

1-1-2012

A New Light On Elias Hicks

Stephen W. Angell

Earlham School of Religion, angelst@earlham.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Angell, Stephen W. (2012) "A New Light On Elias Hicks," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 119 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol119/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

NEW LIGHT ON ELIAS HICKS

STEPHEN W. ANGELL

Paul Buckley, ed. *The Journal of Elias Hicks*. San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2009.

Paul Buckley, ed. *Dear Friend: Letters and Essays of Elias Hicks*. San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2011.

Paul Buckley. "Thy Affectionate Friend: The Letters of Elias Hicks and William Poole." M. A. Thesis, Earlham School of Religion, 2001.

We are greatly indebted to Paul Buckley for making so much of Elias Hicks available in the past ten years. There are many reasons to be thankful for Paul's publications. His editing work is meticulous, as he works from the original manuscripts wherever possible. His commentary on Hicks, mostly in footnotes, is concise and clear. Where he has included maps and images (mostly line drawings of Quaker meetinghouses), as in his edition of Hicks' *Journal*, the illustrations are attractive and a significant aid in elucidating material in the text.

In the *Journal*, we encounter mostly a Quietist Hicks who is a recognizable spiritual descendant of John Woolman and Job Scott. Most of its entries were written prior to 1819, in other words, before Hicks became especially controversial. We encounter a Hicks who is a very skilled minister in the Quietist mold, speaking to Friends' "states and conditions." In a 1797 entry, a Hicks who would later be reviled as an infidel, can be found complaining about "the prevailing of a spirit of great infidelity and deism among the people," something he attributed to Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* "(falsely so-called)." (77; see also, 54) Some of Buckley's service as editor is similar to that which Phillips Moulton performed for John Woolman; he restores dreams that were dropped by previous editors, for example. He also restores a story missing from the earlier edition shedding light on Hicks' vegetarian impulses. After butchering a cow, Hicks' mind was "seriously impressed with . . . the extraordinary change that had taken place in so short a space with a strong, well-favored, living animal, that in the morning was in a state of health, vigor, and comely proportion,

8 • STEPHEN W. ANGELL

and at the close of the evening, all its parts were decomposed, and its flesh and bones cut into pieces and packed away in a cask with salt to be devoured by the animal-man.” True to Quaker form, Hicks was inspired to pose a query: “Is it right, and consistent with divine wisdom, that such cruel force should be employed and such a mighty sacrifice be made necessary for the nourishment and support of these bodies of clay?” (169) Buckley’s edition of Hicks’ *Journal* emphasizes Hicks’ edginess and complexity, while highlighting his impressive qualities that made his descent into controversy in the 1820s even more threatening to many.

But the *Journal*, whether Buckley’s edition or the previous one, is not the place to explore the immediate background to the Great Separation. The crucial years of 1820 to 1827 are covered in a mere 18 unenlightening pages that barely acknowledge the storm surrounding him. Hicks’ treatment of the important 1828 events is fuller and reveals startling changes in the Quaker world. But as to how the Religious Society of Friends got to this conflicted new place, Buckley’s two editions of Hicks’ epistles are far more helpful.¹

Buckley’s edition of the letters continues to render a more three-dimensional portrait of the man. For example, in the midst of the height of the Hicksite-Orthodox controversy (3/6/1826), Hicks found time to write a very detailed letter to Barnabas Bates roundly criticizing hymn singing, on the grounds that singing “and indeed, all kind of music that has sound, tends abundantly more to operate on the animal passions than it does to edify and comfort the soul.” (205) Hicks unleashes a stunning array of arguments to support his contention, nearly all of which are clear, although not especially convincing (at least to the twenty-first century Quaker ear).

Unlike Buckley’s earlier volume, however, this sheds considerable light on the Hicksite-Orthodox controversy (or, as Hicks would prefer, the controversy between the Orthodox and the “Tolerants”), and I would be remiss if I did not examine that part of the work before the Quaker Theological Discussion Group.

Neither Buckley nor any other scholar who has looked at this era of Quaker history has gone far toward examining the exact timing of the earliest roots of the Orthodox controversy with Elias Hicks. Jerry Frost thinks that the proto-Orthodox in North America may have been looking for a scapegoat for the Hannah Barnard heresy uncovered in Britain around 1800, and that Stephen Grellet, a sometime traveling companion of Hicks, may have been the one to make the connection of

Barnard to Hicks. In considering Frost's conjecture, one might point to a retrospective passage in Grellet's memoirs where he mentions elderring Hicks at the 1808 New York Yearly Meeting sessions for "frequently advanc[ing] sentiments repugnant to the Christian faith, tending to lessen the authority of the Holy Scriptures, to undervalue the sacred offices of our holy and blessed Redeemer, and to promote a disregard for the right observance of the first day of the week,"² but to little effect. If Frost is correct that Grellet may have been instrumental in the beginning stage of the disturbances, the list of issues that Grellet is concerned about shows up most clearly in Hicks' correspondence with William Poole, a correspondence which began in 1816 and is collected in Buckley's M.A. thesis. This would supply a date about eight years after the Yearly Meeting sessions Grellet long after mentions. Grellet's retrospective chronology may be too early.

Larry Ingle has previously asserted that Elias Hicks had an "Adoptionist" Christology.³ What Buckley has done, in the main, is to provide us with the primary texts on which Ingle made those assertions (and some additional ones, as well). In brief, there is ample evidence that Hicks was an "Adoptionist;" but, one might well ask, what is "Adoptionism"? An Adoptionist tends to believe that Jesus was not divine from the creation of the universe, or even from his conception in Mary's womb and subsequent birth, but only during his period of active ministry beginning with his baptism in the River Jordan (and, all gospels but the Fourth would specify, at the hands of John the Baptist). Jesus was not born the Son of God. He is instead God's adopted son. Thus, Jesus' period of divinity would have been relatively brief (perhaps one to three years, depending on which gospel chronology one adopts), as the passage of time goes, but this kind of theology tends to highlight the importance of Jesus' words and deeds during his active ministry. As an Adoptionist, Hicks would accept both the Virgin Birth and Jesus' Resurrection, but without investing either event with much meaning. In other words, Hicks and other Adoptionists emphasize the humanity of Jesus, and in so doing, emphasize, the importance of Christians following Jesus' example in his faithfulness to the will of God.

One can find some support for this kind of theology in the Scriptures (mostly the Gospel of Mark), but over two millennia Christian theologians have generally looked askance at Adoptionism. In the eighth century, the Catholic Church declared it to be a heresy, but Quakers have generally paid little attention to the pronouncements

of Church councils and popes. Moreover, several of the best Christian theologians have been advocates of Adoptionism, including Peter Abelard, Duns Scotus, and Howard Thurman. In its emphasis on Jesus's humanity (but without denying his divinity), Adoptionism is often called a form of "low Christology."⁴

In a series of letters in the 1820s, Hicks proclaimed his thoughts along these lines.⁵ Each of these letters referenced Jesus' undergoing baptism by John as a crucial turning point. In Hicks' words, this baptism was the "last ritual" and by complying with it, Jesus "fulfilled all the righteousness of the outward law and testament, and was then prepared to receive the qualification for entering into the gospel state by reception or more full diffusion of the Holy Spirit, which descended upon him as soon as he had finished all the work of the shadows relative to the law state, and which qualified him for his gospel mission." (Buckley, 108) Hicks thus worked extensively with categories he inherited from early Friends—shadow and substance, inward and outward. Repeatedly, he saw himself standing up for the pure inward faith and his opponents for the outward faith that Jesus had come to show us how to get beyond. The difference between Jesus and us is that Jesus had a fuller diffusion of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit has been diffused upon us as well. Thus, while not denying Jesus' divinity, his virgin birth, or his resurrection (the purpose of these miraculous elements, Hicks held, was "to prove to that dark and ignorant people, debased by their bondage, that there was a living and invisible God"—Buckley 215), he found those marvelous aspects of Jesus' witness to be relatively unimportant, and instead he emphasized the similarities between Jesus and Friends of his time, and possibly of ours.

In 1822, lest anyone think that he was denying fundamental Christian doctrines, Hicks was more specific: by virtue of baptism at the hands of John, Jesus became "a partaker of the Divine Nature of his heavenly father . . . the Son of God with power." (Buckley 2011, 142; see also 214) Hicks' opponents never seem to have commented directly on his Adoptionist views—instead they *did* accuse him of denying fundamental Christian doctrines, such as the divinity of Jesus. When Hicks was accused by one of his formerly good friends of denying the virgin birth, Hicks acknowledged advising another of his friends to say as little about the virgin birth as possible, because he believed "there was as much plain Scripture against it as there was for it. And although that was the case in my opinion, it had not diverted me from my former views, as the mere Scripture has but a very little part in

forming my faith. For I consider God only to be the real author of all true faith.” (Hicks to Gideon Seaman, 5/3/1822, in Buckley 2011, 158) In other words, Hicks was concerned that his beliefs were being stripped of all nuance, in order that his Orthodox opponents be able to portray him more convincingly as a heretic denying fundamental Christian doctrines. It has been a matter of debate among Quaker historians as to just how unfair his Orthodox critics were, but the letters from Hicks that Buckley reprints here provide many further examples of this kind of phenomenon.

Hicks was a strong theist, affirming that God is “everywhere else [i.e., not just in Christ] in the same fullness, as he pervades all space and is a complete, indivisible, omnipresent, and unchangeable God, and who only is worthy to be worshipped, honored, and obeyed by the children of men throughout all ages, world without end.” (Buckley 2011, 103) In the divinity shared by both God the Father and Jesus, a similar achievement of holiness is available to us as was experienced by Jesus: God “enlightens man’s spirit. . . . And as the spirit of man yields and submits to his operation, there is a birth of God brought forth in the spirit of man. . . . And this birth of God in the soul, being begotten by God, unites in record or witness in unity with God, as son.” (Buckley 2011, 82)⁶ In the areas of Christology and theology, it appears that Hicks’ main point may be a negation, that Christian faith not be outward, because, among other things, of the dangers of a blood atonement theory. This is something that he may have in common with other Adoptionists, especially Peter Abelard, who put himself at such pains to formulate an alternative theory of the atonement to the feudal transactional type that had been previously put forward by Anselm.

Again, as Hicks wrote to Poole, “Only one man pierced the outward Messiah, but all have pierced the spiritual Messiah and borne him down as a cart with sheaves, and for which we all will have to weep and howl, either in mercy or judgment.” (Buckley 2011, 102) The Hicks material that Buckley has produced is certainly voluminous enough so that I have missed something, but the orientation of Hicks himself and Hicksites on the question of the outward atonement may be more fully elucidated in material other than what Buckley has published for us here.⁷

Hicks was charismatic, highly capable, smart, articulate, and had impressive spiritual attainments in many respects, but he seems also to have been immensely irritating at times and not always very humble.

12 • STEPHEN W. ANGELL

The first time I read through Buckley's M.A. thesis, it was these latter characteristics that dominated my reading, and I encountered them especially in Hicks' contrasting usages of "apostasy" and "reformation." Hicks sees a cycle throughout Christian history of apostasy and reformation, and the way that he develops this topic as he comes closer to his present, it is clear that he thinks of himself as the reformer and his opponents as the apostates.⁸ Given the kind of treatment of himself and other "Tolerants" that he details in both his journal and his letters, such a conception may be understandable. It would require some tolerance of cognitive dissonance to concede that Quakers who have mutually incompatible views of how to adapt Quakerism to their contemporary age may all be reformers. But some sort of expansive way of dealing with such cognitive dissonance is what is needed, in that basic Quaker query, to maintain love and unity among the immense variety of Quakers in our age—and could it have been what was needed in his age, too? So I went into my first reading of Buckley's thesis thinking that I was a Hicksite, and when I finished that reading of it, I wasn't so sure.

Whether you agree or disagree with Hicks, or, like me, agree in part and disagree in part, we can all be grateful to Paul Buckley for putting such an enormous amount of Hicks primary source materials at our fingertips in scrupulously edited and attractive works. I'm sure that there will be more to come. Perhaps Paul can bring us some of his marvelous, concise, and insightful commentaries on Hicks such as can be found in his M.A. Thesis. But having the chance to read Hicks, often with my students, in these primary source collections has been a delight. I heartily commend these volumes to you as well.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I confess that my favorite volume of Buckley's composition is his ten-year-old Earlham School of Religion Master's Thesis, "Thy Affectionate Friend: The Letters of Elias Hicks and William Poole." By including the full correspondence of both Hicks and his Wilmington, Delaware, correspondent, one gets the welcome sense of the exchange of letters as a dialogue, a conversation, missing for the most part from Buckley's 2011 edition of Hicks' letters, at least when one takes the latter on its own. Buckley also provides extensive and helpful headnotes in his thesis, headnotes that are entirely missing from his two subsequent publications. Even better, however, is to work back and forth from Buckley's 2001 and 2011 productions simultaneously.
- 2 Stephen Grellet, *Memoirs of the Life and Gospel Labors of Stephen Grellet* (Philadelphia: H. Longstreth, 1860), I, 142.

NEW LIGHT ON ELIAS HICKS • 13

- 3 H. Larry Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998), 90.
- 4 “Adoptionism,” s.v. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 19; Stephen W. Angell, “Howard Thurman and Quakers,” *Quaker Theology* 16 (Fall-Winter 2009): 48-49.
- 5 Elias Hicks to William Poole, 2/14/1820; 2/3/1823 (these two are cited by Larry Ingle in *Quakers in Conflict* [Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1998]) but see also *An Essay on the Birth and Offices of Christ*, dated by Buckley to 1822; and Elias Hicks to Moses Pennock, 7/22/1827. All of these can be found in Buckley, *Dear Friend*, 105-110, 140-145, 166-169, 213-218.
- 6 Elias Hicks to William Irish, 1/15/1820; in Buckley 2001, 89, one can determine that this same letter was copied to William Poole. So one can deduce from the body of Buckley’s work that Hicks regarded some of his works as important enough theological statements that he would painstakingly copy them out for more than one correspondent.
- 7 See, e.g., Ingle 1998, 91.
- 8 See, e.g., Buckley 2011, 54-55, 111, 125, 181, 209. The last three of these references are drawn from letters wrote by Hicks to William Poole, and hence can be found in Buckley 2001 as well.