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ROBERT BARCLAY'S CHRISTOLOGY

MADELEINE WARD

Robert Barclay (1648-1690) was arguably the most influential Quaker theologian of the seventeenth century, but his legacy has been controversial. This article will assess this legacy through an examination of his changing Christology over time. This focus on Christology is justified because underlying the earliest Quakers' belief that Christ was 'come to teach his people himself' was the notion that the Light within *was* Christ—and Barclay has been accused of striking this concern at its heart.

Some, most notably D. Elton Trueblood, have argued that Barclay saved the early Quaker project with a theological acumen that evaded the more spiritually charismatic George Fox. However, others have been less positive. In particular, Rufus Jones viewed Barclay as retreating into a more pessimistic, Calvinist view of human nature than the mystical optimism of the first Friends; Maurice Creasey criticised a 'quasi-philosophical' Cartesian dualism in Barclay's writing, noting especially his distinction between natural and supernatural senses; and more recently, Richard Bailey has suggested that Barclay transformed what 'began as a radically christopresent theology' into a 'Spirit theology' as the original vision of Fox was scaled back to 'no more than an impersonal, mediating *Vehiculum Dei* which helped direct fallen man back to God.'¹ Barclay is seen as more cerebral, more pessimistic, more worldly than his predecessors—his most contentious contributions being his particular conception of the Light within, and his distinction between different categories of senses which, it is argued, relied heavily on Cartesian dualism. In this article I will consider Barclay's writings, to challenge such characterisations of his theological contribution. In doing so, I will illustrate how his work was motivated by Christological concerns which were largely in continuation with the rest of the early Quaker movement.

First, then, what do we know of Barclay's earliest Christological understanding? Barclay became a Quaker around 1666-7, and wrote his first published work in 1670, aged just twenty-two. By this time, the movement—about the same age as Barclay himself—had been maturing for around two decades. Crucially, it had already been met with considerable theological opposition, and its Christology had

undergone a certain degree of preliminary refinement. This process of theological change is documented most extensively in my doctoral thesis, but it is worth recalling some of the main developments here to contextualise Barclay's understanding.² Most of the earliest Quakers conceived of the immanent Christ within in purely spiritual terms. However, opponents argued that this view must exclude Christ's humanity from his identity—and if Christ's humanity was not integral, his human crucifixion could not atone for human sin. So, for example, the Baptist Matthew Caffyn accused James Parnell of professing 'a spirit within him [Parnell], to be the only Christ,' which same 'Christ' was previously indwelling in the body of Jesus.³ Similarly, Thomas Drayton confronted Parnell over whether he would 'deny, that Christ according to the flesh, was at [Jerusalem].'⁴ These detractors were essentially questioning whether Parnell included the body of Jesus in the supposedly fully human 'Christ.' If Christ was pure spirit, he could not be the man Jesus of Nazareth—and this implication was seemingly made explicit in sentiments such as Fox's in 1659 that 'if there be any other Christ but he that was crucified within, he is the false Christ.'⁵ This view did continue into the Second Period: even as late as 1674, George Whitehead denied that 'Jesus Christ consisteth of human Flesh and Bone' and denied the 'hypostatic union'—that is, the union of full humanity and divinity in the single person of Christ.⁶ However, distinctions between Christ in Himself and the Light within became more emphatic. Later Quakers increasingly stressed the importance of the Incarnate Christ and the cross, and denied the radicalism of the earliest Friends: in Penn's words, 'We do not say that the Light in every Man is Christ, but of Christ.... Such an Absurdity never fell from us, nor our Doctrine.'⁷

This was the theological climate in which Robert Barclay published his first work, *Truth cleared of calumnies*, in 1670. Unsurprisingly for its time, his account was sensitive to a distinction between Christ and the Light, but it did not explain exactly how this distinction might be conceived. At some level, he clearly understood 'Christ' to refer to a historical figure; for example, he invoked 'Christ' who 'commanded his disciples' in specific gospel stories.⁸ Yet he also argued forcefully for the presence of Christ within all individuals, particularly as the agent of conversion. Furthermore, he clarified that this was not intended as a metaphorical description of Christ's works in the soul, but as 'Christ himself, the worker, revealed in us, indwelling in us.'⁹ Indeed, 'Christ is not separated from that light and seed, which is of him, that is in every man', and whilst Quakers 'do not confound them... we

must not divide, or separate them... for where the light... is, there is Christ himself.¹⁰

What was inward was inescapably primary for the young Barclay: he argued that an understanding of the inward crucifixion of Christ by our sin was 'necessary', whilst knowledge of Christ's outward and historic crucifixion was merely 'good.'¹¹ Furthermore, when describing the true communion, like all Quakers, he rejected the outward ritual Eucharist and instead emphasised the 'heavenly bread and refreshment, which Christ himselfe giveth... which bread is indeed his body,' so that Christ 'did come according to his promise in a Spirituall and inward way... in [the first Christians'] hearts, feeding them, with the heavenly food, and refreshment of his own life and, Spirit which is the substance.'¹²

Barclay's earliest view was therefore permeated by a distinction between inward and outward, and the priority of the spiritual over the physical. In this respect, at this point at least it is unfair to view him as perverting or twisting the Quaker views he first received. Simply, his Quakerism was of its time. Incidentally, this position also held important implications for his Trinitarian theology, as he seems to have spoken interchangeably of the Spirit, Spirit of God, Christ, the Light of Christ, and the Word. And of greater relevance to the present discussion, he did not articulate how the exact relationship between the historic and spiritual Christ operated beyond a theoretical distinction between the two.

We do also find his earliest mention of spiritual senses in this publication, as he stated that since 'The Word of God' was 'spirituall, yea Spirit and life', it could not be 'heard, or read, with the natural externall senses.'¹³ As noted above, Barclay's distinction between inward and outward senses formed a central pillar of Creasey's accusation that he was a Cartesian. However, I do not think that the implications of his understanding in 1670 were any greater than many other Quakers' common reiterations that the Light within was not a natural Light, or their distinctions between the Seed and the human conscience, or their priority of spirit over flesh, or their exhortations to the Light over Scripture alone. Thus, *Truth cleared of calumnies* represented a young man setting out his first attempt to defend Quaker theology. He certainly showed promise, but his truly innovative work was yet to come.

This innovation was tied to a metaphysical shift affecting his thought in the mid-1670s, just as he wrote his *Apology*. And crucially,

this shift led him to become less dualist than his forebears—not more. It is reflected in the *Apology*'s description of the Light within as

a Spiritual, heavenly and invisible Principle, in which God, as Father, Son, and Spirit, dwells... which, of its own natur, draws, invites, and inclines to God, and this we call *Vehiculum Dei*, or the Spiritual body of Christ, the flesh and blood of Christ which came down from heaven, of which all the Saints do feed, and are thereby nourished unto eternal Life.¹⁴

We might note the echo of his earlier descriptions of spiritual nourishment here. Yet now, Barclay collapsed the traditional distinctions between flesh and spirit, human and divine, altogether. The *Vehiculum Dei* was 'Spiritual' but also 'Flesh and bone.' It was the 'flesh and blood' body of Christ, and yet the 'Divine... Life,' in which God (as Father, Son and Spirit) dwelt. It was neither 'man's nature,' nor 'the proper essence and natur [sic] of God, precisely taken, which is not devisible into parts and measurs [sic],' nor even an 'accident' of God (according to the Aristotelian categories), but a 'real Spiritual Substance'.¹⁵ This was a body experienced in a locality; it was a measure of Christ's essence but not the fullness of Christ himself; it was neither spirit nor body in isolation; and it was, strictly speaking, neither simply God nor simply human. This was far more esoteric than Paul's classic account of the spiritual resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15. Despite his high regard for the spirit, Barclay now placed the category of Christ's 'body' at the very heart of his religious exploration, and in doing so, conceived of 'spirit' interacting with and encompassing human, divine, spiritual and physical properties.

This was an attempt to relate the Light within to the Incarnation more definitively, and it was enabled directly by his engagement with the intellectual constellation comprising the Quaker sympathiser (and later convert) Lady Anne Conway, the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, and the continental alchemist Francis Mercury van Helmont. All rejected some element of standard Cartesian metaphysics. More challenged Descartes' definition of material essence in terms of extension, arguing that spirit was extended too. Van Helmont introduced the circle to a bastardised version of a Kabbalistic notion of a Primordial Man, as a middle substance between the ineffable Godhead and the created world. And Conway took elements of both, to argue that reality was divided essentially into three categories: the immutable God, mutable creatures, and Christ as mediator between the two.¹⁶ For Conway,

then, the fundamental nature of Christ was actually ontologically different from creation, but the created essence itself was undivided: spirit and body were not actually contrasting essences, and 'every Body may be turned into a Spirit'.¹⁷

The correlations between Barclay's collapsed dualism, the middle substance of the Kabbalah, and this tripartite metaphysical understanding are not incidental. For in fact, Barclay's contact with the group increased dramatically just as he was writing the *Apology*. Barclay first visited More in 1674, and was encouraged by George Keith to visit Conway 'again' in November 1676.¹⁸ These tantalising references are elusive nods to blossoming friendships: in his correspondence of the mid-1670s, Barclay frequently mentioned Conway (referring to her as 'that truly noble & virtuous Lady'), and he even wrote to van Helmont in November 1677 as a 'close friend'.¹⁹

It is worth stressing that this notion of middle substance was not intended to undermine the genuine and full humanity of the Incarnate Christ Jesus. In his 1676 catechism, Barclay remained clear that Jesus 'took not on him the Nature of Angels, but... the Seed of Abraham,' and he emphasised the justification of sin wrought by Christ's human death on the cross.²⁰ This was an affirmation of the Man Christ's fully humane and creaturely nature, and distinguished Quakerism from the celestial flesh theologies of the radical Reformation. Rather, the *Vehiculum Dei* was an innovative attempt by a more theologically mature Barclay to pinpoint the exact nature of the derivation of the Light from Christ. However, Barclay was still unmistakably an early Quaker: he was also keen to stress that '[though] we have known Christ after the Flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more.' For true Christians, Christ's ultimate nature was still spiritual.²¹

In addition to—and apart from—this work on the *Vehiculum Dei*, Barclay also expanded on his distinction between the different senses around this time, in a letter written to the Dutch Ambassador Adrian Paets in 1676. The letter was published a decade later as *The possibility and necessity of inward immediate revelation*. Here, Barclay distinguished extensively between inward and outward senses—and within that, between inward natural and inward supernatural senses. Thus, he described how we have 'Supernatural Ideas of Supernatural Beings; which Ideas are nevertheless not perceived by us unless they be stirred up by some Supernatural Operation of GOD, which raiseth up in us Supernatural and Spiritual Senses.'

Three points of observation are worth making on Barclay's description of the senses. First, and most importantly, the inward supernatural senses were not Barclay's sanitised version of the Light within: they were that part of the human individual that was able to receive the stirrings of the *Vehiculum Dei*. Second, against Creasey, neither did this distinction amount to a Cartesian dualism of body and mind. Rather, it was a consolidation of a distinction between spiritual and carnal that had already been prevalent amongst early Quakers. Indeed, his letter explained explicitly that this account 'differeth much from that Natural Idea of God, which Cartesius and his followers so much talk of.'²² And third, in contrast to the earliest Quakers' vision of completely fallen humanity saved by the indwelling presence of Christ alone, Barclay was actually investing humanity with its own spiritual resources here—a whole faculty that could receive grace—and in this sense at least, he was more positive about human nature than his predecessors.

Barclay died young, at the age of forty-one in 1690, and spent much of the 1680s involved in the governance of the Quaker colonies. Therefore, his major writings were all written by the close of the 1670s. But how does this brief consideration of Christological themes reflect on the scholarly assessment that he somehow polluted nascent Quakerism? Such readings imply that Barclay misunderstood the nature of the movement he was defending. That he got it wrong, missed the point. However, Barclay's contribution was wildly popular amongst Quakers in his own time: in 1692, the Oxford divine John Norris spoke of "the general Exultation and Triumph" among Quakers when Barclay's works were published in folio, and the Quaker Richard Vickris later wrote to Norris that the middle substance was "the Quakers principle."²³ Similarly, George Fox explicitly endorsed the publication of Barclay's books, in a letter he wrote to him in 1675.²⁴ It is unlikely that this would have been their response if they did not see something of value in his work. What was it then, that they saw?

I would posit that, far from perverting early Quakerism, Barclay picked up where the wider movement left off. As he matured intellectually, his fundamental intention was to find a clear path through the thorny issue of how Quakers might affirm both the historic Christ and a genuine presence of Christ within them. In doing so, he arrived at a subtler metaphysical framework than straightforward Cartesianism. Moreover, whilst his understanding of

inward, supernatural senses was an important element of his theology, it was ultimately groundwork, not the main event. The main event was the function of Christ's body at the heart of the *Vehiculum Dei*, and the esoteric notion of the middle substance which reflected his keen desire to engage constructively with those outside the movement. Barclay did not abandon claims of the immanent Christ in the individual, then, but aimed to preserve their tenability, and it is on this note that I wish to end. Even as late as 1690—the year of his death—he enthusiastically affirmed his belief in the manifestation of Christ within. For him, this manifestation remained ‘the Riches of the Glory of the Mystery, which, God would make known among (or rather IN) the Gentiles: Christ within, the Hope of Glory.’²⁵ Hardly, then, the ‘impersonal, mediating’ principle of a mere ‘Spirit theology.’

ENDNOTES

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2. Madeleine Ward, ‘The Intellectual Context for the Development of Quakerism, 1647-1700’, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2017.
3. Matthew Caffyn, *The deceived, and deceiving Quakers discovered*, C206 (London: Smith, 1656), 36.
4. Thomas Drayton, *An answer according to truth*, D2147 (London: s.n., 1655), 21.
5. George Fox, *The great mystery*, F1832 (London: Simmons, 1659), 206.
6. George Whitehead, in William Penn and George Whitehead. *The Christian-Quaker*; P1266 (London: Sowle, 1674), pt 2, 96, 141.
7. Penn, in Penn and Whitehead, *The Christian Quaker*; pt 1, 91.
8. Robert Barclay, *Truth cleared of calumnies*, B738 (Aberdeen: s.n., 1670), 10.
9. *Ibid.*, 14-15, 34.
10. *Ibid.*, 15, 20.
11. *Ibid.*, 18-20.
12. *Ibid.*, 55.
13. *Ibid.*, 26.
14. Robert Barclay, *An apology for true Christian divinity*, B270 (Aberdeen: s.n., 1678), 94.
15. *Ibid.*, 95-8
16. Jasper Reid, *The Metaphysics of Henry More* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 12, 46-70, 147-57, 185-212; Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614-1698)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 153-307; Anne Conway, *Principles*, C5989 (London: s.n., 1692), 10-12, 35-36, 53-56.

17. Conway, *The principles*, 81-2.
18. Norman Penney (ed.). *Extracts from State Papers relating to Friends 1654-1672* (London: Headley, 1913), 323.
19. Robert Barclay to Francis Mercury van Helmont, 'Reliquiae Barclaianae: Correspondence of Colonel David Barclay and Robert Barclay of Urie', 17 November 1677, Friends House Library, 10, 28. Similar developments are found in George Keith's theology at the same time. Keith also engaged with Ragley Hall and is likely to have influenced Barclay directly, though probably not to the extent that he later claimed. Again, the historical evidence for all these connections are explored in greater detail in Ward, 'The Intellectual Context', 175-83.
20. Barclay, *A catechism and confession of faith*, B727 (London: s.n., 1676), 19-22.
21. *Ibid.*, 26.
22. Robert Barclay, *The possibility & necessity of the inward immediate revelation*, B732 (s.l.: s.n., 1686), 13-15.
23. John Norris, *Two treatises concerning the divine light*, N1276 (London: Manship, 1692), pt 2, 1.
24. Fox to Barclay, 'Reliquiae Barclaianae', 16 December 1675, Friends House Library, vii.
25. Robert Barclay, *A catechism and confession of faith*, B729 (London: Sowle, 1690), 132.