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HOLINESS, PERFECTION, AND ORTHODOXY: A REVIEW OF CAROLE SPENCER'S *HOLINESS: THE SOUL OF QUAKERISM*

STEPHEN W. ANGELL

It is good to be able to read this long-awaited study of Quakerism from Carole Dale Spencer. Since Quakerism is a movement with very diverse roots and branches, it may not be evident, even to a Quaker scholar like myself, what reality constitutes “the soul” (center, essence) of Quakerism. We will forbear running through a number of candidates for that designation, but Spencer has chosen an excellent candidate in “holiness.” Her quest is an ambitious one, and that is to “re-map” Quakerism in all of its forms and historical eras into the various kinds of holiness that were present in those eras. She admits that one volume is inadequate to accomplish such a great task fully, but she aims to cover many of the key figures and, to the extent that it is possible, all of the eras.

There are many strengths manifested in Spencer's book. An important one is evident from the outset, and that is definitional complexity. While she provides a working definition of holiness at the very beginning (she calls it “a spiritual quality in which human life is ordered and lived out as to be consciously centered in God” [3]) there is considerable effort given throughout her text to put flesh on these rather spare bones. Her eight-part typology of holiness, starting on page 10, was a particularly welcome part of this definitional nuancing.¹ Aspects of holiness that we might be tempted to overlook because of our social location are brought forward—here I especially have in mind the dimension of suffering and martyrdom. Nor is this attention to nuance and typology limited to the opening pages of her book. As she examines the various branches of Quakerism in the last two centuries, she casts a keen eye as to how these dimensions of holiness work out in the various strains of Quakerism which develop in more recent times.

Another strength of her work is her acute awareness that the theories of the origins of Quakerism will have a bearing on whether

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or how holiness turns out to be Quakerism's soul. She works carefully through theories of Quakerism originating with the mystics, with Puritans, and with others. What is especially noteworthy here is her work with pre-Protestant Christian traditions, and her careful showing of the relevance of the work of early Eastern Orthodox theologians and medieval Catholic mystics to the spirituality which seventeenth-century Quakers came to champion. She is quite correct to see Quaker spirituality as based on a kind of *theosis*, or deification, and in that respect have considerable similarities to Eastern Orthodox spirituality. Importantly, however, she does not claim too much in terms of derivative inferences. It may well be true that these are mere analogous developments with no direct line of transmission, and while she is interested in what George Fox and Robert Barclay may have read, she does not make claims that go beyond the evidence in terms of possible influences.

Spencer has read numerous Quaker theologians at great depth and reports her findings with sophistication. Her acquaintance with the primary and secondary literature is extensive. Her interpretations are accurate and well informed. I especially appreciated her description of J. Rendel Harris' thought, as she showed how he combined mystical, evangelical, and modernist tendencies in an unusual synthesis. The sweeping, ambitious historical scope of the book is itself a considerable strength. This is a book with which all Quaker scholars will have to reckon in the future, no matter what era they are working on.

I have not by any means exhausted the book's strengths, but at this point, I would like to transition to asking some questions about the book, in areas where I was not wholly convinced.

I do have a question about the criteria by which Spencer chose the persons for inclusion in this book. If I were to generalize, they are all thoughtful, mostly well published individuals whose own theologies did not stray too far from a centrist position, and this was the case even in the latter, more schismatic centuries. Would the power of her work have been strengthened if a greater diversity of Quakers from the left and the right had been included? I am thinking in particular of the nineteenth century, in which I missed hearing such voices as John Henry Douglas, Luke Woodard, Esther and Nathan Frame, and David Updegraff on one side; and Lucretia Mott, Joseph Dugdale, and Thomas McClintock on another side. In her re-mapping of Quakerism, she concluded, for example that "Hicksism differed from Orthodoxy in only one key element: the role of Scripture, which was

gradually replaced by experience alone as a source of revelation.” Might Hicksism and Orthodoxy have looked more different from one another if a fuller range of Hicksites and Orthodox had been included in her survey? Would chapter five on Holiness Quakerism have been more informative and enlightening if more staunch advocates of the Holiness Revival had been included? (The only person reasonably close to the perspective of the Holiness Revival included in that chapter is Hannah Whitall Smith, and she was far from the scene of most of the revivalistic action during the decades when the Holiness Revival was at its height among Quakers in the Midwest and elsewhere in North America.)

Spencer's response to this point, in our dialogue at San Diego, was to assert that she had included in her study the historical personages with whom she had a personal affinity. However, this response does not entirely address my concern here, especially if Spencer also wants to make normative claims for the place of Holiness Evangelical Quakerism within the broader Quaker tradition. She desires, for example, to re-map modern Quakerism so that the Wilburite/conservative party, often portrayed at the center of Quaker family trees, is off to one side. Instead, she would position the Revival Holiness group at the center (253). But she cannot make this case persuasively unless she gives us a full portrait of the Revival Holiness leaders such as Updegraff, the Frames, and Douglas. In other words, she must give us an accounting of the central figures of the movement (not just her preferred figures) if we are to accept her historical judgment that in some way Holiness Evangelical Quakerism is central, and indeed normative, for the last century and a half of Quakerism. Hopefully, she will grapple with this important point in her future work.

Of course, the question of the theological orientation of Quakerism long precedes the nineteenth century, and it is very much present in the theological interpretations offered for the first generation of Quakers. Spencer takes on the discrepancies in interpretation between, on one side, Rosemary Moore, Hugh Barbour, and Jerry Frost (she could have added Rufus Jones²) who have asserted (in Barbour's and Frost's words) that “the Society of Friends have always existed somewhat uneasily within the pale of orthodox Christianity,” and on the other side, T. Canby Jones, Arthur Roberts and others, who firmly assert that Quaker theology “presumes an orthodox soteriology and Christology” (38). Spencer sides with the latter group of scholars, identifying the perfecting light of Christ strongly with the Atonement: “The Light is the ongoing power of the Atonement to transform the

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individual who responds to the Light” (38). The main deficiency she sees in the analysis of scholars who argue that Quakerism is essentially orthodox is their failure to see how central mysticism must be to the process by which orthodox theological tenets can be assimilated into Quakerism. Mysticism and Puritanism are not antagonistic elements in the Quaker worldview, Spencer maintains; rather, they are thoroughly complementary of each other when rightly interpreted and understood.

My questions to her analysis at this point have to do primarily with whether she has incorporated an adequate degree of historical development into her interpretive model for seventeenth-century Quakerism. When I read the George Fox of the 1650s, I read somebody whose orthodoxy may be as much open to question as Moore, Barbour, Roberts, Larry Ingle, and Christopher Hill make him out to be. The message of the Fox and Nayler of *Saul's Errand to Damascus* in 1653 was surely centered on holiness and perfection, but it is a holiness and perfection that has only a tenuous relationship to anything in orthodox Christian theology. Fox, for example, rejected any sort of imputation of Christ's righteousness to those who have been saved in his 1653 interpretation of the atonement. There is a stark Manichaeism in that document, with Fox denying that he ever had said that “the Scriptures are Antichrist,” but instead affirming an only slightly guarded doctrine that “they which profess the Scriptures, and live not in the life and power of them, as they did that gave them forth, that I witness to be Antichrist.” Spencer asserts that Fox never expressed himself in blasphemous ways, but the Fox of *Saul's Errand* skirted on the edge of blasphemy. Denying that he had ever made the statement that “he was equal with God,” Fox affirmed, in the words of Hebrews 2:1, that “He that sanctifieth, and they that are sanctified, are of one,” adding that “the saints are all of one in the Father and the Son, of his flesh and of his bone.”³ There are several Quaker scholars, Larry Ingle and Glen Reynolds among them,⁴ who, looking at the way these earliest Quakers downplayed the flesh (especially of the historic Jesus) and elevated the spirit, have offered the opinion that the 1650s Quakers were closely theologically aligned with the Gnostics of the first few centuries of the Christian church.

Now, Spencer does not completely ignore this kind of material in the earliest Quaker writing. In her discussion of the scholarship of Richard Bailey, for example, she notes that “the prevalence of the expression ‘bone of bone and flesh of flesh’ to describe union with Christ, which Bailey seems to think is so unique to Fox and evidence

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[for Bailey's theory] of celestial habitation, is commonly found in Christocentric mysticism in that period." The lines of development for left-wing mystical Puritanism preceding and coinciding with the Puritan Commonwealth period are only beginning to become clear, with David Como's *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004)⁵ providing a major contribution to that end.

Reading the Fox and Nayler of *Saul's Errand* does make me think of Christopher Hill's dictum in *The World Turned Upside Down* that "the whole early Quaker movement was far closer to the Ranters in spirit than its leaders later liked to recall, after they had spent many weary hours differentiating themselves from Ranters and ex-Ranters. It is perhaps a help for us to look at early Quakers in connection with the world of the Ranters in which Quakerism grew up, rather than through the spectacles of the respectable Quakers of the later seventeenth century." What seems to have distinguished Quakers from Ranters in the early 1650s was not their theological belief system per se, but rather a different concept of holiness and perfection. Hill quotes Fox in 1654 as maintaining that "Ranters 'had a pure convictionment,' but they had 'fled the cross' and turned the grace of God into wantonness."⁶ Doug Gwyn makes the provocative point in *Seekers Found* that Thomas "Clarkson and other Ranters aimed to immerse themselves in everything held odious by respectable society, until they could experience and claim a kind of *sinful perfection*." This was not a kind of perfectionism that could long endure; while positing that Ranters had "some important overlap" with Quakers, Gwyn notes that the "Ranter phenomenon quickly degenerated into reflexive bawdiness and blasphemy."⁷ A perfectionism, perhaps, but emphatically not a scheme for holiness.

The George Fox of the 1680s had largely changed theological course, steering more firmly in the direction of theological orthodoxy, and at least one of the events Spencer references, the dispute with James Nayler, would have provided a strong reason for doing so. In Fox's Wheeler Street sermon, while there is no discussion of the imputation of Christ's righteousness per se, there is an extended passage on "the blood of Jesus Christ" and its efficacy in the new covenant. Fox interpreted the Scriptures in both Testaments reverentially. And, again using the text of Hebrews, Fox drew a stronger distinction between the manifestations of the godhead, Father and Son, and the holy people who are gathered to them: "In the Old Testament God spoke

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to the Fathers by the Old Testament, but in the New Testament the apostle saith God hath spoken to us by his Son who is the one head and speaks to his people, to whom all are to keep.”⁸ The Fox of the Wheeler Street sermon, while demonstrating lines of continuity with his earlier witness on the matter of divine indwelling among others, couched his theological assertions in a more demonstrably orthodox way. I don’t have space here to examine the question of how Fox’s theological evolution was mirrored by that of others who belonged to the movement he had done so much to found and to nurture over the time span of four decades.

Spencer writes: “George Fox never developed a concise theology of perfection or a clear doctrine of it. He never claimed to be a theologian” (65). I don’t see this as entirely accurate; I see Fox’s authorship of numerous catechisms as evidence of theological intent.⁹ I would agree that Fox was not a systematic theologian, as he wrote nothing that would rival Robert Barclay’s *Apology*.

If, by “orthodoxy,” we mean adherence to the key doctrines of the ecumenical Christian churches, many of whom, such as the Trinity, received their classical formulations in the fourth century or later, then Barbour and Frost are right in stating that Quakers’ relationship to orthodoxy in Christianity was (and perhaps always will be?) a profoundly uneasy one. Spencer offers as an answer to humanist and universalist forms of Quakerism the title of one of William Penn’s tracts: “Primitive Christianity Revived” (36). But what was the primitive Christianity that Penn wanted to revive, and how did he propose to revive it? It was a primitive Christianity that conflated the Inward Light of Christ with the Holy Spirit. Penn did acknowledge the “coming of Christ in the Flesh, and being our one holy Offering to God for Sin, through the Eternal Spirit,” but that is only one small line in his tract. A far heavier emphasis was given to the efficacy of the Light, and its identity with God’s grace, and with the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ His “primitive Christianity” is the kind that gives rise to the questions that Rosemary Moore poses about the Quaker assertion of primacy of Christ as Light over any celebration of the historic Jesus, and while it may have been profoundly comforting to Penn’s Quaker contemporaries, it is doubtful that any non-Quaker Christian of his own time could have easily discerned orthodoxy to be present in that text. And, Joseph John Gurney, a century-and-a-half later, would have profoundly disagreed with Penn in this regard.¹¹

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My questions for Spencer are as follows: Is it necessary to posit a consistent theological orthodoxy for Fox in order to understand how holiness and perfection may have been at the core of his (orthodox or un-orthodox) Christian witness? To what degree is one's witnessing to a doctrine of holiness at root a matter of ethics, and hence not strongly affected by matters of orthodox Christian theological belief to which one may or may not subscribe, or to which one may subscribe at one time in one's life but not at other times? Rather than asking whether Quakers (of the seventeenth-century, say) were orthodox, might it be a better question to ask *how* they were orthodox, or even when they became orthodox? To what degree do you see development over time as key to understanding the witness for holiness by Fox or any of the other historical figures on whom you focus?¹²

Much more could be said about this excellent text, and its first two chapters in particular. I thought the portrayal of Robert Barclay's thought to be a perceptive one, although I did miss any mention of Barclay's careful disavowal of having any experience of perfection himself. I look forward to the illuminating and wide-ranging discussions which can develop from Spencer's far-ranging and very helpful work!

ENDNOTES

- 1 Roman Catholic (real presence); Lutheran (*sola fides*); Puritan/Pietist (divine guidance); Charismatic (Spirit-Baptism); Quietist (silence/passivity); Mystical (*Unio mystica*); Monastic (obedience/renunciation); and Anabaptist (suffering/martyrdom).
- 2 In this regard, Jones' *The Church's Debt to Heretics* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924) is informative; Jones saw George Fox as one of the heretics to which the church should be grateful.
- 3 Hugh Barbour and Arthur Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings, 1650-1700* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 254-5.
- 4 H. Larry Ingle, *First Among Friends: George Fox & the Creation of Quakerism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 112; Glen D. Reynolds, "George Fox and Christian Gnosis," in Pink Dandelion, ed., *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004), 101, *passim*. Spencer writes that "Fox never claimed to be equal to Christ" (66) but Ingle (112, 122) seems to offer a counter to her view. Also, Fox apparently made sure to destroy early manuscripts that might have presented uncomfortably exalted claims for himself: Ingle, "George Fox, Historian," *Quaker History* 82 (1993): 28-35.
- 5 This book is not listed in Spencer's bibliography.
- 6 Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1980 [1972]), 232, 237.

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- 7 Doug Gwyn, *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Books, 2000), 170 (emphasis Gwyn's), 184.
- 8 Barbour and Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, 511.
- 9 Stephen W. Angell, "The Catechisms of George Fox: Why they were written in the first place, what was contained in them, what use was made of them, and what we can learn from them today," *Quaker Theology* 5, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2003), <http://www.quaker.org/quest/issue-9-angell-01.htm>.
- 10 Hugh Barbour, *William Penn on Religion and Ethics: The Emergence of Liberal Quakerism* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 609-26; quotation on 618.
- 11 For Gurney, the Light Within was radically different, and much less powerful, than the Holy Spirit. See Gurney, *A Peculiar People: The Rediscovery of Primitive Christianity* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1979), 65-67. (Originally published as *Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends* in 1924; it's interesting that the revised title chosen by Donald Green echoes Penn!).
- 12 Spencer writes (47): [Lewis] "Benson, in his radical primitivism, disallowed any continuity or development within Quakerism." My comment in the margin: I'd like to see more discussion of development in Spencer! But see page 53, top, for one example where she does ascribe development to Fox.