

Quaker faith and conscientious objection to taxation for military purposes

About Quakers

1. The Religious Society of Friends (or 'Quakers') emerged as a Christian religious movement in England in the Seventeenth Century. The Society is now 354 years old and numbers around 300,000 worldwide. The Society has 16,000 members in Britain in about 470 worshipping groups.
2. In Britain, Quaker worship has no liturgical structure; it is rooted in silent waiting for spiritual insight. Nor is there an ordained clergy; anyone may speak during the meeting if they feel moved spiritually to do so.
3. Quakers are committed to working for peace and social justice through nonviolent social change. This has included peacebuilding overseas, humanitarian relief, social inclusion projects, peace education in schools, policy advocacy, citizens empowerment, and the establishment of new movements and organisations such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Oxfam and others. The work is often pioneering and small-scale. Quakers are deeply involved in national movements like the campaigns for nuclear disarmament and against arms trade.
4. The Society's structure is broadly egalitarian: there are no designated leaders; decisions are made by a system of representative committees, whose meetings are acts of worship as described above.
5. In Britain, an annual meeting, called *Yearly Meeting* and open to all Members of the Society, decides overall policy and constitutional changes.
6. The Society's affairs are managed on a monthly basis by a group called *Meeting for Sufferings*, which consists of about 140 representatives appointed from regional Quaker groups. Meeting for Sufferings was formed in 1675 to relieve the suffering of Quakers imprisoned and persecuted for conscience' sake. Its role has since expanded and today is the legal employer of the Society's staff.

Quaker thought

7. The early Quaker movement argued that the divine was present within all people; we could each know it directly and it could guide our conscience. They held that the truth of religion is weighed in personal and shared experience rather than determined by scripture or church creeds.
8. The Society's emphasis on direct experience of the sacred remains today. This experience inspires Quakers to strive to live authentically and humanely and it guides the conscience accordingly. For Quakers, the link between faith and faithfulness is a necessary condition of a true religious life.

Quakers and conscience

9. For Quakers, faith intensifies and clarifies conscience, in the sense of a personal moral and existential compass. Practical commitments to peace, simplicity, equality and truthfulness — called *testimonies* — reflect the way Quakers believe God guides the conscience in daily life.

10. Quakers feel that to avoid these commitments is to live within a lie, forsaking faithfulness to God, the world and one's own self. Hence, for Quakers freedom of faith and freedom of conscience are joined and the personal and political spheres of life are not separate.
11. Quakers have established practices for distinguishing action inspired by political opinion and that arising from conscientious faith. In order for the Quaker community to unite behind actions of its members, it must be convinced that they are seized of a genuine religious commitment, often called a 'leading of God'. This discernment of unity may begin with the local Quaker group and then progress to regional and national levels.
12. Through their own processes, Quaker communities around the world have repeatedly recognised the integrity of individual Quakers' conscientious objection to taxation for military purposes as a matter of genuine religious commitment.
13. Whether allied to faith or not, the active conscience belongs to mature citizenship; neither individuals nor society can thrive without it. Quaker faith places great trust in conscience as a force for positive social change: small groups of conscientious people have led history's major positive social changes, such as abolition of the slave trade and recognition of minority rights. Quakers support freedom of conscience as both a human right and a social necessity.

Quaker commitment to nonviolence

14. Quakers believe that human failings do not diminish the inherent worth of every person in God's perspective. This is a quintessential religious conviction. It forms the basis for a rejection of violence and it inspires Quaker work for peace, justice and social inclusion.
15. Involvement with violence is seen to be profoundly wrong in terms both of Quaker faith and the understanding of humanity that develops when following that faith. This rejection of violence was first set out in writing in 1660: '...the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons...'

Quakers and the state

16. There is often harmony between requirements made by the state and those of faith and conscience. Quakers generally honour and support state systems, such as the taxation system in Britain, when they are seen to serve the social good. Quaker conscience is 'in conversation' with the state, rather than rigidly dogmatic, and the emphasis is on attempts to improve state systems rather than undermine them. In some cases, however, Quakers find the claims of faith and those of the state radically in conflict.
17. A conflict of values arises when the state is seen to cause oppression or violence and expects Quakers to participate in it. For Quakers, as for many other religious people, the claims of faith are ultimately prior to those of the state. Thus, a faith commitment may lead Quakers to object to certain requirements that the state makes of them.

Conscientious objection in the Quaker tradition

18. Conscientious objection has taken many forms in the Quaker tradition, beginning in the 17th Century with refusal to support practices that perpetuated oppression or undermined Quaker principles: these included paying tithes, hat honour, swearing oaths and signing creedal statements. Civil disobedience drew popular attention to social injustice and helped society to become more tolerant and just.

19. Refusal to take part in military activity has been a feature of Quakerism since the early days of the movement. Quakers understand the view that the military is often intended to serve peace, but those committed to nonviolence cannot support an institution whose power stems from the threat and use of lethal violence. History shows that reliance on that power has caused suffering beyond imagining; the human impact of recent wars over Afghanistan and Iraq has supported that view.
20. Generally, the Quaker objection to participating in violence extends to refusal to support the military industrial complex as a whole, including its civil branches. In times of war, Quakers try to provide a service and make a contribution to peace in ways that do not involve them in the military effort. For example, Quakers carried out humanitarian relief during and between the World Wars, for which they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.

Quakers and conscientious objection to taxation for military purposes

21. Quakers have long been exercised by the inconsistency of refusing to kill while paying for war and war preparations through taxation. There is no fundamental moral distinction between fighting in war and paying for others to do so; both acts facilitate violence and thus both are violent. By paying taxes that are used for warfare, Quakers feel that they are passively participating in the killing of other human beings.
22. Quaker concern about taxation for military purposes dates back at least as far as 1755. While the Pennsylvania Assembly was debating raising funds for the British armed forces in the French and Indian War, a delegation of Quakers addressed the Assembly in opposition.
23. Within the discipline of their faith, Quakers choose how to express their testimony to peace. Some are strongly moved to object to taxation for military purposes; others are not. The Quaker community in Britain is united in wholehearted support for those of its members who withhold a proportion of their tax payment until assured that it will be used for non-military purposes. These few individuals broadly reflect and represent the concerns of the wider Quaker community.
24. The relatively small numbers of Quakers choosing to withhold tax does not reflect the extent of feeling in the community as a whole. The structure of the British tax system and the personal circumstances of individuals can often prevent Quakers from expressing an objection that they may nonetheless hold strongly.

Corporate Quaker support of the right of objection to taxation for military purposes

25. As military spending reached extreme levels during the cold war, British Quakers became increasingly troubled by their tacit support for militarism through the taxation system. In 1978, Quakers were instrumental in forming what is now *Conscience—the peace tax campaign* to campaign for a change in the law to facilitate objection to taxation for military purposes without weakening the social obligation to pay tax.
26. In 1982, 25 members of the Quaker staff asked their employer, Meeting for Sufferings, to withhold that proportion of their tax that would fund war preparations, until assured that it would be used for non-military purposes. Meeting for Sufferings accepted the request and challenged the law in court unsuccessfully. After failed appeals, the amount due was paid. An application to the European Commission on Human Rights was deemed inadmissible under Article 9 of the European Convention, possibly because the nature of ‘freedom to manifest religion or belief in practice’ had not been fully explored as it applies to Quakers. Under sustained protest, Meeting for Sufferings continues to pay the tax due from its employees today.

27. Meeting for Sufferings both supports the right of individuals to object to taxation for military purposes, and objects to its own role as a gatherer of tax for the same. In 1993, the Meeting composed a statement, reading in part: 'Not only are we expected as employers to collect taxes for military purposes, but we are also expected to participate in denying our employees the right to exercise their consciences. This offends our conscience.' Corporate Quaker support for the peace tax campaign stands, having been reaffirmed in 2001 following another wave of staff requests not to pass on tax that would be used to facilitate warfare.
28. Locally and nationally, Quakers continue to support successive parliamentary initiatives to change UK law. When opportunities arise, delegations meet with government ministers to put the case for a change. Quakers also support *Conscience—the peace tax campaign*. Some of those Quakers able to do so have continued to withhold a proportion of tax in objection to being forced to pay for war preparations. They have suffered significant restraint upon their property, harassment by debt collection companies, and occasionally imprisonment.

Conscientious objection to taxation for military purposes since the end of the cold war

29. Quaker objections to military service and taxation for military purposes are not contingent on the severity of particular violent conflicts. The objection is a general one based on the incompatibility between the violent nature of militarism and a faith commitment to honour the absolute worth of every person.
30. Recent developments in militarism have sharpened awareness of the human impact of war and increasingly exercise Quaker conscience. They have brought Quakers to greater awareness of the role of taxation as a primary sustainer of modern militarism. Issues of particular concern include the following, all sustained through taxation:
 - a. The UK is the largest military spender in the world after the United States and faces no major conventional military threat.
 - b. The UK's approach to national security has become more activist and preemptive: initiating war has become a norm for the UK as conflicts over Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate.
 - c. The Iraq war and occupation are near-universally believed to have been unlawful; the civilian population has suffered most; and the action has cost billions of pounds supplied through taxation.
 - d. The UK government actively supports arms exports. The government's Defence Exports Services Organisation (DESO), which employs 500 staff to promote UK military exports, cost £14.4 million in the year 2005-06; DESO supported UK military sales to all 19 major violent conflicts in 2004.
 - e. The International Court of Justice advised in 1996 that nuclear weapons are generally illegal under international law. According to the government, British nuclear weapons cost £12.5 billion to acquire at 1998 prices and £700 million per annum to maintain.

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