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THE PURE PRINCIPLE AND BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT: A REVIEW OF CAROLE SPENCER'S *HOLINESS: THE SOUL OF QUAKERISM*

MARGERY POST ABBOTT

The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives, edited by Pink Dandelion, offers a fascinating glimpse of the people behind the academic theory. It also poses an interesting gesture towards the old practice of journal writing, which seems to have fallen prey to the academic treatise as the major written form of transmission of Friends' faith. As Carole Spencer states in her essay in Dandelion's book, "Theology and theory are not the life. At best, they are compost . . . [and] may enrich the seed's life in us" (Dandelion, 147). Dandelion's book lays out a multitude of ways in which Friends' experience of the "life" at the core of faith has shaped the ways we articulate our common history and understand Quaker theology. Spencer's new book, which was summarized in the essay, expresses the life she has experienced as it traces holiness through the generations and branches of Friends. This book is a valuable and fresh way of articulating our faith—a way that points to the wholeness possible in knowing God present and active in guiding human behavior.

Spencer uses holiness "as the key to unlocking the complex interpretative problems that revolve around the origins of Quakerism . . . and its place within the broader Christian tradition." Her thesis in many ways runs parallel to the doctrine of "perfection," which is the unifying theme in my work. We have, in fact, worked literally side by side finding ways to minister to, gather together, and articulate our common faith to Friends out of our very different experiences.

Focusing on the commonalities of Friends' experience of holiness and perfection, while drawing on her knowledge of the early church and Eastern Orthodox spirituality, allows Spencer to give a valuable approach for considering Quakerism. Holiness calls Friends to step out of the old disagreements about evangelicalism vs. mysticism, which too often are distracting or even destructive. Spencer's definition of holiness within a Christian framework works well for describing the

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first two centuries of Quakers. Definitions of holiness and perfection which account for the more universal dimension present in Fox, Penn, Penington, and Benezet among others, brings out the continuity that runs through Hicksite and “modernist” Friends.

I was asked to comment on the middle chapters of this book. Chapter 3, “Holiness in the Golden Age of Quietism,” highlights Anthony Benezet and Stephen Grellet, Friends who would rightly be better known. Benezet’s compassion for slaves and work to educate black children are the shining fruit of “his deeply interior spirituality. . . . [he] was a true apophatic (*via negativa*) mystic. One of his favorite phrases was ‘It is in nothingness that God is found’” (94, 95). Grellet, another convert, was more of an evangelical whose faith foreshadowed that of the Holiness Revival of a century later, although evidence of both apophatic and kataphatic (*via positiva*) mysticism can be found in his writings. His faith took him into prisons and to work among the unemployed, as well as speaking to the Czar and visiting among Catholics and Mennonites (115).

By focusing on these two men she describes as “evangelical Quietists,” Spencer makes clear some of Friends’ dynamic engagement with the world in an era often dismissed as withdrawn and inward focused. Unfortunately, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were also a time when Friends responded to the pressures of the world around them by turning against each other rather than finding new common purpose. One only can wonder with dismay what Friends might be like today if the Reform movement had offered more room for grace and generosity—the living manifestation of the joy found in union with God. Further study might help us understand why meetings spiraled into seemingly unending rounds of disownments over more and more petty behaviors that are widely accepted by today’s Quakers, rather than generating more ministers like Anthony Benezet and John Woolman.

The aptly named chapter 4, “The Breakdown of Holiness and Divergent Paths,” takes us into the mid-nineteenth century, a time which was simultaneously—and oddly—a period of divisions and a period of energetic renewal. In this chapter, Spencer focuses on Elias Hicks and contrasts him with the evangelical ministers, Steven Grellet and William Savery, as well as Job Scott—another minister whose theology was challenged. It ends with Joseph John Gurney and John Wilbur. Hicks will also be my primary focus here, as I am part of the Hicksite tradition. The focus on his life and preaching were

significant factors in dividing Friends, and are sorely in need of a new evaluation.

Job Scott, who became controversial after his death, falls within the bounds of Spencer's definition of holiness; his mysticism "followed the teaching of the early Greek Fathers on *theosis* [divinization]" (127). Yet pressures for orthodoxy were such that Scott grew concerned that he might be called a heretic and felt he had to assert his belief in the "history of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension and glory" (129).

Spencer contrasts Scott's orthodoxy with Hicks' claim for the divinity of Jesus, placing Hicks in the category of Gnostics because he states that "[Jesus] was begotten of God . . . but [it was] a birth of the spiritual life in the soul." This, Spencer argues makes his spirituality incompatible with Quaker holiness because of his failure to affirm the incarnation—a charge which Hicks as well as Scott consistently denied according to new research by Paul Buckley. In an unpublished letter to his friend and confidant, William Poole, Hicks writes:

"As to the two Natures in Jesus Christ. I conceive that if any should deny that, they are justly to be accounted deists, as they make void every Scripture account concerning him. And as his human nature is abundantly more fully established, than his divine nature, as there are some who are accused of denying his divine Nature, but I dont [*sic.*] recollect of ever hearing of any, who dare deny his human Nature . . ."

In considering the place of Hicks, Spencer argues from a different place than a more liberal scholar might choose. Her discussion of Elias Hicks brings out several places where a broader definition of holiness would be helpful in understanding an important strand of Quaker development. Here I would note a couple of tensions.

(1) The experience of God and Christ as personal or as abstract: both types of experience are evident among Friends from the start, whereas Spencer's approach assumes orthodox theology and leaves little space for those without a personal sense of Christ.

(2) Dramatic conviction experiences or those which are gentler struggles over obedience: reading a range of narratives indicates that there may be more of the latter than Spencer indicates. Study of Quaker journals may show interesting differences between birthright and convinced Friends.

The example of Hicks raises the question of how wide the Quaker understanding of mysticism is. Spencer sees Hicks as an “extreme apophatic,” whose actions are purely ethical and outside a Quaker holiness requiring belief in incarnation. I read his *Journal* as reflecting a continuing sense of divine guidance, just as those of other ministers do, and note how he regularly speaks of awareness of the divine presence. Hicks does seem to experience the Light more as a “principle” than as a “person.” This is one place where it would also be helpful if Spencer brought in a broader range of examples. One only has to go as far as John Woolman’s *Journal* to find another minister who frequently speaks of being “moved by an inward principle” or the “heavenly principle.” In fact, Hugh Barbour found that 17th century Friends rarely spoke of Jesus in the intimate personal way of modern evangelicals, often speaking of the Spirit as “it”. Even near the end of his *Journal*, Hicks uses kataphatic phrases like “we had abundant cause for thanksgiving and gratitude to the blessed Author of all our mercies, in condescending to manifest his holy presence . . .”, and “the divine canopy was felt to spread over the whole assembly.”¹

Similarly, in considering the specifics of conviction experiences as expressed in Quaker journals, it is valuable to explore the differences between the experiences of those raised in Quaker families and those who were not. Hicks, a birthright Friend, speaks of his initial transforming experience as a “visitation of grace” rather than conversion or conviction. Yet looking elsewhere, we quickly see that Woolman does not speak of his own conversion or conviction in those words. From my reading of journals, I find it not unusual for Friends who grew up in Quaker homes to have less intense conviction experiences (Joseph John Gurney comes to mind here also), but also to find their most intense wrestling to be around the call to stand and speak in worship. Take such an iconic figure as Samuel Bownas, who was spoken to when an older minister laid out the challenge during worship that “[thou] art no better for thy coming; what wilt thou do in the end?” Returning to meeting the next week with his mind fixed on God, “A divine and spiritual sweetness abiding with me,” he began to see the difference between “a preacher of the letter and of the spirit.” Soon thereafter, “as I was going to meeting, walking alone, it came very livingly into my mind, that if I was but faithful and obedient to the heavenly vision, I should soon be qualified to teach others.” It took him a while before he could face the consequences of speaking in meeting, but the weight of the concern for obedience finally brought

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him to his feet—an action which brought “much sweetness and joy” (Bownas, 4).

The last section of the chapter on “Divergent Paths” turns to Joseph John Gurney, the British Friend, whose name became affixed to the Orthodox branch of Friends, and John Wilbur, who upheld the “conservation” of the mystical dimension of Quaker holiness. Gurney, like Hicks, was a powerful preacher but was a “clear exponent of the Evangelical faith” (Spencer, 137). The example of Gurney shows the growth of both rationalism and biblical scholarship among Friends. These two men, she notes, were very close theologically, although Wilbur more closely matches her definition of Quaker holiness, and “their conflict,” she concludes, “reflects the danger of an emphasis on being exclusive” (156).

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON HOLINESS

As Spencer notes, “holiness movements are inevitably counter-cultural,” and “while holiness creates a condition of being inwardly detached from the world and emptied of self-ego, it also impels the ‘pure in heart’ back into the world to spread the Quaker message and to promote justice” (92). Knowing God, relying on divine guidance, and living a life filled with the perfect love of God are at the heart of Friends’ faith.

I would argue that rather than “[spinning] out of the circle of holiness” (135), Hicks was part of a broadening sense of holiness among Friends—an understanding that had roots extending back to Fox and others who recognized “the Light and the Spirit” at work in the hearts of Native Americans and other non-Christians. The expansion of holiness from its ties to doctrinal Christian orthodoxy opens a door to welcoming cooperation with all people worldwide, who know God intimately and live transformed lives evidenced by the Fruit of the Spirit.

To return to the premise of *The Creation of Quaker Theory*, the vivid and transforming action of God in my own life has consistently provided space for the paradoxical experience of knowing that the Truth is Christ, and that the Truth is more than Christ and can be found in other faiths. If I were to propose a dissertation topic, it would be similar to Spencer’s. It would develop a model of perfection and holiness (the distinction between the two is a fine one to the non-academic ear) along the lines indicated above. The most significant

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difference between our two theses would be that mine would defend the idea that perfection and holiness are present in spiritual traditions outside of Christianity.

Spencer defines holiness as “a spiritual quality in which human life is ordered and lived out as to be consciously centered in God” (3). Her typology asserts holiness is based on the “macrocosm of Christian history and places Quakerism within that framework” (4). This typology gives no place for those who know the overwhelming love of God, look to the Spirit for guidance, and live in accord with that love but articulate this in a variety of ways. Over the centuries there has been a strand of Quaker perfection/holiness that is consistent with orthodox Christianity in many ways but is not dependent on acceptance of orthodox Christian doctrine. These include being transformed so that the self is centered in God rather than the ego, suffering with Christ and our fellow beings, recognizing the fruits of the Spirit and walking in the Spirit as essential marks of right leadings, and asserting God’s presence and guidance available to all people. This Quaker perfection also welcomes those who know God inwardly in manifestations other than of Jesus as Christ. Thus, such Friends recognize these aspects of holiness in other faiths where they are expressed in words unfamiliar in much of Christianity.

ENDNOTES

1. Elias Hicks, *Journal of the Life and Religious Labours of Elias Hicks* (New York: Isaac T. Hopper, 1832), 430.