



Quaker Minister James Nailor entering Bristol with his revolutionary message. graphic: Bristol Radical History Group

by Jim Tarbell

Absence of ethical considerations in corporate/imperial decision making began with the birth of corporations, empire and liberal democracy in the 1600s. Coming out of the reformation that broke the iron grip of the church, the merchant class rose to hail the sanctity of individual accomplishment and personal gain as their morality.

In the first decade of the 17th century, the East India Company and the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie received charters as the first modern corporations. Under the authority of the British and Dutch states, these trading companies then raised armies and began conquering the world in the name of business profits. Big business and politics were intertwined from the beginning. The first three governors of the British East India Company also served as Mayors of London. Parliament became increasingly controlled by the merchant class.

By the mid 1640s, Parliament raised the New Model Army based on merit rather than inherited titles, defeated the monarchy and beheaded the king. Under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, the New Model Army became a revolutionary political force. Elements within the army realized that all processes of the state apparatus, educational institutions and religious organization were succumbing gradually to theamoral logic and imperatives of the market. Accounting had become the norm. The relationship with God and the church was becoming contractual and depended on "calculation" rather than beliefs. As Christian redemption became commodified, true religious seekers became outraged.

Searching for a solution, groups within the army advocated the end of the monarchy as well as the aristocratic House of Lords. They promoted universal male suffrage and the elimination of private property. They embraced communally-owned land, resources and means of production.

Alarmed by these ideas, Parliament forced Cromwell to purge the army of the radicals. The ensuing unrest led to the emergence of the Quakers who developed their own universal covenant with God within. They did not have to

Corporate Empire & the Selling of the Soul

The recontainment of Christian faith into the private sphere was absolutely vital if capitalism was to operate without serious moral constraint.

— Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism*

depend on the King, Parliament or the army to communicate with God.

Quaker preachers rallied huge crowds in northern England as they pointed out that "The emerging capitalist contract promised material ease and great profit to those willing to stifle the witness of the universal covenant." They saw that capitalists created a "covenant with the World" where everything is for sale according to the values of the market, where divine judgement and guidance are not allowed.

They implored that "trading has become a trap, to captivate men in deceitful dealings and vain customs and fashions, to serve the adulterous eye and vanity. In this trap the just become a prey to the insatiable, the obsessively self-interested." Vainglorious clothing and amusements "have lost the man of the heart through vanity." Consumerism "destroys the creation." Flattering merchandisers "cheat poor country people." "What traps there are in laws, which should protect the simple."

Quakers even suggested that lawyers and judges, like the Quaker preachers should serve without pay. They reasoned that since the lawyers and judges were making new laws under the developing capitalist order, they would be more likely to serve the common good if they served without pay, for otherwise they would serve the good of the corporate class which paid them.

Such pronouncements outraged merchant-class politicians. Parliament arrested James Nailor, the first Quaker minister to approach London. Then they spent three weeks convicting him of "horrid blasphemy." They publicly flogged the poor fellow and made him a spectacle for all to see. But the public flogging of the pious Quaker caused such outrage that Cromwell realized that the state had to get out of religious affairs and he instituted the first move toward separating church and state. Douglas Gwyn notes that "England's rise to world dominance, built upon militarism, imperialism, colonial slavery, and ruthless exploitation of domestic labor demanded" this separation of church and state in order to allow corporate empire to rule without moral constraint.

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graphic: PBS