

# Clean cloth and clean spirit: christianity in woolman's journals



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John Woolman's Journals document his life from his earliest childhood experiences and growing relationship to God as he becomes more involved in the Quaker community to his adult life, working as a merchant's assistant and later a tailor. Woolman's observations and memories throughout this spiritual narrative present many moral lessons on Christian behavior not just at Church Meetings, but outside in everyday life. In his journals, Woolman ties the sinful practice of slavery to the clothing materials of the textile industry. This moral association, which can be traced from the beginning of his professional career to his later adult life, produces a dynamic between physical and spiritual cleansing across Woolman's personal spiritual development and his broader observations of Christian hypocrisy in slave-holding.

Slavery, at the time, was present in nearly all the major American industries such as agriculture and the manufacturing of goods. Woolman's focus on the exploitative practices of the textile industry stems from his first-hand experiences. When he is 23, he writes about being employed as a clerk by a merchant, who asks him to write a bill of sale for a recently sold slave. This economic opportunity becomes a kind of spiritual test. He expresses his discomfort, calling the "practice inconsistent with the Christian religion" (33), but, in a moment of moral weakness, he ends up writing out the bill anyway to much regret. That interaction teaches Woolman to assert his moral beliefs, so much so that he refuses to write an instrument of slavery when later asked by another man in his town. He notes a justification among Christian peoples who own slaves and/or continue to support slavery: "I spoke to him in good will, and he told me that keeping slaves was not

altogether agreeable in his mind, but that the slave being a gift made to his wife, he had accepted of her" (33). Despite their knowledge that this practice is sinful and immoral, Woolman acknowledges that they continue to participate in slavery and make excuses for their actions—something which directly contradicts with the purity of Christian morality. When he enters the tailoring trade, Woolman, as is common in previous spiritual narratives, believes that it is "the hand of Providence" which has brought him to this humbling profession (35). This position, working alongside retailers merchants, will allow him to bear witness to the extent to which slavery has become integrated into New England's economic and social systems and strengthen his moral stance against the harmful, un-Christian practice.

As Woolman becomes more involved in his community and takes up the trade of tailor to freely travel to other Quaker villages, he feels as though "a love clothes his mind", invoking the language of textiles to describe his devotion as he advances "forward in Christian firmness" (57). While Woolman views his job as a humble tailor as being closer to God, this relationship to textiles is complicated by the exploitative slave labor of the industry. Towards the end of his narrative, he describes witnessing the toxic, dirty work conditions of clothing dyers as he passes through various towns. Woolman argues that these colored fabrics not only conceal physical dirt, but spiritual corruption: "Real cleanness becometh a holy people, but hiding that which is not clean by coloring our garments appears contrary to the sweetness of sincerity" (190). Through his assessment of these dyed materials, Woolman denounces the hypocrisy of Christian peoples who claim to follow religious doctrine yet continue profit from slavery. This emphasis on

“ real cleanness” and the exposure of hidden sin echoes Adam and Eve’s covering up of their naked bodies out of shame after they eat the Garden’s fruit. The act of purchasing pure, simple (read: “ naked”) undyed clothing brings both a literal cleansing of dirt and dye and a spiritual cleansing, a return to Christian values of human love which have been lost in this shameful economic practice and an end to the materialist vanity these expensive dyed fabrics bring.

Unlike other Christian writers, Woolman moves his spiritual practices beyond the walls of a church into everyday social spaces through economic interactions. His advocacy for ethical clothing consumption demonstrates a change in Quaker practices, greater emphasis placed on devotion through daily action rather than just through reading and speaking during meetings. Woolman uses his experiences with the textile industry, from his first clerk job to his independent life as a tailor, to underscore the importance of ending slavery and confronting Christian hypocrisy in slave owners and customers who buy slave-made products. Woolman acknowledges that one can be clothed by the love of God, yet that very cloth can become soiled. The dyed material represents a masking of not only physical, but spiritual dirt, sin that can be excused or unacknowledged by Christians who wish to continue to reap the economic benefits of slavery. For Woolman, a clean, simple cloth represents a cleansed, moral soul.

## **Works Cited**

Woolman, John. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. Friends United Press, 2007.

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