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Reynolds's "Was George Fox a Gnostic? An Examination of Foxian Theology from a Valentinian Gnostic Perspective" - Book Review

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REYNOLDS, G., *Was George Fox a Gnostic? An Examination of Foxian Theology from a Valentinian Gnostic Perspective* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), pp. iv + 277. ISBN 0-7734-5901-4, Cloth, £69.95.

The ostensive purpose of this book is to see whether Fox's teaching can be described as Gnostic, to which the answer is a qualified yes. But another purpose becomes apparent as Glen Reynolds takes on scholars who have failed to recognise this affinity with Gnosticism. This is to show that Fox had 'a hidden faith' (p. 33) that was very different from that of many of his Quaker contemporaries, and certainly from that of later generations of Quakers who wanted to be seen as orthodox. The later interpretation of Fox by Quakers has tended to suppress his more radical vision, which, to an orthodox eye, could seem heretical. When Fox speaks of people's 'unity with God', for example, this has been interpreted to mean their living in harmony with God's will, rather than an actual identity with God. It is, they say, a moral not a metaphysical unity. The main point of this book is to argue against this interpretation and to demonstrate that Fox did have such a metaphysical faith.

It is not immediately clear why a comparison with early Christian Gnosticism should be needed for this argument. Fox knew nothing of this ancient religion, so far as we can tell, and there are in any case many obvious differences between his faith and theirs. But, as becomes clear in the book, Gnosticism does help heuristically: as a fully fledged system of Christian belief and practice it provides a model for the interpretation of Fox, whose ideas were less developed, and as a system that was roundly rejected by the orthodox church Gnosticism provides a yardstick by which to judge whether Fox himself was heretical.

The strength of the book is its argument that Fox's understanding involves a *real presence* of God in human beings and a *real transformation* of human beings, enabling them to become 'perfect', free from the power of sin. This corrects a real imbalance in Fox scholarship and opens the way to a more convincing interpretation of Fox's teaching as a whole.

After introducing us to the present-day understandings of these two ways of thought, Reynolds then compares them around the three themes he has discovered they have in common: revelation, perfection and the means of grace (he refers specifically to 'scripture, baptism and communion'). He brings together a mass of evidence from both sides so that he manages to persuade us that they do indeed have much in common, and that Fox was, unbeknownst to himself, something of a Gnostic.

I would therefore recommend to anyone who takes George Fox seriously to read this book and ponder its argument. If it is true we have to reconsider what Fox was about, and whether his followers (then and now) have properly understood him. But I would also recommend that they bear two questions in mind as they read and ponder questions which my reading of the book has stimulated me to ask myself: (1) Have the differences between Fox and the Gnostics been fully taken account of?; and (2) Has the description of Fox as almost Gnostic left us with a coherent picture of Fox as a teacher?

With regard to the first question, the most obvious *difference* between the two is that the Gnostics found the natural world alien to the spirit, and the source of their

enslavement, while Fox did not. They looked for a liberation from the material world, but since they were trapped in the material body, they could really only expect this after the death of the body. Fox, on the other hand, looked for a liberation from sin, which, in his view, is brought about by 'deceit' and, symbolically, by the devil as 'the father of lies'. This liberation, he found, was possible in this life, since it is brought about by the 'light of God' within people, which is able to dispel the deceit and reveal the truth. There is therefore no great interest, as Reynolds points out, in a life after death, which in that time was unusual. Now this is a very fundamental difference, and I am not sure that Reynolds has taken it seriously enough.

Let me give an example, which will also show how difficult Fox can be to interpret. In his fascinating discussion of time, in the chapter on 'Scripture, Baptism and Communion', Reynolds quotes a passage of Fox where he really does seem to be adopting the Gnostic metaphysic of time: 'Which [the Yea to the promises of God] fetches up the seed out of time who hath been in prison in time, and brings it by the power of God where there is no time' (*Works* 3:563). Reynolds infers from this that time is 'the domain of Satan'. But this is to treat Fox's distinctions as primarily metaphysical, where 'in time' means temporal and 'out of time' means eternal. They could, however, be treated more existentially, where being 'in time' means being preoccupied with temporal, transient things, and 'out of time' is to be free of their allurements. Fox often uses words 'in' and 'out' in that sense, for example, being 'in the truth' or 'out of the spirit', which describe a spiritual condition. Reynolds gives another, similar example where Fox seems to speak metaphysically: 'the truth...draws up that which lies in prison, and refresheth it in time, up to God, out of time, through time' (*Works* 4:18). But even here it is possible for Fox to describe this leading 'up to God, out of time' as itself a process 'in time' and 'through time'. So time and history have their role to play after all.

The second question to bear in mind is whether the picture that emerges is *coherent*. What are we to make of the conclusion that Fox was surprisingly 'similar to the Gnostics'? That he was really a Gnostic underneath, or perhaps, partly Gnostic? That he was 'a heretic' after all? Reynolds seems to accept R. McL. Wilson's point that what makes a movement Gnostic 'is not the separate characteristics or elements in any belief system...but the total synthesis into which they are combined'. So if Fox does not accept the whole synthesis he should be said to be simply 'not Gnostic'. The elements that Fox has in common are direct illumination and indwelling by the spirit of God, leading to a liberation from the world and a state of perfection. This is true. But would this not be better described as 'mysticism'? The answer may depend on whether Reynolds is right in arguing that Fox also shares with Gnosticism a hostility to nature and history, that is, whether he shares the Gnostic dualism of matter and spirit, which I have briefly touched on. Reynolds makes a good case, but I am not yet persuaded.

The answer may also depend on whether Fox is to be seen as primarily a thinker, propounding his own system of thought or theology. There are indications in his writing that he was dismissive of theology and of all 'notions' that could be developed in the mind, and that his message was rather more practical and experiential. But Reynolds finds contrary indications that there were elements of a system here,

and he is dismissive of Doug Gwyn's argument that Fox was not interested in 'metaphysical speculation' (p. 91).

So I leave the reader to judge: Given the striking similarities between Fox and the Gnostics, what are we to make of them?

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