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Jay Miller

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BEN PINK DANDELION, DOUGLAS
GWYN, TIMOTHY PEAT. *HEAVEN ON
EARTH: QUAKERS AND THE SECOND
COMING*. TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY
EDITION. PHILADELPHIA: PLAIN
PRESS, 2018.

JAY MILLER

The provocative arguments in this unique book about the centrality of the second coming to Quakerism are challenging to summarize but easy to recommend: this is a work that many Friends could benefit from reading. That it has not been widely read is, I suspect, one of the reasons for its reprinting, two decades after its initial publication. While the insights offered by Ben Pink Dandelion, Douglas Gwyn, and Timothy Peat in *Heaven on Earth* have appeared elsewhere in separate and better known studies by the same authors, here they come together with a particular force and urgency. The book itself arose out of a 1997 course at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre taught by these three men, and reading it one can feel a desire to connect and a willingness to take risks often more characteristic of the classroom or seminar than the scholarly text. *Heaven on Earth* is learned, but it is also deeply personal—as Dandelion writes in the introduction, “the apocalyptic resonances of early Quaker witness continue to disturb and inspire us” (3).

I will discuss the personal aspects of *Heaven on Earth* towards the end of this review, but first I will attempt an overview of its contents, which are broadly theological but also at various points biblical, historical, and sociological. In Part I, Peat, a biblical scholar, lays the foundation for the book’s apocalyptic interpretation of Quakerism by giving a reading of the apostle Paul’s writings that emphasizes direct guidance from God by way of encounter with the risen Christ, i.e. the second coming. In Part II Gwyn discusses early Quakerism in terms of Peat’s Pauline lens and the second coming more generally, before explaining the process by which Friends lost this apocalyptic spirit in the late seventeenth century. In Part III Dandelion picks up where Gwyn

leaves off and analyzes nineteenth-century divisions and twentieth-century developments in Quakerism in terms of the second coming, advancing an avowedly pessimistic interpretation of the secularization of liberal Quakerism. Part IV forwards conclusions about the second coming “model” of Quakerism used in the preceding sections.

Peat—who has published *Paul’s Necessary Sin* (2006) under the last name Ashworth—uses Part I to present an interpretation of the apostle that finds living a new life of liberation from sin and the law at the center of his thought. Framing this as a transition from law to faith, Peat summarizes the latter as “living under direct guidance from God; living with confidence that God’s word is active and can be discerned” (20). This divine guidance is construed as a “prophetic word” that causes individuals to speak and act by divine inspiration, “the authority of the unmediated word, the direct revelation of God” (27). Peat claims that “In Paul’s understanding, for those who have been set free from sin and have the way of doing what is right through faith, the mediation of the law is no longer required” (34). While this may sound antinomian, Peat emphasizes that the transition from law to faith is analogous to the transition from childhood to adulthood, with the law functioning as a gift that provides “the protective restraint of a wandering child . . . rather than the custodial restraint of an offending adult” (47).

Yet, given that “law is necessary because sin exists,” the question arises of why the law and sin exist in the first place, forcing Peat to apply his reading of Paul to salvation history more broadly (51). His account of sin centers on God simultaneously giving humankind dominion over creation while prohibiting them from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. “To be true to its God-given dominion” Peat argues, “humankind finds itself asserting its own will against” God’s prohibition, causing separation from God. “So the law—the prohibition,” Peat concludes, “both brings the separate ego—the sin—into existence, and provides a check for it” (53). Peat then turns to Paul’s understanding of Jesus as the one in whom “faith has a beginning” that can free humans from the endless cycle of sin and law. Pointing out that the New Testament does not speak of “faith *in* Jesus” as much as the “faith *of* Jesus,” Peat argues that those “who come to faith can be understood as having a fundamental connection” with Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection, participating in the liberation from sin he accomplishes (55-56). Thus we should think in terms of not one, but *two* incarnations: God incarnated into Jesus

and the subsequent “whole of humankind as the incarnation of God” (64).

Another question, arises, however, that reappears throughout *Heaven on Earth*: if it is the case that humanity can be freed from sin and the law by becoming one with God through the faith of Christ that allows participation in his life, death, and resurrection, why hasn't this happened yet? Peat's response is to point to Paul's well-known claim in 1 Corinthians 13:9: “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end” (NRSV). In other words, “the present reality of what has been effected by the death and resurrection of Jesus . . . is only a partial realization of what is to come” (70). While Paul and the other apostles can be thought of as having reached spiritual adulthood because of their encounter with the risen Christ, many others remained in a state of spiritual childhood that it was the vocation of the apostles to nurture towards a future where “all of humanity will become the incarnation of God” (86).

In Part II, Gwyn argues that early Quakers believed they were living out the future expected by Paul. In chapters that summarize the *Apocalypse of the Word* (1986) and *The Covenant Crucified* (1995), Gwyn describes the Quakerism that emerged out of a “Seeker scene” dissatisfied with the Puritanism of the 1640s and 1650s as a movement marked by “the kingdom of God coming in *power*, not merely in words. The realities . . . prophesied as *imminent* were discovered as an *unfolding present*” (103). The “clear Second-Coming message. . . that the light in people's consciences was nothing less than the presence of the risen and returned Christ” had both inward and outward consequences that led to frequent confrontation with Puritan society (105). Rather than the Puritan covenant of grace that enfranchised the ruling classes, the covenant of light cast an “alternative covenantal vision” for society (123).

The apocalyptic spirituality of early Quakers, however, underwent a gradual recontainment that Gwyn discusses in terms of “the Nayler incident of 1656, the Restoration of the Stuart throne in 1660, and the gospel order initiative of 1666” (131). Central to this recontainment was the development of “liberal political philosophy, which bracketed covenantal questions of divine will and ultimate truth for the sake of pragmatic, contractual arrangements between self-interested parties” (127). By making arguments for toleration, for example, Quakers struck “a bargain with the world, of covenant becoming a contract

in the pejorative sense” (135). Gwyn concedes that the transition from apocalyptic spirituality to the establishment of gospel order in the form of organized church polity can be seen “not as a decline but as the maturation of a successful movement,” but he nonetheless confesses “mixed-feelings” about this transition that made Quakerism more viable in the long-term but also less radical and less oriented towards the second coming.

While Dandelion could also be described as displaying mixed feelings at points throughout Part III, he is generally more willing to embrace a declension narrative of Quakerism, and to powerful effect. While Dandelion’s interpretation of the Society of Friends in its various forms during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may be encountered throughout his many writings—*The Liturgies of Quakerism* (2005) comes to mind—it is particularly pointed and compelling here. For example, Dandelion produces the following simile that I believe is worth quoting at length:

It is almost as if early Friends heard the corporate or global alarm clock of the Second coming ringing. Over three centuries, the ‘snooze’ button has been pressed (Quietism); the clock then rewound so the hands were closer to the First Coming than the Second (Evangelicalism and the pastoral tradition); the batteries taken out (by those for whom the First Coming is more important than the Second Coming); and perhaps the clock itself has even been chucked out (twentieth century Liberal Quakerism, in which people will wake up/find transformation in their own time!) (161).

In the chapters that make up Part III, Dandelion attends to each component of this simile, but it is Liberal Quakerism that receives the sternest assessment. Characterizing the early Quaker experience of the second coming as a “realising eschatology” in which Christ’s return was understood to be in the process of happening (152-154), Dandelion notes that the shift to Quietism in the eighteenth century meant Friends were less interested in proclaiming a universal message than protecting the purity of the waiting remnant (164). The schisms of the nineteenth century can also be understood in terms of eschatology, as evangelicals became more preoccupied with Christ’s life, death, and resurrection as described in the Bible, and Hicksites turned their attention to building heaven on earth by their own works rather than looking for the second coming to accomplish this. While Dandelion finds at least a potential orientation to an experience of

the second coming maintained in the practices of Evangelical Friends (one of his chapters is called “Why the Pastoral System Makes Sense”), he is far more critical of Liberal Quakerism’s ability to reclaim the second coming message of the early Friends. “If Liberal Quakerism is a vanguard for anything,” he writes, “it may be the dangers of permissiveness, an increased tolerance vainly hoping for an increased appeal but one which may only be suicidal in the end” (197).

While reading Dandelion’s chapters I was reminded of historian Mark Noll’s description of his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), as “an epistle from a wounded lover”—indeed, all the authors in *Heaven on Earth* write from positions that seem simultaneously affectionate towards and yet somehow alienated from their experience of contemporary Quakerism. Here the personal essays interspersed throughout the book become relevant. I cannot do justice to the depth and integrity of these essays in a review, and so I will opt to give only brief characterizations and recommend them to the reader. Peat writes of how he is “uncomfortably straddling two communities,” Catholicism and Quakerism, finding both offer something the other seems to lack (42). Gwyn uses the term “bispiritual” to describe his journey back and forth between Evangelical and Liberal Quakerism, “at home in either tradition—and at odds with both” (143-144). Dandelion calls himself an “agonised” and “distressed” Quaker, wrestling with his training as an academic and his formation as a Friend (207). These personal testimonies to the strengths and shortcomings of the contemporary Society of Friends motivate Part IV’s conclusion that “If the Second Coming experience is fundamental to our understanding of our past, present, and future, then this is where Friends need to be dialoguing” (224). The chief hope of the authors is that “this can and needs to be a key component in a revitalisation of Quaker faith” (229).

Of course, this was all written twenty years ago. Quakerism is as much in need of revitalization today as it was then, but in the absence of any kind of retrospective material, this book leaves one wondering what Dandelion, Gwyn, and Peat think of their work today. Perhaps they will have the opportunity to offer their assessments in some other forum, but regardless, this is a book Friends can be grateful for. It not only presents a coherent account of the apocalyptic interpretation of Quakerism these scholars are known for, but stands as a kind of apocalypse in and of itself, in that it is ultimately a revelation of faith.