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REVIEW OF *EARLY QUAKERS AND THEIR THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT*

MADELEINE WARD

In *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought*, Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion have provided students and scholars of early Quakerism with an invaluable tool, capturing not only the vibrancy of the early Quakers' intellectual world, but also the vitality of Quaker studies in the present day. This review will especially consider Douglas Gwyn's chapter on Quaker origins, and the final three chapters on William Penn, George Keith and George Whitehead respectively, before reflecting on the book as a whole.

Douglas Gwyn's characterisation of the early movement primarily as an epistemological break from Puritan biblicism, within an eschatological framework, is convincing. The question of origins is one of the most contested in early Quaker studies. However, Gwyn largely avoids the choppy waters of that controversy, by presenting Quakerism as the result of a synthesis of, and response to, a wide coalition of different historical and intellectual influences—rather than arguing for one influence above all others. In this way, he steers the reader through a robust and multi-faceted contextualisation of the early movement, and introduces the key categories of Quaker theology which are discussed in the rest of the book. I think this is exactly what was needed at this point in the volume. Gwyn possibly downplays the early Quakers' radicalism by his extensive use of the *Journal*. Nonetheless, it is a brilliantly informative essay, and provides an indispensable starting point from which to approach the more specific investigations in subsequent chapters.

In "William Penn's Contribution to Early Quaker Thought", Melvin Endy presents William Penn as a wide-ranging, dynamic, and ultimately modern thinker. The chapter is organised thematically, through discussions of Penn's views on metaphysics, the relationship between the Inward Light and reason, scripture and doctrine, and salvation history. Endy's Penn utilised the fashionable philosophy of Descartes to radicalise and systematise dualistic tendencies within early Quakerism. He was a fiercer critic of original sin than Barclay, and was significantly more positive about the role of reason than

the average Friend. He believed the direct revelation of the Light within in the soul, not Christ's suffering and death, ultimately enacted our salvation. He stressed the saving potential of this eternal Christ even before the Incarnation, affirmed the importance of behaviour over belief, and was notably ambivalent towards the conversion of non-Christians. And yet, he still wanted to affirm the consistency of Quakerism *with* Scripture, the progressive nature of salvation history (admittedly towards the fullest revelation in his own time), and (increasingly over the course of his life) the importance of the historical Jesus. The chapter is, then, robustly theological, allowing for a refreshing exploration, through Penn's *theology*, of a progressive creativity normally associated more specifically with his political and tolerationist views.

Perhaps Endy's closing characterisation of Penn as a forerunner of John Hick—one of the most prominent religious pluralists of the 20th century—tends towards a slight exaggeration of Penn's liberality (p. 252). After all, Penn was still keen to show the thoroughly Christian nature of the movement, as demonstrated by his questionable commitment to toleration for Catholics, and publications such as *The Christian Quaker*. Nonetheless, the discussion itself does not neglect this concern. From his stimulating consideration of Penn's changing Christological beliefs, to his extremely helpful elucidation of Penn's view of reason, Endy subtly presents Penn's position on an impressive range of theological issues. Moreover, he gently guides the reader through areas where Penn was possibly inconsistent, limited in his innovation, or changed his mind. And whilst others will disagree with his reading of Penn's dualism as arising out of earlier tendencies within Quakerism, I support the insinuation that the early Friends were highly dualistic.

Similarly, Michael Birkel's chapter on George Keith demonstrates the benefit of considering early Quakers from a specifically theological perspective, where the focus has traditionally been elsewhere. For, Birkel does not dwell unduly on Keith's notorious break with Quakerism. Rather, the kernel of this chapter concerns Keith's articulation of his earlier *Quaker* faith through his knowledge of dialectical theology and interaction with the Kabbalah. Birkel begins with an account of Keith's early appreciation of Quaker worship and the importance of "immediate revelation", before examining in detail his use of the Kabbalah to explain these theological priorities. In the Kabbalah, Birkel argues, Keith found new ways to articulate his

religious vision—his justification for the universality of the Light, the notion of Christ as the “Heavenly Man”, and his association of the Kabbalistic *Adam Kadmon* with the soul of the Messiah. Birkel also connects the term *Vehiculum Dei* and the Jewish mystical image of the *Merkabah*, or chariot of God. Only after this wonderful articulation of Keith’s earlier intellectual influences does he turn to the Keithian schism itself, noting the tangled theological and political dynamics which culminated in Keith’s excommunication. In particular, Birkel suggests that Keith’s rejection of his earlier belief was tied to his changing view on the possibility of new revelation, which he came to view as a product of “Imaginations and Fancies”, and even characterised as magic or witchcraft.

By resisting a more conventional focus on Keith’s later work, Birkel captures not only Keith’s intellectual gravitas as a defender of Quakerism, but also his theological creativity. This reveals a less familiar—but no less significant—aspect of a man who has since been remembered for trying to impose a confession upon the early Quaker movement. To this end, Birkel’s work on Keith and the Kabbalah raises questions relevant to all students and scholars in this field. For example, it may have implications for how we interpret Keith’s possible motivations in calling for stricter affirmation of Christian orthodoxy, given the obvious esotericism of his earlier intellectual life. So too, the chapter invites more research into the influence of the Kabbalah on other Quaker authors—particularly Barclay. Birkel does note Barclay’s own connection to the Kabbalah, both here and in his recent article in *Quaker Studies*. But I think there is more to say, especially on the similarities between the “Middle Substance” of Lurianic Kabbalah and the *Vehiculum Dei*.

Of course, these are not questions which could, or should, have been addressed in a single chapter on George Keith. Rather, they provide glimpses of a tantalising vision of future possibilities unlocked by Birkel’s work. This research will undoubtedly enjoy a prominent place in any future account of Quaker theology during this period. In short, the chapter is a delight.

In the final chapter, Robynne Rogers Healey discusses George Whitehead’s “theology for the eschaton deferred”. Taking a chronological approach, she portrays early Whitehead as a typical first-generation Friend, driven by an ecstatic and apocalyptic expectation and a belief in the urgent need for repentance in light of God’s unfolding actions in the world. She then considers the heightened

persecution of the Restoration era, and Whitehead's subsequent attempts to present Quakerism both as a suffering remnant preserved by God, and as a tolerable movement. Healey argues that this *political* necessity precipitated Whitehead's gradual shift from a belief in an "imminent eschatological moment" to a "more socially acceptable meantime theology" (that is, a "theology for the eschaton deferred"), and guided his strong concern to regulate behaviour within the movement (p. 278).

Healey consistently stresses Whitehead's preference for orthopraxy over orthodoxy. Nonetheless, as a study of one of the main defenders of Quaker theology, this does not prevent her consideration of Whitehead's considerable theological output. In particular, Healey unpacks the transition of Quakerism into Quietism, and summarises Whitehead's leadership of the movement as a time in which "Quaker culture became increasingly behaviourally controlled, but remained theologically flexible, leaving space for multiple perspectives, and even for doubt" (p. 288).

As Healey notes, existing scholarship tends to present Whitehead more as bridesmaid than bride, and she expressly avoids any attempt to rescue him from this lukewarm reception. Yet what she does provide is a coherent *portrait* of a hugely important figure who is too often encountered only through a side-glance. Casting incidents such as the Perrot controversy as "disputes over practice, not belief" (p. 281) arguably tends towards a politicised reading which downplays the theological implications of enacting a "Church" unity. Furthermore, her suggestion that "Whitehead's confidence in perfection persisted throughout his life" (p. 277) also raised questions for me about whether later Whitehead conceived of "perfection" in the same way as early Whitehead—or indeed, as the earliest Quakers more generally. Nonetheless, Healey's sketch of a man prepared to engage theologically with his opponents, but ultimately prioritising "praxis" over "precise belief", is certainly recognisable (p. 273). This was a man who, when disputing with John Norris the minutiae of their differing metaphysical commitments, eventually seems to have given up, exclaiming: "why may not Christ's Spiritual Body... as well be a Light, as Life, Aliment or Food to the Soul?"¹ This chapter captures the essence of Whitehead's more general frustrations with a whole way of doing religion—that is, a combative, rationalistic, almost scholastic, approach—and to that end, it is certainly compelling.

Through the person of George Whitehead, Healey explicates a quite different approach to theological engagement from that favoured by Penn or Keith. Individually, then, these chapters illustrate the great benefits of detailed consideration *of individuals*, in all their idiosyncrasy. Together, they illustrate the rich and diverse tapestry of the early Quakers' theology, even into the eighteenth century.

This interplay between unity and diversity is a theme of the whole book. On the first page of the volume, the editors write of early Quakerism that “different authors [used] the same phrases in different ways or different phrases in the same way”, and that “this collection circumvents the challenge of trying to characterise the global message by exploring in depth... key writers individually” (p. 1). Clearly, the lack of homogeneity in the early movement must be acknowledged, and the chosen approach is a very reasonable way to do this, whilst also demonstrating the richness of early Quaker theology. It also makes the volume readable, well-paced, and varied, so that it accommodates both scholarly and popular audiences. Yet the book itself acknowledges that circumvention cannot be the last word. Indeed, if we can discern any coherence in the earliest Quaker message—as Doug Gwyn does so gracefully—then we should aspire to find coherence in later stages too, when it was more (not less) theologically codified. To this end, it is fitting that, whilst the book begins by stressing fragments, it ends with a vision of the whole: in the *Afterword*, Moore and Allen muse that “All Quaker theology is in some sense a unity” (p. 293).

Perhaps this wider picture could have been drawn out more. In particular, the inclusion of a chapter on Anne Conway would have allowed further space to elucidate broader trends. For, whilst Conway was only published posthumously, her intellectual influence was still profound—especially on Keith and Barclay (as noted by Michael Birkel). This omission would be my only actual criticism of the volume. Nonetheless, the editors do acknowledge this decision in their introduction, and it is ultimately understandable, given the space constraints of such a wide-ranging project.

It seems to me that both these features—commitment to a study of theology, and a slight reluctance to dwell on a theological “plot” guiding the individual cast members—are neatly reflected in the title of the book: “theological thought”, not “theology”. Whilst Quakers (then and now) may have frustrations with systematic theology, it seems quite clear to me that the early Quakers were nevertheless

doing something called “theology”. As Carole Spencer points out in her chapter on Nayler, they often “did” it quite literally, by enacting, rather than thinking, it (pp. 64-82). And even Whitehead, with all his frustrations, was prepared to issue his opponents with a confession of Quaker faith. This entailed that their theology changed, was codified, debated and developed (at least to some degree) as a whole.

That aside, a renewed interest in the role of *religious ideas* in the history of religion is not only gathering speed in Quaker studies, but marks a trend across the field of “Church history”—a trend of special relevance in studies of the Long Reformation and Enlightenment.² Therefore, we should view this book as part of a wider sea-change in the historiography of religion, and welcome the new opportunities that it may bring for the field.

To this end, as the editors note, it is an exciting time to be studying Quakerism. For part of the vitality of the book is that it so clearly points beyond itself—in the first instance, to Moore and Allen’s forthcoming volume on the Second Period of Quakerism, but also more widely, to the emergence of a broader interest in the theology of the early movement. It is full of exciting contributions, and will surely become a standard point of departure for anyone researching early Quaker theology. It was a joy to read, a joy to review, and I would like to thank its editors and contributors for the stimulation and challenge it provides to us all.

ENDNOTES

1. George Whitehead, *The divine light of Christ in man*, W1924 (London: Northcott, 1692), 10.
2. For example, see Knud Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Diarmaid MacCulloch, “Protestantism in Mainland Europe: New Directions”, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 59, 3 (2006), 698-706; Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).