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# A REVIEW OF EARLY QUAKERS AND THEIR THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT, 1647-1723

JON R. KERSHNER

*Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647-1723*, edited by Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion features the foremost scholars of seventeenth century Quakerism in a concise, groundbreaking volume. Quaker Studies is something of a growth industry as new approaches are being tested and previously inaccessible sources mined in digitized collections.<sup>1</sup> The dynamic duo of Angell and Dandelion have combined to plan and edit the *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought*, and the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Quakerism*. These three volumes make the best of research on Quakerism accessible to wider audiences, and solidify a base of active research that brings Quaker Studies the attention and rigor it needs to foster vibrant inquiry.

The essays in *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought* analyze Quakers of the first and second generations, bringing them into conversation and illuminating the early development of Quakerism from a loose movement of the spirit to a bounded religious group with its own traditions and orthodoxies. The essays under consideration in this review, chapters one through five, are concerned with the first generation of Quakers and their context. While research on first generation Quakers has been popular among scholars for some time, these essays are original in their approach.

To wit, in this volume, Angell and Dandelion bridge the theological insights of first and second generation Quakers. By design, they framed the theological arguments within the biographies of influential spokespeople in Quakerism's first half-century.<sup>2</sup> This micro-theological methodology helpfully situates theological convictions within the experiences and concerns of individual Quaker leaders. This approach mitigates abstract, "notional," simplifications of early Quaker theology. Moreover, this approach helps scholars assess the theological nuance and differing applications of theological terminology—such as, "seed" and "Light"—among core early Quaker leaders.

In my remaining comments, 1) I will try to highlight some of the theological insights in chapters 1-5; and, 2) I will make some comparative observations, which this volume facilitates so well.

Chapters one and two of *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought* address the seventeenth century context and print culture, respectively. Douglas Gwyn's examination of the seventeenth-century context anticipates following discussions of Quaker leaders and their thought by examining the Quaker "epistemological break" from Puritan biblicism, and resulting interactions with the "eschatological expectation" of the era.<sup>3</sup> Gwyn argues that the "interplay" between epistemology and eschatology provided early Quakers a fundamental break with established churches. In keeping with this initial insight, Gwyn uses "dialectical pairings" of epistemology and eschatology, hermeneutics and ecclesiology, Christology and pneumatology, hamartology and soteriology, and cosmology and ethics as key categories for assessing Quaker theological trajectories.<sup>4</sup>

Gwyn's dialectical pairing of cosmology and ethics is especially interesting because Christian theology has most often paired eschatology and ethics. For example, Karl Barth's view of "eschatological prolepsis" understands ethics as a type of enacting the Christ-decision, a realized ethics that brings the ethos of the new heaven and earth into a confrontation with world occurrence.<sup>5</sup> By pairing cosmology and ethics Gwyn implies that early Quakers understood their "testimony" to correspond with a reality that had, in fact, been accomplished and, so, move from the realm of spiritual prolepsis to spiritual actuality.

Betty Hagglund's essay on mid-seventeenth century print culture and publishing practices gives cultural shape to the spread of Quaker ideas. Quakers used publishing to proselytize, to solidify their identity among competing groups and to create networks among a geographically dispersed membership.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the increased literacy of the era, coupled with the profitability of shorter, controversial pamphlets, was a boon to the spread of Quaker ideas. Printing technology and a general demand for reading material made for a dynamic environment that fostered the spread of ideas by early Quaker leaders such as George Fox, James Nayler, and Richard Farnworth, the three leaders whom I will address in turn below.

In the first two chapters, Gwyn and Hagglund described the theological context and print culture that aided the spread of the Quaker message. In her chapter on Fox, Hilary Hinds argues that the

“doctrine of the Inward Light” provided a compelling center to every aspect of early Quaker practice and theology and must be understood as the theological reason for the attractiveness of Quakerism in mid-seventeenth century Britain.<sup>7</sup> According to Hinds, the key to Fox’s theology of the Light was the way in which a theology of the Light modified traditional Calvinist identifications. Whereas Fox was roiled by the Calvinist suggestion that humans were united by a state of unconquerable sin and divided by salvific grace, such that the reprobate and the elect could never know which they were and could never affect a change anyway. Fox’s theology of the “universal inward Light” proposed an alternative identification: humanity was united by the Light and only divided by the “faultline” between those who submitted to the Light and those who did not. Because of this modification, unity with the divine became the concern of one’s present life and was imminently knowable through “testimony” and conversion experiences.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, Hinds shows that after Fox’s discovery of unity with God his *Journal* changes its focus. No longer is his internal trouble and sorrow the keys to the text, rather the priority becomes the consequences of his new found unity.<sup>9</sup>

In chapter two, the meaning of the Inward Light in early Quaker theology is expanded to describe a mystical, “incarnational holiness” in the life of James Nayler. Carole Dale Spencer argues that Nayler viewed the implications of his incarnational theology as a sign of Christ’s spiritual and bodily presence. Spencer argues that Nayler’s infamous Bristol road incident was consistent with his incarnational theology. Moreover, Spencer makes the innovative and original claim that despite his fallout with Fox and other Quakers, Nayler never recanted that core theology. Instead, Nayler incorporated his rejection and discipline by other Quakers into his theology of incarnational mysticism. His sufferings and his chastisement, then, was something of a typology of Jesus’ passion narrative. Nayler’s supporters viewed his wounds as a type of stigmata. His acceptance of Quaker discipline was akin to Christ’s acceptance of his fate at the hands of Roman and Temple authorities.<sup>10</sup> Nayler was eventually restored to the community, and as Spencer says, “he accepted all with equanimity, tranquility and mystical detachment, as he authentically and publicly documented in his confessional writings.”<sup>11</sup>

Spencer views Nayler as a prime example of Quaker “holiness,” a subject she has worked on in depth.<sup>12</sup> This scholarship is important for the volume under review because it clarifies early Quaker theologies of perfection and types of early Quaker mysticism. For example, Nayler’s

incarnational holiness understood perfection in terms of a journey of death to self-will. As Spencer writes: “One is perfect ‘in measure’ to the extent that one has died to self. And the extent that one has died to self is the extent that Christ is revealed in measure. When the self is fully emptied (kenosis) then Christ is fully revealed, incarnated within (pleroma).” Perfection, then is a process of incarnational signification in which the life and passion of Christ are actualized. This incarnational holiness constitutes a mystical sharing in the two natures of Christ. Whereas early Quakers have traditionally been described as maintaining a dualism between flesh and spirit, Nayler believed the two natures of Christ could not be separated and, therefore, incarnational representation required a sign that pointed to the unity of these two natures in history. Thus, Nayler believed that Christ is potentially present bodily and spiritually in every person, and, so, the Bristol road incident is a sign of that presence acted out as testimony.

The interplay between mystical incarnation and perfection was a key feature of Nayler’s theology and likely shows the influence of the German mystic Jakob Boehme (1575-1624). The extent of Boehme’s influence on the first two centuries of Quakerism is an intriguing matter of scholarly interest that warrants further study. Spencer makes a compelling case that Nayler would have been familiar with Boehme and that Nayler’s incarnational holiness mirrors Boehme’s theology.<sup>13</sup> Boehme was a complex figure and his writings were speculative and, sometimes, indecipherable, at least to me. However, a mystical incarnationalism features strongly in his works, as does a cosmology that blurs the barriers between eschaton and temporality. All of this would have been attractive to Nayler.

What this reviewer wonders, though, is whether Boehme’s experience of censure by the established Lutheran church of his day, and eventual vindication by the admiration of devout Christian dissenters, was a model and encouragement for Nayler. Perhaps Nayler found not only Boehme’s theology, but his biography, to be in the stream of incarnational holiness that fully originated with Christ, but that would be signified in the *imitatio Christi* of the faithful in history.<sup>14</sup> Exploring Nayler’s theology and its signification through the lens of incarnational holiness is helpful for understanding the whole of Nayler’s story—before and after Bristol—and distinguishes him from other early Quaker leaders who stopped short of Nayler’s typological representation.

Nayler's high view of the mystical presence of Christ's two natures is more literal than Fox's and Farnworth's. Fox and Farnworth were strong advocates of the eschatological immediacy of Christ, but the type of incarnational sign Nayler enacted never occurred to them. However, while Fox was quick to rebuke Nayler, perhaps as much for leadership concerns as for concerns of theology, Stephen Angell and Michael Birkel point out that Farnworth did not rebuke Nayler and that this fact may explain why Farnworth's prominence among Quakers diminished during the time of the Bristol controversy.<sup>15</sup> These types of comparisons are facilitated by the structure and content of *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought*. They show the diversity of theological views and sympathies among the Quaker leadership of the 1650s. It is to Angell's and Birkel's chapter on Farnworth that I now turn.

While Farnworth may have been sympathetic to Nayler during the controversies surrounding the Bristol incident, the nature of those sympathies are unclear. Farnworth may not have shared Nayler's incarnational holiness. In fact, Birkel and Angell argue that Farnworth's anthropology was generally more positive than that of other early Quakers, like Nayler. Farnworth was the first to use the phrase, "mind the light of God in you," which connotes that God's presence was universal and only seeking a response to divine initiative.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps because of the universality of the Light, Farnworth was a vigorous promoter of women as preachers. Taking the issue head on, Farnworth wrote that the Apostle Paul's criticism of women in Corinth was not due to their gender, but to the carnal spirit, which was present in both men and women. The only one who could speak in the church was the Holy Spirit, Farnworth contended, and the Spirit could speak through women and men.<sup>17</sup>

Farnworth was also involved in conceptualizing early Quaker statements of order and discipline theologically. Farnworth was one of the first Quaker to view church structure as a means to support interior freedom, rather than merely a means to stay external threats of persecution. Thus, the authors describe Farnworth as both a "prophet of Light *and* an apostle of Church Order."<sup>18</sup> That Farnworth was concerned with both the universal presence and leadership of the "Light," and the ordered structures that provides freedom for the "Light" to operate, challenges simplistic assessments of early Quaker leaders as "either/or" figures that can be easily classified. Additionally, Farnworth's theological shift in the 1660s

toward pastoral encouragement and respect for religious forms<sup>19</sup> demonstrates how the modification of Quakerism after the first decade was not an unprecedented, alien development, but, rather, followed along culturally responsive trajectories that were already present in Quaker origins.

In conclusion, *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought* makes at least three important contributions to Quaker Studies. First, it makes explicit the interconnection between context, biography and theology. In so doing, it heightens appreciation for the many ways early Quakers formed religious meaning and contributed to the shaping of the group. Second, it demonstrates that all of these factors of theological construction provide a basis for comparative analyses among the early Quaker leadership itself, and that such comparisons provide a view of Quaker development that is less deterministic and more responsive to the various personalities, convictions, and cultural events that give shape to religious movements. And finally, *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought* demonstrates that rich source material is available for in-depth analyses and that such micro-theological approaches can reveal new insights into early Quaker origins and the individual personalities with whom the movement was associated.

The type of research and analysis seen in these essays brings both well-known and hidden figures in early Quaker history into conversation like never before. The nuance and understanding that arises from these micro-theological treatments is crucial for unearthing new ground on the religious complexity of Quakerism and the dynamism of its change into modern forms. This reviewer hopes that Cambridge Press will commission at least three more volumes on the theological thought of subsequent eras of Quakerism into the current day (i.e. a volume each on 1) mid-eighteenth century through the Great Separation; 2) Great Separation through the end of the nineteenth century; and, 3) twentieth through twenty first centuries). Just imagine how much more clearly the main actors and theologies of the last three centuries of Quakerism could be seen if such volumes were available.

## ENDNOTES

1. There are many excellent collections of Quaker documents online, which make research accessible for scholars. Here are some examples: Earlham School of Religion Digital Quaker Collection (<http://esr.earlham.edu/dqc/>); Swarthmore College, Friends

Historical Library (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/friends-historical-library/quaker-history-genealogy>); Quaker Heritage Press (<http://www.qhpress.org/texts/index.html>); The Tri-college libraries of Swarthmore, Haverford, and Bryn Mawr (<http://tritych.brynmawr.edu/>).

2. Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion, eds., *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647-1723* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 9.
3. Douglas Gwyn, "Seventeenth-Century Context and Quaker Beginnings," in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647-1723*, ed. Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 13.
4. *Ibid.*, 13, 20, 23, 25, 27.
5. Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishers, 2004), 287.
6. Betty Hagglund, "Quakers and the Printing Press," in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647-1723*, ed. Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 32.
7. Hilary Hinds, "Unity and Universality in the Theology of George Fox," in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647-1723*, ed. Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 49.
8. *Ibid.*, 50–51.
9. *Ibid.*, 55.
10. Carole Dale Spencer, "The Man Who 'Set Himself as a Sign': James Nayler's Incarnational Theology," in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647-1723*, ed. Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 74–75.
11. *Ibid.*, 75.
12. Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness – the Soul of Quakerism: an Historical Analysis of the Theology of Holiness in the Quaker Tradition* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).
13. *Ibid.*, 75–76.
14. *Ibid.*, 74–75.
15. Stephen Angell and Michael L. Birkel, "The Witness of Richard Farnworth: Prophet of Light, Apostle of Church Order," in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647-1723*, ed. Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 93.
16. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
17. *Ibid.*, 87.
18. *Ibid.*, 96.
19. *Ibid.*