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# Review of Early Quakers and their Theological Thought

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## REVIEW OF *EARLY QUAKERS AND THEIR THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT*

LEAH PAYNE

First-generation Quakers were a radical and persecuted sect of early modern British Christianity. *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought: 1647-1723* shows why the Quakers have survived when so many other 17th century radicals—including Diggers, Ranters, Levellers or Muggletonians—did not. Along the way readers also discover why the Friends, though initially derided, are so loved in the twenty-first century. Quaker theology, rejected by the powers that be in its own era, resonates with many 21st century readers.

Chapters six through nine of *Early Quakers* include discussions of the theology of Margaret Fell, Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill, Samuel Fisher, and Dorothy White. In “Margaret Fell and the Second Coming of Christ,” Sally Bruyneel demonstrates how Fell interpreted scripture as well as how Fell’s socio-political context informed her eschatology, harmartiology, anthropology, and theology of the Trinity. Pink Dandelion and Frederick Martin explore the social context and relationship between two northern Quakers and their changing apocalyptic visions in “‘Outcasts of Israel’: the Apocalyptic Theology of Edward Burrough and Francis Howgill.” In “Renegade Oxonian: Samuel Fisher’s Importance in Formulating a Quaker Understanding of Scripture,” Stephen W. Angell shows how Quaker theology and notions of biblical authority was refracted through an academic lens. Michele Lise Tarter discusses the radical end-times theological vision of Dorothy White in, “‘That You May Be Perfect in Love’: the Prophecy of Dorothy White.”

Rather than rehash the academic contributions of each chapter (which are many), this review essay discusses the issues of gender, class, and theology that are threaded throughout each chapter. This essay raises questions in the hopes of prodding further discussion about Quaker theology and practice. Finally, this essay compares early Friends to the early theologies and theologians of a twentieth-century Spirit-oriented group: the Pentecostals. Putting the founding generations of Quakers and Pentecostals - separated by time, but

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united in Spirit—into conversation with one another has the potential to enhance scholarly understanding of both movements.

The Friends emerged during the early modern era, a season of extraordinary religious creativity in England. During the mid-seventeenth century, many Englishwomen and men became dissatisfied with the Church of England and sought to form a more perfect version of religious life. One of the most obvious distinctions between the Friends and their early modern counterparts is the fact that the Friends counted women among their foundational theologians (of course other early modern movements also benefitted from the contributions of women theologians, but they rarely received credit as such). Margaret Fell and Dorothy White are two of the most influential women theologians. Sally Bruyneel explores Margaret Fell’s self-conscious theologizing in “Margaret Fell and the Second Coming of Christ.” While many women religious founders (and Fell is arguably a co-founder of the Quaker movement) did not have access to and/or did not see value in engaging in traditional theological discourse, Bruyneel shows how Fell dove into theological conversations about Christology, the Trinity, etc.

Fell’s theological vision does not fit within traditional notions about women and theology. In feminist circles, the role of the body is key in theological discourse.<sup>1</sup> Women, the logic goes, are (by nature or by nurture, depending upon whether one adopts an essential or phenomenological view of gender) are more closely tied to the body (and by extension the material) than men. Men are often associated with the mind and its rational, philosophical, and theological capacity.<sup>2</sup> Women are often associated with the body and its appetites.<sup>3</sup> The fact that women throughout scripture are categorized often by the ability (or inability) of their bodies to produce children (e.g. Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth’s infertility or Eve, Leah, or Mary’s fertility) and the fact that a prominent metaphor for the church as a virginal bride who is defined by what her body has not yet done (but will in the future!) seems to buttress this claim. Likewise, medieval mystics like Julian of Norwich and early modern mystics like Teresa of Avila, who report ecstatic, physical responses to being “pierced through” by angels highlight the role of the body when it comes to women and their experience with the Divine. Thus, womanly, feminist theology tends to be bodily-minded.

Fell’s apparent lack of interest in “Jesus Christ as man,” in favor of “the Light as the Spirit of Christ,” as well as her rejection of Roman

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Catholic teachings about the body of Christ's presence in the Eucharist in favor of "those who walk in obedience to the Light," simultaneously enhances and detracts from the embodied nature of Christ on earth (p. 112-113). On the one hand, emphasizing the Spirit's presence in the individual and corporate body invites theologians to consider all (including children!) as vessels of that inner light. This seems to broaden the scope of whose bodies can be considered a part of the Body of Christ. On the other hand, deemphasizing the humanity of Jesus in favor of his divine spiritual function as the Light seems to be a turn away from the physical savior and perhaps the typical relationship feminists note among women, the body, and the theological. Does this make Fell an outlier when it comes to female theologians? Or does Fell's status as founder of an enduring religious movement invite scholars to expand the categories of feminist theology?

Michelle Lise Tarter's chapter on Dorothy White addresses these questions by noting "how prophecy was a visceral, embodied practice for Friends," (p. 157). White seems to take on all of the typical qualities that Fell did not. She took on the role of "Spiritual Mother" to the Friends and claimed to have unmediated prophetic experiences in her body. Lise Tarter's analysis of White "feeding the babes with her prophetic streams pouring forth as the milk of the Word of God," reveals that White conceptualized her leadership role in traditional, embodied, female ways (p. 168).

These two contrasting approaches create rich questions of analysis for historians of gender. For example, which approach to female empowerment is most effective in a new religious movement: the typically feminized route of comparing the role of the female leader/teacher to the role of mother or the atypical path of the Light of Christ over the sacramental body? The very fact that Lise Tarter notes that "so very little is chronicled about this leading visionary and author" referring to Dorothy White, while Margaret Fell's legacy as a co-founder of the Friends movement remains secure indicates that traditional theological discourse is the best way to be enshrined in histories of the movement. Perhaps the motherly image of a nursing mother did not have as much staying power as did Fell's theologizing about the Light.

In addition, the Spirit-centered language of male Quaker preachers like Burrough and Howgill, received by outsiders with some ambivalence, brings to the fore questions about the gendered nature of pneumatology. The Spirit is often associated with the feminine;

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perhaps hearing men speak so eloquently about the Light and the Spirit was off-putting to listeners so accustomed to Puritanical/Reformed rhetoric about the Father and the Son. Could one argue that some of the criticism that Quakers endured was due to the fact that their theology transgressed theological gender boundaries?

Gender is one prominent lens through which the Quakers and their theology are analyzed, but class is an equally powerful and insightful lens through which to interpret the Quakers. The early Friends had a seemingly paradoxical relationship to class. On the one hand, Quakers were committed to equality between the sexes, races, and classes. They demonstrated this theoretically through their writings and in practice through their admirable attempts to recognize the Light of Christ in all.

One cannot help but notice, however, that many of the leading voices of the early movement were educated, privileged persons. Margaret Fell's status as a learned woman of means is demonstrated powerfully in the methods through which she sought to defend the Quakers. What uneducated, indigent would presume to litigate a theological cause? And yet Fell, the spouse of a powerful Judge, did just that.

The theological development of the Friends likewise demonstrates the education and class privilege of many of its brightest theological stars. While Fell was not a "trained theologian," she was nevertheless an educated woman with enough wealth to dedicate time to the study of the scriptures and theological discourse. Samuel Fisher's graduate education and status as an "Oxford man" clearly demonstrate his class privilege. Even Edward Burrough and Francis Howgill—whom Pink Dandelion and Frederick Martin tell us were characterized as "outcasts of Israel," because of their lower-class, northern status—could read and write well in an era when few (perhaps 30-40 percent) Englishmen could do so, *and* both men had invested in theological and biblical study.

These chapters demonstrate that there are some clear benefits to class privilege early on in a movement. First, Quakers benefited from having the controversial aspects of their movement articulately defended in the public sphere. Bruyneel points out that Margaret Fell was able to use knowledge and language of the legal system in her writings. Second, Quakers had theological tools from formal education at the outset of their movement. Angell's portrait of Fisher depicts a man who sharpened his theological lens with world-class

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minds at Oxford. Third, by having a well-educated first generation, Quakers were able to ensure that their early theologies such as White's eschatology, Fell's Christology, Fisher's hermeneutics, and Burrough and Howgill's end-time theology were preserved and built-upon by subsequent generations.

Through their writings and practices, the Friends emerged from their early modern British milieu with powerful theological visions and a striking social witness. 300 years and an ocean separate them, but the Friends in the United States greatly influenced American Pentecostals. When it comes to gender concerns, Pentecostals and Quakers share much in common. Like the Friends, Pentecostals had a significant number of women as founders. Jenny Seymour, Carrie Judd Montgomery, Emma Cotton, Maria Woodworth-Etter, Florence Crawford, and Agnes Ozman to name a few. And, like Fell and White, many of these women contributed important theological visions to their movements that set Pentecostalism on its 21st century trajectory. Similar to the Friends, early Pentecostal women also contributed to the Pentecostal tradition through their hospitality; they opened their homes as churches and healing rooms, they fed and clothed worshippers, commissioned pastors, and established itinerant ministries. As with Dorothy White, however, many of the details of their lives and ministries are lost to history at a disproportionate rate compared to their male counterparts. Barely 100 years after their founding in the mass media age, we know very little about these women and their accomplishments.

Theologically-speaking, 21st century Friends and Pentecostals alike may be surprised to learn that there are a number of points on which early Friends and Pentecostals agree. For example, imminent eschatology characterized both groups. Howgill's use of apocalyptic texts such as Revelation 12 and Fell's use of Joel 2 foreshadow the Pentecostals' love of eschatological anticipation. The pneumatological similarities between the two groups are undeniable. Both groups engaged in prophetic utterances, which indicates that they both believed that the Spirit was at work in the world in ways similar to the Spirit's work in Acts 2. Both groups included preachers like Burrough who conceived of themselves as engaging in an apocalyptic spiritual battle (note: of all of these theologians in chapters 6-9, I believe Burrough's vision of the Spirit, judgment, and the "dawning of the gospel day" would have been the most heartily embraced by early Pentecostals). The early Pentecostals, birthed out of the holiness

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movement, would have shared Dorothy White's conviction that "Spirit of God within us" had cleansing power. In addition, this high pneumatology, as Angell notes of Fisher, "outranked the Scriptures as a guide to faith and life," in the Quaker movement and I believe it did in the early Pentecostal movement too. The evidence of this can be seen in the fact that the Pentecostals, while birthed in the midst of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and while claiming that the Bible was authoritative, nonetheless managed to escape much of the controversy's worst battles over the authority of the scriptures. One could argue that this because the Spirit (or at least experience with the Spirit) was the interpreter for Pentecostal practitioners and as such situated the movement outside the empirical epistemology that pitted liberal and conservative Protestants against one another.

Alongside these similarities, chapters 6-9 of *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought* highlight two important distinctions between the early theologians of both movements: the soteriology of the Pentecostals and the Friends and the social class of each movement's founders. Unlike the early Quakers (at least those profiled in chapters 6-9) early Pentecostals were deeply concerned with the physical form of Jesus: specifically, his blood. The Pentecostals took up the "blood hymns" of previous revivalists and emphasized the role of the blood in the sanctified life. Perhaps this emphasis tied Pentecostals more closely to the physical realm. Perhaps they emphasized divine healing of the body, the physical act of glossolalia, and being "slain in the Spirit" over intellectual illumination as a result. And, it is possible that this commitment to the body may have blinded the early Pentecostals to what the Friends did so rigorously: embrace the work that the Spirit does in the intellect.

In addition to theological distinctions, unlike the Friends, the Pentecostals did not have the benefit of a sizeable number of educated first-generation founders who had access to empowering relationships. For example, there was no Margaret Fell to encourage her husband to argue for Pentecostal revivalist Maria Woodworth-Etter when she was put on trial for practicing medicine without a license due to her practice of prayer for divine healing. Likewise, there was no Samuel Fisher to create a scholarly version of Pentecostal hermeneutics when Pentecostals were being ridiculed in the public sphere. And, there were few to no educated clergy who translated ecstatic experiences into theology that had potential to be understood and even accepted by the respectable middleclass, as in the case of Burrough and Howgill.

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Perhaps class (to say nothing of race/ethnicity) played an important role in setting these two movements on distinct trajectories. For example, the Friends movement has a long and venerable history of investing in education. Did their privilege (social, economic, intellectual) give them a vision for creating what would become some of the world's most elite educational institutions? Conversely, the Pentecostals are often (mis?) labeled as anti-intellectual. Did their relative lack of privilege and education set them on a course toward establishing Christian radio stations and television channels over institutes of higher learning? And, do these trajectories help or hinder the movements? This line of questioning could yield a rich scholarly harvest for those who study Friends and Pentecostals.

*Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought: 1647-1723* is a handbook for those who wish to understand the enduring theological contributions of famous and forgotten Friends. And, this volume is a helpful tool for comparative study in American religious history.

## ENDNOTES

1. See for example: Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, Vol. 2 (London: A&C Black), 1998; Lisa Isherwood, ed., *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*, Vol. 5 (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000); Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St Ville, *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
2. Leah Payne, *Gender and Pentecostal Revivalism: Making a Female Ministry in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 25.
3. Ibid.