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Rachel Muers

Originating amid the religious and political upheavals of seventeenth-century England, Quakers are now a geographically widespread and theologically diverse group, often best known for their peace work and for their social and political activism. Although Quakers have often not valued, and have even been suspicious of, academic or systematic theology, they do have a distinctive and coherent set of theological emphases that are closely related to their approaches to worship and to the life of faith.

In ecumenical Christian contexts, Quakers are sometimes placed alongside the Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren as 'historic peace churches'. Quakers do share many theological and ethical emphases with churches that are descended from Anabaptist movements, but both Quakers' origins and their subsequent history give them a different trajectory. Contemporary global Quakerism includes groups that clearly fit within evangelical Christianity; liberal groups with many members who do not identify as Christian; and much in between. This article focuses on the contribution of Quakers and Quakerism, as a whole, to the bigger picture of Christian theology. It also notes the internal diversity and major debates within Quakerism.

The background section establishes the historical and contemporary background for Quaker theology, and introduces some of the main genres of Quaker theological writing, showing how and why these ways of doing theology become important for Quakers. The body of the article focuses on three core themes in Quaker theology and practice. Quaker theological reflection on 'The Light' as the presence and call of Christ in every person's life, experienced as convicting and salvific (a theological theme developed from John 1, especially John 1:9) connects Christology, theological anthropology, and theologies of revelation, and is also particularly important in shaping Quaker theologies and practices of mission. Closely connected with this is the emphasis on the living presence of the Holy Spirit as forming and guiding the church-community – including in its practices of worship and of collective decision-making. The third Quaker emphasis is the close integration of theology and practice. This is illustrated through an account of the theological significance of some commitments or patterns of behaviour common across Quaker history: pacifism or peacemaking, simplicity, and the recognition of women's authority and leadership.

Keywords: Quakerism, Protestantism, Soteriology, Peacebuilding, Worldwide Christianity, Nonviolence, Universalism

Table of contents

1 Background: origins, contexts, and forms of Quaker theology

1.1 Origins of Quakerism

The origins of Quakerism lie in the religious and political turmoil of the English Civil War (1642–1651), and the brief, but historically and socially transformative, period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate (1649–1660). The distinctive shape of Quaker theology and practice reflects both the collective experience of seeking and re-finding Christian community in a 'world turned upside down', and the subsequent experience of state persecution.

Most accounts of Quaker origins begin with the itinerant preaching ministry of George Fox (1624-1691). As Fox described his conversion and ministry, it was precipitated by a strong sense of the reality of sin and of alienation from church communities – followed by a revelation of the saving presence of Christ, addressing him directly with the conviction that the power of sin was overcome:

> I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to your condition.' When I heard it, my heart leaped for joy. Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the Earth that could speak to my condition; namely, that I might give him all the glory. For all are bound under sin, and shut up in unbelief, as I had been, and to become free, each person must know that Christ is the creator and he alone understands us; he who enlightens, and gives grace, faith, and power… This I knew experimentally [from experience]. (Fox 1694: 7; entry for 1647)

The first Quaker communities emerged when Fox's preaching was taken up in the northwest of England by groups of 'seekers' – those who, like him, had become alienated from churches in the context of intense religious and political conflict. They had many of the characteristics that remain distinctive to Quakers: unprogrammed worship based on silence; an emphasis on holiness and on the experience of transformation; recognition and encouragement of women as preachers and leaders; visible enacted opposition to social and religious hierarchies; and the rejection of many of the established forms of Christian worship, including sacramental worship. They generally referred to themselves and each other as 'Friends', in a reference to John 15:14–15 that reflects the sense of intimate relationship to Christ; 'Quakers', like many denominational names, originated as a term of abuse, although it was rapidly and widely adopted.

Alongside the formation of communities went a very active and successful missionary movement, with Quaker preachers travelling not only throughout Britain but also further afield, notably to North America. Quakers' proclamation of the saving and transforming presence of Christ, available to every person, was linked with an apocalyptic urgency –

a belief that the reign of God was breaking in and making itself apparent in the present historical moment, and that the mission of Quakers was impelled and empowered by this action of God in history. The imagery of Revelation and other apocalyptic texts appears in several Quaker accounts of these early years – for example, when James Nayler refers to the mission of Quakers as engagement in the 'Lamb's War' (see Rev 5:6), taking up the decisive struggle against the powers of the world in 'these the last times' (Nayler 1658: 7).

The rapid growth of Quakerism in the 1650s was followed, after the restoration of the monarchy, by a period of intermittent severe persecution – occasioned both by Quakers' rejection of the established church (which they shared with many other groups) and by specific beliefs and practices that made them politically suspect (notably, their refusal to swear oaths and the unusual character of their meetings for worship). This experience, as much as the initial period of rapid growth and missionary activity, laid important groundwork for subsequent Quaker theology – as well as providing a further reason for Quakers to become established beyond Britain. Quaker responses to persecution included the development of the theology, and visible practice, of nonviolence (see Fox and Farnsworth 1660); an even greater emphasis on conscience and on the individual's free response to the call of God; and distinctive practices that both expressed core Quaker theological commitments and reinforced the unity of Quaker communities.

Writings from these first few decades of Quakerism, as well as stories and exemplars, continue to shape Quaker self-understanding and Quaker theology, and to carry significant authority among Quakers. In particular, liberal Quaker theology since the beginning of the twentieth century has been strongly influenced by the work of Rufus Jones, William C. Braithwaite, and others who sought to rekindle interest in Quaker origins, in an attempt to revitalize and reform the Quakerism of their day (see Braithwaite 1912: 1919). The fresh scholarly interest in Quaker origins that these later Quaker reformers inspired has in turn led to numerous re-readings of, and debates about, the theology of the first generations of Quakers.

1.2 The diversity of Quakerism

Quakerism has repeatedly shifted, changed, fragmented, and reunited in the years since it emerged. At the time of writing, there are around 300,000 Quakers worldwide, of whom around half are in Africa and more than a third in Kenya alone (for the history and context of East African Quakerism, see Riggs 2014). Organization is at a regional or national level and there are very significant differences of theology and practice – both between geographical areas and, in some cases, between different Quaker groups in the same area. The worldwide organization Friends World Committee for Consultation is an instrument for relationship-building and dialogue, which can also be a significant context for shared theological reflection across contexts (see, for example, Friends World

Committee for Consultation 2012). The contemporary global distribution and diversity of Quakers reflect the history of internal controversy and schism, the ongoing commitment to mission in its various forms, and also responses to the particular needs and conditions of local communities. The latter two points are closely related to core Quaker theological emphases, in particular the belief that the salvific and revelatory presence of God is available to every person, and the emphasis on community formation and collective discernment.

Various attempts have been made to characterize the historical and geographical diversity of Quakerism. For a clear and influential account, see Dandelion 2007; and for the historical and contemporary diversity of Quakerism in the USA specifically, see Hamm 2003. Standard typologies tend to categorize Quaker groups both by their patterns of worship and by their broad theological approach. Quakers may be 'unprogrammed', practising unstructured worship based on silence with little or no material planned in advance; or programmed, with worship including more planned elements such as sermons or hymns, often led by pastors. Typologies of Quaker theology will generally identify 'liberal' and 'evangelical' groupings as well as a broad centre ground of 'Christ-centred' Quakers. 'Conservative', when used of Quaker groups (mostly in the USA), refers to maintaining (what are taken to be) the practices and theological approaches of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Quakers, against both evangelical and liberal innovations (Wilson 2013).

1.3 Genres and sources of Quaker theology

Quakers do not have a strong tradition of systematic doctrinal work, nor indeed of extensive theological education – although there are Quaker seminaries and colleges in many parts of the world. Quaker theology, whether authored by individuals or by groups, tends to be occasional in character, responding to particular circumstances and questions. Many of the most 'systematic' or comprehensive texts of Quaker theology, as also many of the texts that are regarded by one or another group of Quakers as touchstones of orthodoxy, originated as apologetic or controversial works intended to present Quaker faith and practice to an unsympathetic non-Quaker audience. The titles of two early Quaker 'systematic' theologies, Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1678) and Elizabeth Bathurst's *Truth's Vindication* (1683), already indicate that they are written as responses to the opponents of Quakerism. The same is true of George Fox's 1671 letter to the governor of Barbados – often quoted, particularly by evangelical Quakers, as an early source for Quaker approaches to various key doctrines (see Webb 2016). The early years of Quakerism produced a profusion of 'controversial' writings as theological debates – often mixed with heated interpersonal conflicts – were conducted in public through tracts and pamphlets.

Early Quaker printed works also include sermons and appeals to specific audiences, in which theology is done in the service of specific tasks of persuasion and sometimes in relation to specific social and political issues. The practice of doing theology in the context of socially-engaged mission – discerning, and witnessing to, divine truth for a particular situation – continues; one well-known and controversial recent example, theologizing in response to the 'sexual revolution', was the British Quaker publication *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* (Heron 1963).

Another important genre of Quaker theology is the personal testimony or the spiritual journal, both of which are taken to show how divine truth is reflected and expressed in the lives of those who encounter it (see, for example, Fox 1694; Woolman 1774). Indeed, apologetic or controversial works often include passages of personal testimony, reflecting the long-standing Quaker suspicion of 'professors' of religion who have no experiential knowledge or understanding of what they profess. Testimonies concerning deceased Quakers – giving accounts of the work of God in their lives – are a long-established tradition, and a particularly clear demonstration of the Quaker commitment to theologizing from, and in relation to, lived experience (see Howgill 1672, and the examples in Bathurst 1683).

Some of the texts that are significant sources for Quaker theology, and turning-points in the history of Quaker theology, are produced and authorized by groups rather than individuals. Quakers have not typically used 'confessions' or declarations of faith as markers of shared Christian identity. In fact, the early Quakers' rejection of religious forms included a rejection of the communal use of the historic creeds. However, Quakers do have a history of producing and publishing texts – often self-consciously 'occasional', aimed at particular times and places – that express the whole community's theological and practical commitments; an early and famous example is the 1660 *Declaration from the Harmless and Innocent People of God*, often referred to as the 'Peace Testimony' (Fox and Farnsworth 1660). The significance given to collectively authored, and authorized, texts reflects the Quaker theological emphasis on the discernment of divine guidance by the faithful community gathered in worship. Moreover, despite Quakers' historical resistance to statements of faith as markers of belonging, the production and acceptance of collective texts can still mark turning points – and in some cases new lines of inclusion and exclusion – within Quaker communities. The 'Richmond Declaration' (1887), which articulates Quakerism in terms that fit within evangelicalism (broadly understood), is a well-known example of a collectively authored document that has become both a touchstone for orthodoxy and a marker of division.

2 'The Light' in Quaker theology

One of the distinctive features of Quaker theological vocabulary, across many different historical and geographical contexts, is the frequent mention of ‘the Light’. ‘The Light’ is not a precisely defined technical term in Quaker theology; it has many shades of meaning and many near-synonyms. It does, however, point to one of the core principles of Quaker theology and also to some of the main foci for controversy in and around Quaker thought. It is the convergence point in Quaker theology for Christology, soteriology, theological anthropology, and theology of religions, among other themes.

2.1 Scriptural origins and core meaning

The text most commonly quoted by early Quakers to explain their teaching about ‘the Light’ – a text that also indicates the core of its ongoing theological significance – was John 1:9, which in the King James Version reads, ‘That was the true Light, that lighteth every man that cometh into the world’. Quakers placed this text, and more broadly the Johannine theme of ‘light’, at the centre of their theological vision.

In Quaker thought, ‘the Light’ refers not primarily to the nature of God in Godself, nor even to the nature of Christ, but rather to the economy of salvation. Put most simply, in Quaker theology the Light is *God in God’s presence to and for humanity*. By naming God-with-and-for-humanity as ‘Light’ – within a Johannine framework – Quakers establish several distinctive theological emphases. First, through the reading of John 1:9 mentioned above, they establish Quakers’ theological universalism. Although the belief that all *will* be saved is not consistent in Quaker theology, the belief that all *can* be saved, through the direct relationship established by God in Christ with ‘every [person] that cometh into the world’, is a core and relatively consistent principle.

Second, the theme of ‘Light’ establishes how the salvific activity of God takes shape and is experienced in the world. It is personal and ‘subjective’, in that the Light is experienced and responded to by each person; but it is also inseparable from divine truth, which is, as Margaret Fell put it, ‘one and the same always’ (Fell 1710: 47). The universal Light as it enlightens each person establishes truthful knowledge of God and truthful understanding of oneself, of others, and of the world. Indeed, ‘Truth’ is another core term of Quaker theological vocabulary – again naming God in God’s presence to and for humanity, and also pointing towards the response that God’s presence and action elicit, namely truthful speech and action.

Third, the theme of ‘Light’ also points back to the apocalyptic aspect of Quaker theology. Once again, as in John’s Gospel, the Light *comes into* the world to dispel darkness, and is met with opposition and conflict. On a personal and social level, the encounter with the Light shining in darkness is associated with conviction and convincement – both perceiving the darkness and being saved from it. Encountering the Light is associated with personal

transformation, including, crucially, transformation towards loving and peaceable relations with others (see section 4.3).

The very diverse ways in which 'the Light' is presented and discussed in Quaker theology reflect both internal debates and more subtle long-term shifts in emphasis. Writings that speak of the 'inner' light or the light 'within' draw attention to the personal and experiential nature of divine revelation; references to the 'inward' light emphasize that the salvific relationship between the individual and God is not a natural capacity but rather a gracious divine gift.

2.2 Christology and soteriology

The Quakers' 'Light', at its biblical source and in very many of its subsequent uses in Quaker theology, is clearly identified with and as Christ. Many of the terms used as synonyms or near-synonyms for the Light in Quaker theology likewise contain more or less explicit christological references, often linked to biblical texts that name (or are taken to name) Christ according to his saving work. The Light is the 'inward teacher' or 'the seed' (cf. Gen 3:15) or, as discussed above, 'Truth'. It is, however, slightly misleading to say that the Light in Quaker theology simply *is* Christ – not least because 'the Light *of Christ*' is a very common formulation. More accurately, the Light is Christ *given to and received by* humanity.

Quaker theology has generally emphasized soteriology over Christology, and within soteriology has emphasized sanctification – specifically, the lived and experiential effects of the defeat of sin and death. There is, in fact, relatively little sustained engagement in Quaker theology with questions of Christology. It is not always easy to establish the precise relationship, in any particular text of Quaker theology or in Quaker theology as a whole, between Jesus Christ and 'the Light' – and the frequent close connection between the Light and the Holy Spirit in Quaker writings further increases the difficulty of isolating Quaker Christology from other core themes (for a discussion of twentieth-century examples, see Randazzo 2020).

From early on, Quakers were accused of not believing in the historical realities of the crucifixion and resurrection, or of not taking these realities seriously enough. There was a risk, at least as some critics of Quaker theology saw it, of emphasizing the present transformative encounter with Christ at the expense of the once-for-all event of atonement for sin; and there was also a risk of, in effect, denying the incarnation by minimizing the significance of the historical Jesus. The response, at least from the broad central ground of 'Christ-centred' Quakers, has been on the one hand to affirm the truth and the definitive significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and on the other to direct attention back to (what they took to be) the pressing question: how is the truth of the gospel known,

experienced, and lived in the present? Here, Quaker theology of 'the Light' points to the living Christ making himself, and the truth of his story, known to the faithful seeker.

Quakerism's claim to have established true church-community, and to preach and teach with authority, rested on the assertion that Christ was himself present among those who gathered in his name (cf. Matt 18:20). In early Quaker theology, and as a recurring theme in debates, the leadership and authority of Christ himself is frequently polemically contrasted with church structures that seem to attribute leadership and authority to individual church members. The affirmation of Christ as king (or strikingly in some early texts as 'shepherd'), priest, and prophet is used both to name the authority received from Christ by the community as a whole, insofar as it is obedient to Christ; and to justify the distribution, rather than the concentration, of authority among believers so that nobody is seen to usurp the role of Christ (see sections 3.2 and 3.3).

2.3 Theological anthropology

2.3.1 Sin, righteousness, and salvation

Much early Quaker apologetic and controversial writing focused on questions of theological anthropology – unsurprisingly, since these were the questions with which many of their contemporaries, including their opponents, were particularly concerned. Drawing on their core claims about the universal Light of Christ, Quakers roundly rejected double predestination, or indeed any anthropological claim that would limit the scope and application of the salvation offered in Christ. Notably, from a very early stage and consistently throughout their history, Quakers argued that the Light of Christ was present – at least in the form of an offer or a call – in the lives of people who had not heard the Christian gospel preached.

In keeping with their emphasis on the experience of divine presence, early Quakers also developed a strong critique of accounts of salvation that emphasized the extrinsic imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinful people, while denying or neglecting the real 'impartation' of righteousness. They described the theologies of some of their contemporaries as 'preaching up sin' or 'sin-pleasing' (see Bathurst 1683: 21) – accusing them, in effect, of underestimating the real effects of God's saving work on people's capacity to live holy and righteous lives. Quakers' long history of counter-cultural practice (see section 4) reflects their conviction not only that Christian faith *should* have consequences for behaviour, but that the grace of God given to God's people *does* in fact make possible what was previously impossible: namely, life in conformity with divine purpose.

The doctrine of the universal inward or inner Light, combined with an emphasis on holiness, can suggest a very optimistic account of theological anthropology. At various periods, Quaker theology has embraced this optimism. Liberal Quaker theology from

the early twentieth century onwards held out a vision of social progress and social transformation, based on the conviction that every person could recognize and respond to divine truth. As Grant shows in her overview of liberal Quaker theology, many of the characteristic emphases of liberal Quakerism can be tied back to the idea of the universal Light, or as Grant puts it the belief that 'direct, unmediated contact with the Divine is possible' (Grant 2020; for an earlier influential articulation of liberal Quaker theology with a comparable starting point, see Scott 1980).

For some critics of Quaker theology, and indeed for some Quaker theologians, however, this optimistic theological anthropology brings anxieties. If divine Light is given to 'every [person] that cometh into the world', and if that divine Light can bring about holiness of life, how is this different from saying that human beings are intrinsically good, or that all human beings are automatically made free from sin? Early Quakers were accused of preaching 'perfection', of denying the gravity of sin, or of claiming that people could become holy through their own efforts. Two significant themes in Quaker theological anthropology developed in response to these concerns. Firstly, responding to the charge that Quakers believed holiness was a human work, Quakers have emphasized that the Light and its effects are not inherent human capacities, but rather gracious divine gifts. In some strands of Quaker theology, there is a tendency to minimize human powers and capacities and to attribute all faithful action to God – the paradigm for this being the spontaneous speech in worship that is understood as divinely inspired. The basic attitude of the human being before God – which again is seen most clearly in Quaker silent worship – is one of expectant and humble 'waiting' and the setting aside of one's own desires, concerns, and preoccupations.

Secondly, Quaker theology has had to find ways to navigate the tension between, on the one hand, belief in the universal Light that enlightens everyone, and, on the other hand, the observable fact that not everyone lives as one 'enlightened' by God. The general idea is that the Light is present as an *offer* or call, which not everyone recognises or accepts; the alternative language of 'the seed', found very frequently in early Quaker theology but less common later on, captures this sense of potential that may or may not be realized depending on how it is nourished (cf. Mark 4:1–20 and parallels).

Robert Barclay's *Apology*, a core influence on generations of Quaker theologians, frames the offer of salvation not as a permanent presence in a person's life but rather as a 'day of visitation' (cf. Luke 19:44), a period of time during which God makes it possible for each person to receive and accept the salvation offered in Christ. Barclay's statement that 'many men may outlive this day, after which there may be no possibility of salvation to them' (Barclay 1678: prop 6:XII) is a way both of explaining the urgency of the preachers' appeal, and of dealing with what he presumed to be clear evidence – from scripture and from experience – that there are people who are 'given over' to sin. Early accounts do not

always clearly frame the ‘day of visitation’ as a single moment – but many accounts of its place in Quaker spirituality emphasize the expectation of intense experiences of spiritual crisis (see Mitchell 2018). References to the ‘day of visitation’ fade from Quaker theology and spirituality after the eighteenth century.

Taking up and reinforcing the ‘passive’ strand in Quaker theological anthropology, Barclay attributes to the fallen human being’s will and reason only the capacity to *resist* the divine offer in the day of visitation. For comparison, a century later Job Scott, equally committed to the basic idea that salvation is an inward work of God in the soul, emphasized much more positively the ‘consent and co-operation’ of the believer, developing an unusual extended comparison between the conception and birth of Christ from Mary and the new birth effected by the work of God in the soul (Scott 1824).

2.3.2 Conscience, reason, and knowledge of God

Conscience plays a significant role in Quaker theology, as the *locus* of the encounter with the Light of Christ. Similar in this respect to Baptists and Anabaptists, Quakers emphasize freedom of conscience as a prerequisite for truth in religion; compelled worship or compelled affirmation of faith is not only worthless but actively destructive of a person’s capacity to respond to the Light. The development, internationally, of rights to ‘conscientious objection’ – most often discussed now in relation to military service – can be traced back in part to English Quakers’ refusal ‘for conscience’s sake’ to swear oaths of allegiance to the monarch. An emphasis on freedom of conscience should not, however, be confused with a claim that conscience is infallible, nor with an equation of the Light with the conscience. Freedom of conscience is a prerequisite for, rather than a guarantor of, right belief and action in obedience to divine guidance.

Unlike the Cambridge Platonists, with whom they have sometimes been compared, Quakers have generally been careful not to associate the Light too closely with natural reason or with any other natural human capacity. Indeed, belief in the universal Light has proved compatible, in some streams of Quaker theology, with a very pessimistic view of ‘worldly’ reason, and hence of the conscience informed purely by reason. The passivity of Quaker anthropology – the emphasis on waiting for and responding to the work of God in the soul – also produces, in at least some strands of Quaker tradition, a deep scepticism about the capacity of reason or (especially) study to produce reliable knowledge of God. On the other hand, as discussed above, liberal Quakerism in particular embraced the contribution that modern scholarship and the sciences could make to understanding the world and discerning divine guidance in it (see section 4.6).

Liberal Quaker theology makes frequent reference to ‘continuing revelation’ or similar terms. This points back to the consistent Quaker emphasis on the living presence of God ‘enlightening’ and providing guidance in every age and context; but to describe this

continuing presence as ‘revelation’ further suggests that genuinely new insights can be rightly recognized as divine truth and can carry some kind of ongoing authority within the community.

2.4 Theology of religions

Quaker universalism has important consequences for the theology of religions. The other side of Quakers’ appeal to the inner or inward Light that enlightens everyone is a negative evaluation of religious ‘forms’, that is, of according definitive significance to specific religious practices or authoritative institutions. This opens up Quaker theology to a positive evaluation of – at least some aspects of – diverse religious and spiritual traditions, seeking and finding evidence of response to the universal Light beyond the boundaries of Christianity. One significant focus for Quaker dialogue across religious traditions, particularly in liberal Quakerism from the early twentieth century onwards, has been mysticism. The influential Quaker theologian Rufus Jones was a scholar of mysticism, and understood Quakerism and its connection to other religious traditions through this lens (see Jones 1909; Holt 2022). Furthermore, the claim that the conscience is the human faculty, or the aspect of human experience, where the Light is encountered has inspired successive generations of Quakers to look for evidence of *moral* responses to divine guidance in non-Christian communities and traditions. William Penn’s claim that ‘the humble, meek, merciful, just and pious souls are everywhere of one religion’ (Penn 1682: I.519) was made in the context of intra-Christian difference, but can be and has been applied more widely. The philosopher of religion John Hick, famous for his account of religious pluralism, was influenced by Quaker thought and became a Quaker towards the end of his life.

This long-standing theme in Quaker theology, of the availability of salvation beyond the bounds of Christianity (see, for example, Phipps 1783: 22), helps to explain why contemporary liberal Quakerism – by contrast with the liberal Quakerism of the early twentieth century – includes many who do not identify as Christian and who argue that core Quaker insights and experience can be expressed in non-Christian terms. This grouping includes both Quakers who would not use any label of religious belonging other than ‘Quaker’, and smaller numbers who explicitly connect themselves with some specific non-Christian religious tradition (for example, on the beliefs and identities of ‘Buddhist Quakers’, see Huber 2001).

3 The Spirit in Quaker theology

3.1 Experiencing divine presence

One consequence of the relative lack of systematic doctrinal theology in Quakerism is a relative lack of attention to the doctrine of the Trinity – and indeed often a suspicion

of the non-biblical ‘speculation’ involved in Trinitarian theology. Quaker theological texts often do not make clear distinctions between the living Christ and the Holy Spirit – and make no apologies for the lack of clear distinctions. Although ‘the Light’ is primarily a christological or more properly soteriological term, Quaker theology also characteristically emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit, particularly in effecting the transformation into holiness that constitutes ‘walking in the Light’ of Christ, and even more specifically in gathering, guiding, and empowering the community of believers, both in its worship and in its discernment. The Holy Spirit appears in Quaker theology as agent and guarantor of the unity and continuity of Christian community. Accounts such as that by Francis Howgill of the formation of early Quaker communities emphasis the work of the Spirit in drawing individual believers together:

> our hearts were knit unto the Lord and one unto another in true and fervent love […] We met together in the unity of the Spirit, and of the bond of peace, treading down under our feet all reasoning, questioning, debating and contending about religion… (Howgill 1672)

The Holy Spirit also maintains the community in consistent faithfulness to the teaching of Christ. An early statement of Quaker commitment to nonviolence makes explicit the implications of this latter point when it emphasises that ‘the Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable […] and […] will never move us to fight and war against any man’ (Fox and Farnsworth 1660).

Quaker emphasis on the present, shared, experience of the Holy Spirit has important implications for ecclesiology. William Penn claimed, in a pamphlet of that title, that Quakerism was ‘Primitive Christianity revived’ (Penn 1702). Unlike many formally similar claims made by churches of the Reformation, Penn was not saying that the form of Quaker worship and polity corresponded with that of the early Church. Rather, he was claiming that Quaker experience was a ‘revival’ of the ongoing dependence on divine power, presence, and guidance, and of the expectation of individual and societal transformation through the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. What Quakers claimed to have recaptured was the dynamic of (for example) the narrative of Acts, rather than the original *practices* of the primitive church as set out in the New Testament. Quakers have certainly been willing and able to claim biblical precedent for, or at least biblical openness to, many of their characteristic practices, but the core reason for the practices – as given by Quakers – is obedient response to the present guidance of the Holy Spirit (see Quakers in Britain 2013).

3.2 Worship and sacrament

The origins of Quakerism involve the re-founding or rediscovery of church community, and of Christian worship, by people who for whatever reason had become alienated from a divided church. To be more precise, the people who became Quakers were rejecting –

or feeling unable to be part of – not only the various particular worshipping communities of their day, but also the forms that worship took. Quaker worship as it emerged among these 'seekers' was, and is, characterized by intense focus on waiting and expectation – the silence that is now the best-known feature of Quaker worship. The 'unprogrammed' or spontaneous character of much Quaker worship reflects a theology of worship that emphasises the experience of divine presence defining and directing worship. It is an element found even in those strands of Quaker tradition that have re-adopted more of the standard forms of Christian worship, including prepared sermons and hymns. Apologetic or explanatory accounts of Quaker worship may refer to texts such as Acts 2 (Pentecost) or 1 Corinthians 14 to indicate the plausibility of Spirit-led worship within which preaching and praise are gifts of God to the community 'poured out' spontaneously on those who are present.

The (near-universal) Quaker rejection of water baptism and Eucharist/Lord's Supper also rests on a theology of worship in which the activity of the Holy Spirit is not constrained by particular liturgical forms. Challenged repeatedly on this very unusual feature of their ecclesial practice, Quakers have emphasized the scriptural and experiential evidence for the centrality of baptism with the Holy Spirit (see *A Spirit-Led Church: A Response from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain to WCC Faith & Order Paper No. 214, The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 'Baptism'), as well as the idea that unprogrammed worship based on silence can itself be formative and expressive of communion with God and with one another:

> […] we have known the Spirit of Christ so convincingly present in our quiet meetings that his grace dispels our faithlessness, our unwillingness, our fears, and sets our hearts aflame with the joy of adoration. We have thus felt the power of the Spirit renewing and recreating our love and friendship for all our fellows. This is our eucharist and our communion. (London Yearly Meeting 1928, quoted in London Yearly Meeting 1987: 10)

Quaker unprogrammed worship also reflects the belief that preaching and prophecy are functions that can be fulfilled by any member of the community. Since all are recipients of the divine grace that not only saves but also sanctifies and equips for service, and since true worship is enabled and shaped by the present activity of the Holy Spirit, authoritative speech in worship cannot be restricted to specific individuals or groups. Quaker communities in many times and places have had systems for recognizing individuals with particular gifts of preaching, or for appointing pastors or ministers; however, there is no theological basis for ordination in Quakerism.

3.3 Scriptural interpretation

Controversies over attitudes to the Bible have often featured in Quaker internal divisions over the centuries. Emphasizing the universal Light, and the direct availability of divine

guidance – of saving knowledge of God – to every human being, raises inevitable questions about the importance of the Bible. Early Quakers freely explained and defended their teaching and practice with reference to the Bible, but would also often imply that biblical texts alone were not the source of the teaching and practice. A core claim was that the interpretation of the Bible, and its application in people's lives, was the work of the same Holy Spirit who inspired the biblical authors – so that the Bible without the Holy Spirit was merely a dead letter. This claim, relatively consistent in Quaker tradition, establishes that there must be a close relationship between the authority of the scriptural text and the authority of the rightly guided interpreter; but it does not exhaustively specify how that relationship works.

In the Richmond Declaration of 'orthodox' or evangelical Quakers, the emphasis is on using scripture as a measure of right doctrine, on the basis that any claimed inspiration that contradicts scripture cannot in fact originate from the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there are also good grounds in Quaker theological tradition to relativize the authority of the scriptural text as *text*, and to prioritize the present activity of the Holy Spirit in guiding its interpreters to new understandings that are not apparent from the plain sense of the text. 'Liberal' Quakers' acceptance of modern approaches to biblical criticism, from the late nineteenth century onwards, could draw on a longer tradition of (for example) reluctance to refer to the scriptures as the 'word of God' without qualification.

Quakers' emphasis on the inward Light, and the present experience of divine 'enlightenment' and guidance – as well as the claim to be a community empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit – has sometimes given rise to readings of the Bible that collapse the distance between the biblical narratives and the readers' individual or corporate experience. A striking example is the complex early Quaker theological use of the image of 'two seeds' in Gen 3:15. While this image is used to explain or develop the belief in the universal offer of salvation and the idea that it may be refused or resisted, it is also drawn upon to narrate individual spiritual experience and to re-narrate social and religious conflicts – as well as to provide supplementary justification for women's preaching and spiritual leadership.

3.4 Discernment and decision-making

Somewhat unusually among the new religious groups of the period, the first generations of Quakers formed and maintained a relatively cohesive national network and, at an early stage, a national and regional organizational structure of decision-making bodies to maintain 'gospel order' – that is, a shared understanding and implementation of a pattern of right behaviour, individually and collectively. Quakers' distinctive approach to collective decision-making and discernment also appears to date from this early period. Quaker decision-making is based on the belief that the community, when gathered together in

obedient expectation of divine guidance and following disciplined practice, will be able to discern the will of God in relation to the particular issue at hand. Quakers' theology of decision-making is in fact very close to their theology of worship – having at its core the expectation of divine guidance in the present moment, discerned by individuals and tested and confirmed by the community (see Loring 1999).

Also important in Quaker theologies of decision-making is an emphasis on unity and peace as a gift of the Holy Spirit and a sign that the community is rightly guided. The avoidance of voting and of other practices that encourage factionalism or open conflict reflect this emphasis. It has also given rise, in many Quaker contexts, to a strong sense of the authority of the community and its discernment as (at least) a check on the decisions and choices of the individual. If belief in the universal Light places enormous value on each individual's experience and living knowledge of God, it is also a core belief and experience that the Light is the same in all and that the Holy Spirit leads people into unity. The voteless and highly participatory decision-making processes that Quakers have developed have attracted considerable attention and interest from secular organizations, and were also an important influence on the development of consensus process for the World Council of Churches (Grace 2000).

The formation of parallel structures of authority and decision-making for men and for women was, in the seventeenth century, a way of including women in the government of the community and notably of recognizing the authority that women as a group could hold in relation to *each other*, rather than being subject to male authority (for more on this, see section 4.5). Quakers have used parallel governance structures for men and women in many contexts, particularly where wider societal norms – such as strongly differentiated gender roles and/or legal structures – mean that a unified governance structure is likely in practice to exclude women from effective participation.

4 Quaker theology and Quaker practice

4.1 Quietist and activist dynamics in Quakerism

Two pervasive tensions in Quaker attitudes to social action and activism are set up by ongoing dynamics in Quaker theology. One tension is between the attitude of passivity ('waiting on God' and ascribing everything in the religious life to divine agency) and the claim that salvation is necessarily connected to holiness and the capacity for right action. Quakerism thus contains the seeds both of quietism and of activism.

Quaker 'quietism' is often particularly associated with the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and with the popularity among Quakers of the works of the European Quietists. *A Guide To True Peace* (Backhouse and Janson 1946, first published 1813) – compiled in the early nineteenth century by two Quakers from the works of Fenelon, Guyon, and

Molinos, and very widely circulated among Quakers – both reflected and reinforced a long-established affinity. The Quietist emphasis on the passivity of the soul before God, the elimination of desire, and separation from a world of temptation and struggle as the foundations of the spiritual life resonated with Quakers' experience and practice of 'waiting upon God'. Likewise, the Quietists' troubled relationship with ecclesiastical institutions and their experience of persecution resonated with themes in Quaker history.

Within Quaker activism a further tension can be seen between, on the one hand, the emphasis on holiness and the comprehensive transformation of life that sets a person apart from 'the world', and, on the other hand, the recognition of active presence of God in *every* person's life. The former turns Quaker theology and practices outwards, towards world-engaged activism; the latter pulls it inwards towards the formation and nurture of holy lives and communities distinct from 'the world'. In much Quaker theology this is a productive tension, rather than a contradiction, and the two emphases can co-exist. Fox's famous charge to early Quaker missionaries to 'be patterns [and] examples […] that your carriage and life may speak among all sorts of people and to them' (Fox 1694; entry for 1656) conveys both the commitment to visible holiness and the relationship of that holiness to mission. Quakers' very early critique of those who 'preached up sin' went alongside a set of ordinary everyday practices that both enacted the obedient response to God and, incidentally but inevitably, marked Quakers out as a distinctive community.

Quakers' practice of faith, then, has at times been mostly concerned with maintaining their separation from 'the world' – although even this visible separation can be understood as having a missionary or world-transforming function, through (for example) peculiarities of dress and speech that serve as a critique of prevailing norms and customs. The weight of Quaker theological reflection on practice, however, focuses on actions that engage with 'the world' in the hopeful expectation of change.

4.2 Framing Quaker action: testimony

Testimony is a key term in Quaker theology for the bringing together of theology and practice. Testimony is used to refer both to the speech that makes God's work public and visible, and – more importantly – to theologically communicative action or behaviour, the action through which people's 'lives speak' (see further on this Muers 2015). In Quaker usage, 'testimony' refers most often to patterns of distinctive world-engaged action that are sustained throughout Quaker history and help to define Quaker identity. Quaker testimony in this sense has predominantly, through much of Quaker history, been framed negatively. Quakers at various times spoke of and practised testimony *against* – for example – swearing oaths, paying tithes to support the state church, using forms of speech and dress that affirmed social hierarchies, participating in the slave trade, gambling and games of chance, and a wide range of other practices framed as 'worldly' and contrary to the

truth revealed in Christ. Across Quaker history as a whole, the sustained testimony of nonviolence, and later of active peace work, has been particularly influential on how Quakers are perceived as well as on the shape of their theology.

From the mid-twentieth century, particularly in North America and Britain and following the enormously influential work of Howard H. Brinton, Quakers in the liberal tradition have often spoken of a few central 'testimonies' framed in positive terms: peace, simplicity, integrity or truth, equality, and community (Brinton 1943; see Punshon 1990). This shift, in some Quaker circles, to a very broad and positive articulation of the central themes of Quaker practice may reflect the need to find unifying principles in the context of increased theological diversity. It also, however, generates new theological reflection, and new points of connection with non-Quaker theologies. One example is the multifaceted ecumenical conversations on peace and reconciliation, especially in Europe, in the aftermath of the Second World War. Another emerging example is the re-examination of the history of Quaker attitudes to the transatlantic slave trade through the wider lens of racial justice – with contemporary theologians and historians examining how Quaker testimony against the slave trade often co-existed with complicity in broader patterns of racial injustice (see McDaniel and Julye 2018).

4.3 Theologies of peace

Commitment to nonviolence is not the longest-standing Quaker 'testimony', but it is one of the most consistent and the best known. Like the refusal to swear oaths, its most obvious biblical source is the commands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Quakers' early statements about nonviolence did refer back to these texts, but placed more emphasis on the wider spiritual context – the condition of the soul and of the community – that gave rise to violence or to nonviolence. The refusal of violence is associated in Quaker theology with the core movement of turning towards and accepting the Light, and with rejecting the wrongs and falsehoods of 'the world'. Nonviolence is not, then, simply one among many ethical principles or rules to be followed by the disciples of Christ; it is the mark, and enactment, of the transformation of life that Christ makes possible.

This aspect of Quaker theologies of peace and nonviolence – nonviolence as the mark and enactment of a new form of life – becomes clearest in social contexts where violence is conspicuously and visibly a normal part of life. In the early twenty-first century, for example, Quakers in East Africa have made significant contributions to the theology and practice of peace from responses to numerous complex situations of violence and conflict (Mombo and Nyiramana 2016). Particular emphases arising from this work include the centrality of healing in the work of peace and reconciliation – healing that begins with every individual and their deepest needs, and becomes effective at the communal

and social level (see Mombo 2017). The theology of peace that emerges emphasizes a comprehensive vision of peace – as *shalom* encompassing justice, wellbeing, and right relation – and the call to each person to become part of the process through which this vision is realized.

Seeing nonviolence or peace as a core characteristic of holy living also leads Quakers to important critical analysis – including theological analysis – of the individual and social patterns of behaviour that sustain violence or make violence possible. A common theme is the connection between greed or misdirected desire and violence. Margaret Fell, in one of the earliest public statements on Quaker nonviolence, contrasted 'wars and contentions that come from the lusts that war in the members' with 'follow[ing] after those things that make for peace, love and unity' (Fell 1710: 208–209). British Quakers' 1918 text on 'Foundations of a True Social Order', which was the direct result of extended reflection on the social, economic, and political roots of the First World War, called for a way of living free from the 'bondage of material things' (London Yearly Meeting 1918). This document also identified the connection between right relationship to God and right relationship to others – arguing that the 'Fatherhood of God' should give rise to a 'brotherhood which knows no restriction of race, sex or social class' and calling for a social order 'directed towards the growth of personality truly related to God and man'.

4.4 Theologies of simplicity and environmental concern

Quakers have a history of distinctive clothing, speech, and consumption practices that reflect a commitment to the 'plain', the unadorned and the simple, and to the avoidance of luxury. In this they might be thought to resemble their Puritan forebears, but there are distinctive features of Quaker commitment to simplicity that reflect distinctive theological emphases. One strand of Quaker theologies of simplicity relates to a particular way of interpreting – in practice and in everyday life, as well as in theology – the Johannine negative evaluation of 'the world'. 'The world' is associated with false judgements of value and significance, and with attempts to establish security based on status or possessions. Rejecting or eschewing status symbols (for example in dress or in speech) is a corollary both of turning away from the world and of giving up the attempt to stand in one's own strength.

John Woolman, one of the most influential Quaker theologians of simplicity, develops a systematic theological and spiritual critique of the nascent consumer economy in his day centred on the Matthean idea of the 'single eye' (Matt 6:22; see further on Woolman, Kershner 2018). Woolman describes, in his journal (1774) and his other writings, how the possession of wealth and the attachment to wealth impedes clear vision: of particular neighbours and fellow-creatures and their needs, of the systemic injustices that sustain patterns of wealth and poverty, and of the relationship of creation to God.

Simplicity of life for Woolman – paradigmatically, the refusal to use goods produced by enslaved people – both expresses and enables love for the neighbour. In a striking prefigurement of environmental theology, Woolman also recognizes overconsumption as an impoverishment of the Earth and a phenomenon connected to the mistreatment and exploitation of nonhuman animals. Quaker simplicity in the Woolman tradition is not primarily about self-denial, but rather about the formation of just relationships. The critique of 'worldliness' is not necessarily associated with a negative view of the body; the 'single eye' fills the *body* with light, that is, it makes everyday existence holy.

In the context of the wider tradition of testimony, contemporary Quakers have drawn on the tradition of simplicity to produce theological responses to the environmental crisis. For example, the 'Kabarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice' from the Friends World Conference in 2012 refers both to Quaker 'testimonies' of peace, equality, and simplicity, and to the biblical themes of care for the 'least of these' (Matt 25:40) and the call to be salt and light for the world (Matt 5:13; see Friends World Committee for Consultation 2012). Kabarak also reflects the pattern exemplified in Woolman's theology by juxtaposing individual action and the critique of systemic injustice, and by placing the restoration of right relationships at the centre of 'earthcare'.

4.5 Sex and gender

One of the distinguishing features of Quakers from their earliest years – as identified and attacked by their opponents, as well as promoted by the Quakers themselves – was the role of women in leadership, and more especially in public preaching and teaching. The earliest Quaker itinerant preachers in Britain (those sometimes referred to in Quaker historiography as the 'First Publishers of Truth') included numerous women, and women conducted some of the best known early Quaker missions further afield. Margaret Fell (originally Askew, later Fox) is particularly well known for her leadership in the nascent Quaker community, providing advice and instruction to male and female preachers as well as speaking and writing on Quakers' behalf (see Fell 1710).

Recognition of women's authority and leadership within Quakerism has taken a variety of forms, reflecting both the acceptance of some contextual gender norms and the subjection of these norms to distinctive theological critiques. The theological basis of Quakers' recognition of women's authority, and of their distinctive account of gender, is broadly fourfold. First, it is *protological*, based on claims about divine intention in creation; this is the 'helpsmeet' theology identified by Doan and Kamphausen (2013) and shaping – among other things – early Quakers' radical understanding of marriage. It is worth noting that this account of gender relations does not preclude distinct spheres of activity for men and for women in most areas of life; it sat comfortably with the maintenance of parallel structures of church governance (parallel 'meetings') for men and for women, with distinct

areas of responsibility. The ‘protological’ account of gender relations is not extensively used in relation to women’s public preaching, but is very influential in other aspects of Quaker life and organization.

A second strand in Quaker theological accounts of women’s authority is *soteriological* and comes from the account of the universal Light of Christ, referred to above (section 2). Although there is of course nothing distinctive or controversial about claiming that women and men are equal as regards sin and salvation, the Quaker emphasis on the inward testimony of the Light in the conscience – and the connection between the activity of the inward Light and divine revelation – forms a strong link between equality in relation to salvation, on the one hand, and equality in relation to the preaching of the gospel, on the other. The naming of Christ as the ‘Inward Teacher’, for example, allows both women and men to claim to be subject *only* to Christ, and to teach and preach according to Christ’s instruction, requiring no external authorization. This in turn provides the hermeneutical key for interpreting some of the New Testament texts that appear to require women to accept male authority in church contexts: they are read as requiring *all* to accept Christ’s authority (see Fox 1656).

This connection between soteriology and women’s ministry is further strengthened by the third strand, which might broadly be characterized as ‘pentecostal’: the belief that preaching and prophecy are gifts of the Holy Spirit, given alike to any and all members of the church as they are caught up in the action of God within history. Rejecting the ministry of women is on this account rejecting or denying the power of God to fulfil God’s promises; and to the extent that women’s ministry in any particular context is ‘counter-cultural’, this is an indication of the dramatic transformation that the Spirit effects.

A fourth strand that should be mentioned relates to female spiritual authority. Quaker apologetic writings (see Fell 1667; Bathurst 1683) make extensive use of a familiar collection of texts, from both Old and New Testaments, recognizing women’s authority as prophets and teachers – and also, at least in the early years of Quakerism, of texts that associate the spiritual authority of the church as a whole, especially the church’s triumph over evil, with powerful female figures. Particularly significant here are the victorious ‘seed of the woman’ in Gen 3:15 and the ‘woman clothed with the sun’ in Revelation 12. The use of these ecclesiological and eschatological texts functions to undermine not only arguments against women’s authority to preach and teach, but also wider theological structures of misogyny based on negative readings of Eve: woman is made to symbolize not primarily sin’s origins but sin’s defeat.

4.6 Quakerism and science

The relatively significant contribution of Quakers to scientific discovery (relative, that is, to their size as a community) has many possible explanations (Cantor 2013). In England,

at least, it may be explicable partly by historical accident; Quakers as nonconformists, excluded from the traditional professions and from the ancient universities, were overrepresented among the pioneers of the industrial revolution. However, it is also easy to see connections between Quakers' consistent emphasis on experience as a source of truth – 'knowing experimentally', to use the seventeenth-century terminology – and an openness to scientific discovery and the scientific method. Even during those periods when Quaker theology was most anxious about 'worldly' reasoning and wisdom, there has often been support for practical, observational, and experimental science.

Quakers as a group were relatively slow to grapple with the key scientific developments, particularly around evolutionary theory, that caused upheavals in religious thought in the nineteenth century. Following the liberal 'turn', however, Quaker theology of the twentieth century made some notable contributions on the relationship between scientific and religious truth. Quakers' critical approach to received traditions of doctrine – particularly insofar as these did not seem to be confirmed by the 'evidence' of experience – arguably fits well with the spirit of scientific enquiry. Quaker astrophysicist Arthur Stanley Eddington's argument in his *Science and the Unseen World* argued for the importance of open enquiry and 'seeking', as well as humble recognition of the extent of what is 'unseen', in both the religious and the scientific life (Eddington 1929; see also, for a different perspective on Quaker spirituality and scientific method, Scully 2002).

Quakers' theological and ethical emphasis on truth, alongside the close relationship in Quakerism between theology and practice, not only encourages Quaker theologians to see scientific practice as closely linked to the religious vocation – it also encourages them, particularly within the liberal tradition, to look for the unity and coherence of religious truth and the findings of science. In terms representative of the spirit of early liberal Quaker theology, Silvanus P. Thompson argued that if a person 'would know the whole truth of God concerning the ultimate great things […] he must learn the truth of man and of nature, for truth is one' (Thompson 1915: 124).

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