little then as are our habits of consumption today, such as the wearing of textiles that are produced in the* maquiladoras *by the disenfranchised, literally enslaved women who work in the textile factories that serve the global market. Woolman sought to break through the normality of this way of living. He began where he lived, among the citizens who had become rich but who did not actually defend slavery or profit directly from the trade of human beings. These people, however, sustained this injustice as it accomplices and profiteers. It was the realistic view of the "middle way" that determined John Woolman's life work, and he came to focus more and more on the connections between legally recognized possession and exploitation.*

*"The love of ease and gain are the motives in general of keeping slaves, and men are wont to take hold of weak arguments to support a case which is unreasonable". The methods of his resistance were the simplest imaginable: conversation with all who owned slaves, on the one hand, and his own lifestyle, on the other.*

*Forever unprepared to compromise, he entreated slave owners in a spirit of loving concern. He truly believed in his opponents' ability to change and this Quaker belief in "that of God," to be found also in those who kept slaves, nourished their own, often secret wish to live a different life. At every meeting of Friends, Woolman endeavoured to explain that hunger for possessions causes deadly harm to both rich and poor alike and that oppression destroys both oppressor and oppressed. He posed a simple question to the oppressors: how much longer would it be before they will have become deaf to every kind of moral question? Into the toil of liberation he incorporated his other plan of action, the repudiation of luxury and consumerism.*

*Woolman gained credibility through another form of everyday resistance, namely, his personal rejection of whatever advantage and benefit that derives from injustice. He earned his living as a merchant, then as a tailor and, occasionally, as a teacher. He grew fruit, prepared contracts, and wrote legal documents. This work put him in touch repeatedly with slave owners who desired to bequeath their slaves legally to descendants. Woolman could not in good conscience compose such a last will and testament. Instead, he began to speak to those who called on his services, most of whom were devout, affluent Quakers, and tried to dissuade them from their intent. In so doing, he gradually developed a very clear position on slavery. In his frequent and*

*distant travels that eventually took him to England in connection with slavery, he was dependant on Quakers for hospitality. But when he saw how the field slaves of a farmer were dressed – many of whom, particularly children, wore nothing at all – and their state of health, he preferred to sleep in the open fields. The next day he would go to the owner in question and talk with him about slavery and the treatment of slaves.*

*He did not want to profit from kindness that were "the gain of oppression. Receiving a gift, considered as a gift, brings the receiver under obligations to the benefactor and has a natural tendency to draw the obliged into a party with the giver". This kind of unmasking and refusing complicity is part of the simplicity of lifestyle. Simplicity, the rejection of consumerism and opting for possessionlessness, is a modern, social form of what medieval mysticism called "becoming unattached". In the course of almost a century, Woolman became one of the most important grassroots workers in the process that liberated at least the Quakers from participation in crime.*

*…*

*Woolman refused to drink from silver vessels customarily used in the homes of his hosts. This often caused embarrassment because people had no other ones on the table. He also refused to wear clothing that*

*had been dyed because of the brutal exploitation of slaves in the West Indies, who were exposed to the poisonous vapors of the dyes. He stopped eating sugar because slaves had to produce it. He refused to pay taxes for the war against the First Nations people and accepted no payment when soldiers were billeted in his house. When travelling to England, he did not take his passage in the passenger section but in the 'tween deck of the sailing ship, under the conditions of the ordinary sailors who were continuously soaked through and through. Arriving in England, he walked on foot from London to York because he knew how cruelly the stagecoach crew and the horses were treated. When looking at the "furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves" he wondered whether "the seeds of war have any nourishment in these our possessions or not". Behind such questions was his conviction that when we surround ourselves with superfluities or desire wealth in a manner contrary to true wisdom, we cannot help but become guilty in a certain form of oppression.*

*In critiquing the desire for luxuries, Woolman also developed a different understanding of labor. Until 1756 he himself had worked as a tailor but gave up that trade saying that it had been his general practice to buy and things really useful. He did not wish to trade in things that served chiefly to please people's vanity since he felt that it weakened him as a Christian. He himself stayed*

*poor because he spent no time accumulating wealth. Woolman believed that every human being should work in order to live – and not live in order to work! Everyone ought to do some kind of useful work but neither too much – like the slaves – nor too little – like the masters. (Later Gandhi came to call such work "bread-work.") Woolman considered too much work to be detrimental to a person's spiritual well-being and to the needs of the community. He distinguished between "a people used to labour moderately for their living, training up their children in frugality and business, and those who live on the labour of their slaves."*

*All these forms of refusal, boycott, renunciation, and alternate life that is lived out already here and now have a mystical ground. It becomes manifest in a dream that John Woolman had when he was seriously ill and could not even remember his own name.*

*'Being the desirous to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy colour, between the south and the east, and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great a misery as they could be and live, and that I was mixed in with them and henceforth might not consider myself as a distinct, or separate being. In this state I remained several hours. I then heard a soft, melodious voice, more pure and harmonious than any voice I had heard with my ears before, and I believed it was of an angel who spoke to other angels. The words*

*were* John Woolman is dead…. *I was then carried in spirit to mines, where poor and oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and I heard them blaspheme the name of Christ, at which I was grieved, for his name to me was precious. Then I was informed that these heathens were told that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ, and they said amongst themselves: "If Christ directed them to use us in this sort, then Christ is a cruel tyrant."'*

*At times, the mysticism of simple needs sounds somewhat homespun or even doctrinaire. But behind this moralism there is something that is set alight by the decisive question raised by possessions and the obsession with them. Slavery is the radical, most gruesome consequence of the craving for possessions.*

*…*

*Something of this different thinking that arises from the perspective of God can be seen in John Woolman's dream. Mystical thinking is rooted in a sense of not being different from the 'others', those who have no rights, those of different color and the other sex. The indistinguishable mass of fellow creatures that the dreaming John Woolman saw in the mines is integrally part of the inextinguishable longing for oneness. Possession separates just as Ego does. God, of whom Eckhart says that she is the only reality that we ought to*

*have as a possession and which renders all else unnecessary, binds together all who set themselves apart by means of possessions and the lusting after them. This is what Woolman saw in his dream: in the state of "as great a misery as … could be," he saw those who had nothing and himself "mixed in with them." In the sense of contemporary mysticism, this can mean nothing other than that they who make up the 20 percent of the owners of the world belong together with the remaining 80 percent "in the sat of as great a misery as … could be."*