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AFTER SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: EMERGING QUAKER PERSPECTIVES ON FURTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY AND GENDER

RHIANNON GRANT

INTRODUCTION

This paper was first presented at the American Academy of Religion in Boston in 2017. What follows incorporates some responses to questions which were asked there. In particular, it seems appropriate to preface the main text with a personal comment. The respondent for the session, Sa'ed Atshan, asked about the speakers' relationships to Quakerism, and I answered that although in this paper I say that I am describing possible arguments rather than real positions taken by Quakers, I am a Quaker and I would—at the time of writing!—make points something like these if asked to describe my personal understanding. This paper focuses on what can coherently be said within a Quaker theological framework, but my comments here, especially those regarding gender, also arise from my ongoing process of listening carefully and prayerfully to the experiences of trans and nonbinary Friends. At that level, this paper can also be taken as a contribution to the discussion it describes.

BACKGROUND

Just over eight years ago, Quakers in Britain, in the form of Britain Yearly Meeting, decided to treat same-sex and opposite-sex marriages identically, in as far as the law allowed them to do so.¹ Since then, the law in Britain has changed significantly, not least due to a campaign by the Quakers and several other faith communities, and since a change to the law in 2013 the two forms of marriage are now the same for most purposes.² In this paper, I want to explore the reasons which were given for this decision and where, now that same-

sex marriage is an established part of the British Quaker landscape, these principles might take the British Quaker community next. In particular, I want to look at two questions which might come before the Quaker community—the issues of opposite-sex civil partnerships, and the inclusion of trans and genderqueer people. Some of this is, necessarily, speculative—and theological rather than sociological, in that I am interested in the underlying principles rather than facts about the practice—but hopefully it provides some pointers about how discussion of gender and sexuality might develop. I should also note that I restrict myself here to Quakers in Britain, as the situation both legally and theologically is sometimes very different elsewhere in the world.

So, why did Quakers in Britain decide to start performing same-sex marriages? There were undoubtedly many factors involved—for example, a general social shift towards greater acceptance of gay, lesbian and bisexual people in wider society. However, of all the reasons which were put forward within the meeting itself, two are particularly interesting theologically and therefore form the focus of this paper.³

One is often described as a commitment or ‘testimony’ to equality, and might be summarised in the claim that since all people are equal in the eyes of God, Quakers should treat all people equally in order to manifest this aspect of the kingdom of God on earth. This is a long-established Quaker principle—it has drifted in and out of practice, and there have been some notable failures to live up to it, but there are solid sources for it in early Quaker literature, usually around the inclusion of women as preachers within the community. For the purposes of this paper, I shall call this the principle of equality.

The other can be summarised in the oft-quoted phrase from George Fox: “marriage is the Lord’s work, and we are but witnesses”.⁴ As a theological argument, this essentially claims that marriages are created or performed by God, and only witnessed—noted, accepted, and recorded—by people. During the Yearly Meeting sessions in 2009, the experience of hearing from same-sex couples who considered themselves already married in the eyes of God, but unrecognised by the law and the community, seems to have been a deciding factor for many. This creates a strong call for the community to live up to another of their key values, truth, and acknowledge these marriages publicly. I will call this idea that God is doing the work and the community is merely recording it the principle of givenness.

In the context of same-sex marriage, these two principles can be seen as amounting to different arguments for the same conclusion. According to the principle of equality, everyone is equal before God whether or not they are homosexual, and the community sees that some people are able to have their long-term relationships recognised by the law of the land and the Quaker community while others are not. Therefore, in order to enact greater equality, Quakers will recognise same-sex marriage. The principle of givenness invokes a more direct piece of evidence: there are same-sex couples in the Quaker community who, in Quaker understanding, have already been brought together in marriage relationships by God. The only part missing is that the law and the community were not recognising and able to celebrate these relationships as such. Therefore, because God is already creating them, Quakers will recognise same-sex marriages.

DIFFERENT-SEX CIVIL PARTNERSHIP

Taking these two principles, of equality and givenness, how might other questions turn out? On the other side of the idea of givenness is the picture of a relationship, whether same-sex or opposite-sex, which is *not* a marriage given from God, but understood to be a human construction. Under British law at present, civil partnerships are only open to same-sex couples—because they were a marriage-like arrangement offered to the queer community as an attempt at a compromise, at a time when opposition to real same-sex marriage was much stronger—but a small number of people are campaigning for opposite-sex civil partnerships.⁵ This is not a campaign which has been widely taken up by Quakers—indeed, formal Quaker use of the civil partnership arrangement ceased as soon as same-sex couples could be married—but some of the individuals involved in the campaign are Quakers, and I argue that theologically, this is a coherent position to take based on the thinking which led British Quakers to endorse same-sex marriage.⁶

Opening civil partnerships to all couples would clearly carry through the principle of equality, since at present there is a legal structure to which some but not all have access. However, that principle alone could also lead to the conclusion that the civil partnership process should simply be ended. Same-sex and opposite-sex couples can now all get married—with a few exceptions involving people who are transitioning between genders or have a non-binary gender which

isn't recognised in law, just about everyone can get married equally, so why would civil partnership be needed at all? This is where I come to the second principle, and, as I said earlier, the implication that if some relationships are divinely formed as marriages, there might be others which are not. I do not think, by the way, that I am talking here about relationships which are abusive, or formed for financial or other practical reasons rather than in affection, or in any other way unloving. These things can occur in any relationship—people registering marriages typically try to screen at least some of them out, but will never get it right every time. Instead, the picture is of a loving, happy couple who simply do not feel that God has had any role in their relationship, or who reject the religious or patriarchal history of marriage. Civil partnership, if they have that option, allows them to register their relationship with the state and thereby gain the legal and financial advantages of formal recognition, without engaging with the bigger social and theological issues raised by marriage. As I say, this is not a position with which British Quakers have yet engaged extensively or formally, but if they did, I think their principles as currently held would lead them to support opening civil partnerships to all rather than ending the scheme entirely.

It is also worth saying that this does not seem to me to amount to a secularising trend within the Quaker community. If anything, the recognition of a need to recognise non-religious forms of relationship suggests the opposite—a desire to keep religious marriages special and different, and only to engage in them in cases where both partners feel that they are recognising the work of the divine. In other words, the principle of givenness is *more* respected if there is also a way for couples who value their relationship and want legal protection for it to register this without making concomitant theological claims.

GENDER

Another issue to which these principles may be relevant, and which has started to get some attention among the British Quaker community, is the question—or perhaps the network of interconnected questions—of gender, prompted by increased awareness of gender diversity, including transgender, non-binary, intersex, and genderqueer identities. Quakers in Britain were already aware of these issues in 2009 when they addressed the issue of marriage. The language of the formal documents follows legal texts in using the terms 'opposite-sex

marriage’ and ‘same-sex marriage’—although these words imply the existence of binary gender, they have the advantage over the terms ‘straight marriage’ and ‘gay marriage’ of including bisexual people. Since 2009, though, the awareness of non-binary identities in the community has increased and the annual report of statistics, known as the tabular statement, offered three gender options—male, female, and other—from 2016.⁷ The principle of equality is often used to support this: Wanstead Quakers, in their December 2016 statement on gender diversity, say, “We want it to be known that our Local Meeting is a place where all are welcomed and nurtured, including people who are transgender and non-binary.”⁸ This application of a long-standing existing principle arguably returns it to its roots in affirming the equality of men and women.

At first glance, the principle of givenness, which could be articulated as the idea that God puts together couples, does not apply directly to issues of complex gender. However, it would only be a small step to apply the same structure of argument, perhaps like this: God creates people and their genders, and the community can see among their number some people who do not fall into the socially created categories usually used for gender. Therefore, whether or not the law recognises more than two genders, the Quaker community will do so in order to remain true to what they witness as God’s actions.

Those who follow online discussions of feminism and gender issues may recognise that this is a theological entry into a highly disputed territory, namely the origin or nature of gender. Very simply, this wider debate is often framed as a disagreement between those who think that gender is entirely socially constructed and equality would be best served by minimising differences or even abolishing it, and those who think that gender is an innate felt sense and equality would be best served by valuing and diversifying it. I have left out of this analysis those who think that gender is, or should be, directly linked to some aspect of biology; those people definitely exist, in churches and on Twitter, but this isn’t a position which seems to be trying to take a place in British Quaker discussions of these issues. How, then, do the different understandings of gender just outlined play into the possible theological argument I am describing?

I think that both positions might be picking out something important about the picture of gender as God-given and socially sanctioned. In another area entirely, Rachel Muers has suggested that denial of untruths is a key Quaker move—very briefly, in discussions

of the existence of God, nontheist Quakers deny overconfident claims about what we can know about God, while Quakers who affirm a belief in God deny the claim, embedded in much of British society today, that there is nothing more than, and nothing more important than, the material.⁹ The two views of gender could be seen as making similar moves: one position denies the immutability of gender, while the other denies its disposability. A possible Quaker picture of gender could see it as both God-given and humanly shaped—and before I go into detail, I want to say again that I’m not sure that anyone is taking this position as such, only that they could do so while remaining theologically coherent and true to their existing principles.

Gender is then God-given in the sense that it is a core part of a person which is accompanied by experiences such as wishing to express oneself in certain ways and the presence or absence of gender dysphoria. (The latter point makes it clear that biology matters, but is not limiting; your body is relevant to, but does not define, your gender.) It is also humanly shaped in the sense that people and societies make decisions about how to respond to and express what is God-given. Whether a particular shape of clothing, hair style, or manner of speech is classed as ‘masculine’, ‘effeminate’, or so forth is a matter of convention within a culture, as is the question of whether things associated with one gender are valued as more important than those associated with another. The part which is God-given is precious, even sacred, and not disposable. Like the same-sex marriages which were found to be already within the community while lacking formal recognition, it should be acknowledged and supported. The part which is humanly shaped is mutable, and—especially as it often creates inequalities—Quakers should want to change it.

CONCLUSION

In August this year, Britain Yearly Meeting agreed to the following as part of a much longer minute on what God is calling the community to do at this time.

We have heard the call to examine our own diversity, particularly in our committee and organisational structure, locally and nationally. Diversity has several key dimensions and more may emerge in the future. We ask Meeting for Sufferings [a nationally representative decision-making body] to look at how we can remove barriers and actively seek wider participation in the full

life of our meetings, paying particular attention to race and age diversity and to keep Yearly Meeting informed in their annual report.

Although gender did not get mentioned specifically here, it was clearly around as a topic at the meeting—some influential workshops led to visible responses, such as attendees adding their preferred pronouns to their name badges—and it seems likely that it will either return in the future, or simply be accepted as a natural outcome of the principles of equality and givenness I have described.

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ENDNOTES

1 Minute 23 of Britain Yearly Meeting 2009, meeting in York.

2 The Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013 can be found at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/30/contents/enacted>

- 3 A fuller description of the reasoning behind the decision, aimed at members of other churches, can be found in Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), “We are but witnesses: Marriage equality and the decision of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends to recognise same sex marriages” <https://quaker-prod.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/store/e11e2bbf3c69c9d149d6b615cfd548b28cd-79c05445641036fca2eb223e4>.
- 4 George Fox, 1698, A collection of select and Christian epistles, London: printed and sold by T. Sowle, p. 281. Quoted in Quaker faith & practice, 16.01.
- 5 For a clear description of the differences between marriage and civil partnership in British law, see “Living together, marriage and civil partnership,” Citizens Advice, <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/living-together-marriage-and-civil-partnership/>. For more about the campaign, see “Equal Civil Partnerships,” <http://equalcivil-partnerships.org.uk/>.
- 6 For example, on the list of supporters given by the Equal Civil Partnership campaign website, at least one of the Members of Parliament and two of the Members of the European Parliament are also Quakers.
- 7 See, for example, “Tabular statement,” Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, <https://quaker-prod.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/store/84ec2f457787743ac763c030b6c4ac679b7886ce2506bf696a6f4d713be>.
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- 9 Helen Rowlands, ed. *God, words and us: Quakers in conversation about religious difference* (London: Quaker Books, 2017).