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CHRISTIAN AND UNIVERSALIST?: CHARTING LIBERAL QUAKER THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS THROUGH THE SWARTHMORE LECTURES

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I elucidate two main strands of thought in the Swarthmore Lectures concerning the relationship between Liberal Quakerism, Christianity, and Universalism. Within these two poles are nuanced differences, however, with relation to where Liberal Quakerism falls along a spectrum between explicitly Christian and Universalist.

I argue that the earliest lecturers were explicitly Christian, and only recognized the Christian heritage of Quakerism. These lecturers viewed Liberal Quakerism as having an uncomplicated relationship to its heritage. By the midpoint of the Twentieth century, however, Universalist ideas began to emerge. These ideas were not rejecting Christianity, however. Instead, they argued that while Quakerism has a Christian heritage, Universalist themes also have deep roots within the tradition and might be a more appropriate basis for a modern Liberal Quakerism. Universalist is understood in this sense to mean, as Quaker Universalist Ralph Hetherington explained, a ‘doctrine of universal salvation or redemption’.¹ Hetherington argues that in the context of Liberal Quakerism, Universalism stems initially from William Penn’s claim that belief that the ‘Light of Christ’ is present in all people everywhere leads to enlightenment and salvation. This could then extend to all belief systems, where the Christian vision of God is not the only ‘true’ understanding of the nature, and framework, of God.

Recent lecturers, however, have moved more towards what could be termed a ‘Christian Universalism’ which acknowledges Universalist themes in Liberal Quakerism while arguing that Christianity is the

most appropriate theological basis and heritage for Liberal Quakerism based on Quaker history, theology, and practice. The variety of approaches to this question within the lectures is important, because it allows the Swarthmore Lectures to serve as a resource upon which to build theological bridges between Christianity and Universalism in Quaker theology.

CHRISTIAN

The lecturers in the first half of the Twentieth Century who claim that Liberal Quakerism is synonymous with Christianity state so unequivocally.² They envisioned Liberal Quakerism as a continuation of the Christianity of the early Friends, and as one branch of a worldwide Christianity. They often assumed that the distinctives of Liberal Quaker theology and practice held the same place of importance for early Friends, citing evidence of the existence of such distinctives amongst early Friends and extrapolating value from such existence. This included a tendency to assume a direct correlation between Christian Liberal Quaker theological beliefs and the rest of Christianity.³ These lecturers also assumed that these were universally-held beliefs amongst Liberal Quakers, and that the audience for the lecture was not likely to include those who disagreed with ‘the proper form of Quaker life’, nor those who didn’t believe in God.⁴ T.R. Glover was an early proponent of this view, stating in 1912 that the ‘living Christ’, the expression of Jesus resident within the world and each individual believer, has always been acknowledged by the entirety of the Christian church as a proper theological construct in which to comprehend the work and person of Jesus.⁵ Glover argued that the Christian church, both broadly defined and understood, has always been constituted by people who felt drawn to Jesus, and sought to gain a ‘new life’ through aligning their lives and souls with Jesus and gaining union with others through Christ.⁶

This assumption of overlapping synchronicity between Liberal Quakerism and Christianity was critiqued in such a way that the primary value of Liberal Quaker interpretation of Christianity was still paramount. These lecturers argued that as Liberal Quakers presented multiple visions of what it means to ‘be Christian’, not only was Liberal Quaker belief making Christianity a more diverse tradition, but also the existence of the entire spectrum of Christian belief within Liberal Quakerism therefore made it the most complete expression

of Christianity. Typical of this view, Howard Collier claimed in 1936 that while Quakers could not abandon the term ‘Christian’, they must acknowledge that Quaker perspectives on essential Christian doctrines and beliefs, since the time of the early Friends, might not be shared by other Christians.⁷ Far from abandoning the term, however, Collier argued that Liberal Quakers have the responsibility of reclaiming Christianity as a term encompassing a whole life ethic rooted in Jesus’s life.⁸

In response to this perspective, and to an apparent rise of Universalist thought in Liberal Quakerism in the second half of the Twentieth Century, some lecturers sought to defend the central role of Christianity within Liberal Quakerism, while others opened space for a potential redefinition of both the meaning of Christianity within Liberal Quakerism, and of Liberal Quakerism itself. Representing the tension, Duncan Fairn stated in 1951 that while Quakerism ‘is Christian, or it is nothing’,⁹ he did acknowledge that there are those who feel excluded by his statement within Quakerism.

Hugh Doncaster developed this approach further in 1963, when he argued that the Universalist position within Liberal Quakerism represented a challenging lack of theological specificity. He claimed that Liberal Quakerism had moved so far from any requirement of Christian belief that membership did not entail any theological commitment other than a ‘vague, woolly liberalism’ manifested in the concept of ‘seeking’.¹⁰ While Doncaster acknowledged that openness to, and tolerance of, differences in belief was a necessary corrective to the enforced theological mono-culture of previous iterations of Quakerism, he argued that such openness as represented by the acceptance of Universalist positions threatened to dissipate anything vital about Liberal Quakerism into a constant state of syncretism in an effort to gain theological unity.¹¹ Doncaster’s argument extended that critique further (reflecting the concerns of earlier lecturers) by making the claim that Quakerism was inherently Christian.¹² Doncaster assured that his claim, contra Fairn, was not that Quakerism was the ‘only’ true form of Christianity, but that it was the ‘most true’. The implications of this statement for Liberal Quakers who are not Christian are clear: according to Doncaster, the Light can only ever mean the Light of Christ, the ground of all Quaker experience of God is the experience of Christ, and that union with non-Christians, including Liberal Quakers, is not possible if such union is achieved at the expense of proclaiming the truths of Christianity.¹³

Maurice Creasey represented the second strand of this argument, potentially reflecting the Universalist theological development in Liberal Quakerism by the time he delivered his lecture in 1969. He began by claiming that that early Quakers rooted their faith in Jesus Christ as the concrete and personal revelation of God.¹⁴ He then argued that Liberal Quakerism is essentially Christ-centred, with the term ‘Christ-centred’ meaning that Quakers are rooted in the ‘main orthodox Christian tradition’, including giving priority to issues of conversion, evangelisation, and holiness.¹⁵ While Creasey defined those terms based on the unique perspective that the Quaker tradition gives to them, he did not assume that denominational distinctives disqualify other Christians from claiming the name. Creasey also acknowledged that the term ‘Christian’ had been misused by both the wider Christian church and by Quakers in order to separate and denigrate those who might not ascribe to the entirety of the orthodox Christian tradition, including Quakers.¹⁶ Creasey argued that the essential role that Christ, and thus the Christian identity, plays in Quaker life requires Liberal Quakers to attempt to rehabilitate the word, however.¹⁷

UNIVERSALIST

Despite the dismissals of the explicitly Christian lecturers, Liberal Quakerism has a tradition of respecting Universalism as both a constitutive aspect of Liberal Quakerism and as a necessary critique to the Christian heritage of Quakerism.¹⁸ For some, the existence of an alternative theological perspective to Christianity is helpful, providing Christianity with a useful dialogue partner. Two lecturers typify this trend: Henry Cadbury and Janet Scott.

While not rejecting the vital importance of Christ for Liberal Quakers, Henry Cadbury recognised back in 1957 that the critiques of Christianity offered by Universalists and others have significant weight, and led some Liberal Quakers to consider the viability of using the term ‘Christian’ to encapsulate a religious expression which, Cadbury claimed, was often more open to diverse perspectives than others who claim the title ‘Christian’.¹⁹ This was framed, however, in a vigorous defence of that relationship. Cadbury argued that the heritage of Liberal Quakerism was unequivocally Christian due to the overtly Christian environment of seventeenth-century England and the Christian upbringing of every early Quaker.²⁰ Cadbury strongly asserted that Christianity was not conditional for Liberal Friends.

Instead, Cadbury insisted that Liberal Friends cannot reject that heritage as it was rooted deep within the Liberal Quaker ethos.²¹

Yet, Cadbury acknowledged the potential for a ‘non-Christian’ Quakerism within a strand of thought which argued that ‘Christianity’ was a contested term for both Quakers and other Christians. The result of this, Cadbury argued, might be that some reject the right of others to claim the title, including Quakers.²² Cadbury chose to develop this further, wondering whether Quakerism and Christianity are actually synonymous. He argued that should Quakers place Quaker distinctives in one circle, and Christianity as Quakers understand it in another circle, the circles might not automatically align.²³ Cadbury suggested that Quakerism, as it had developed into a practice and an inclusive life ethic, might actually be a more inclusive circle than Christianity, if Christianity is understood to include some of the more restrictive Christian expressions.²⁴ Thus despite his own claim about this theological impossibility, Cadbury acknowledged the pragmatic possibility that one might consider oneself a Liberal Quaker, and not actually a Christian as well.

No other lecturer took up this line of thinking in a rigorous fashion until Janet Scott’s 1980 lecture.²⁵ This lecture represents the most consistent expression of the Universalist perspective in the entire sweep of the lectures, and the one which most completely addresses the critiques offered by Doncaster and others. Scott acknowledges the debate between Universalist and Christian visions of the Inner Light: that the Light is within all people irrespective of any relationship that they might have with Jesus, and that the Inner Light is synonymous with the Light of Christ, respectively.²⁶ She dismisses this debate on both Christian and Universalist terms, stating that the construct of the Light does not adequately explain the relationship between word and Jesus. Scott also claims that explaining the relationship of God to humans in explicitly Christian terms is dismissive of other religious traditions.²⁷

Scott argues that Liberal Quakers have historically framed the debate between Christianity and Universalism as the question, ‘Is Quakerism Christian?’ She cites Rachel King in arguing that, first, the argument that the early Friends linked the Light explicitly with Christ is incomplete, as it does not take into account the Universalism present within Fox’s vision of the Light.²⁸ Fox was therefore using inherited Christian terminology of incarnation and salvation unnecessarily, for the construct of a universal Light unifying all of humanity does not

take the Christian revelation, and its insistence on the specificity of Christ, into account. Scott argues that early Friends were Christian by default; as they were born into a world undergirded by Christian assumptions, the early Friends had little choice but to express their teachings using the language of Christianity.²⁹

Scott claims that the debate within Liberal Quakerism between Christianity and Universalism incorrectly places the focus on the alignment of Quakerism with Christian belief and doctrine. Instead, she suggests that Liberal Quakerism should focus on developing a form of life which reflects the existence of God within each person, and the necessity to abandon ourselves to God.³⁰ This would entail a shift in the Quaker hermeneutic from viewing Quaker distinctives through Christianity to viewing Christian theology through the lens of Quaker experience.³¹ Scott insists that this does not stem from an effort to denigrate any truth resident within Christianity. Instead, Scott continues, this reflects the need to respect ‘all human experiences of truth’, without adhering to any one truth-claim out of a sense of obedience to dominant structures of belief.³² In this perspective, beliefs about Jesus held by individual Quakers, such as the incarnation, matter little to the corporate experience of Liberal Quakers.³³ Instead, Scott insists, a recognition of the universal presence of God, even within criminals and ‘the lost’ forces humans to acknowledge that God upsets all concepts of human order, and that God calls humanity to release any claims to certainty inherent in theological doctrines and instead live a risky life entirely dependent on the movement of the Light.³⁴ Christian doctrine, Scott asserts, is just another of a long line of certainties that separate Quakers from the freedom that the Light calls humans to live.³⁵

POST-1980 TRENDS

The majority of recent lecturers, post-1980, view Quakerism as inherently Christian, yet define Christianity in Universalist terms and avoid making the kind of claims of Quaker uniqueness that Cadbury engaged in.³⁶ These lecturers acknowledge the existence of Universalism within Liberal Quakerism, and choose to engage with that tension by imagining a uniquely Liberal Quaker Christian Universalism. This is not to claim that these lectures fail to place Quakerism squarely within the Christian tradition, broadly defined. These lectures acknowledge both the reality and benefits of pluralism in Quakerism yet express

extreme caution towards the corrosive effects that excessive pluralism has had on Quaker distinctives. Christine Trevett is representative of this stream, particularly with her insistence in 1997 that Quakerism does make certain truth claims and is resident within a certain faith heritage.³⁷

Trevett recounts her surprise at the claims of other Quakers that the 'life' of Quakerism was paramount, superseding any actual belief structure inherent to Quakerism, and demanding an 'unfettered tolerance' of various spiritual paths within Quakerism.³⁸ Through a long list of other religious traditions that she has encountered within the faith practice of Liberal Quakers, Trevett notes to what extent these other traditions fail to meet the 'previous convictions' of Quakers, and thus place those people outside of the admittedly flexible bounds of Liberal Quakerism.³⁹ These traditions include practices that are actually contrary to the 'life' of Quakerism, such as the offering of 'corn to the Goddess' in a ritual in the meeting house, which Trevett notes violates Quaker beliefs about externals, priesthood, liturgy, and the absolute dependence on God over and above any human ritual expression.⁴⁰ She then questions whether this openness to ritual would extend to liturgy in other Christian traditions.

Trevett argues that no matter whether she might respect and gain wisdom from any number of other religious traditions, some extant within what she terms the pluralistic bounds of modern Liberal Quakerism, she is not actually a member of any of those other traditions, and Quakerism is not synonymous with them either.⁴¹ This caution towards the benefits of pluralism and tolerance is echoed by Christine Davis, who argues that the current 'spirit of openness' in Liberal Quakerism is actually harming the ability of Quakers to find any sense of unity within the tradition anymore, and may actually be contributing to the destruction of Liberal Quakerism.⁴² While Davis acknowledges that her question might sound alarmist, she also expresses concerns that pluralism is contributing to an increased secularism in Liberal Quakerism, which will eventually undermine any religious aspect in Quaker belief and practice.⁴³

Peter Eccles offers a possible way forward. He first acknowledges the challenges that many Liberal Quakers have with using the words 'God' and 'Christ'. However, he also emphasises that, save removing every mention of either word in Liberal Quaker texts, these words are part of the Quaker heritage and must be dealt with in some form.⁴⁴ He argues that this challenge can only be resolved through the process

of discernment, where Friends seek to determine how to order the ‘whole of life’ according to the desires that God, or the ‘Spirit of Christ’, has for humanity.⁴⁵ Eccles argues that by acknowledging the Christian heritage of Liberal Quakerism for the sole purpose of determining what form of life God desires, Liberal Quakers can honour their heritage without clinging to it.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the Swarthmore Lecturers have generally acknowledged Christianity as a central aspect of Liberal Quakerism, while also demonstrating a strong Universalist strand. Liberal Quakers have demonstrated willingness to reconsider traditional Christian theological categories, and to either re-interpret them or cease using them if they are found to be inadequate for explaining the corporate theological experience of Quakers. In post-1980 lectures, this has developed into a form of Christian Universalism, albeit a form that is both very open to the value of non-Christian religious teachings and which prefers to avoid making determinative theological statements.

ENDNOTES

1. Ralph Hetherington, ‘A Theology of Quaker Universalism’, *Quaker Universalist Fellowship*, 5 (1985), 15.
2. R. Duncan Fairn, *Quakerism: A Faith For Ordinary Men* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1951), 20.
3. Duncan Fairn argued that Quakerism rooted itself in what he understood to be the core beliefs of Christianity, which excluded some beliefs that others might consider essential, such as the substitutionary atonement. Fairn explained this disconnect by claiming that such beliefs were simply not consistent with Christian belief. R. Duncan Fairn, *Quakerism: A Faith For Ordinary Men* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1951), 21.
4. William E. Wilson, *Our Response to God* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1935), 74.
5. T.R. Glover, *The Nature and Purpose of a Christian Society* (London: Headley Brothers Publishers Ltd., 1912), 43.
6. T.R. Glover, *The Nature and Purpose of a Christian Society* (London: Headley Brothers Publishers Ltd., 1912), 43.
7. Howard E. Collier, *Towards a New Manner of Living* (London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1936), 53.
8. *Ibid.*, 54.
9. Fairn, *Quakerism*, 20.

10. Hugh Doncaster, *God in Every Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1963), 25.
11. *Ibid.*, 55.
12. *Ibid.*, 59.
13. *Ibid.*, 55.
14. Maurice A. Creasey, *Bearing, or Friends and the New Reformation* (London: Friends Home Service, 1969), 64.
15. *Ibid.*, 72.
16. *Ibid.*, 67.
17. *Ibid.*, 67.
18. The Quaker Universalist Group was founded in the United Kingdom in 1979, publishing the first edition of its journal, *The Universalist*, in that same year. The year is notable, as Janet Scott delivered her Swarthmore Lecture arguing for a greater recognition of Universalism in Liberal Quakerism in 1980. The existence of a particular group dedicated to Quaker Universalism, as well as an active journal, speaks to the existence of an active community of Universalists within British Liberal Quakerism at least by 1979, if not earlier.
19. Henry J. Cadbury, *Quakerism and Early Christianity* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1957), 27.
20. *Ibid.*, 6.
21. *Ibid.*, 27.
22. *Ibid.*, 27.
23. *Ibid.*, 28.
24. *Ibid.*, 29.
25. Carole Dale Spencer notes the importance of Scott's Swarthmore Lecture on the continued development of a more praxalogical interpretation of Liberal Quakerism, which had begun early in the Twentieth Century. While previous iterations of this interpretation claimed that the praxis of Quakerism still rested within a Christian construct, Spencer notes that by 1980 Scott did not insist on Christianity as the primary consideration for being a Liberal Quaker. Carole Dale Spencer, 'Quakers in Theological Context', in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, eds. Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 153.
26. Janet Scott, *What Canst Thou Say? Towards a Quaker Theology* (London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1980), 8.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 9.
30. *Ibid.*, 70.
31. *Ibid.*, 69.
32. *Ibid.*, 27.
33. *Ibid.*, 67.
34. *Ibid.*, 70.
35. *Ibid.*, 70.

36. One example of this phenomenon is Alex Wildwood's 1999 lecture, *A Faith to Call Our Own: Quaker Tradition in the Light of Contemporary Movements of the Spirit* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1999).
37. Christine Trevett, *Previous Convictions and End-of-the-Millennium Quakerism* (London: Quaker Books, 1997), 45.
38. Ibid., 86.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid, 91.
42. Christine A. M. Davis, *Minding the Future* (London: Quaker Books, 2008), 56.
43. Ibid.
44. Peter J. Eccles, *The Presence in the Midst: Reflections on Discernment* (London: Quaker Books, 2009), 7.
45. Ibid, 8.