George Fox, the founder of Quakerism and a former shoemaker’s apprentice, wrote in his journal for 1658 that Latin, as well as the other learned languages of Hebrew and Greek, were “all but the teachings of the natural [i.e. unredeemed] man” and “not the way to make [...] ministers of Christ.” Latin was the language of the Romans who persecuted Christians, Pilate being the prime example. Latin was also the language of set prayers in the Roman Catholic church – all anathema to Quakers as to other radical Protestant groups who believed in spontaneous prayer and preaching inspired by the Holy Spirit rather than merely human knowledge.

Given these assumptions, it would be surprising if Quakers of Fox’s generation produced any Latin writings at all. Yet they did. Many of George Fox’s epistles for instance were translated into Latin, and he personally urged Quakers who had friends and relations beyond the sea to be “diligent to spread the truth and send Latin books.” Missionary Quakers travelled with Latin epistles, including ones addressed to the mythical ruler Prester John. The Quaker use of Latin was not restricted to missionary work only. A tract of 1660 used Latin to justify the Quaker’s distinctive use of “thou”. In the next decade, a comprehensive apology for Quakerism by Robert Barclay was published in Latin for a European readership. At the end of the century, the first comprehensive history of the Quaker Movement (albeit a not entirely friendly history) was published in Latin by the Dutch Protestant minister Gerard Croese; a Quaker at Amsterdam found fault with Croese, answering him with a polemic, also in Latin. Just before his death, George Fox is thought to have proposed a history of the Quakers, “to be spread almost all the world over, and that first in Latin.”

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3. Benjamin Furly, A Battle-Door for Teachers & Professors to Learn Singular and Plural (London, 1660); Robert Barclay, Theologiae Vere Christianae Apologia (Amsterdam, 1676); Robert Croese, Historia Quakeriana, Sive De vulgō dictis Quakeris (Amsterdam, 1695); ‘Philaletha’ [Caspar Kohlhans], Dilucidationes quædam valde necessariae in Gerardi Croesi[i] Historiam Quakerianam (Amsterdam, 1696).
This essay will briefly survey the kinds of Latin text produced and distributed by the Quakers, a sect which defined itself by its rejection of worldly or university learning and whose earliest followers were generally unlettered men and women. It will consider the paradoxes and the practicalities of this situation. Under what circumstances were Quaker suspicions of ‘Roman’ or ‘humane’ learning suspended in order to reconceive of Latin in Quaker terms, as a useful agent in spreading the truth and witnessing to a universal ‘Divine Light’?

Quakers against Latin: Rhetoric against the Academy

George Fox’s rejection of Latin as well as other learned languages originated in his opposition to an ordained ministry authorized by institutionalized education and worldly authority. In the place of those made ministers by state authority and university education, Fox and the early Quakers recognized only those who spoke ‘in the Light’, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Quaker ministers included artisans and women: a pointed rejection of the traditional training for the ministry received by men of status at Oxford and Cambridge. When Oliver Cromwell proposed a new third university in the north, to be founded at Durham, Fox vocally opposed the plan. According to Fox’s journal of 1658, he and a few companions confronted Cromwell’s agent, sent from London to Durham, about the premises of this new university. It was to be a kind of ‘Oxbridge’ for the North, providing philosophical, theological, and philological training for prospective ministers of religion. As at Oxford and Cambridge, the learned languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin were at the centre of this training. Fox, however, countered these were “but the teachings of the natural [unredeemed] man” and “not the way to make [...] ministers of Christ.” Latin in particular was a tainted language, the language of the Romans who persecuted Christians. The fact that Pilate ordered a notice in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin to be displayed above the crucified Jesus, was itself a damning indictment of these three languages, the learned triad of post-Reformation Protestant scholarship. According at least to the journal account, Fox’s arguments prevailed and the agent returned to London, newly convinced of Quaker ideas about true knowledge proceeding not from any human institutions, inventions, or traditions, but from the universal Light within each man and woman.

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