Quaker Holiness: A Response to John Punshon's Reason for Hope

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John Punson’s recent book on the theology of the Friends Church fills an enormous void in the Quaker canon. For no one to date has written a book of this scope and depth on Quaker faith and practice from the perspective of the evangelical tradition and its rootedness in holiness, which is so central to Quaker spirituality. The Friends movement owes Punshon an enormous debt of gratitude for his labor of love—a book that is scholarly, yet passionately written, and which should reach and impact a broad audience, far beyond the borders of the evangelical Friends tradition. We should be especially grateful that Punshon writes with the greater objectivity of an “outsider” to the Friends Church, rather than as either apologist or triumphalist insider. Coming as he does from the liberal tradition of British Friends, he explores the faith of the Friends Church as an observer-participator and ultimately appreciator of the role and value of the evangelical tradition for both the preservation and future of Quakerism.

I was drawn immediately into Punshon’s chapter on holiness when he declares in his introductory paragraph that entering the realm of holiness is a step across the boundary of the ordinary into the extraordinary, a step into the transcendent. He says the step is a short one, “but we know when we have taken it.” (p. 259) But though he has identified the essence of holiness as transcendent, he resists using the word “mystical.” Holiness is first of all a step into the mystical, a direct encounter with God as early Friends experienced it, and “we know when we have taken it.” Unfortunately, the term mystical is so slippery, so abused, and so misunderstood, especially among modern evangelicals, that the word can no longer be used with authenticity or meaning. Quaker evangelicals are still recovering from all the polemic surrounding Rufus Jones’ interpretation of Quakerism as “mysticism,” and the co-opting of the term by liberalism and humanism. Holiness and perfection, related terms, have
come to share a similar, but dialectically opposite fate, being identified with sectarianism and moralism.

Punshon admits holiness is not heard much among evangelical Quakers today, and identifies only three yearly meetings as “avowedly Holiness” (only one, Central YM in Indiana, in the US). Since all of the evangelical yearly meetings affiliated with EFI include holiness doctrine in their Faith and Practice, one is left wondering how Punshon is defining holiness. Does “avowedly Holiness” mean Wesleyan holiness, does it mean faithful to the traditions and practices of an earlier revivalistic holiness, or does it mean fundamentalist?

Punshon surveys the history of holiness from early Friends, through Fox and Barclay, to Wesley and on through the nineteenth-century revival movement and its impact on American Friends. He steers the reader through the complex evolution of Quakerism, during the revival period with the kind of balance, insight, and reliability we’ve come to expect of his lucid historical writing. Punshon’s treatment of the tumultuous era of revivalism and the controversial and lasting changes it generated provides a positive counterpoint to Thomas Hamm’s less sympathetic but far more detailed historical analysis in the Transformation of American Quakerism (Indiana University Press, 1988).

I appreciated Punshon’s clear assertion that Friends are not Wesleyans in spite of the similarities. Quaker holiness is not the same as Wesleyan holiness. One obvious reason, as Punshon points out, is that Quaker holiness predates Methodism. However, it is not altogether clear from Punshon’s description of Quaker holiness and Wesleyan holiness just how they substantially diverge. The “process versus crisis” debate concerning sanctification is one potential difference that is discussed; yet Wesley himself was never entirely consistent on this issue. The American Holiness Movement spawned by Wesley’s teachings naturally embraced the crisis experience, shaped as it was by charismatic revival preachers calling people to the altar for decisions. Punshon describes the early Quaker experience of sanctification to be a natural process of growth in grace, but differentiates that process from entire sanctification (or the second blessing) that can come in an instantaneous rapture. Yet at the same time he quotes from the statement of faith of the Association of Evangelical Friends in 1956 which includes a belief in “holiness of heart and life through the instantaneous baptism with the Holy Spirit subsequent to the new birth.” (p. 284) In the final analysis the question as to the pattern of sancti-
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significant as progressive growth or crisis experience has never been settled and in any case is no longer the burning and divisive issue it once was. So the question still remains, how does a Quaker theology of holiness differ from the Wesleyan version?

Wesley’s familiarity and actual mining of Barclay’s Apology is well known. (See for example, Dean Freiday’s introduction to Barclay’s Apology in Modern English, 1967.) Even though Barclay referred to it as “that solemn trifle” he clearly did not consider it a trifle when he reprinted his own edited version, a virtual reader’s digest condensation of key portions of the Apology. Wesley was especially fond of Barclay’s section on universal atonement, a refutation of Calvinist election and limited atonement. In addition, the sections on perfection and assurance of salvation (perseverance) were incorporated into Wesley’s preaching and teaching. Barclay’s theology of perfection as outlined in the Apology is almost identical to Wesley’s view but without the ecclesiology and the liturgical sacramentalism of Wesley.

It is here that Wesley and Quakers part company, though Punshon does not explore this great divide in relation to holiness. For Wesley the question of the sacraments became the crucial point of separation between himself and the Quaker theology of holiness. Baptism and regular communion were essential means of grace in Wesleyan sanctification. Wesley found the Quaker view of sacraments incomprehensible, because he did not have the mystical consciousness of the early Quakers, and by that I mean he had no appreciation (and saw no value for) the apophatic dimension of spirituality—the emptying and imageless via negativa of the Christian contemplative tradition. Wesley, as a good Anglican, insisted that the means of grace must include physical, material elements—consecrated bread and wine, and real water for baptism. And yet, the underlying spiritual foundation of both Methodism and Quakerism was identical. Wesley identified that spiritual foundation as “the main principle of Friends,” with which he had no quarrel: “We are all to be ‘taught of God’, to be inspired and ‘led by His Spirit’: and then we shall ‘worship Him’, not with dead form, but ‘in spirit and in truth.’” (Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II, 1746. Wesley’s Works, V, 130-134)

Punshon provides a reasonable and clear explanation and analysis of holiness as a doctrine, with its biblical foundations and historical elaborations. But he does not develop as carefully the experiential side of holiness as a relationship of personal encounter with the love of God and continuing sense of intimate presence. Since Punshon cov-
ers so much in so little space it seems unfair to criticize for what is omitted, but the relationship of holiness and love is such an essential component of holiness, whether experienced as process or crisis, that it feels like a significant omission. Wesley’s favorite term for Christian perfection was “perfect love.” The sum of perfection is the great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27) Robert Barclay in an essay called *Universal Love* wrote: “...Perfection thereof consists in loving God above all....” (*Truth Triumphant*, Vol. 3, pp. 190-1, written from Aberdeen Prison, 1677) Perfection is growth in love, a continuing expansion of the heart to include even one’s enemies, the ultimate test of the ethical side of holiness, because it is so humanly unnatural.

Which leads to one distinctive aspect of Quaker holiness that does diverge from Wesleyan and the American Holiness revival—the integration of peace and holiness, implied by Punshon but not specified. Having recently read Arthur Roberts’ autobiography, *Drawn by the Light* (Barclay Press, 1993), I was reminded of this significant difference when he describes his experience of being a Quaker student in a Nazarene seminary. He illustrates forcefully how Quaker holiness is understood and expressed differently when in homiletics class he preaches a “practice sermon” on Hebrews 12:14 “follow peace and holiness...,” which he exegetes as a bold call for Christian peacemaking, upsetting and angering many of his Nazarene classmates.

In the final analysis, Punshon writes: “Holiness is not the whole of evangelical Quakerism, but is an essential component of the faith.” (p. 285) I would add that for early Quakers, holiness was the whole of Quakerism, personal, experiential, mystical, communal and ethical.