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Williams' "Quakerism: A Theology for our Time" - Book Review

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1850, but the nineteenth-century material is brief and much less detailed than that on the earlier periods. A nine-page supplement by William H. Marwick covers the period from 1850 to 1950. It is an institutional history with an emphasis on the struggle of Quakerism to survive in a hostile environment; there is little social history.

George Burnet was a Church of Scotland Minister and his personal religious views come through strongly in the chapter titled 'Why Quakerism Failed in Scotland' which argues that 'neither the psychological nor the spiritual climate of Scotland suited it' (p. 192). Nonetheless the book provides a valuable starting point for any historian of Scottish Quakerism and a wealth of information and sources for further work.

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WILLIAMS, P.A., *Quakerism: A Theology for our Time* (York: Sessions, 2007), pp. 198. ISBN 978-1-85072-364-6, Paper, £10.

Patricia Williams makes a vigorous claim: that Quakerism is the best theology for our time, at least in the context of modern Christianity. Other forms of Christianity have proved themselves inadequate. Specifically, they fail by the criteria of modern biblical criticism and empirical science. Williams is well qualified to use these criteria, since she herself is a philosopher of science and an active participant in biblical research. It is the philosopher that comes through most strongly, however, as she draws the contrast between early Quakerism and orthodox Christianity, and subjects both to the tests of modern critical knowledge.

The book is in three parts. Part 1 characterises Quakerism as a spirituality and theology grounded in the experience of the Light. It is an experience open to everyone, whatever their culture or belief, since the Light is found to be present in everyone, and to be effective in them if they give it attention (Chapters 2, 3). This experience, once accepted, leads people to the divine and proves to be sufficient to guide them in the practicalities of life (Chapter 5) and to unite them with others who are similarly open (Chapter 4). They do not require beliefs as a basis for life since they can experience the reality of life for themselves, and they do not need rules to live by since they can (if they choose) discern what needs to be done. This discerning, it is true, may need to be checked by the community, but the community's guidance is principally in the form of lived testimonies to its truth (Chapter 5).

This presentation is fresh and clear, but the summary on p. 61 sits somewhat oddly with it.

The foundational Quaker doctrine is that all people have a measure of the divine Light within them... The remainder of the core Quaker theology follows logically from this foundational doctrine. Because the Light is divine, everyone should heed it. To heed it, people must listen for it, and a good listener listens in silence.

It is the words 'doctrine', 'logically' and 'should' that jar. The philosopher seems to have taken over here, to define Quaker faith in a way that makes it directly comparable with other forms of Christianity, and susceptible to the modern critiques.

The challenge from biblical studies comes in Part 2. It hits orthodoxy very hard. Both Protestant and Catholic theology are shown to be so dependent on a Bible-based way of thinking that they cannot survive (intellectually) the critique of the Bible that has developed over the last 300 years. They are committed, for example, to the idea of 'the fall' of Adam and Eve and the corresponding atoning work of Jesus that reverses it. Williams has a delightful passage in which she shows that the so-called fall of human beings is better understood, in the light of modern scholarship, as a rise (pp. 69-70)! The Quakers, by contrast, are shown to be not dependent on past ideas and therefore not vulnerable to the academic study of the past. On the contrary, what they say and have said about the Bible fits surprisingly well with what modern biblical scholars are saying (e.g. pp. 79, 91). The Bible is understood, not as laying down what we should believe, but as recording the experience of people in the past, from which we can nonetheless learn.

It provides a kind of mirror that confirms our faith and strengthens our hope... The Spirit that moved the ancients provokes in us a response to their stories, for the same Spirit prods us (p. 86).

Part 3 is devoted to the encounter with modern science, which Williams is able to describe with authority and clarity. Her interest here is not so much its undermining of orthodox belief, as its capacity to harmonise with and invigorate spirituality. Her descriptions of the new science are often quite poetic in fact, and the logician's measuring rod is left behind. The 'attributes of science', for example, are surprisingly similar to those of Quakerism (pp. 105-10). They are both based on experience, as against authority, both accept the role of intuition as well as of reason and both accept a discipline of checking in the community and the virtues of honesty and humility, among others. They both arose, of course, in response to the same crisis of authority in the seventeenth century. But they differ also. Quakers give priority to intuition, not to reason, and their experiments are inward, not outward and public (pp. 109, 112). The orthodox are, by contrast, out of step with science. As Williams puts it (rather bluntly again, as the logician comes into play),

Orthodoxy does not need experiment, reason or intuition to find truth, although it may use reason to defend itself. Indeed, orthodoxy does not need to seek truth, for it has already grasped it. For orthodoxy seeking is dangerous. It may carry the seeker away from established truth into error (p. 110).

Her conclusion, then, is that Quakerism is the spirituality best able to incorporate the knowledge we have gained in science (pp. 133-35) and therefore best able to foster our integration and progress as human beings. It resonates so well with the image of the world that we have been given by science that we are able to celebrate the world and our own intimate place within it. It enables us to see, for example, that our basic dispositions, inherited by evolution, have to be fully accepted but also transcended (pp. 123-32).

The spiritual Light pervades all. Shining in the evolved person, it transforms superficial individuals into characters of depth, purpose, and spirituality (p. 140).

(An appendix contains a useful discussion of metaphor, as understood by evolutionary psychologists and philosophers, which makes the point that all our language for spiritual things has to be metaphorical.)

I have hinted already at a tension in the book between evocative description and over-clear logical distinctions. Williams herself admits to occasionally simplifying (p. 183 n. 364), aware that she may not be doing Protestantism justice. But she has a polemical purpose here, and perhaps in America, from where she writes, she has something to be polemical about. The distinctiveness of Quakerism has so rarely been emphasised and clarified that a bold propagation of it like hers has to be welcome. So my real question about the book is not whether it is really fair to orthodox, but whether it does full justice to the Quaker distinctiveness. The emphasis on the Light as the central and distinguishing theme of Quakerism is surely sound. But the tendency to reduce this to a 'doctrine' which Quakers 'believe', and which then makes it comparable to other faiths that give priority to doctrine, blurs this very theme. I have given one example already, where the 'theology' of Quakers is said to 'follow logically' from the 'fundamental doctrine' of the Light (p. 61). Another, in the concluding chapter, reads,

This theology has consequences, logically entailed corollaries. If everyone has the Light within them then treating anyone violently must be rejected, for everyone warrants respect (p. 138).

To many modern Quakers this may well seem unexceptional, or perhaps pleasingly concise. But it sits uncomfortably with the early Quaker thinking that Williams has been largely drawing on. She even quotes Barclay on this very point, though she is aware of the irony of her doing so 'as a philosopher myself'.

If you want to make a man a useless fool, teach him logic and philosophy. Before that he may have been fit for something, but after it he will be good for nothing but speaking nonsense (p. 28).

Barclay's own writing shows that he himself was no fool in logic, so he must have been joking. But he had a serious point. The wisdom needed to illuminate and guide a life cannot be gained by logical inference. It can be gained only by opening yourself to the truth that the Light will show you, and then holding on to it and 'obeying' it. It is a process of experience and life, not of reflective thought. Thought can then be applied to this process to clarify what is going on, as Barclay does so well in his *Apology*, and as Williams does here. But it has to be distinguished from the fundamental insights on which Quakerism is based. If the two are confused, the insight and the reflection, our understanding of Quakerism gets distorted. Quaker life, for example, can be described as attempting to follow certain 'rules' which are derived logically from basic 'doctrines' (p. 61) rather than flowing naturally from the understanding and desire transformed by the Spirit. It also leads to the artificiality of acting according to how you *think* you should act. Notice the process at work here:

Furthermore, if everyone has a measure of the Light, then logically, everyone deserves equal respect. To live as if everyone deserves equal respect results in the Quaker testimonies of equality, truth-telling...simplicity...and peace (p. 61).

But to 'live as if' people are a certain way when actually they are not, or not found to be, is not to act truthfully, and not to act on the basis of experience. So something has gone amiss in the way Quakerism is being described. This could be prevented, I think, by paying closer attention to the basic experience of the Light, as this was understood by early Friends. Williams gets near to it:

In us, the Spirit does three fundamental things. First, it reveals itself... Second, the Spirit transforms us... Third, some transformed people carry the good news to others (pp. 136-37).

Yes, but it does these things by first showing people themselves. That is, it makes them aware of what they are doing and who they really are. This self-knowledge frees them from self-deception and false idols, which inflame desire, the 'four dispositions' (p. 137), which had led them to act wrongly. They are free to see reality as it is (as in Zen), to see 'the truth', as early Friends put it. It is a truth fundamental to their life, but they had previously turned a blind eye to it. So when the Light shows them the truth, and they accept it, it transforms their life. This is then the basis for their action in the world. They will act from the new understanding and the new desire that the Spirit has brought about in their hearts, without any need to consult doctrines or ethical rules.

This understanding would correct and complement Williams' work, I feel. It would not undermine it. As it stands, it is a strong and clear-headed presentation of what Quakerism today is, and can be.

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MILLIGAN, E.H., *Biographical Dictionary of British Quakers in Commerce and Industry 1775-1920* (York: Sessions Book Trust, 2007), pp. 606. ISBN 978-1-8507-2367-7, Paper, £30.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of Ted Milligan's authoritative reference work for students of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Quakerism and, more widely, for social, economic and family historians working on this period. The disproportionate importance of Friends (relative to their numbers) in the economic life of the British Isles at the time is well known so I believe there is a place for this book in every university and major public library in the English-speaking world. At the extraordinarily modest cover price there is really no reason not to buy it! Very many individual scholars and Friends will also want to own it and certainly the Woodbrooke Library copies are already well used.