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Comments on "Christ's Wife: A Vision for All Women"

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LORENA JEANNE TINKER

The history of the Society of Friends does not show them as making any marked contribution to speculative theology, but rather as specializing in a type of conduct and corporate witness that they believe to be in harmony with the inward experience of God in the soul.

London Yearly Meeting report, 1920¹

In order that I may respond to the incredibility of Lisa Kuenning's paper, it is important that I try to understand what she is saying. It is necessary for me to take out of sequence what for her is a valid thesis and to arrange the items of her thesis in logical sequence.

First, she and her husband belong to a community of seven people who believe the first allegiance of each member, male as well as female, is as bride to their bridegroom, Christ. They follow George Fox's and Margaret Fell's interpretation of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, in which he wrote that "I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband" (2 Cor. 11:2 RSV). Within the small community some of the members are married to each other, others have spouses outside the community, and there is at least one single person.

Second, this community is called the second Publishers of Truth, after the seventeenth-century group with which George Fox identified.

Third, this community, if Kuenning is representative, accepts the Puritan-based doctrine of original sin, that "in Adam's fall we sinned all," in the familiar McGuffey's Reader language. This was because of the disobedience of Eve and the subsequent weakness of her male-mother, Adam, the first man, who then also disobeyed his creator-father-God.

Fourth, according to Kuenning and this community, to be saved from this original sin men and women must accept Jesus Christ as saviour-bridegroom.

Fifth, men and women as "brides" (as members of the "true church") of the saviour-bridegroom, Christ, will thus be equal, male and female.

Sixth, in this proposal Kuenning insists she recognizes true liberation of women compared with that of the twentieth-century women's movement for liberation.

Seventh, Kuenning and the other members of the small second Publishers of Truth community identify themselves as rooted in Fox's Quakerism and that in turn as rooted in earliest Christianity, which developed in response to Jesus' fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecy, which provided the base for Christian eschatology.

Eighth, Kuenning gives examples to prove the equality of at least some seventeenth-century Quaker women with Quaker men.

To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, for Quaker women (and men) who want this thesis, then this is the thesis for these Quaker women (and men). My response to the thesis is not only one of incredulity that an intelligent twentieth-century woman, Quaker or otherwise, does actually believe it but also one of questioning the assumptions underlying it.

Is Kuenning's thesis faithful to George Fox?

Although without formal education, social status, or political power, Fox undoubtedly was a powerful religious and social leader and organizer. He was responsible for the mobilizing of spiritual resources for social dynamic in his own seventeenth-century world and also for their continuing impact into the twentieth century. He spoke the language of the common people of England. And he more or less understood the language of the King James version of the Bible. He was not persecuted because he disagreed with the standard literal interpretation of Holy Scripture or even with many of the fundamental theological tenets of Puritanism. Rather, he was jailed for a total of almost one-tenth of his sixty-seven years, sometimes with very cruel and harsh punishment, because men with vested interests in the religious and other institutions of

his seventeenth-century England rightly perceived the threat of the true radicalism to which he was committed and which guided his witness: there is that of God (or at least a seed of God) in every human being. Refusal to doff his hat in the presence of authorities? From a superficial viewpoint, this perhaps appeared a trivial or childish act of a person emotionally imbalanced. It can be more profoundly recognized that his behavior was a deeply rooted expression of basic God-centered self-identity which refused control by any and all emissaries of kings, popes, prime ministers, or the powers and principalities themselves! As with Moses, his trembling was in the presence of the Holy Spirit, and his relationship with the Spirit was his holy experiment.

If people should truly follow Fox, what might happen to the power and control of those who headed religious and other societal institutions? If the people should be liberated from bondage to these institutions and their false gods, then the very foundations of not only English but western society would be undermined!

If Fox were alive today, would he not speak the vernacular? James Childress, in "Answering That of God in Every Man," in a 1974 issue of *Quaker Religious Thought*, wrote: "Fox did not demand an acceptance of Christian vocabulary and practice in order to be subordinated to Christ, since Christ is universal."² Childress referred the reader to Fox's *The Royal Law of God Revived* (1671-2), not to the more commonly quoted and proof-texted *Journal*.

If Fox were addressing twentieth-century women, including a large number of the small population of Quakers, who are conscious of their own oppression under milleniums of patriarchal societies, would he hold on to language which was perhaps suitable for his seventeenth-century needs, but which is awkward and downright ridiculous today? Kuenning stoutly defends and tries to repair Fox's "meet help." The biblical correction, "help meet," is scarcely better, because it has come to be identified with a female spouse, subordinated to her husband, performing work within sexual, sexist bonds. The analogy of the bridegroom and bride, which Jesus (Matt. 9:15)

and Paul (2 Cor. 11:2) used to define the relation of Christ to his church, was rooted in sexist Isaiah's beautiful poem:

For your Maker is your husband,
the LORD of hosts is his name. . . .
For the LORD has called you
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit. . . .
For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you.
(Isa. 54:5-10)

The Jewish patriarchal marriage was unapologetically one of vast inequality between the male and the female. The woman was the possession of her husband, to be his "handmaiden," arriving "unblemished," a "new piece of merchandise," never before "used" by a man — in other words, a virgin. Jesus, Paul, and George Fox accepted much that was sexist in their respective societies. The Judaeo-Christian assumptions about marriage, which included the dominant male and the submissive female, have been rooted in long tradition.

Would Fox indeed resort to models which at best must be translated and at worst are unmentionable for many thoughtful twentieth-century women, if he were to be with us today in the flesh? Can any perceptive Quaker woman or man envision Fox as a Billy Graham, regardless of the century of his living presence?

Fox witnessed to his considered convictions, based on illumination and warmth from the Light of the Holy Spirit. His marriage came out of his personal and religious relationships and needs. Kuenning, in my opinion, does him a disservice by accepting literally, with a few grammatical corrections, his writing that he was commanded to marry Margaret Fell as a testimony of "the Church coming out of the Wilderness, and the Marriage of the Lamb, before the Foundation of the World was."

Kuenning "found what Fox said about the heavenly marriage rather exciting." In fact, she literally gushed:

So Christ was to be our husband? That was fine with me, since I was in love with him. I did have a twinge of anxiety as to whether a heterosexual

male would feel left out by the arrangement. Larry assured me it was not a problem. He was in love with him too. But he had no feeling that Christ should be the bride.

This rather incredible³ statement reminded me of explanations my teacher-nuns gave their students in Corpus Christi, Texas, over forty years ago. They said right-hand wedding rings symbolized their spiritual marriage to Christ. However, the nuns' marriage was monogamous, unlike that of Kuenning, Christ, and her earthly husband. In my considered judgment, to say that both the earthly woman and the man are "brides" — or the female part of the marriage union — is a play with words which does disservice to the prophet Isaiah's concept, to the Pauline analogy of Christ and his church, and to George Fox's interpretation.

Regardless of Kuenning's effort to minimize the thinking of concerned twentieth-century Quaker and other feminists, models of male-female relationships rooted in and enforced by Judaeo-Christian sexist theology are not relevant and may be very offensive.

For over one hundred Quaker women at Friends' General Conference in Berea, Kentucky, in the summer of 1975, their request, that either words of the hymn, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," be changed or another hymn be substituted in evening assemblies, was not a laughing matter. For an increasing number of Quaker women, together with other thoughtful women, their experience with Deity reveals the Holy Spirit — the universal Christ — as alien to the image created by Michelangelo and Charlton Heston. Why should women use Kuenning's analogy, which has been fraught with oppression for many women through millennia until the last decades of the twentieth century? Because exceptional bridegrooms relate with equality to their brides? When they do, they put aside the Judaeo-Christian tradition which reeks of sexist assumptions about not only the inferiority but the sinfulness and the uncleanness of women.

No! Just as I am liberated from wearing my hair long and covered, from keeping silent in Quaker business meetings, from being assigned to segregated women's meetings (remem-

ber, racist white South Africa brags about apartheid), from considering myself subordinate to any man, so am I liberated from accepting Judaeo-Christian semantic boundaries on my experience of and experiment with the Holy Spirit. If, as Fox and many Quakers, including myself, believe, Christ is indeed universal, then Christ is not just the male-delineated Messiah. Perhaps — thrilling idea — across cultures and aeons, the universal Christ has appeared to faithful men and women in physical bodies of women as well as of men!

If the Word should become flesh today and dwell among us, could the flesh be that of a girl-child? And might not the earthly mother and father have decided that the Holy Spirit has freed them from the earthly law requiring a recorded marriage contract?

Lisa Kuenning, faithful to the gospel according to Lewis Benson, sincerely witnesses to the model she and at least six other modern Quaker men and women accept. But it is wise for other Quakers, in my opinion, to question the wisdom of this model for twentieth-century seekers of the Truth and the Light and to consider the irrelevancy of such a model for the needs of modern women and men.

Thoughtful Quaker women and an increasing number of Quaker men can no longer accept societal models which do not allow justice and power along with love in relationships across or within sex lines. Equality of partners in modern heterosexual relationships, including those of legal marriage, may be possible where both bride and groom accept themselves and each other with respect in loving relationship with the Holy Spirit. Even Kuenning left unanswered the question of marital success where one partner's religious convictions are stronger than the other's. Equality today can be no longer with Paul's "cop-out" that all are members of one body (the church), although having different functions like the parts of a physical body. In the modern liberated Quaker woman's marriage her role is equal with that of her spouse. Kitchens are not the exclusive property of women. Dirty dishes and children's diapers are not female responsibilities any more than leaving the house for eight hours daily is a male prerogative.

What does it indicate that, according to Howard Brinton, expert scholar in Quaker journals, Quaker journalists (mostly male) seldom even mentioned the birth and death of their own children, "except when such an event had a special religious significance"?⁴ Brinton wrote that he could think of only two who described their courtship and marriage! While a very few Quaker women did leave homes and families to preach and travel for Quaker concerns, and while from Margaret Fell's time to the present Quaker women have been disproportionately in the forefront as well as in supportive roles of all the great social causes of western society, for most married Quaker women to the present year, 1977, life has been lived with primary responsibility for domestic tasks, whether or not they had jobs also outside their homes.

Fox either was unaware of or chose not to raise issues about English social mores that delineated and confined women to domesticity in seventeenth-century England. More probably, no women except those who did take on pastoral and missionary functions questioned established sex roles of their culture.

Today, however, unlike Kuenning, many women including Quakers are refusing to try to prettify, to rationalize outmoded patriarchal religious analogues along with other sexist structures. Many women, even those married to "good Quaker men," raise saliently the inequities of their condition compared to that of their husbands. "To obey God" is no longer synonymous with accepting patriarchal oppression from earthly males who have varying degrees of power but almost no sensitivity to justice. Some of us women, in our experiments in Quaker living, are convinced that the Light reveals expanding truth to us and that it must be shared with other women, such as Kuenning, as well as with men.

This truth requires semantic expansions. We have limited vocabulary for thrilling new consciousness-raising meanings. It is too bad to use so awkward a word as "androgynous" to express a very important emerging concept. Holy Spirit is not necessarily a "male" word. The universal Christ must not, in the opinion of women such as myself, be identified as a "bridegroom"! Men as well as women must not, especially as followers of the Light, be identified as quasi-brides!

Notes

1. From a report presented to London Yearly Meeting of 1920 defining the Quaker standpoint, reprinted in A. Neave Brayshaw, *The Quakers: Their Story and Message*, 1st paperback edition (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1969), p. 354.
2. James F. Childress, "'Answering That of God in Every Man': An Interpretation of George Fox's Ethics," *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. 15, no. 3 (Spring 1974), p. 24.
3. The word "incredible" is defined as "beyond belief."
4. Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Journals: Varieties of Religious Experience among Friends* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1972), p. 1.

Surprise! Surprise!

Every so often we get letters from enthusiastic new readers who want to know "why we have never heard of *QRT* before." Some of us who have been in on the magazine since the beginning can remember when even your best Friends wouldn't tell you, but surely with the new interest among Quakers about who — and Whose — we are, we can expect our readers to pass along the good word. Besides, a greatly increased circulation is your surest defense against further price increases.

J. H. M.