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THE EXPERIENCE OF REGENERATION AND THE EROSION OF CERTAINTY
IN THE THEOLOGY OF SECOND-GENERATION QUAKERS: NO PLACE FOR
DOUBT?

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Tousley argues that there was a discernible shift in Quaker spiritual epistemology (theory of knowledge) between the first and second generations, with implications for both the theology and the spiritual and moral lives of those involved. She considers this mostly from a theological, but also from an anthropological perspective. She also includes a short biography for each of the people she discusses, and a description of the sources she refers to.

Keywords: Justification, sanctification, regeneration, conviction, knowing/knowledge of God, epistemology, journals, narrative theology, scripture, reason, tradition, development of structures and forms, early Quakers, first and second generation Quakers, certainty, doubt, perfection, immediate and progressive change and conversion, moralism. Puritans and Quakers.

Who it would be useful for: Theologians and historians of doctrine and ideas; and religious studies scholars, such as anthropologists and sociologists of religion.

Introduction

According to Thomas Story, the 'Divine essential Truth' became 'self-evident' to him in his conversion. 'I need not reason about Him; all reasoning was superseded and immersed, by an intuition of that Divine and truly wonderful evidence of that light which proceeded from Himself alone, leaving no place for doubt or any question at all.' According to Tousley a shift in Quaker spiritual epistemology (the study of the nature of knowledge) can be discerned, from this view, characteristic of the first generation (convinced c1650-60), to the second generation (c1675-1700), who were less confident about their understanding of, and hence witness to, the truth. For the first Quakers, experience provided certainty; for the second, it did not provide quite the same level of luminous, intuitive comprehension and conviction, on account of a 'different experience of regeneration'; though it remained a prerequisite for the proper understanding and authoritative appropriation of other sources of religious authority such as scripture and tradition. Narrative writings containing significant autobiographical detail such as spiritual journals are the essential sources for the theology of this period, due to this general emphasis on experience.

Tousley begins by giving a brief historical review of the Quaker movement, and a longer review of the scholarly literature relevant to her topic. 'Most historians of Quakerism describe a transition between the first and second generation of Friends, from an enthusiastic movement with few structural controls to a well-organized religious body with clear boundaries.' While the first generation grounded spiritual authority in immediate revelation by the Spirit, the second had to develop a distinctive communal practice and authority, though this process had already begun with the first generation on account of controversy within and persecution from without. The late seventeenth century is comparatively under-researched, and epistemology is rarely the main focus: Tousley's study aims to fill this gap 'both in its attention to the second generation and in the focus on revelation and theological epistemology as they relate to soteriology (the study of salvation) [including the doctrine of perfection].'

Tousley goes on to contextualise Quaker spiritual autobiography. The genre 'blossomed in the mid-17th c as a result of the emphasis on self-examination, personal piety, and experience in the English Reformation, which stressed inward confirmation of belief over intellectual assent.' Puritans personally experienced doctrines they had learned, then articulated them through narrative and testimony; Quakers followed this path but prioritised experience itself over received doctrine. Initially conviction tracts were written to spread

the message by displaying its effect on the life of the author; by the end of the century journals had become the predominant form. This perhaps reflects a concern to nurture the movement.

Spiritual autobiography provides a standard format of human nature and spiritual development with which to communicate experience: so, for Puritans, there is a two-fold experience of law and gospel, in which they learn by experience that justification cannot be earned. Similarly, Quaker autobiography reflects Quaker theology. Tousley identifies five typical spiritual stages on an idealised spiritual path, adhered to with variations and changes in emphasis between individual accounts, and some common differences between first and second generation writers. The stages are: childhood religious experience, seeking and youthful estrangement, conviction or day of visitation, spiritual warfare, and regeneration.

Intimations in childhood are followed by restless seeking, punctuated with partial 'experiences of grace and openings of understanding', and culminating in a 'standstill' in which seeking is abandoned in private devotion or ranterism. Birthright Friends tend to describe youthful wandering, involving the experience of divine abandonment as a result of play and jesting, rather than the seeking stage, though this sometimes leads to a quiet personal seeking. Next comes the day of visitation, in which - typically though with many variations - the divine presence is experienced, partial understanding received and hope enkindled. This sometimes follows intellectual assent to Quaker doctrines in second generation Friends; in first, it is always original. Spiritual warfare, involving the conviction of sin (self-will and pride) expressed in Pauline language, is often continuous with the earlier stage for the second generation; unlike Puritans, for Quakers a final assurance is both 'possible and expected'. Regeneration involves the experience of sin being overcome and Christ immediately present, leading to the completion of creation and restoration of the state of Adam for the first generation, while the second have an ongoing struggle to remain faithful, similar to Puritans. In the second generation there is an increasing emphasis on accepting the cross of Quaker discipline, and corresponding shift in the theology or revelation, to be explored below.

First-generation experience

Tousley considers tracts by Richard Hubberthorn, William Dewsbury and Isaac Penington with reference to the five stages, before moving on to the theology implicit in these and other narratives of the first decade of the Quaker movement. She identifies in Penington the first

hint of the principal shift in Quaker thought which she is dealing with: a 'greater emphasis on the need to continue to abide in the Seed', rather than a fulsome sense of victory achieved. She draws out some common threads from these accounts regarding 'areas which are crucial to early Friends' understanding of revelation: regeneration, knowledge, and the use of scripture and tradition.'

'Almost all the first generation narratives describe an initial experience of grace leading to an internal struggle and final victory, though these maybe temporally distinct. Some ... emphasise spiritual warfare and obedience, [others] a new relationship with God. Yet for both, the fruits of regeneration are fulfilment of the quest for authentic religion and the commission to bring others to the same experience.' This fulfilment involves the experience of the 'immediate Christ', and in contrast to other aspects of spiritual development this is a challenge to utter: 'a new language, or at least a new appropriation of old language' is necessary. This experience distinguishes those granted it from the pre- and unregenerate and is in total contrast to 'worldly wisdom'. One speaks of being 'broken, melted and overcome with the love of God'. Apocalyptic metaphors are used, and that of new birth. There is an inward experience of judgement and purging, involving a crucifixion of self will. In contrast to the second generation, and Penington, regeneration is complete at the moment of conversion, not a gradual process of conformance to God's image.

The outward cross is of less importance, though James Naylor insists that it prepared him to receive the inward experience. Justification and sanctification are simultaneous: 'Complete assurance was contingent on the eradication of sin accomplished through waiting in the Presence and submitting to the purging of spiritual warfare.' Perfection, however, might only occur over time, and had to be maintained with diligence; it was only made possible by a single work of grace.

The 'return to the garden [of Eden]' metaphor can also be significant, also the 'opening of the senses' – the claim to know 'sensibly' or 'experimentally', expressed in intensely sensuous language. Both point to a 'transformed relationship with creation': not an outward restoration but 'a new understanding of the existing creation'. Common to all is a 'transformed, intimate relationship with God ... most often referred to as the Seed, Life or Light of Christ'. The Seed is pre-existent, but revealed at the day of visitation, and learning to 'abide in and submit to it is essential to the complete assurance of God's Presence and love'. This Presence causes rejoicing, and empowers for public ministry in the face of all obstacles: yet this power is always Christ, and is often expressed in the passive voice. Only Penington speaks about bearing the cross of conversion, but all express 'assurance and understanding

through waiting and abiding in the Seed of an ever-present God' and 'complete certainty of the love of God'.

The 'knowledge' of the 'Truth' which this is of and entailed by is the immediate divine presence; secondarily, it is the revelation of 'who the writer is in relationship to God and creation, and ushers in the judgement that transforms and restores these relationships.' Human wisdom regarding these matters is rejected, including metaphysical doctrine and outward forms and aids of religion. Knowledge is confirmed by a sense of comfort and peace with God, which comes from obedience to the divine presence, and it does not involve information about God: 'The content of revelation consisted essentially in man's interior non-conceptual awareness of God.' This is a gift, and a relational form of knowing.

Though other forms of knowing were rejected rhetorically, actually scripture, reason and even tradition played a role: only they were all to be understood through inner illumination. 'Dobbs argued that Fox had so absorbed the scriptural tradition that his new revelations were really an illumination of scripture', and various Quaker ideas and practices were adapted from other denominations. Tousley concludes this section by exploring the emergence of the journal genre and its differences with tracts in terms of the five stages. She identifies a growing emphasis on 'the difficulties of conversion and the need for diligence in abiding in the Light', and this as taking up the cross, as in Penington's tract; this 'reflects a growing concern among Friends with discernment and the possibility of erring.' There are further departures; some portray 'judgement and ethical conversion with little sense of victory'.

Tousley summarises her conclusions about the theology of first-generation Friends as follows: 1. They did not stress one aspect of regeneration; 2. They use a variety of metaphors to describe it; 3. Knowledge is essentially a new relational understanding of God, and discernment a matter of resting in this relationship; 3. Knowledge and righteousness are characteristics of Christ that are shared with humanity through the indwelling Seed causing a real change in the person; 4. Despite their insistence that immediate revelation was more authoritative than scripture, early Friends drew heavily on scriptural tropes and imagery.

Second-generation experience

Tousley analyses the journals of four important second-generation Friends in terms of the five stages: James Dickinson, Thomas Story (who represents a transition between first- and

second-generation narratives), Samuel Bownas, and John Fothergill. The narratives of second-generation Friends are almost entirely in journal format. 'The journals of second-generation Friends typically describe childhood and early religious experience, followed by a period of indulgence in pastimes that create distance from God (youthful estrangement). As with first-generation Friends, this is followed by an experience of God (day of visitation) that leads to an internal struggle (spiritual warfare), and at least a partial victory in which sin is conquered (regeneration). Yet in contrast to earlier Friends, the last three stages are more often described as a single experience, with a focus on spiritual warfare and little elaboration on the more positive aspects of grace.'

Notably the emphasis is on continuing struggle, rather than perfect union with the principle of regeneration, Christ the inward teacher. 'Knowledge also develops gradually, and is contingent on obedience and waiting on God.' Rather than 'an exhausted standstill where human wisdom is confounded, most second generation Friends describe a moment of surrender and a tenacious resolve to remain in the Light.' This reflects aspects of the experience on earlier Friends, but also anticipates Quietism. For the second generation, regeneration leads to openings of the understanding, 'but these are discreet events, not a new identity that confers a complete opening of creation and immediate certainty described by Story and the first generation.' They draw on metaphors from Malachi of threshing and the refiner's fire, as much as from Revelation. This imagery focuses on individual spiritual change rather than situating the author in the completion of salvation history. They also refer to the struggle of Israel's heroes to remain faithful, rather than 'accomplished victory'. Spiritual warfare with intermittent release becomes as characteristic as immediate revelation of Godself. 'These changes might reflect a difference in how the story is told, rather than an actual difference in experience, but in either case there is a shift in the underlying theology.' Justification and sanctification are arguably separated again in the second generation; this shift 'may also lessen the powerful metaphor of rebirth', which is effectively redefined in terms of ethical perfection. There is also a striking lack of explicit references to empowerment for the ministry, apparently connected to a sense of humility.

Second-generation Friends continue to insist on the relational and subjective nature of revelation, and the need for external sources of knowledge to be confirmed inwardly; but gradual regeneration and incomplete transformation strain this, with an increasing emphasis on obedience rather than relationship; and there 'may be an emerging emphasis on the unknowability of God among more intellectual Friends'. 'This emphasis on the inexpressibility of the encounter with God, rather than the confounding of intellectual pride

and obedience to the inward teacher [as in the first generation], may suggest the development of a negative theology that stresses waiting and the unknowability of God, rather than the knowledge of God that is the gift of the inward teacher.’ Birthright Friends in the second generation ‘are explicit that through regeneration they receive an inward knowledge of what they formerly knew only by education.’

If ‘revelation is essentially a disclosure of Godself, then the incomplete victory over sin experienced by second generation Friends raises the question of discernment and the place of knowledge in an imperfect community.’ This ‘room for doubt’ helps to account for the increasing reliance on corporate structures and external authority (albeit confirmed from within); though of course, this remains an incipient tendency, not a radical breach with first-generation narratives. At any rate discernment becomes a more protracted process, relying on more factors. Second-generation Friends ‘recognise the limits of [the older] theology in periods of doubt or a mixed community.’

Tousley picks out the differences between the first and second generations concerning external sources of authority, scripture, reason and tradition, as a consequence of the shift she has been describing. Whereas scripture is used typologically by the first generation – as if the story was being fulfilled within them – the second tends to use it analogically – to discover parallels and examples between their own experience and the story. This reflects a certain experiential distancing; though again it is not true always or in every case, and the experiential emphasis remains more pronounced than in other denominations. Tradition has come to play a more important role for second-generation Quakers: while there is a rhetorical rejection of external, inherited Quaker membership as opposed to inward conversion, ‘the role of elders is increasingly valued and unity is viewed as a mark of authenticity’. However, Tousley points out that even for the first generation, tradition played an implicit role: their inner experience was interpreted in the light of scripture and doctrines derived from those of Puritans and Seekers. The second generation inherited the view that regeneration is an experience one needs to have, and this causes anxiety that it should take place: ‘The temptation to stretch experience to fit the frame of Quaker teaching, and thus assert a prescribed personal experience, was probably particularly strong among those born into Quaker families.’ ‘In either generation, there may be a false sense of coherence imposed by the use of shared rhetoric and structural forms’: for the first generation, ‘the early structural forms dictated assurance, and did not leave room for the expression of doubt.’ The emphasis on sin in the second generation might be connected to the inherited need to experience freedom from it. The biggest difference between the first and second generations concerns

reason: the second generation still require it to be confirmed inwardly, but it often plays a vital role in convincement: a conversion experience was effectively induced in Crisp by reading Barclay, and when Story was convinced, it was of ideas he was already intellectually convinced of.

‘Early Friends experienced one, overarching grace that included justification, sanctification and the restoration of creation, and stressed the culminating experience of regeneration. Without the broad vision linking justification and sanctification, second-generation Friends were left with the expectation of victory over sin, but with no explicit teaching on justification and [their own] experience suggested that the struggle with sin was ongoing. For some, regeneration was easily reduced to individualised ethical perfection and a lack of assurance of forgiveness.’

Conclusions

The two generations have a similar explicit theology of revelation and knowing, but the experience of second-generation Friends left more room for doubt and their narrative theology suggests greater reliance on other sources of knowing.

The experience of the immediate presence of Christ, in which the Christian was justified and Christ’s righteousness imparted so that sin was conquered, provided the first generation of Friends, many of whom had been Puritans afflicted by anxiety concerning their election, with a sense of complete victory through God’s grace. This sense weakens slightly in the second generation: it seems that the sense of liberation was a difficult one to transmit. As a result, a ‘focus on individual sins and piety’ overshadows the ‘wider vision of early Friends’ in those seeking to recover this experience, so to put it, ‘on demand’. They have ‘a concern to eliminate sin, rather than a sense of justification in the midst of sin.’ ‘Thus, the primary difference is the erosion of assurance of salvation, not the more gradual view of perfection held by second generation Friends’; and it should be bourn in mind that the ‘early Quaker experience of return to the garden where God is known intimately is not dependant on an experience of instantaneous perfection, nor is the understanding of the unity of grace.’ All of this, Tousley comments, ‘probably reflects the typical spiritual journey in any religious tradition’, from the idealism generated by an ‘unusual historical moment’ to the search for an enduring and more generally utilisable spiritual structure. In her footnotes she discusses the

views of various scholars on the Quaker account of the relationship between free will and divine agency raised by the issues she is dealing with; characteristically, early Quakers saw the possibility of a choice to obey as residing in the experience of regeneration.

The greater tenuousness of the relationship with God in conversion affected second-generation epistemology. Gwyn describes 'early Quaker approaches to the truth using four philosophical models, one of which is correspondence, an inductive approach analogous to the emerging sciences, in which belief must be verified by experience' – though this is an analogy, because of course the Quaker epistemology concerns knowledge of God, of whom there is 'no natural knowledge except by the grace of inward revelation', and not the natural world. Second-generation Friends are less confident in this experiential certainty, though they always seek to judge other sources of knowledge against their inward sense. Barclay reflects a further move away from the correspondence, subjective conviction of truth, when he effectively holds that the truth experience provides is abstract and intellectual in nature. For most, it remains the case that discernment is 'primarily through the subjective measure of Light, Life or a sense of peace, despite the subsidiary role played by reason, tradition and scripture.'

Tousley ends by making some suggestions concerning other perspectives which might be taken on her material, and further avenues of research arising from it, which may be of interest to readers of this summary:

- Test theology of journals against the more explicit theology of doctrinal tracts and pastoral epistles.
- Inclusion of manuscripts, especially in discussing women's experience.
- A study of how the narratives are used by Friends in developing sectarian social control.
- Comparisons with other religious traditions: eg autobiography from other movements with an emphasis on individual experience and enthusiasm.
- Incorporation of anthropological approaches to religious studies (reflected in aspects of Tousley's thesis): eg the process of ritualization and the way in which language both forms and is formed by theology; standardisation of autobiographical forms.
- A comparison between Quaker theology and aspects of modern theology eg Barth's theology of revelation (content of revelation; rejection of human constructs).
- Historical and theological analysis of late 17th and 18th c Friends, and the impact of the emerging modern worldview on Quaker thought. (Different authors emphasize

either epistemology or perfection, and this may reflect an incipient division between liberal and more evangelical worldviews.)

Summary prepared by Andrew Harvey (2012)