

## Letter to the Editor and Excerpt from *The Covenant Crucified*

by Douglas Gwyn

Dear Esther—

Thanks for your piece [["Art and the Lamb's War"](#)].... Your question about whether the Lamb's War might have been sustained through a Quaker embrace of the arts is an interesting one. In a way, I think there was an artistic sense to living out the testimonies in a serious way, just as Jews sometimes find great creativity in living kosher. Then "art" is not some separate realm of existence. But as cultural signifiers, Quaker codes no doubt lost their communicative power as time went on, and the self-referentiality led to legalism. I guess legalism also pervades the arts whenever a particular "school" succeeds enough to perpetuate itself and become self-referential in its own way--"mannered" I suppose is the appropriate word.

Douglas Gwyn

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### *"To the Musicians": An Early Quaker Critique of the Arts*

*A brief excerpt from Douglas Gwyn's recent book, The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1995).*

Early Quaker critiques of "vain pastimes" were not novel. Puritans had long stressed plainness in dress and lifestyle, and had criticized the arts, which they saw as distractions from spiritual life (for example, theaters were closed during Cromwell's rule).

Early Quaker polemics often added radical socioeconomic insight. Humphrey Smith wrote in 1658 *To the Musicians, to the Harpers, the Minstrels, the Singers, the Dancers, the Persecutors; from one who loved Dancing and Musick as his Life*. There he develops a biblical critique of the arts.

He notes that music began with Jubal, son of Cain the murderer (Gen 4:21). Smith argues from the story of Cain that the arts develop in the violence, wealth, and power that are concentrated in the building of cities (which begins with Cain). Music and dance encourage lightness and vanity, which bring spiritual violence within and material oppression without. The nature of Cain and Jubal will therefore slay the man of sorrows within—and without as well. He adds the examples of Saul and Herod to his argument: when King Saul departed from God's counsel, he took comfort in David's harp-playing; after watching Salome dance, Herod ordered John the Baptist beheaded.

# Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

*Issue #3, Fall 1996*

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Smith's wholesale rejection of the arts is extreme. But his critique makes it clear that neither religion nor the arts can pretend not to be socially situated and politically positioned either for or against God's kingdom on earth.

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*Types & Shadows* is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page revised July 2001