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The Inner Light and the Outstretched Hand: *Quaker Theology as the Ground of Humanitarian Action in World War II*

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Abstract

This essay examines the theological foundations of Quaker humanitarian activism during World War II, with particular attention to the work of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and British and Australian Quaker networks in aiding Jewish refugees and civilian internees. Drawing on core Quaker doctrines—the Inner Light, the testimonies of equality and nonviolence, and the prophetic witness tradition—the essay argues that Quaker humanitarian action was not merely philanthropic but constituted an integrated theological praxis: a living embodiment of their understanding of the divine in every human person. The essay situates this analysis within the broader historical context of wartime internment, with attention to the Tatura internment camp in Victoria, Australia, where Jewish refugees—many of them German and Austrian nationals displaced by Nazi persecution—were held under conditions that drew Quaker response. The essay concludes that the Quaker model offers an enduring paradigm for theologically grounded ethical witness in circumstances of systemic injustice.

Introduction: Theology Made Visible

In the history of humanitarian response to the Holocaust and the wider European refugee crisis of the 1930s and 1940s, the Religious Society of Friends—the Quakers—occupy a singular and largely underappreciated position. Despite their small numbers (fewer than 20,000 members in Britain and roughly comparable numbers in North America at the time), Quaker organisations were among the first to recognise the existential threat posed by National Socialism to Jewish life in Europe, and among the most sustained in translating that recognition into concrete action [1]. Their response encompassed emergency financial relief, emigration assistance, the organisation of the Kindertransport, the operation of refugee hostels, underground rescue work in Vichy France, and advocacy at the highest levels of government [2,3].

Yet the historical significance of Quaker relief work cannot be fully assessed apart from the theological convictions that animated it. The Quakers did not act from political ideology, national interest, or even conventional religious duty in the sense of institutional obligation. They acted from what they understood to be a direct theological imperative: the recognition that every human being bears an irreducible fragment of the divine, and that to abandon the suffering other is to abandon God [4]. This essay traces the genealogy of that conviction and examines how it generated one of the most remarkable humanitarian networks of the twentieth century.

Of particular historical and personal resonance is the context of the Tatura internment camp in Victoria, Australia—a facility that housed, among others, German and Austrian Jewish refugees who had fled Nazi persecution, many of whom had previously been interned in Britain before being transported to Australia. The Quaker presence in and around these internment networks, even at the furthest geographical remove from the European theatre of persecution, is a testament to the global reach of a theology grounded in universal human dignity [5,6].

TATURA, VIC. 1943-06-10. CROWD OF GERMAN INTERNEES OF NO. 1 CAMP

Foundations of Quaker Theology: The Inner Light and the Testimony of Equality

The central theological concept of Quakerism—articulated by George Fox (1624–1691), the movement's founder, and elaborated by early apologists such as Robert Barclay (1648–1690)—is the doctrine of the Inner Light, or 'that of God in every person' [7]. This teaching holds that the divine Spirit is not mediated exclusively through scripture, sacrament, clergy, or institutional structure, but is immediately accessible to every human soul, irrespective of race, gender, social class, nationality, or religious background. Fox's formative spiritual insight was that 'there is that of God in every man' (using the language of his seventeenth-century context), a claim that had radical implications for how one was to regard and treat other human beings.= [7].

Barclay's systematic account in the Apology for the True Christian Divinity (1678) grounded this teaching in a thoroughgoing pneumatology: the Inner Light is identified with the universal seed of Christ, the Logos of the Fourth Gospel, present in all humanity as the ground of moral knowledge and spiritual possibility [8]. This was not a vague humanism but a specifically christological claim: the divine became universally present not only in the particular history of Jesus of Nazareth but in the fabric of human personhood itself. To encounter another human being was therefore, for

the Quaker, to encounter a site of divine indwelling.

The practical implication of this doctrine was immediate and far-reaching. If every person bears the Inner Light, then no system of social organisation that treats human beings as disposable, subhuman, or expendable can be regarded as theologically legitimate. Slavery, war, capital punishment, social exclusion, and ethnic persecution are not merely moral wrongs in the abstract; they are, in Quaker theological terms, desecrations of the divine image. This was not an insight arrived at gradually or reluctantly. It was, from the movement's inception, a constitutive feature of Quaker identity [9].

The Testimonies: Equality, Simplicity, Peace, Integrity

Quaker theology is expressed not primarily through creeds or confessional formularies but through what the tradition calls 'testimonies'—durable commitments to patterns of life and action that embody core theological convictions. The four classical testimonies are those of simplicity, equality, integrity, and peace, often rendered in the acronym SEIP or, more popularly, SPICE [10].

The testimony of equality holds that all persons are of equal worth before God and therefore deserving of equal dignity in human social arrangements. This testimony drove Quakers to oppose slavery centuries before abolitionism became mainstream, to advocate for women's equality in religious and civic life, and to insist on equal treatment for those whom society marginalised or persecuted. In the context of the 1930s and 1940s, it animated their response to antisemitism and to the broader refugee crisis with a directness and urgency that many other religious communities, encumbered by institutional caution or political calculation, could not match [1].

The testimony of peace—Quaker pacifism—is perhaps the most widely known aspect of Quaker identity and has sometimes been misread as a form of passivity or withdrawal from the world. In fact, Quaker pacifism is precisely the opposite: it is an active, engaged commitment to the resolution of conflict and the protection of the vulnerable by nonviolent means. The refusal to take up arms does not entail a refusal to act; on the contrary, it intensifies the imperative to act by foreclosing military solutions and redirecting moral energy toward direct humanitarian engagement [11]. It was this combination—the conviction that violence is never the answer and that inaction in the face of suffering is morally equivalent to complicity—that made Quakers such effective humanitarian actors in circumstances where conventional responses had failed.

The Prophetic Witness Tradition

A further dimension of Quaker theology relevant to this analysis is the tradition of prophetic witness—the practice of 'speaking truth to power,' a phrase attributed to Quaker usage in the mid-twentieth century that encapsulates a long tradition of engagement with political authority on behalf of the marginalized [12]. The historical precedents include William Penn's advocacy for religious toleration, John Woolman's anti-slavery witness before the American colonial legislatures, and Elizabeth Fry's prison reform campaigns. In each case, the mode of engagement was characteristically Quaker: personal, direct, grounded in moral testimony rather than political strategy, and uncompromising in its refusal to accommodate injustice.

This tradition supplied Quaker humanitarian workers during World War II with both a framework and a legitimacy for their engagement. Advocacy before governments for refugee visa policies, negotiations with Nazi bureaucracies for the release of individuals, and lobbying of the British Home Office on behalf of Jewish internees in Australia were all understood as continuous with a centuries-long tradition of prophetic witness. Rabben's historical analysis of the Quaker sanctuary tradition demonstrates that from the seventeenth century to the present, Friends have consistently understood their advocacy for the persecuted as answering a higher law that supersedes the claims of secular authority—a conviction she characterizes as the defining feature of Quaker humanitarian identity across more than three hundred and fifty years.35 The activist was not departing from Quaker faith; the activist was expressing it in its most concentrated form [12,35].

Historical Context: The Crisis of Jewish Refugees, 1933–1945

The election of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933 precipitated an immediate crisis for the Jewish communities of Europe. Within weeks, antisemitic legislation began to be enacted; within months, systematic persecution, economic exclusion, and violent intimidation were underway. Jewish emigration, initially encouraged by the Nazi regime as a means of Aryanising German society, became an urgent necessity for hundreds of thousands of families. Yet the international response was, for the most part, characterised by bureaucratic obstruction, antisemitic prejudice, and political calculation. The Evian Conference of 1938, convened by President Roosevelt to coordinate an international response to the refugee crisis, produced almost nothing of substance [13].

It was in this context that the Quakers' early and systematic response stands out as historically remarkable. The Germany Emergency Committee, established in 1933, was one of the first organised responses from any non-Jewish religious body to the Nazi persecution. The committee provided financial assistance, helped Jewish families with emigration logistics, and facilitated the acquisition of visas and documentation at a moment when such assistance could mean the difference between life and death [1] Rabben documents that within a year of Hitler's assumption of power, the Berlin Quaker Centre had become a focal point for Jews seeking emigration assistance to the United States, while the Paris Centre was supporting some four thousand Jewish refugees, the majority in southern France.35 The particular circumstances of Austrian Jews following the Anschluss of March 1938 presented an acute challenge: a case study by Brandt on eight Viennese refugees resettled through Quaker networks in the American Midwest illuminates the intimate, practical character of Quaker rescue work at this moment—the individual cases, the specific families, the particular human stories that lay behind the aggregate statistics [36].

Children from a Kindertransport arriving at Waterloo Station, London / Public domain

The Kindertransport

The most celebrated instance of Quaker humanitarian organisation in this period was their central role in the Kindertransport (Children's Transport), the rescue operation that brought approximately 10,000 mostly Jewish children from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland to safety in Britain between 1938 and 1940.14 The operation was precipitated by Kristallnacht (November 9–10, 1938), the nationwide pogrom that made

unambiguously clear the lethal intentions of the Nazi regime. Within days, Quaker organisations, working alongside Jewish and other charitable bodies, were lobbying the British government for emergency visas, organizing transport logistics, and securing foster families and institutional accommodations for the arriving children.

Bertha Bracey (1893–1989), a British Quaker and secretary of the Germany Emergency Committee, was among the principal architects of the Kindertransport and has been recognised by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations [14]. Rabben's account specifies that Bracey supervised eighty caseworkers and volunteers to coordinate the effort, and that in 1945 she further persuaded the British government to transport three hundred child survivors of the Holocaust to Britain aboard RAF aircraft [35]. Her work exemplifies the Quaker mode: quiet, persistent, organizationally sophisticated, and grounded in a straightforward theological conviction that the children's lives were sacred and that bureaucratic obstacles were moral challenges to be overcome rather than accepted [1].

The American Friends Service Committee

In North America, the primary vehicle for Quaker humanitarian activism was the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), founded in 1917 and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947 (jointly with the British Friends Service Council) in recognition of its wartime humanitarian work [15]. Under the leadership of Clarence Pickett (1884–1965), the AFSC operated across multiple fronts: facilitating the emigration of Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe, providing relief in Vichy France, assisting internees, and advocating in Washington for more generous refugee policies.

Pickett's memoir, For More Than Bread (1953), provides an invaluable primary account of the AFSC's operational ethos. What emerges is a picture of an organisation that combined theological conviction with bureaucratic pragmatism and political acuity—willing to engage with Nazi officials, Vichy administrators, and American government bureaucrats alike in service of saving individual lives.16 The AFSC's work in France, under figures such as Howard Kershner, included the operation of feeding programmes in internment camps and assistance with escape routes for Jewish refugees. Rabben estimates that the AFSC assisted approximately fifty thousand refugees in France over the course of its wartime operations—a figure that underscores the organizational scale that Quaker theological conviction was able to generate in conditions of extreme danger and political hostility [35].

TATURA, VIC. 1943. BARBED WIRE ENTANGLEMENTS AND FENCES AROUND THE PERIMETER OF THE COMPOUND

The Tatura Internment Camp and the Australian Context Enemy Aliens and the Paradox of Internment

Among the most poignant dimensions of the wartime refugee crisis was the internment by liberal democracies of the very people who had fled Nazi persecution. In Britain, following the fall of France in May 1940, a policy of mass internment of 'enemy aliens'—persons of German and Austrian nationality resident in the United Kingdom—was hastily implemented. The policy made no systematic distinction between Jewish refugees and Nazi sympathizers; both were classified as potential security threats and subject to internment [17].

The injustice was compounded when thousands of these internees, including a significant proportion of Jewish refugees who had already survived persecution, emigration, and the loss of home and livelihood, were transported to the British Dominions—Canada and Australia—aboard ships that were themselves vulnerable to German submarine attack. The deportees arrived in Australia knowing almost nothing of where they were being taken or for how long they would be held [17].

Tatura: Camp 3 and the Jewish Refugee Population

Tatura, in the Goulburn Valley district of Victoria, approximately 180 kilometres north of Melbourne, became the site of a major internment complex comprising multiple separate camps. Camp 3 at Tatura held a substantial population of Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria, alongside Italian and Japanese civilian internees in adjacent facilities. The camp population included academics, musicians, medical professionals, artists, and craftspeople—individuals of considerable cultural and intel-

lectual distinction who had been stripped of their liberty on the basis of nationality rather than any demonstrated threat to Australian security [5,6]. Brandt's documentation of the Viennese refugee experience provides a richly particularized account of what internment and displacement meant at the human level for this specific population: the rupture of professional identity, the disorientation of cultural transplantation, and the significance—material and psychological alike—of Quaker sponsorship networks in facilitating not only escape but the reconstruction of livable lives in new environments [36].

The conditions in the Tatura camps were, by the standards of wartime internment, relatively humane: the internees were permitted to organise schools, cultural events, and religious observances, and many made significant contributions to camp life through teaching, musical performance, and artisanal work. Nevertheless, the fundamental injustice of their situation—imprisoned by the same democratic nations that had ostensibly offered them refuge—was not lost on the internees themselves or on those outside the wire who advocated on their behalf [6].

Group Foto of internees Tatura Internment Camp1941

Quaker Advocacy and Assistance at Tatura

Australian Quakers, though small in number, were active in advocating for the more humane treatment of internees and for the accelerated release of those whose refugee status was beyond question. The Religious Society of Friends in Australia maintained contact with the AFSC and the British Friends Service Council, drawing on the international network of Quaker humanitarian infrastructure to bring both material assistance and moral pressure to bear on the internment system [5].

The Quaker approach in the Australian context was consistent with the broader Quaker model: personal, persistent, and theologically grounded. Visitors to Tatura reported on conditions; correspondence was maintained with internees; advocacy was conducted with government officials. The concern was not abstract—it was for specific individuals, specific families, specific children whose futures were being shaped by an administrative system that had lost sight, in the exigencies of wartime, of their fundamental human dignity.

For the refugees themselves, the presence of Quaker visitors and advocates represented something of considerable psychological and spiritual importance: evidence that outside the camp, there were those who regarded them not as enemy nationals but as fellow human beings deserving of care and solidarity. In a situation of extreme disorientation and vulnerability, this witness—quiet, consistent, non-coercive—carried a weight that material assistance alone could not provide.

19th-century engraving of George Fox, based on a painting of unknown date

Theological Praxis: The Coherence of Belief and Action

One of the distinctive features of Quaker theological anthropology is the refusal to distinguish sharply between the sacred and the secular. In traditions that maintain a strong sacramental theology—Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy preeminently, but also much of Lutheranism and Anglicanism—the sacred is concentrated in specific rituals, spaces, and persons. The Quakers, by contrast, universalize the sacred: every moment of genuine human encounter, every act of compassion, every instance of truthful speech, is potentially sacramental. There are no 'mere' acts of charity; there is no merely secular care for the refugee [9].

This theological logic is of considerable importance for understanding the Quaker humanitarian response. When Bertha Bracey negotiated with British Home Office officials for children's visas, she was not engaging in a secular political activity to which her religious faith happened to be incidentally attached. She was performing a theological act: bearing witness to the infinite worth of specific children as bearers of the Inner Light. When Quaker volunteers in Vichy France distributed food parcels in internment camps, they were enacting, in physical form, the theological conviction that the divine inhabits the hungry body of the refugee as surely as it inhabits any sanctuary.

The Refusal of Abstraction

A related feature of Quaker humanitarian praxis is its consistent resistance to abstraction. Quaker aid was characteristically particularized: it was concerned not with 'the refugee problem' in the aggregate but with this family, this child, this individual. This orientation reflects the theological conviction that the divine is encountered in the specific and the particular, not in statistical categories. It also has obvious practical implications: particularized care is more likely to be effective and more likely to be sustained through the vicissitudes of bureaucratic obstruction and political volatility.

Clarence Pickett's memoir is instructive here. The narrative is populated by individuals—named persons with specific histories, needs, and fu-

tures. The institutional and political machinery of relief work is present throughout, but it is consistently subordinated to the human person as the irreducible locus of concern. This is not merely literary convention; it reflects a theological anthropology in which the individual is never merely an instance of a class but always an end in themselves—a conviction that Kant would have recognised, though its Quaker formulation is characteristically grounded in the language of divine indwelling rather than rational autonomy [16].

Pacifism and the Ethics of Witness

The relationship between Quaker pacifism and their humanitarian activism deserves closer attention than it sometimes receives. It might appear that pacifism and effective humanitarian action are in tension: in a situation of violent persecution, is not armed resistance the most defensible moral option? The Quakers' answer, consistently maintained across the communities that faced this question most acutely during the 1930s and 1940s, was that this framing presents a false dichotomy [11].

Pacifism, in the Quaker sense, is not passivity but a different mode of agency. The refusal to participate in violence does not foreclose action; it redirects it. The Quaker humanitarian worker in Vichy France, carrying food to a camp, arranging the escape of a Jewish family, negotiating with a bureaucrat for a visa, is acting with at least as much moral seriousness as the armed resister, and arguably with a more durable form of moral credibility. The pacifist witness refuses the logic of violence even when violence would be instrumentally convenient, and in doing so, maintains a kind of moral integrity that purely political or military resistance cannot sustain.

This is not to make an argument for pacifism as a universal moral requirement—the Quakers themselves did not make that argument in any coercive sense—but to observe that in the specific historical circumstances of the 1930s and 1940s, the Quaker combination of pacifist conviction and activist commitment produced a distinctive form of humanitarian agency that proved remarkably effective. The moral authority that came from their refusal of violence opened doors that armed or politically compromised organisations could not open [12].

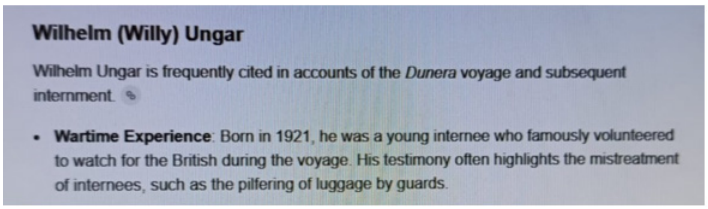
Legacy and Contemporary Significance

The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the British Friends Service Council and the American Friends Service Committee in 1947 represented a public recognition of what the Quakers had accomplished [15]. The Nobel Committee's citation noted the organizations' work in relief and rehabilitation across Europe and their consistent witness to the possibility of human solidarity across national and ideological boundaries. The award was unusual in being given not for a specific act or initiative but for a sustained pattern of action over many years—a recognition, in effect, of the coherence between Quaker belief and Quaker practice.

Righteous Among the Nations

Many individual Quakers were subsequently recognised by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations—a designation conferred on non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust [14]. These recognitions, from Bertha Bracey and her colleagues to Quakers who hid Jewish families in their homes or forged identity documents for those fleeing the Gestapo, document a pattern of individual moral courage that was, in each case, grounded in the same theological conviction: that the person in danger bore the Inner Light, and that this recognition left no room for the luxury of inaction.

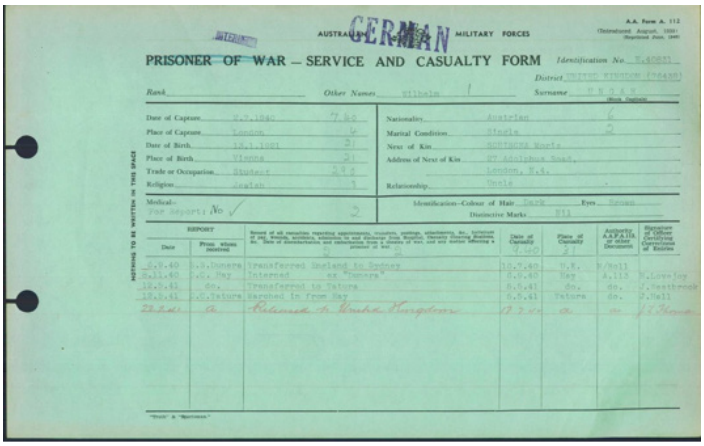
Willy Ungar, Internee



The Tatura Legacy and Personal Witness

For many families, the encounter with Quaker assistance at Tatura and in similar internment contexts was not merely a historical episode but a formative experience. The knowledge that, at a moment of maximal vulnerability—imprisoned without just cause in a country to which one had fled for safety—there were those who came, who advocated, who bore witness, and who refused to treat the administrative fact of internment as a moral verdict: this knowledge was itself a form of humanising gift. It restored, in some measure, the dignity that the internment system had stripped away.

The legacy of the Quaker witness at Tatura is therefore not only historical but, in the deepest sense, personal—lived in the memory of those who experienced it and transmitted through the generations. It is a reminder that the theological conviction that every person bears the divine image is not an abstraction but a claim that has concrete consequences: consequences that can be measured in lives protected, families sustained, and human dignity restored.


GERMAN

AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES

PRISONER OF WAR – SERVICE AND CASUALTY FORM

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the Quaker humanitarian response to the Jewish refugee crisis during World War II—including their work with internees at Tatura and in comparable settings across the English-speaking world—was not a contingent expression of individual compassion but the coherent enactment of a fully articulated theological vision. The doctrine of the Inner Light, the testimonies of equality and peace, and the tradition of prophetic witness together provided not only the motivation for action but its characteristic form: personal, particularized, persistent, nonviolent, and grounded in the conviction that no bureaucratic or political system can overwrite the sacred worth of the human person.

The Quakers were a small community, measured by conventional metrics of religious and social influence. Yet, relative to their numbers, they achieved more in the service of Jewish refugees and civilian internees than virtually any comparable group. The explanation lies precisely in the depth and coherence of their theological commitments. They acted not because circumstances permitted but because their theology required—and in doing so, they demonstrated the continuing truth of the prophetic tradition from which they drew: that moral clarity does not require institutional power. It requires only the willingness to act on what one believes, in the face of fear, in the presence of the other.

In an era of renewed humanitarian crisis, mass displacement, and the recrudescence of ethnic and political persecution, the Quaker model of theologically grounded humanitarian witness retains its full relevance. The Inner Light has not dimmed; the question is whether those who profess to see it are willing, as the Quakers were, to let it be seen.

ADDENDUM

The Inner Light and Hermeneutic Medicine: A Jewish Mystical Convergence

Two Traditions, One Imperative

The foregoing essay has traced the theological grounds of Quaker humanitarian action—principally the doctrine of the Inner Light, the testimonies of equality and peace, and the tradition of prophetic witness—as they were enacted in relief work, refugee rescue, and the compassionate presence of Friends at internment sites such as Tatura. The addendum that follows proposes a convergence: that this Quaker theological structure finds a striking parallel, arrived at independently from within Jewish mystical tradition, in the body of work on hermeneutic medicine and sacred therapeutic encounter developed by Ungar-Sargon across an extensive body of peer-reviewed scholarship spanning 2024 to 2026 [21–34]. The convergence is not superficial. Both traditions ground the ethical imperative for compassionate action in an ontological claim about the divine presence inhabiting every human person. Both insist that to encounter another human being in suffering is to stand on sacred ground. And both resist the bureaucratic and institutional reduction of the person to a case, a category, or a problem to be managed.

The Inner Light and the Or HaGanuz: A Structural Parallel

George Fox's foundational insight—that there is 'that of God in every person'—represents one of the most consequential theological claims in the history of Christian thought. It is worth observing, however, that the Jewish mystical tradition arrived at an analogous conclusion through a distinctly different but structurally equivalent route. The doctrine of the Or HaGanuz—the hidden primordial light concealed at the moment of creation (Genesis Rabbah 3:6)—holds that within every human soul there resides a spark of the original divine radiance, a nitzotz (divine spark) awaiting recognition and restoration. Lurianic Kabbalah elaborated this insight into a comprehensive cosmology of divine contraction (tzimtzum), shattering (shevirat hakelim), and redemption (tikkun), in which every human encounter carries the potential for the recovery and elevation of scattered divine sparks [22].

Ungar-Sargon's publication 'The Hidden Light in the Therapeutic Space' (2025) makes this connection explicit within the clinical context, arguing that the therapeutic encounter can be understood as a site of Or HaGanuz—a space in which the concealed divine light within the patient may be recognised, honoured, and allowed to illuminate the healing process [21]. This is structurally identical to the Quaker claim: in both frameworks, the encounter with the suffering other is simultaneously a theological event. The patient who enters the consulting room and the refugee who arrived at Tatura internment camp are, in these two traditions, bearers of the same sacred burden—the divine light that no system of power or bureaucratic categorisation can extinguish, though both may render it temporarily invisible.

Listening as Theological Act Sacred

Among the most distinctive features of Quaker meeting practice is the discipline of attentive silence—the gathered community waiting upon the Inner Light, listening for what the Spirit may speak through any member, however marginalised. This practice of sacred listening is simultaneously a theological discipline and an ethical posture: it refuses the priority of the institutional voice over the individual witness, and it creates the space within which hidden truths may emerge.

Ungar-Sargon's scholarship has developed an extensive parallel account of sacred listening within the clinical encounter. 'The Art of Sacred Listening: Divine Presence and Clinical Empathy in Contemporary Medical History Taking' (2025) argues that genuine clinical listening constitutes a form of theological attention—an openness to the sacred narrative within the patient's account of illness that refuses the reductionism of diagnostic categorisation.28 Similarly, 'Presence Within and Beyond Words: Sacred Listening as Experiential Encounter' (2025) elaborates the phenomenology of this attentiveness, drawing on both Kabbalistic and clinical frameworks to argue that the space between healer and patient is potentially a space of divine disclosure [24].

The parallel to Quaker practice is precise. Bertha Bracey listening to the testimony of a German Jewish refugee before a Home Office committee; Quaker volunteers in Vichy France attending to the specific history and need of individual internees; the Quaker visitor to Tatura receiving without judgment the account of an unjustly imprisoned person—these are all instances of the same sacred attentiveness that Ungar-Sargon identifies as central to therapeutic practice. In both contexts, the act of listening is a refusal to allow the institutional narrative (the administrative category of 'enemy alien,' the diagnostic label of the patient) to override the irreducible particularity of the person who is present and suffering.

Tzimtzum and the Ethics of Therapeutic Withdrawal

Lurianic Kabbalah's foundational myth of tzimtzum—the divine contraction by which God withdrew into Godself to create the space within which finite existence became possible—has proven to be one of the most productive theological concepts for the analysis of therapeutic relationship. If God's first creative act was a withdrawal, a making-room, then the healer's first act toward the patient must similarly be a contraction of the ego's tendency to occupy, categorize, and manage. The therapeutic space is created, in this model, not by the healer's assertion of competence but by the healer's willingness to withdraw into attentive presence.

Ungar-Sargon's paper 'Epistemology versus Ontology in Therapeutic Practice: The Tzimtzum Model and Doctor-Patient Relationships' (2025) develops this insight systematically, arguing that the Lurianic tzimtzum provides a more adequate model for the therapeutic encounter than the conventional epistemological frameworks of evidence-based medicine [25]. The physician who makes tzimtzum—who contracts the professional ego, suspends the diagnostic imperative, and creates space for the patient's own narrative—enacts a form of therapeutic presence that mirrors the divine creative withdrawal.

It is suggestive to note that the Quaker model of humanitarian action operated by a structurally analogous logic. Quaker relief workers, characteristically, did not impose their own narrative upon the refugee or the internee. They did not arrive at Tatura with a programme, an ideology, or a framework within which the internees were to be fitted. They arrived with presence, attention, and the willingness to be shaped by the encounter. This is tzimtzum in practice: the withdrawal of the institutional self to create the space in which the sacred particularity of the other person may emerge and be received.

The Shekhinah in the Therapeutic Space

The Kabbalistic concept of the Shekhinah—the indwelling divine presence, traditionally figured as feminine, associated with exile, suffering, and the divine accompaniment of the people of Israel through darkness—offers a further point of convergence. Ungar-Sargon's 'Shekhinah Consciousness: Divine Feminine as Theological and Political Paradigm for Human Suffering' (2025) develops this concept as a framework for understanding the presence of the divine within clinical suffering: the Shekhinah does not reside only in places of triumph or restoration but precisely in the midst of brokenness, exile, and marginality [26].

This is a claim with direct implications for the interpretation of Tatura and sites of comparable suffering. If the Shekhinah is present wherever human beings are exiled and diminished—and the Talmud (Megilah 29a) explicitly states that the Shekhinah accompanies Israel into exile—then the internment camp is, theologically, a site of divine indwelling. The Quaker visitor who came to Tatura was, in this framework, not merely performing a humanitarian service but entering a space of concentrated divine presence, a place where God was most fully present in the suffering of those whose dignity had been most egregiously violated.

This convergence between the Kabbalistic Shekhinah theology and the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light is not coincidental: both arise from the same fundamental theological conviction that the divine is not distant from human suffering but present within it, and that the appropriate human response to suffering in another is therefore not merely practical assistance but a form of sacred witness—recognition of the divine that is hidden within the broken vessel of the suffering person.

The Fractured Vav: Brokenness as Sacred Portal

Ungar-Sargon's 'The Fractured Vav: A Theology of Sacred Brokenness as Portal Between Healing and Holiness' (2025) develops one of the most theologically resonant aspects of this convergence [27]. The broken vav of Numbers 25:12—the deliberately fractured letter in the word shalom in the covenant of peace given to Phinehas—has been read in the mystical tradition as a sign that peace achieved through violence is inherently incomplete, that wholeness incorporates brokenness rather than transcending it. In the therapeutic context, this theology of sacred brokenness holds that the patient's wound is not merely an obstacle to healing but a potential site of transformation—a portal through which the divine may be encountered precisely in its concealment.

The internees of Tatura were, in this theological reading, bearers of a fractured vav: their lives had been broken by persecution, displacement, and unjust imprisonment. Yet the Quaker witness at Tatura recognised, whether explicitly in these terms or implicitly through the logic of its theology, that this brokenness was not the last word about these persons. The divine spark—the Inner Light, the nitzotz—persisted within the fracture. The work of the healer, the witness, the humanitarian actor is not to pretend the fracture does not exist but to honour the divine that is present within it.

Ungar-Sargon's account of 'Primordial Silence and Therapeutic Presence: Theodicy and the Paradox of Divine Concealment in Clinical Practice' (2025) adds a further dimension to this analysis [29]. The divine concealment—the hester panim of post-Holocaust theology—is not merely a theological problem to be solved but a clinical reality to be inhabited. The healer who remains present in the space of divine concealment, who refuses the consolations of false certainty, and who maintains therapeutic presence without resolving the patient's darkness into premature light is enacting the same form of witness as the Quaker visitor who entered Tatura and simply remained with those who suffered there.

Hermeneutic Medicine and the Quaker Model: A Synthesis

The concept of hermeneutic medicine, as elaborated across Ungar-Sargon's extensive body of work, holds that the clinical encounter is fundamentally an act of interpretation—that the patient's history, symptoms, and suffering constitute a text that requires the hermeneutical skills of a trained reader who approaches the text with both technical competence and receptive openness [23,30]. The physician who practises hermeneutic medicine does not impose a pre-formed interpretive grid upon the patient's account but remains open to the possibility that the patient's narrative may disclose meanings that exceed the physician's categories.

This is, in structure and in spirit, precisely what the Quaker humanitarian workers practised at Tatura and across their network of refugee relief. They approached the individual refugee not as an instance of a type—the 'enemy alien,' the 'displaced person,' the 'refugee case'—but as a text requiring careful, respectful, and open-ended reading. The Quaker testimonies of simplicity and integrity reinforced this orientation: the witness was not to perform a role or execute a programme but to be genuinely present to the particular person before them.

Ungar-Sargon's 'The Patient as Parable: Highlighting the Interpretive Framework—Applying Mystic Hermeneutics to Patient Narratives' (2025) develops this analogy with particular elegance, arguing that the patient's story, like the parable (mashal) in the rabbinic tradition, carries a meaning that exceeds its surface narrative and must be received through a mode of attention that is simultaneously rational and spiritually attuned [31] The parallel to the Quaker practice of attentive listening—waiting upon the Inner Light to speak through the other—is here at its closest: both traditions insist that the most important knowledge cannot be extracted through interrogation but must be received through presence.

The Therapeutic Dimension of Quaker Witness: Concluding Reflections

What emerges from this comparative analysis is a striking convergence

between two traditions that have developed, largely in isolation from one another, a set of structurally analogous responses to the fundamental theological question of how the divine is to be encountered in human suffering. The Quaker tradition arrived at its answer through the doctrine of the Inner Light and the testimonies; the Jewish mystical tradition arrived at its answer through the Or HaGanuz, the Shekhinah, and the theology of tzimtzum. Ungar-Sargon's hermeneutic medicine represents a sustained contemporary articulation of the Jewish mystical account and its implications for clinical practice.

The therapeutic dimension of Quaker witness at Tatura and at comparable sites of suffering was not incidental to their humanitarian effectiveness: it was constitutive of it. The Quaker workers did not merely deliver material assistance; they were present in a way that recognised and honoured the Inner Light within the internees. In the language of Ungar-Sargon's work, they practised sacred listening; they made tzimtzum; they entered the space of Shekhinah in exile and remained there without flinching. This therapeutic presence—distinct from, but inseparable from, their practical humanitarian interventions—was itself a form of healing.

The Sacred Temporality of Healing, the Physician as Witness, the Wound as Altar—these are not merely evocative metaphors in Ungar-Sargon's scholarship. They are precise theological descriptions of a mode of presence that the Quakers at Tatura enacted, perhaps without the specific Kabbalistic vocabulary, with remarkable fidelity. The Inner Light that George Fox identified as the ground of human dignity and the ground of ethical obligation toward every suffering person is, in the end, the same light that the Lurianic tradition calls the Or HaGanuz—the hidden light that persists within even the most shattered vessel and that awaits the witness who is willing to recognise it.

For the families of those who were held at Tatura—including those who received, in the midst of their unjust imprisonment, the quiet, persistent, theologically grounded care of Quaker visitors and advocates—this convergence between the theology of the Inner Light and the theology of the divine spark is not an academic observation. It is a testimony to the reality that the divine presence was not absent from that camp. It was present in the witness of those who came, and in the irreducible dignity of those who endured.

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