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HOLINESS—THE CENTRAL TRUNK OF THE QUAKER FAMILY TREE: A REVIEW OF CAROLE SPENCER’S HOLINESS: THE SOUL OF QUAKERISM

JIM LE SHANA

In the pursuit of truth, understanding a point of view is enlightening, if not essential. Whether it is in relation to hearing a testimony in court, listening to a presidential debate, or interpreting the significance of a first kiss, grasping issues of context and utilizing an interpretive framework helps us to gain greater insight into a given situation. Carole Spencer, in her book *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism*, provides scholars and lay persons alike with a persuasive and helpful new perspective that will influence informed discussions about Quaker history for years to come. She calls it the “new lens” of Quaker holiness. Her innovative contribution to the historiography of Quakerism is interesting, stimulating, and refreshing—a welcome new outlook that breathes new life into the tired and dry bones of at least some historical inquiry.

When summarizing this new perspective, Spencer suggests humbly that “holiness theory does not contradict or devalue other important theories” of Quaker history, such as Jones’ view of mysticism, or Barbour’s emphasis on the role of Puritanism. However, she also seems to recognize that her version of the story of Quakerism is not exactly complementary with (or a simple extension of) previous opinions. In fact, Spencer argues frequently for the priority and importance of holiness. And, “argues” is the right word. She uses some form of the word “argue” at least sixty-four times in her seven chapters, and the phrase “this study argues” or “this study contends” a total of twenty-five times. Evidently, she understands at some level the significant departure from most historical studies that her research represents.

Spencer also reiterates repeatedly the heart of her study, that holiness is the “central trunk” in the family tree of Quakerism from the beginning to the present day, “rather than an offshoot” (1). It is the “primary theme and variation in the history of the Quaker
movement” (1). It is the “key to unlocking the complex interpretive problems” surrounding Quaker studies (2). It is “the *sine qua non* of what it means to be a Quaker” (33). And, it is “the clue to understanding early Quaker history and its subsequent development” (205)—the clue that other historians have either missed or dismissed. Her repetition of this theme may be warranted to ensure that we don’t ignore it this time.

In contrast with Jones’ notion of mysticism as the answer to the Quaker puzzle, Spencer posits a new historical paradigm in which holiness takes center stage. Rather than “that of God” in everyone, she appears to see “that of holiness” [my term] in every Quaker sector as the defining feature of Friends. This does not mean that each strand of Quakerism has accepted uncritically every tenet of holiness theology. Instead, Spencer asserts convincingly that both the influence of and reactions to holiness have shaped the contours of historic and contemporary Quaker thought and practice like nothing else. “Holiness is diluted today in all modern branches,” she explains, “yet [it] is sprinkled throughout” (248). This reinterpretation of Quakerism tends to emphasize a sense of continuity and connectedness between various groupings of Friends over time. Ironically, the groups of Quakers that might be the most encouraged by this finding of apparent unity and spiritual connection are those liberal Friends who are moved to the fringes of her Quaker evolutionary map. While Spencer finds various aspects of holiness in “liberal, modernist, and non-orthodox branches” of Friends, she concludes that “evangelicalism tends to maintain the strongest connections” to holiness, and presumably, to its original roots in early Quakerism. Some will no doubt perceive this assertion—that evangelicals live toward the heart of what it means to be a Friend and liberals land near the periphery, not the other way around—to be a reversal of their understandings of what it means to be a Quaker. A

Seen through Spencer’s lens of holiness, however, this is a worthy conclusion.

Spencer makes an admirable attempt to sift each era of Quaker history through the filter of holiness. Her approach is perhaps no more relevant than in relation to the holiness revivals of the nineteenth century, which she explicates in Chapter 5, one of the chapters I was asked specifically to review. This period has long been declared a pivot point in American Quakerism… a part of the “transformation” observed by Thomas Hamm that changed Orthodox Quaker meetings into evangelical Friends churches. Rather than continuity and
connectedness, many historians (especially those from a more liberal persuasion) have viewed this revival era among Friends as a sharp departure from the traditional Quaker path—adopting external forms and practices from other Protestant denominations at best, and leaving the true Quaker fold at worst. Hamm viewed it as a “near-revolution” of assimilation into the dominant evangelical culture, and Joel Bean lamented that it was a “regression” and a backward movement (191, 193). Spencer argues well for an alternate conclusion. By focusing on holiness as the theme and ultimate goal of the revivals (rather than emphasizing outward practices and forms of worship), she observes that revivalist Friends rediscovered their early Quaker holiness roots. She ends up giving this period special recognition above all others, referring to it as a kind of “Quaker renaissance—and the last great flowering of holiness within American Quakerism.” For Spencer, this was no simple accommodation or acquiescence to outside enthusiastic influences. Along with Walter Robson, the British Friend who visited and commented on American Quakerism, she recognizes the image of “authentic Quaker holiness” in the reflection of the revivals themselves (182).

When it comes to the discussion of the specific causes of the nineteenth-century revival among Friends, Spencer's study seems somewhat narrow... perhaps because of the nature of the boundaries of her study and the specific evidence she sought. She asks the right, intriguing question: “Why were Quakers so receptive to this particular form of the revival movement [presumably as opposed to earlier revival periods in America]?” Her answer, of course, points back to the role of holiness in the spiritual DNA of Quakerism. “The holiness revival met the spiritual longings of so many Friends,” she reasons, “because of its strong connections to the Quaker holiness heritage of early Friends, a heritage rooted in a Christ-centered mystical vision of perfection.” In other words, the revival was able to succeed and attract Friends because it somehow felt like a spiritual homecoming, a right match theologically if not a comfortable fit in every form or practice. This revival promoted a kind of holiness that led to an “ethical mysticism”—a personal piety mixed with active social service—that resonated with Friends. Although evangelism and numerical growth occurred, Spencer seems to suggest that the main reason this revival movement swept successfully through Quakerism was because of its emphasis upon “sanctification” rather than “conversion” alone, as if the former concern had greater parallels to and affinities with early
Quakerism than the latter. Although her study mentions briefly that a “combination of sociological, cultural and even economic factors” contributed to the revival and its aftermath in the “divisions and transformations” of Quakerism, Spencer chooses not to recognize or discuss any of these factors or any other possible causes (161-63).

While Spencer’s argument in favor of holiness as the leading revival influence for Quakers is worthy of attention (and fits her thesis well), other potential causes (which also have strong links to early Quakerism) could have been mentioned. One of the most significant is the role of lay men and women as outspoken ministers and promoters of the revival. By most accounts, the first signs of this revival appeared in 1857 in a regular noontime prayer meeting among businessmen in New York. No dynamic or noteworthy evangelist or preacher (like George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennant, or Charles Finney from previous revivals in America) led the way. The lay persons’ prayer revival soon spread to other cities in which thousands of others throughout the country met in like manner, focusing mostly on prayer and using lay leadership rather than emotional preaching. Although Spencer mentions the importance of women ministers among Friends during this period, the link and attractiveness of lay involvement to the Quaker past as a prime cause for the revival among Friends is not emphasized.

In addition to the importance of lay involvement, the role of direct, personal evangelism seems swept aside by the tidal wave emphasis on holiness. It is true that most historical studies minimize the significance of early Quaker evangelism. Echoing others, colonial American historian James Axtell reasoned that “the Quakers did not believe in proselyting” unless by quiet example. Elton Trueblood restated the “popular” misconception that Quakers are “an exceedingly mild and harmless people, largely given to silence, totally unaggressive, with a religion that is neither evangelical in content nor evangelistic in practice.” Spencer clearly (but concisely) proclaims that she does not find this to be true. In chapter 1, she lists “evangelism” as one of the characteristics of early Quakerism and even acknowledges that “evangelistic outreach” became “one of the distinguishing features of the Holiness Revival.”

My own research confirms this notion that evangelism functioned not as a hiccup, but as part of the heartbeat of the early Friends movement, which persisted during the greatest periods of health and growth for Quakers. Trueblood commented hyperbolically that “all [of the first generation of Friends] tried to make converts, and
they tried all of the time.” Perhaps this was also true of the Friends during the holiness revivals when men, women, boys and girls prayed for people to become saved, invited them to meetings, and shared their faith with the unconverted. However, when the time comes in chapter 5 to discuss the factors that contributed to the reception of revivalism among Friends, Spencer discounts the significance of evangelistic efforts.

In addition to the call for sanctification and holiness teaching, the active role of non-clergy and the priority of evangelism are simply two additional examples of potential causes of the revival among Friends that also would have found strong parallels in early Quakerism. A more complete and compelling argument for the rise of revivalism among Friends in the nineteenth century (even one which assumed that spiritual familiarity breeds attractiveness) might note the similar connections between more than the holiness emphasis of the revival and the “holiness heritage” among Friends. Could it be that a more complex and dynamic interaction of factors resonated with Friends during this period to ignite the revival fires?

In the balance of chapter 5, Spencer discusses some of the reactions to the Holiness Revivals, focusing on Joel Bean, Walter Robson, and Hannah Whitehall Smith. In her discussion of Bean, she attempts to show that he became the “voice of a Quaker modernist” and that his “position represents the natural outcome of Gurneyite ecumenism.” While this may have been the final outcome of Bean’s legacy, it is not altogether clear that this was “the” natural result—as if a modernist/universalist/ecumenical stance was an inevitable spiritual offshoot of the orthodox Gurneyite branch. If indeed this is Spencer’s position, more information to substantiate this conclusion would be helpful.

Spencer notes insightfully the inconsistency and selectivity in Bean’s ecumenical position. He embraced a liberal and tolerant stance toward a wide variety of religious beliefs, she observes, but “he was not willing to include revivalism as a legitimate form of spiritual expression.” Even though Bean initially gave cautious support to the revivals, he later came to oppose them forcefully. The question is, why? Spencer suggests both a psychological and a sociological reason. She thinks Bean held a “fear of engaging emotions” that prompted a defensive positioning toward the inherent expressiveness of the revivals. He may also have developed a kind of upper-class prejudice against the uncultured sensibilities and behaviors which the revivals seemed to foster (170-72). These factors may have worked together
to contribute to Bean’s anti-revival sentiments, but they do not tell the whole story. Although Spencer asserts that Bean held a “different agenda than simply preserving tradition,” she provides plenty of evidence to suggest that his concerns about the new enthusiastic methods and forms contributed to his overall antipathy toward revivalism. She quotes him as thinking that the revivals were “utterly diverse from essential Quakerism in almost every feature,” after which she records his list of some of those specific ministry practices that bothered him (164, 169).

On the other hand, according to Spencer, Robson and Smith seemed able to “see the positive value” of the revival methods and forms. Why was Bean burned by the revival fires, whereas someone like Robson was warmed by them? Bean focused his gaze on the external and foreign revival practices, while Robson saw “the spirit of Quaker holiness,” even when displayed “in a different cultural context.” For all of Bean’s critiques of the revivals as anti-Quaker, he fomented a “groundbreaking shift from the historical roots of early Friends” because of his inability to see beneath the exuberant exterior skin of the revival to its holiness heart (172, 175). Spencer’s study of the reactions to the revival as a religious phenomenon provides fuel for her later assertion about the relative “unimportance of forms” as defining characteristics of Quakerism (239). It also underscores the potential applicability of the “lens of holiness” for interpreting some aspects of Quaker history. A holiness perspective influenced positively at least some views of the revival (for Robson and Smith), while the lack of it led to a near-sighted vision and a whole new Quaker organizational expression (in the form of independent Friends meetings started by Bean).

In chapter 6, Spencer provides a helpful summary and comparison of the teachings of seven influential Quaker leaders in the twentieth century. Through the thinking of these men, she outlines the place of holiness in the development of evangelicalism, liberalism, and mysticism among Friends. She starts by squaring off with Rufus Jones, the formidable proponent of mysticism, and her respectful but firm opposition to his views is clear. He portrayed the “immanence of God in the human soul as the sin qua non [sic.] of Quakerism,” while she contends throughout her study that “holiness is the sine qua non of what it means to be a Quaker” (33, 199). She does not completely dismiss Jones’ perspective, however, but suggests that he moved in the right direction in his quest for the clue to Quakerism but that he stopped short of comprehension: “he was on the right
track, but he was only half right.” Jones understood the importance of the mystical experience as a part of the Quaker heritage, but he missed the historic and essential Christ-centeredness of that mysticism (203-05). J. Rendell Harris, though not as well known as Jones, provides Spencer with an example of a more evangelical version of modernist sensibilities. Although his views did not predominate in early twentieth-century Quakerism either among British or American Friends, his inclusion in this study demonstrates that an alternative to Jones’ liberal-modernist response was possible (207-24).

A contemporary of Harris, William Littleboy, fills the theologically liberal role for Spencer that came to prevail among British Quakers in the twentieth century. Littleboy promoted a non-mystical Quakerism in which holiness as obedience and “doing good” wins out over a felt sense of the presence of Christ leading a person’s life to do his will. She describes this liberalism as a “growing shift” among Friends (perhaps on both sides of the Atlantic) and calls it “the real turning point for Quakerism.” Spencer is not neutral in her opinion of this change. The primary departure away from historic Quakerism was not mystical evangelical holiness but this new acceptance of a liberal, rational, non-mystical spirituality. Littleboy’s liberalism represents the “major turn” and a “shift that tears [Quakerism] from its roots and its historic reason for being” which led to a “genuine loss” for Friends (224-28).

Although Quakerism could have become hopelessly lost in a confused quilt of liberalism, Spencer believes that “the thread of holiness” continued in the twentieth century through the writing and influence of Thomas Kelly. Like early Friends, Kelly focused on a Christ-centered holiness mysticism and won a great following among both evangelical and liberal Friends (228-32). A contemporary of Kelly, Everett Cattell, also emphasized the importance of Quaker holiness and wrote the defining work on the subject for evangelical Friends. While Kelly stressed the mystical aspects of holiness more than Cattell, both men helped Quakerism recapture its core value of holiness.

Spencer concludes chapter six by discussing briefly two contemporary Quakers: Richard Foster and Arthur Roberts. Even though she describes Foster and Roberts and their positions in only a few words (relative to others), it is not because they hold a small place in her study. In some ways, they seem to represent the culmination of her central idea, the logical conclusion of the restoration of the
place of evangelical holiness as Quakerism’s “soul.” Both Foster and Roberts embrace a “Christ-centered, ethical, and mystical” image of spirituality that harkens back to the start of the Quaker movement and which bodes well for the future of Friends. Quaker holiness for Spencer has come full circle and seems headed in the right direction. Although Spencer offers the disclaimer that the perspectives of Foster and Roberts “are not reflected across all branches of Friends,” that thought really goes without saying. Few things among the wider body of Friends meet with unanimous support. As Spencer describes the spiritual journey of Friends throughout her study and as she diagrams later in her map of the “Quaker Tree,” the branches of Quakerism remain varied and at times “antagonistic.” However, by looking through the “lens of holiness,” Spencer recognizes a commonality among all Friends. Even the polarization and diversity of Quaker groupings down through history are “born out of differing emphases,” of course, “on the meaning and expression of holiness” (Spencer, 236, 252).

Since Spencer’s conclusion is stated twice in the publication (once in the forward and once at the end of her study), it is especially worthy of note, and I concur with Roberts in his affirmation of it. This study is both thoughtful and thought-provoking, clear and clearly important in any historiographical discussions of Quakers. “All scholars of Quakerism” will indeed need to “revisit their assumptions and research findings” in light of this study and reassess the place of holiness among Friends as a unifying and enduring theme. I am grateful for Spencer’s work. I believe it will also open up other possibilities for historical inquiry and give pause for the reconsideration of other assumptions regarding Quaker research.

ENDNOTES

1 Carole Dale Spencer, Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism (Great Britain: Paternoster, 2007), 248.
2 Spencer stops short of saying that evangelical Friends are the true inheritors and promot- ers of authentic, historic Quakerism, recognizing that even among this branch “appre- ciation for Quaker holiness varies widely and misunderstandings abound.” But she makes it difficult to believe that any other contemporary version of Friends is better suited to wear that mantel. Ibid., 248, 250.
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5 Spencer, 14, 23.


7 Trueblood, 5.

8 Spencer, 164.