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978-1-107-05052-5 - Early Quakers and their Theological Thought 1647–1723

Edited by Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion

Excerpt

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Introduction

Pink Dandelion and Stephen W. Angell

Early Quakerism has always excited scholars. A revolutionary war, the execution of the king, and the advent of the short-lived British republic provides a dramatic backdrop to the emergence in the north of England of the radical sectarian movement called “in scorn” Quakers. The 1640s were a hotbed of religious ideas as the world was turned upside down and everything seemed possible.¹ Group after group offered new and radical plans for a fully reformed religious and political settlement in England. The Quakers were one of the few of these radical groups which has survived to the present day, or close to it.²

But what were those ideas and how were they expressed? Trying to tease out the Quaker message of the 1650s can be a frustrating task, with different authors using the same phrases in different ways or different phrases in the same way: Rosemary Moore has called at least George Fox’s theology “obscure.”³ This collection circumvents the challenge of trying to characterize the global message by exploring in depth sixteen key writers individually and by looking at their lifetime’s output, thus extending the analysis of the Quaker message across what have traditionally been described by scholars as the first and second periods. In short, this volume outlines the theological ideas of key leaders in the first seventy years of the movement, allowing us to understand better the nature of this important aspect of church history.

This volume fills a large gap in the literature. The past half-century has seen a massive expansion in the quantity and quality of primary sources available to scholars studying seventeenth-century English religious leaders, including Quakers. Databases such as Early English Books Online and the Digital Quaker Collection have made widely available theological works that, three decades ago, could only be accessed by traveling to the archives that held the books in question.⁴ These databases have supplemented recent scholarly anthologies of primary sources which, while inevitably more selective in the amount of primary sources they

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include, contain an editorial apparatus that is still invaluable to scholars who wish to know more about seventeenth-century Quakerism.⁵ Some of the seventeenth-century theologians who are included here have had, within recent decades, notable monographs published on their theologies, or biographies that feature their theological contributions.⁶ In addition, there have been some notable doctoral dissertations on certain theologians we cover here.⁷ Conferences on George Fox and William Penn have resulted in the publication of books incorporating the papers delivered there.⁸

Nevertheless, this volume provides in-depth theological profiles, more substantial and more theologically focused than the short encyclopedia articles that students of seventeenth-century Quakerism have been forced to rely upon hitherto.⁹ While we include theological profiles on such figures as Fox, Penn, Margaret Fell, Robert Barclay, and James Nayler, who have already been the subject of substantial study of their theology and lives, we also include theological profiles on other early Quakers who are just as significant and have thus far been subject mostly to scholarly neglect.

We are very fortunate that we have been able to convince many of those who have been responsible for the scholarly advances of the last few decades, as well as other leading academics, to contribute to this volume. Chapter authors have been encouraged both to provide general coverage of the individual, but also to develop their own thesis about the individual in question. In addition, it has been a central goal of the editors that this volume should be readable, up-to-date, and authoritative, and thus of great interest to a popular audience and scholars alike.

The Shape of the Book

It was not easy to select whom to include and whom to leave out. One of the strengths of Quakerism, indeed perhaps key to its success¹⁰ was the depth of leadership. Thus, we had many Quaker writers to choose from. Notable omissions include Anne Conway (1631–79), a philosopher who was introduced to Quakerism by Francis Mercury Van Helmont. Afterward, she was visited by Fox, Barclay, Keith, and Penn. In her *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, published in Latin posthumously in 1690 and in an English translation two years later, she argued for the goodness of God and the creation, and also contended that hell could not be eternal, instead favoring perfection as the basis for the cosmic order.¹¹

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Thomas Ellwood (1639–1713) would be another obvious entry. A friend of the Peningtons, he was convinced through the preaching of Edward Burrough. He served for a while as John Milton's secretary and later would edit the journal of George Fox for publication in 1694. However, space prohibited further chapters. Indeed, even combining Francis Howgill and Edward Burrough into a single chapter made sense in one way as they so often worked together, and yet this presented challenges for both authors in terms of trying to précis their theology into the space of a single chapter. The same is true of the chapter on Mary and Isaac Penington. We were unable to give adequate space for Melvin Endy to outline his arguments on the synergies between Fox and William Penn in contrast to earlier scholarship suggesting that Penn in particular marked a significant shift in Quaker thinking away from Fox's sense of endtime covenant.¹² Michael Birkel is uncovering new material on Robert Barclay and Kabbalah which we were also unable to include.¹³

In the end we chose sixteen Quaker writers. The chapters follow a chronological pattern in terms of the writer's role within Quakerism, but are preceded by two context-setting chapters. Douglas Gwyn outlines the pre-Quaker history and emphasizes that Quakerism can be best understood as an epistemological break with the Biblicism of the Puritan movement. Quakers needed no text nor tradition for guidance but relied on revelation. This chapter examines the early Quaker theology of the 1650s in terms of classical categories of Christian theology in dialectical pairings: epistemology and eschatology, hermeneutics and ecclesiology, Christology and pneumatology, hamartiology and soteriology, cosmology and ethics. In each case, Gwyn shows how Friends adopted and reframed the beliefs and practices of their radical precursors.

Betty Hagglund explores the extensive program of Quaker publishing within the wider context of the seventeenth-century book trade. We learn here of the processes of seventeenth-century publishing and the practical considerations of such an extensive use of the press. She shows how central London (and, within London, four main publishers) was to the spreading of the Quaker message.

Hilary Hinds explores the life and message of George Fox (1624–91). She emphasizes in particular the role of the northern landscape on his message and popularity and the way he reflected on time, space, and motion, alternating between contrasting understandings of different kinds of time, *Kairos* and *chronos*, and between movement and stillness. Motion was the process from which stillness provided the moments of insight and transformation. Hinds casts Fox as a spiritual delinquent walking with

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God rather than societal norms. His literal walking marks his spiritual authenticity, his “practiced theology” which is in turn so attractive for those also trying to live their faith within the constraints of the 1650s.

Carole Spencer focuses on the 1656 experience of James Nayler (1618–60). She casts his entry into Bristol (and before that into Wells and Glastonbury) as an allegory of the immanence of Christ, using his body to enact the reality of Christ’s inhabitation. As Spencer writes:

Nayler felt called to be a wandering prophet and his body was his “sign.” God called him not only to speak and write, but also to enact his theology. His life becomes an apocalyptic and allegorical drama. . . . Nayler was the exemplar, to suffer as Christ had suffered, and to love as Christ loves. His “sign” pointed back to the passion of Jesus, the historical reality of the event, but also forward into the present, the ongoing incarnation that occurs in the rebirth of the person in the present-day, an incarnational eschatology embodied in the saints.¹⁴

Spencer claims he was prepared for martyrdom as the ultimate parallel with the life of Jesus. She also considers the influence of German mystic Jacob Boehme.

Michael Birkel and Stephen W. Angell explore the life and writings of Richard Farnworth (c.1627–66). Farnworth was a Yorkshire Seeker, convinced through Fox’s preaching in 1651. He accompanied Fell on his trip to Pendle Hill and on into Westmorland and was a prolific Quaker apologist in the early 1650s highly critical of church forms. In 1656, he was probably the main author of the epistle from the Elders at Balby, an important document in reuniting Friends in the wake of the Nayler incident. He is less prominent in the second half of that decade, perhaps affected by the incident, but with Fox and Fell in prison in the early 1660s, he became active again. He was credited with writing *The Testimony of the Brethren* outlining the Quaker view of gospel order or ecclesiology. He is less convincing in writing to non-Quakers to persuade them of the need for religious toleration because, as Birkel and Angell point out, he was never fully convinced that Quakers represented only an equivalent spiritual path to other groups as opposed to the true one.

Margaret Fell (1614–1702) was a central spokesperson of the Quaker movement after her convincement in 1652. Sally Bruyneel outlines her administrative prowess as well as her theological insight. Bruyneel particularly emphasizes Fell’s apocalyptic endtime theology and her attempts to allow the Jews to return to England as part of her reading of the book of Revelation. Bruyneel considers some of her major theological concerns and the context within which they emerged, in particular Fell’s understanding of

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Scripture, eschatology, hamartiology, the Conscience, and the nature of the Trinity. In later life, Fell would become marginalized as London became the centre of Quaker decision making and as the strength of her theological critiques became less popular among the new Quaker leadership.

Pink Dandelion and Frederick Martin explore the theology of the ministerial pairing of Edward Burrough (1634–62) and Francis Howgill (1618–69); Burrough and Howgill were both from Westmorland and together were responsible for the mission to London and then to Ireland. It appears that Howgill, while a minister in his own right, also acted as mentor and elder (spiritual director) to Burrough. The chapter explores their self-perception as northerners, “outcasts of Israel”¹⁵ as well as the changing nature of their rhetoric as the political context changes between the 1650s and 1660s. Both were to die in gaol in the 1660s. Again, as in so many chapters, the apocalyptic nature of their writings is emphasized.

Stephen W. Angell explores the life and writings of Samuel Fisher (bap. 1604–65). Fisher was the first great Quaker theologian of academic standing. Trained at Oxford, he was to lead a renegade path that resulted in him attacking the very foundations of his own educational background, paradoxically, in such an academically well-defended way that could not be ignored. Having served as a Puritan chaplain, he converted to Baptism but in 1655 was convinced as a Quaker. Fisher remained a Protestant of sorts, placing scriptural authority above that of the tradition, but the thrust of his Quaker writing was to emphasize the primacy of revelation. Fisher was one of the signatories on the 1661 Declaration to Charles II and was also one of many imprisoned in the early 1660s. He caught the plague in prison and died in 1665.

Dorothy White (1630?–86?) was, next to Margaret Fell, the most prolific woman writer of the early Quaker movement, and yet, despite the Friends’ meticulous record-keeping, so very little is chronicled about this leading visionary and author. Michele Tarter explores the nature of her prophetic endtime writing: “Upholding a radical, revolutionary vision of Christianity, she espoused Quaker millenarianism and an embodied spirit theology. In tract after tract, and with divine authority and command, she declared that Christ’s kingdom was being established on earth, both inwardly in Friends and politically in the world.”¹⁶ White was clear to delineate in her writing how she came to be used as a vessel for God’s message and is constantly negotiating between the roles of minister and messenger. She was silent for twenty-two years before recommencing her publishing shortly before her death. Tarter speculates on how the formalization of Quaker publishing may have silenced this prophet.

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John Perrot (? –1665) was an Irish Friend, convinced through the preaching of Burrough and Howgill during their time there in 1655. Carla Gardina Pestana outlines the way his involvement in the mission to the Vatican and his imprisonment there added to his reputation among Friends. When he returned to England he became involved in a dispute about whether Quakers should continue to remove their hats in prayer. This became a flashpoint in a delicate internal negotiation between increasing formalization and codification of Quaker practice and direct inspiration. The issue of “hat honour” was perhaps secondary to a debate over where authority lay. With the Nayler incident a recent memory, Fox was keen to quell Perrot and ultimately he was sidelined and maligned. He ended his life in Jamaica, having found the rift with Fox and other Quakers irreparable.

Mary Penington (1625–82) and Isaac Penington (1616–79) belong almost to a second phase of converts, becoming Friends over a two-year period in the mid-1650s having quashed their academic and aristocratic prejudices against the Quakers. R. Melvin Keiser takes each writer in turn. Mary Penington’s writings detail her vivid spiritual dreams and her attempts to embody her faith as a woman minister. Isaac was a more prolific writer and Keiser explores his philosophical, political and spiritual writings. The latter include many commentaries on the contemplative life and his pastoral letters have ensured that his work has stayed in print.

Hugh Pyper examines the life and writings of Robert Barclay, principally of his 1676 publication known popularly as “The Apology.”¹⁷ This was the first systematic defence of Quakerism and was reprinted in English in 1678. After his death in 1690, William Penn reprinted Barclay’s collected works and “The Apology” became standard household text. Barclay differed from Fox’s theology in some regards, notably on the degree of perfection attainable. He also clarified that while everyone is part of the elect, anyone can fall away from grace. This led to spirituality of anxiety and introspection in the following century. Pyper makes the point too that his theology was open to misinterpretation without the transformative experience that underpinned his academic work. Those coming later to the text looking for answers could read it in multiple ways, favoring either an evangelical or liberal preference.

Elizabeth Bathurst (c. 1655–85) only became a Quaker in 1678 but within a year had written a systematic theology of Quakerism; later she wrote a treatise defending the ministry of women. She died in 1685 when only thirty. Her writings were well received and regularly reprinted after her death. As Mary Garman explains, her work was always related to her

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personal experience rather than purely abstract argument. Fortunately Bathurst's writings are now being rediscovered by recent scholarship.

William Penn (1644–1718) joined the Quaker movement in 1667 and soon became one of the most prominent leaders. Of seventeenth-century Quaker writers, only George Fox is credited with more publications, and only George Whitehead had a longer publishing life. Melvin Endy surveys his theological thought in terms of his sense of the human condition, epistemology and the authority of the inward Light, and his soteriology. Endy detects a universalism in Penn which in part betray his arguments about the superiority of Christianity.

George Keith (c. 1638–1716) was another Quaker who ended up on the losing side of a debate. Like Robert Barclay, Keith was from Aberdeen and like Barclay was very well educated. He became a Quaker in the early 1660s, and in the 1670s he was one of the leading Quakers and traveled with Penn, Fox and Barclay on their mission to the Pietists. Michael Birkel outlines in detail Keith's interest in Kabbalah, which set him apart from the other writers featured in this volume. Keith became concerned about doctrinal laxity in the 1680s and his personality exacerbated the ensuing conflict. He was disowned by British Friends in 1695 and went on to be part of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, writing against his former friends such as William Penn, and ending his life as a rector in East Sussex. At the end of his life, he recast his spiritual experiences as a Quaker as a purely natural phenomenon.

George Whitehead (1636?–1723) was one of the longest living first-generation Quakers. He became a Quaker at sixteen while a school teacher, and was one of the Valiant Sixty. As Robynne Rogers Healey suggests:

His publications indicate that his theology was generated by profoundly transformational personal experiences, then influenced by . . . ongoing disputes. In erecting defences around Friends, he was instrumental in the codified, sectarian behaviour that accompanied the expansion of Quietist theology in the Religious Society of Friends. This emphasis on strict praxis instead of precise belief provided space for theological flexibility that allowed Quakerism to navigate its way out of persecution into tolerability and even respectability.

In other words, he helped steer Quakerism into a place of survival, his ability as a minister turned from attacking the apostate to disciplining those who might threaten the Quaker order he felt was necessary by the 1690s. Whitehead does not leave the hope of the endtime behind; he merely understands it as deferred.

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Rosemary Moore's and Richard Allen's "Afterword" shows how the work featured here relates to the whole of seventeenth-century Quaker history. They show important ways in which Quaker theology has been unified, most notably in witnessing to a charismatic experience to the Light of Christ, a Christ who has come again to teach his people, without mediation of priests or sacraments. Early Quakers thus were testifying to a "second coming" that was either just beginning or was already in full swing. They also examine in some detail the various internal and external pressures, in response to which Quakerism was modified, assuming a stronger organizational form, but also shifting toward a more orthodox, recognisably Trinitarian theology which would qualify the denomination for religious toleration. All of the figures profiled in this volume were involved in some way, and Moore and Allen point to their individual roles in this larger narrative, weaving the varied threads of the chapters together.

Our Approach

We can perhaps see two approaches within the chapters presented here. One starts with the wider historical, cultural and religious context and places Quaker ideas within that context. This might be true of Sally Bruyneel's chapter on Margaret Fell and Melvin Endy's chapter on William Penn. (The well-connected Penn, displaying fruits of a classical education, is certainly amenable to such treatment, as can also be seen in essays published in a recent issue of *Quaker Studies* devoted to Penn.¹⁸)

The other, more common, approach among the writers here is to start with the Quaker experience and to try and untangle its own internal theological logic. This latter approach tends to emphasize Quaker ideas as distinctive and radical. It shows the commonality of Quaker thinking while risking the mistake of seeing Quakerism as unique. Very little of the Quaker message was new. The selection and emphasis of key elements was fresh and timing was crucial. By 1652, when the Quaker movement began to gather momentum following George Fox's vision on Pendle Hill and the conversion both of Margaret Fell and her household and of hundreds of others at Firbank Fell, disappointment with Cromwell's moderate approach to religious innovation was widespread. Additionally, significantly, many of the egalitarian alternatives to Quakerism (such as the Levellers) had disappeared or failed to capture the public need for clarity, confidence and certainty at a time of failed harvests and social instability. The libertarianism of groups like the Ranters¹⁹ failed to offer stability.

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To avoid the risk of total abstraction, we have emphasized the need for some biography in each chapter. This, we hope, helps to contextualize theological shifts within the lifetime of the subject, and to help show some of the commonalities and divergences of background and life experience. In some cases, it helps explain the theological shifts they made. It helps us to see, too, just how cohesive this group was. Each of the writers featured here would have known of their Quaker peers. Their itinerancy and shared leadership of the group would have meant they would have met. They shared a message, albeit emphasized in different ways, and they worked together, under the direction of Fox and Fell, to maximize the Quaker mission. We have tried to emphasize this inter-relationship and the inter-weaving of the lives of the writers featured here. Authors have worked collaboratively on this book to try and maximize its coherence. Each one of us has read everything.

Most of the material in this volume represents fresh scholarship, each chapter underpinned by original research. This book expands our understanding of the theology of early Quaker leaders and the context in which they preached. For example, Betty Hagglund's chapter on who published early Quaker tracts fuses scholarship on print culture and the book trade with detailed knowledge of Quaker beginnings to offer original contributions to both literary and Quaker studies. This book complements Rosemary Moore's *The Light in their Consciences*²⁰ but extends the time period beyond 1666. It distils the monographs by Sally Bruyneel on Margaret Fell²¹ and Hilary Hinds on George Fox²² and allows Carole Spencer to elaborate on her article on James Nayler in *Quaker Studies*.²³ We have been able to draw on Douglas Gwyn's extensive knowledge of pre-Quaker history.²⁴ Indeed, we have been fortunate to have had the cooperation of what we believe are the world's leading scholars in their areas for each of our chapters.

Early Quakerism has always attracted a disproportionate degree of scholarly interest in comparison with later periods and yet no book has attempted a comparative theological treatment of the ideas of the key spokesperson for the movement over its first half-century. At a time when scholars continue to revisit earlier understandings of Quaker beginnings, with the recent publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*²⁵ and the forthcoming Penn State Press volume edited by Rosemary Moore and Richard Allen on the "second period,"²⁶ complementing (if not replacing) William Charles Braithwaite's 1919 volume,²⁷ this is an opportune time to undertake this task. Quaker studies scholarship is as vibrant as it has ever been and certainly more energetic than it has been for a century

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and this is reflected in the strength of the innovative collection of chapters presented here. We trust you find this volume useful.

Postscript and Dedication

One hundred years ago, scholarship on Quakerism was experiencing a renaissance. This modern wave of Quaker historiography can be seen to have started with the unfinished but influential work by the nineteenth-century historian Robert Barclay of Reigate entitled *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*.²⁸ Thomas Hamm has argued that while evangelical in its leanings and intent, it influenced the major modernist histories of the twentieth century penned by the likes of Rufus Jones and William Charles Braithwaite in its account of the pre-history of Quakers.²⁹ For the modernists, history was seen to be a critical strategy in the revitalization of the Society. If Friends only knew their history, the ministry would be deepened, and renewal would surely follow. Publication, then, to reach and educate all Friends and thus avoid the requirement of pastors adopted by Evangelical Friends in the late nineteenth century when faced with thousands of newcomers brought in by Quaker camp revivals, was an important part of the modernist vision of renewal.³⁰ The Rowntree Series of histories, seven volumes published between 1911 and 1925, sat alongside the summer schools of the turn of the century, the settling of a permanent summer school in George Cadbury's former home of Woodbrooke, and the Swarthmore Lecture initiated in 1907 as the educational means to deepen the Quaker ministry.

Yet the historical emphasis among Friends at the start of the twentieth century was not limited to modernist scholars like William Charles Braithwaite and Rufus Jones whose work has been much discussed and debated. In 1900, the British Meeting for Sufferings agreed to appoint, at the Recording Clerk Isaac Sharp's prompting, a Librarian for the Friends Reference Library in Devonshire House. The person appointed was Norman Penney (1858–1933), who had spent the previous sixteen years serving the Home Mission Committee in Hawes, Melksham, Gloucester and London. Penney set about establishing the first index for the holdings of the library and in 1903, Sharp and Penney were among the founders of the Friends Historical Society and Penney became close friends with his American counterpart, Allen C. Thomas at Haverford. Rufus Jones acted as a consulting editor to the new *Journal of the Friends Historical Society (JFHS)*, and we can see here a commitment to history that transcended internal Quaker dynamics and motivations. Penney had edited for