

Liberal Quaker Christologies in the Swarthmore Lectures: Two Studies in Theological Method

Christy Randazzo
Montclair State University, NJ, USA

Abstract

This paper argues that the flexibility inherent in Liberal Quaker theology allows for multiple interpretations of two key Christological issues: the relationship between Jesus and humanity, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the life and work of Jesus. These issues are explored through the lens of the Swarthmore Lectures: chronologically, in terms of incarnational theology, offering suggestions for interpreting the development of Liberal Quaker Christology over time; and thematically, in terms of the relationship between Christology and Pneumatology, offering frameworks for developing Liberal Quaker Spirit Christologies. A final suggestion is offered that, far from being a liability, the inconsistency and ambiguity of Liberal Quaker theology is actually an inherent apophaticism, which creates the circumstances for the diversity and variety of Liberal Quaker theology.

Keywords

Christology, Pneumatology, Systematic Theology, Liberal Quakerism, Trinity, Swarthmore Lectures

Introduction

Liberal Quaker theology has focussed much of its attention on developing alternative models to explain the relationship between God and humans, with a special focus on the Light.¹ This includes focussing significant attention on the person of Jesus and his existence as the Christ. In Liberal Quaker thought,

1 Eccles, P. J., *The Presence in the Midst: reflections on discernment*, London: Quaker Books, 2009, p. 69.

however, the relationship between the aspects of God has not often been defined with any specificity following the Quaker insistence on ambiguity when it comes to defining God.

Theologians have generally avoided examining Liberal Quaker theology in a systematic way. Much of this is related directly to Christian theologians' general disinterest in Liberal Quaker theology, which inevitably meant that the vast majority of the theologians engaging in Liberal Quaker theology are Liberal Quaker theologians.² Save some recent work by Christy Randazzo, most Liberal Quaker theologians have also generally shown little interest in examining their confessional theology from a systematic fashion.³ Other structural elements inherent to Liberal Quaker theology made such an examination difficult as well, most especially the emphasis on continuing revelation and experience as the primary theological source.⁴ The first led to an aversion to the creation of doctrine, while the latter led to an aversion to examine the experience of Liberal Quakers from any outside, imposed theological categories which did not emerge from the experience of worship. Thus, the failure to engage in Liberal Quaker theology systematically results from a lack of action rather than a barrier inherent within Liberal Quaker theology, which would bar such an engagement.⁵

An aversion to explicitness in developing a Trinitarian theology is the mainstream of Liberal Quaker theology. An early example of this trend, G. K. Hibbert rejected the need for any more explicit statements about the Trinity other than a recognition that God has personality, a view that he finds in the

2 Stuart Masters is engaging in an attempt to bring Liberal Quaker theology, Wesleyan theology, and Anabaptist theology into dialogue with his blog *A Quaker Stew*. He demonstrates the significant overlaps between these traditions, while charting areas of potential dialogue between them. Masters, S., *A Quaker Stew*, <http://aquakerstew.blogspot.com/> [accessed 04/08/16].

3 Randazzo, D. C., *The Interdependent Light: a Quaker theology of reconciliation*, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2018; Randazzo, C., *Liberal Quaker Reconciliation Theology*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2020.

4 An example of this is Alex Wildwood, whose theological examination is mainly in spirituality and whose recent work in ecotheology is decidedly experiential. Farrow J. and Wildwood, A., *Universe as Revelation: an ecomystical theology for Friends*, London: Pronoun Press, 2013.

5 Pink Dandelion makes a similar argument in his recent Swarthmore Lecture, *Open for Transformation: being Quaker*, London: Quaker Books, 2014. He claims that Liberal Quakerism has the potential to provide a more cohesive communal understanding of its identity and structure if it rooted itself in the *Quaker Faith and Practice*. His work examines the reasons for the Liberal Quaker aversion to specificity, and has critiqued it. Notable examples of his critiques of Liberal Quaker theological tendencies include his argument that Liberal Quakers have a liturgical structure, and that they have a 'behavioural creed'. Dandelion, P., *The Liturgies of Quakerism*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005; Dandelion, P., *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of the Quakers: the silent revolution*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

absence of an explicit Trinitarian theology in the New Testament.⁶ In his 1943 lecture, Leyton Richards dismissed any Trinitarian speculation just as quickly, stating that it need not be of greater concern than to simply acknowledge that the Trinity represented the Godhead in perfect unity.⁷ Richards did not dismiss the Trinity entirely, yet found its significance solely in how the inter-relationality of the Trinity represents the inter-relationality of humanity, and thus how the Trinity establishes a social reality of human interdependence.⁸

I argue that the flexibility inherent in Liberal Quaker theology allows for multiple interpretations of two key Christological questions which I will examine in two sections. In the first section, I examine how lecturers have understood the Incarnation and explored the relationship between Jesus and humanity. I argue that examining these topics through specific lectures, in a chronological fashion, offers insights into the ways that Liberal Quaker theology has developed over time, and wrestled with Liberal Quakerism's increased ambivalence towards its Christian theological roots. In the second section, I examine the ways that lecturers have engaged with wider themes present within Liberal Quaker Pneumatology, specifically the role of the Holy Spirit in the life and work of Jesus. These themes include: exploring the fluidity between Christ and the Spirit, Spirit Christology from a Liberal Quaker perspective, and a final suggestion that, far from being a liability, the inconsistency and ambiguity of Liberal Quaker theology is actually an inherent apophaticism which creates the circumstances for Liberal Quaker theology to be as diverse as it has become.

A Note on Method

Liberal Quakerism, as a distinct and definable branch of worldwide Quakerism, has its roots in the application of liberal theology within Quaker thought in the late nineteenth century. While Quakerism in Britain developed a significant Evangelical focus in the nineteenth century, the relatively small size of the British Quaker community, and subsequent lack of theological diversity, reined in the wide theological diversity and separations experienced in other parts of the global Quaker community. As a result, when the majority of British Quakers began moving from Evangelical theological perspectives towards liberal theological positions in the late nineteenth century into early twentieth century, the community of British Quakerism generally moved towards a consensus around those positions, leading to the development of a distinctly British Liberal Quakerism in the twentieth century.

6 Hibbert, G. K., *The Inner Light and Modern Thought*, London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1924, p. 60.

7 Hibbert, *The Inner Light*, p. 42.

8 Richards, L., *Planning for Freedom*, London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1943, p. 43.

The Swarthmore Lectures were established by the Woodbrooke Extension Committee on 9 December 1907 as an ‘annual lecture on some subject relating to the message and work of the Society of Friends’. The Committee desired that the lectures fulfil two purposes. The lectures had to interpret the message and mission of British Liberal Quakers to British Liberal Quakers. Secondly, the lectures were intended to be a method of informing the wider public of the ‘spirit, the aims and fundamental principles’ of British Liberal Quakers. The Committee insisted that the lecturers were completely responsible for any opinions that they expressed, meaning that the Committee would not censor any message delivered.⁹

Those who deliver lectures are therefore free to engage in any debate that they find most compelling, even to disagree with common trends within British Liberal Quaker thought with the intent of shifting Liberal Quaker theological perspective and belief structures. The lectures thus impact British Liberal Quaker theology in two ways: as definitive statements of British Liberal Quaker theology, as it stands at that time; and as tools to develop British Liberal Quaker theology. This individual focus has a significant benefit for the development of Liberal Quaker theology: it provides a sustained examination of specific topics which spurs dialogue within Liberal Quakerism as a whole, potentially to such a degree that British Liberal Quakerism adapts its corporate understanding of certain core concepts in significant ways. This is very important for a religious tradition that places such significant import on the value of corporate discernment of the testimony of individuals.

The long history of the lectures, coupled with the freedom to explore any topic, has led to an eclectic array of topics covered across the span of the lectures. This breadth not only rivals that of the *Quaker Faith and Practice*, its depth is simply unmatched by any other series of writings in British Liberal Quakerism. The multi-vocal format of the lectures also allows for dynamic growth in the corporate understanding of a diverse array of aspects of British Liberal Quaker practice and theology.

The lecturers have a clear sense of their potential impact on future Liberal Quaker thought. Representative of this is D. Elton Trueblood. In his 1939 lecture, Trueblood argued that the lectures were instrumental in developing Quaker thought, claiming that they were the ‘closest approximation to an authoritative statement of Quakerism in the twentieth century’.¹⁰ Trueblood singled out Arthur Eddington’s 1929 lecture as carrying such import that not only was it the most read lecture to that point, but that it was also deeply influential on American Quakerism.¹¹ Finally, Trueblood argued that the significant re-evaluation of

9 Dale, J., *Beyond the Spirit of the Age*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1996, p. iii.

10 Trueblood, D. E., *The People Called Quakers*, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1971, p. 289.

11 Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers*, pp. 243–44. Eddington’s lecture: Eddington, S. E., *Science and the Unseen World*, London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1929.

the concept of the Inner Light contemporaneously extant was fuelled by the re-examination of the nature of God in lectures in the several years prior.¹²

The lectures are the longest sustained theological conversation within Liberal Quakerism, with the widest variety of topics covered, and serve as the only intentional corpus of theological thought extant within the tradition. In this paper, I will examine how Christology and Pneumatology have been explored in specific, key lectures, ones I have chosen due to either the extent of their examination of these two topics, or the impact their Christological or Pneumatological examination had on subsequent Liberal Quaker thought.

‘Liberal Quaker theology’ is the term used in this paper to refer, generally, to the theological categories and concepts which stem from the context of Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM), and which Swarthmore lecturers respond to, and engage with. Swarthmore lecturers rarely, if ever, explain what they mean when they use theological terms, thus demonstrating that they assume that they are referring to a common understanding of the meaning of these terms, categories, and concepts. While this might not be the case—at least in the sense of a theological lexicon to which all British Quakers would wholeheartedly agree—I will use the term ‘Liberal Quaker theology’ when I am referring to the tradition which the Swarthmore lecturers are assuming when they refer to ‘Quaker theology’.

Jesus as Incarnation

Swarthmore lecturers have expressed a range of perspectives towards the relationship between Jesus the man and Jesus the Incarnate God. Generally, lecturers have moved chronologically, from assuming that their audience accepted Incarnational theology, even if in a mode heavily influenced by the Liberal Quaker emphasis on the humanness of Jesus, towards an assumption that their audience was likely to hold a variety of views towards Incarnational theology, even outright rejection. This has led to a somewhat reactionary tone in recent years, where lecturers have questioned whether Liberal Quakers are in the process of losing something vital by abandoning the historic Quaker acceptance of Incarnational theology.

The desire for creativity in envisioning God that typifies Liberal Quaker expressions of the *experience* of God also typifies Liberal Quaker Christology. This creativity, I contend, leads Liberal Quaker Christology to be more speculative, and therefore less systematic, than Christology in other Protestant traditions. Only a few Swarthmore lecturers deal with issues of Christology in depth, while most deal with Christology from the perspective of the author’s personal experience. Jesus is often referred to in passing, as an aspect of a greater point that the lecturer is seeking to make. This oblique approach appears to stem either from an assumption of a common language of Christology between the lecturer and the audience, or simply because the lecturer was dealing with a topic

12 Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers*, p. 74.

that did not need to address Christology. I argue that over time, the lecturers move from an assumption of a common belief in Jesus as saviour, Incarnation and the unique Liberal Quaker perspective of Jesus as Spirit, towards a latter period when the lecturer was not able to make any assumptions about the Christology.¹³ This trend applies to those lecturers who addressed Christology directly and in-depth; I argue that the tone of the lectures moves from instruction about the common Liberal Quaker Christological language towards one of apologetics for perspectives that run the spectrum from traditional Christological language towards Universalism.

I argue below that an interesting trend that emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century is a return to language reminiscent of the Quaker Christology of the early lectures. I am uncertain whether this reflects any intentional shift on the part of the lecturers to reclaim explicitly Christian language for Liberal Quakerism; if so, it could reflect a response to a desire within Liberal Quakerism as a whole to reclaim such language.

In 1912, T. R. Glover delivered a substantive examination of Jesus as the Incarnation. Glover stated unequivocally that the doctrine of the Incarnation, the teaching that Jesus was both God and human, is an essential element of Christian faith and is irrevocably connected to the doctrine of the redemption. Glover made the claim that Christian theology universally declares that God suffered on the Cross and died for the purpose of the salvation of humanity.¹⁴ Glover stated this as if it is an uncontroversial fact, choosing to spend more time addressing the implications of this reality for the Church and humanity. Glover contended that the doctrine of the Incarnation and ‘the spectacle of Him who died for the slave as well as the free man’ has motivated humanity to embody the values of compassion towards the other and care for the vulnerable more than any other symbol.¹⁵

13 An early example of this recognition of the lack of unity around Christological belief in the audience occurred in Henry Cadbury’s lecture in 1957, where he acknowledges that many Friends are likely to have been significantly influenced by ‘non-Christian religions’, enough that British Friends should consider engaging with ‘non-Christian religions’ in a more systematic way. By 1969, Maurice Creasey felt compelled to acknowledge that there existed within contemporary Quakerism a ‘sympathy’ for what he termed ‘secular or religionless Christianity’ which prioritised action over prayer, and dismissed any distinction between secular and sacred. Harvey Gillman typifies this caution with labelling Quakerism as explicitly Christian or explicitly non-Christian with his long excursus on the benefits and drawbacks of both positions, ending in this inconclusive sentence: ‘I do believe that there is a power which is divine, creative and loving, though we can often only describe it with the images and symbols that rise from our particular experiences and those of our communities’. Cadbury, H. J., *Quakerism and Early Christianity*, London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1957, p. 33; Creasey, M. A., *Bearing, or Friends and the New Reformation*, London: Friends Home Service, 1969, p. 48; Gillman, H., *A Minority of One: a journey with Friends*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1988, pp. 81–82.

14 Glover, T. R., *The Nature and Purpose of a Christian Society*, London: Headley Brothers Publishers, Ltd., 1912, p. 38.

15 Glover, *Nature and Purpose*, p. 42.

Glover argued that this effect has been achieved through the power of both the example of Jesus and of his story, reflecting a Quaker emphasis on the use of personal story as the most effective tool to teach others about the way of life that most embodies Christian teaching. He illustrated this through a long narration of the manner in which the disciples first meet Jesus, and began to study Jesus through a close reading of his life.¹⁶ Glover termed this 'study in the school of Jesus Christ', which Glover argued will begin to develop in each person an instinctive awareness of the manner of life that Jesus requires of his followers.¹⁷ Glover emphasised obedience to Jesus Christ, claiming that while Jesus might be in relationship with each of his followers, Jesus requires obedience to his teachings.¹⁸ Glover did not acknowledge any other worthwhile interpretations of Jesus' message, stating that this truth is extant in both the doxologies of the New Testament and in the seriousness that Christians throughout history have taken the message.

Edward Grubb approached Christology in 1914 from the perspective of examining the personality of Jesus as both incarnate human and as Christ.¹⁹ Grubb examined this question with the assumption that all Quakers concur that Jesus was a person who existed and who was divine, stating that the Quaker desire to 'do its work in bearing witness to the world of the truth of God' is irrevocably linked with the Quaker call to help people who are struggling 'into the sure anchorage of Christian faith'.²⁰ This faith, Grubb contended, is rooted in the 'two facts' of the person and life of Jesus Christ, as well as the experience of the disciples and the new life which their encounter with Jesus had drawn them.²¹

Grubb viewed these facts as both outward and inward truths, respectively, which he claimed were blended by the authors of the New Testament into a unified theory of a Godman.²² Grubb took issue with the manner in which theories about Jesus developed from dynamic questions derived from some direct experience with Jesus into what he viewed as the attempt by the authors of the historical creeds to develop a uniform answer to which all Christians must believe entirely or be labelled a heretic. Grubb viewed this as the deleterious impact of 'creedalism' upon the spiritual experience of the believer, reflecting the Liberal Quaker aversion to definitive creedal statements.²³

16 Glover, *Nature and Purpose*, p. 51.

17 Glover, *Nature and Purpose*, p. 58.

18 Glover, *Nature and Purpose*, p. 58.

19 Grubb, E., *The Historic and Inward Christ: a study in Quaker thought*, London: Headley Brothers Publishers, Ltd., 1914, p. 7. G. K. Hibbert approached Christology from the perspective of personality as well, focussing on the controversy over the use of *ousia* and *hypostases*. Hibbert argues that the imprecision of these terms argues against taking them seriously as definitive statements about God's nature. Hibbert, G. K., *The Inner Light and Modern Thought*, London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1924, p. 61.

20 Grubb, *The Historic and Inward Christ*, p. 15.

21 Grubb, *The Historic and Inward Christ*, p. 16.

22 Grubb, *The Historic and Inward Christ*, p. 20.

23 Grubb, *The Historic and Inward Christ*, p. 23.

Instead, Grubb shifted the focus towards the personality of Jesus as human and centred on his human psychological struggles with temptation and emotion.²⁴ Grubb contended that such a focus provides the most useful approach for Christians, including Quakers, to comprehend and have faith in Jesus, and thus to live into what Grubb considers the most essential aspect of the Christian life: union with Christ through obedience to Jesus' will for our lives.²⁵

Harry T. Silcock approached Christology from the perspective of personality in 1927 by examining the ways that Jesus' personality could be seen as a universal personality, accessible to any person who seeks to gain a better understanding of the divine life. Silcock contended that this desire is 'everywhere and always the deepest hunger of the human heart', whether that human may or may not be aware of such a desire.²⁶ Silcock used the examples of statements made to this effect by two unnamed people, a Catholic and a Hindu.²⁷ Silcock also quoted an unnamed 'mental specialist' who makes the case that the form of Quaker worship is the most efficacious for those who are 'mentally unstable and diseased'. Silcock's tone betrayed an assumption that his audience would agree with his statements, claiming that one would be amazed by the 'widespread openness to the personality of Jesus Christ' across the world.²⁸ Silcock acknowledged that his audience should probably not assume 'too much' from his statements, and then cited the book *The Christ of the Indian Road* by Stanley Reed, which Silcock claimed describes a 'quiet turning towards Jesus Christ'.²⁹

Silcock expressed a deep faith in the power of Jesus' personality to effect significant change in people and institutions.³⁰ Statements about the efficaciousness of the belief in Jesus to combat great evil reflect Silcock's performative Christology. Jesus achieved this, Silcock contended, by creating a new model for the Messiah that emphasises the values of compassion, non-violence, and solidarity with the oppressed.³¹ This model of life is thus the most efficacious for Christians to follow in order to resolve social ills. Silcock's optimism towards the Christian message—and the Quaker reflection of that message—is not unique amongst Liberal Quakers or reconciliation theologians, however. In 1928 John Hoyland claimed that Quakers must have a 'final and ultimate standard of character', will,

24 Grubb, *The Historic and Inward Christ*, p. 51. T. Edmund Harvey expresses a similar view, stating that understanding Jesus' human struggles gives humanity the comfort that God is united with them in their struggles through life. Edmund, H. T., *The Long Pilgrimage: human progress in the light of the Christian hope*, Harrogate: Robert Davis, 1921, p. 35.

25 Grubb, *The Historic and Inward Christ*, 83.

26 Silcock, H. T., *Christ and the World's Unrest*, London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1927, p. 9.

27 Silcock, *Christ and the World's Unrest*, p. 29.

28 Silcock, *Christ and the World's Unrest*, p. 32.

29 Silcock, *Christ and the World's Unrest*, p. 34.

30 Silcock, *Christ and the World's Unrest*, p. 43.

31 Silcock, *Christ and the World's Unrest*, p. 50.

and the power of love, which for Hoyland is Christ.³² John Hughes stated that Jesus Christ is the foundation of all Western history, and is the absolute best human lens through which to understand God.³³ Konrad Braun claimed in 1950 that Christ revealed love in the most complete way possible, placing it as the 'central power of religious experience and life'.³⁴ Richenda Scott was still able to claim in 1964, without any hint of doubt, that Quakerism had always been rooted in the Christian way of life, and that Jesus of Nazareth was the 'utmost expression of the infinite and eternal reality of God' that the human person could ever experience.³⁵

George B. Jeffery's 1934 lecture represented a more cautious stream of Liberal Quaker thought as it relates to Jesus and the Incarnation. While Jeffery stated that the Christian Church is most able to follow God's will when it asserts that Jesus is both human and divine, he then contended that the Church is often unable to express the clearest message as to the relationship between these two elements of Jesus Christ. Jeffery claimed that the Church has historically focussed greater attention on both aspects at different times, to the detriment of the other aspect.³⁶ Jeffery insisted that a delicate balance must be maintained between the different aspects, a balance which is proclaimed with a sense of humility.³⁷ As these are questions that touch on the inner life of God, Jeffery insisted on humbly acknowledging the human incapacity to know them with such certainty as to proclaim them with the passion that Silcock employed.

Jeffery approached the question of what Jesus as Incarnation means for Quakers through the perspective of doubt and uncertainty. He expressed a sense of respect for Jesus' human nature and sought to dim the enthusiasm of Christian statements about Jesus' miraculous power, omniscience, and certainty in his own mission.³⁸ Jeffery found such a perspective of great help when seeking to be in relationship with Jesus and learn from his message, for it emphasised Jesus' epistemological and relational accessibility. Jeffery termed this a 'simple way', reflecting the Quaker emphasis on simplicity, especially as regards theological statements.³⁹ He strenuously rejected the theological insistence on examining Jesus' life and words for meaning, insisting that finding oneself in the story of Jesus is a much more effective tool to understand Jesus.⁴⁰ This narrative approach reflects Glover's, with

32 Hoyland, J., *Light of Christ*, London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1928, p. 43.

33 Hughes, J. A., *The Light of Christ in a Pagan World*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940, p. 60.

34 Braun, K., *Justice and the Law of Love*, London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1950, p. 15.

35 Scott, R. C., *Tradition and Experience*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964, p. 61.

36 Jeffery, G. B., *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1934, p. 11.

37 Jeffery, *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, p. 24.

38 Jeffery, *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, p. 29.

39 Jeffery, *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, p. 30.

40 Jeffery, *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, p. 34.

an added emphasis on the importance of relating to Jesus in a personal way and living a life modelled directly on Jesus' life.⁴¹ Jeffery accepted that this personal approach may result in the loss of certainty about the truth claims of Christianity, yet he dismissed those as unnecessary, even idolatrous.⁴² Jeffery claimed that the most complete faith in Jesus is a faith in his person, accepting the paradoxes completely.⁴³ It is important to note here that Jeffery utilised a tone that, while less certain than others, assumed that the audience would not disagree with his fundamental point about faith in Jesus Christ.

Maurice Creasey was one of the first lecturers to deal with the presence of Quakers who might express doubt in the divine nature of Jesus Christ. In 1969, he sought to defend 'Christo-centrism' as the valid outlook for Quakers, as opposed to a more universal 'Theo-centrism'.⁴⁴ Through a long recitation of arguments made against the Christian perspective, including the argument that Christianity was narrow, exclusive, and elitist, Creasey stated that Christianity need not be defined, nor limited, by any of these traits.⁴⁵ He referred to the Quaker flexibility towards theology and aversion to adhering to creedal statements that were immune to further revision or revelation.⁴⁶

Creasey was speaking to an aversion to certainty amongst Quakers in both the content and the value of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and its attendant claims about the divine nature of Jesus. George Gorman alluded to this aversion in 1973, stating that while the life and death of Jesus represented for him the ultimate demonstration of the power and creativity of love, he felt compelled to assert that Quakerism in general has 'always hesitated to confine their respect and admiration for' Jesus' life in particular, and its authority for Christians in general, in any creedal statement. Gorman suggested that this was due to the possibility for any dogmatic statement to confine the enormous power of the message and life of Jesus. Instead, Gorman insisted, Quakers are left free to develop their own interpretations and assign their own meaning to the divinity and status of Jesus.⁴⁷

Gerald Priestland responded to this vague aversion to truth claims about Jesus in his 1982 lecture. He addressed the issue directly, stating that while many Quakers assume that Liberal Quakerism avoids making any doctrinal or dogmatic statements, the presence of such statements in the contemporary edition of *Christian Faith and Practice*—the anthology of theological, moral, and administrative statements which guides British Quaker life—demonstrates the falsehood

41 Jeffery, *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, p. 36.

42 Jeffery, *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, p. 37.

43 Jeffery, *Christ, Yesterday and Today*, p. 58.

44 Creasey, *Bearing, or Friends and the New Reformation*, p. 69.

45 Creasey, *Bearing, or Friends and the New Reformation*, p. 85.

46 Creasey, *Bearing, or Friends and the New Reformation*, p. 80.

47 Gorman, G. H., *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship*, London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1973, p. 67.

of such claims.⁴⁸ He defended the place of doctrinal statements in the life of a religious community, stating that such statements root the tradition in a particular place and ‘truth’.⁴⁹ Priestland argued for a respect for the existence of specific certainties that simply cannot be argued around.⁵⁰ This includes his argument that Quakers cannot claim that a person cannot know for certain whether Jesus was, in fact, the Incarnation of God. Priestland contended that either Jesus demonstrated that he was the Son of God or he didn’t, and this is not something that can be left in the realm of uncertainty, as it would lead to a very ‘strange’ and illogical view of God.⁵¹ Certainties, Priestland argued, give people not only a place to return when the surrounding culture changes according to its own internal logic and values, but also a tradition to push against and to challenge, something that secular culture could never offer.⁵²

Priestland made a spirited defence of several Christian doctrines that had not received substantive attention for decades. While addressing the Incarnation, Priestland acknowledged that the particularity of Jesus was indeed a stumbling block for many. He dismissed any attempts at turning particularity into damnation of non-Christians, yet also dismissed the Universalist concept of several particular Incarnations throughout history as both illogical and unnecessary.⁵³ Priestland argued that the most effective approach to dealing with the particularity of Jesus was through the Quaker doctrine of ‘that of God in everyone’. The particularity of the human experience demands a particularity to the divine relationship to humanity, Priestland argued.⁵⁴

Helen Steven represented a possible turn back towards positive truth claims about Jesus, while still acknowledging the potential benefit of keeping a Universalist perspective in mind. In her 2005 lecture, she noted her feelings of discomfort when others asked her if she had come to a place of certainty about Jesus as saviour.⁵⁵ She then remarked on the potential limitations of that aversion, reflecting that she may have reacted to the language itself, which made her uncomfortable, as opposed to the claims that such language represented. She re-engaged with the Gospels and related her astonishment at the power that the Incarnation granted her by bringing her completely into the life of God through the human life of Jesus.⁵⁶ She argued that the full participation in the life of

48 Priestland, G., *Reasonable Uncertainty: a Quaker approach to doctrine*, London: Quaker Books, 1982, p. 13.

49 Priestland, *Reasonable Uncertainty*, p. 33.

50 Priestland, *Reasonable Uncertainty*, p. 41.

51 Priestland, *Reasonable Uncertainty*, p. 53.

52 Priestland, *Reasonable Uncertainty*, p. 64.

53 Priestland, *Reasonable Uncertainty*, p. 54.

54 Priestland, *Reasonable Uncertainty*, p. 58.

55 Steven, H., *No Extraordinary Power: prayer, stillness and activism*, London: Quaker Books, 2005, p. 83.

56 Steven, *No Extraordinary Power*, p. 82.

Jesus that the Incarnation offers grants humans the ability to engage in a life of compassion, love for the uniqueness of the other, and non-violent social change.⁵⁷ Steven did not insist on recognising Jesus as one of many other unique people of God; instead, she stated quite clearly, using traditional Christian language, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.⁵⁸ The next year, Susan and Roger Sawtell addressed the issue of claiming Christo-centrism in a religious society that numbers Universalists amongst its members. The Sawtells stated clearly that the Incarnation was an essential element of their faith journey and that they were challenged by the divisions amongst Quakers on this subject.⁵⁹

Subsequent lecturers have chosen to either grant Jesus a special place in Quaker theology or have chosen not to address the issues of Christo-centrism or the Incarnation. Should future lecturers elect to address the issue of the Incarnation, the themes presented in past lectures provide a helpful template: focus on the human aspects of Jesus and how the divine aspects are influenced by interaction with the human; emphasise a narrative approach to theology, including rooting theology in one's own experience of Jesus; and couch it all in a recognition of the necessity to avoid making exclusivist and prescriptive claims upon all Liberal Quakers, while insisting that the values of Liberal Quakerism have historically been expressed most clearly through a recognition of the vital importance of Jesus to Quakerism.

Spirit Christologies

Liberal Quakerism expresses an interchangeability between Christ and Spirit in its language, due to the insistence that God takes the form of Spirit, whether the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of a universal consciousness. The imprecision around the language delineating Spirit from Christ is reflective of the insistence on founding theology upon the base of experience, and formulating theology in the language of the individual. As Liberal Quaker experience of the Spirit and of Christ is sometimes challenging to differentiate, any subsequent theology would also be ambiguous about the difference between them.

Liberal Quakers tend to accept the position that the Spirit moved within Jesus in complete union, where Jesus' will, as the Logos, was that of God. Brinton argues that Christocentric Liberal Quakers base their Christology on the Logos of Johannine theology, where Jesus completely embodies the divine life, a life lived as Spirit.⁶⁰ Trinitarian thought is present here, yet intentionally outlined in very imprecise terms. A minute from Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting represents

57 Steven, *No Extraordinary Power*, p. 91.

58 Steven, *No Extraordinary Power*, p. 82.

59 Sawtell, S. and Sawtell, R., *Reflections from a Long Marriage*, London: Quaker Books, 2006, p. 91.

60 Brinton, H., *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism: the beliefs of Fox, Barclay and Penn as based on the Gospel of John*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1973, p. 66.

this imprecision, claiming that Jesus demonstrated ‘the divine life humanly lived and the human life divinely lived’.⁶¹ This perspective certainly exists in Christian theology; yet, it creates the challenge of defining—and delineating—the unique roles of the Spirit and of Jesus in God’s relationship to humanity. The imprecision of Liberal Quaker theological language about this relationship leads to a wide spectrum of approaches to the relationship, reflected in two broad themes: an examination of the fluidity between Jesus and ‘Spirit’; and the development of a Spirit Christology conflating Christ and Spirit. I conclude this section with an argument that the inconsistency present in much Quaker theology actually speaks to an underlying apophaticism.

Fluidity within Jesus/Spirit

This lack of precision extends to the lack of a clean and clear division between the actions of Jesus the Logos and Jesus the Spirit. As Moore relates, this has deep roots in early Quakerism. Moore notes the confusion that the imprecision of Quaker language created for other theologians, particularly relating to the Quaker construction ‘that of God’.⁶² Quakers were faced with explaining whether this construction represented a fourth hypostasis, particularly as Quakers insisted ‘that of God’ was not specifically the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, yet was somehow representative of all three. Moore argues that for Quakers, this vague concept was almost analogous to the action of the Holy Spirit in the person. It was not the entirety of the Spirit, but was somehow the action of the Spirit moving within the person.⁶³

William Littleboy was emblematic of this aversion to specificity, stating unequivocally that Quakers ‘dare not dogmatise on the manner of the Parousia’.⁶⁴ Littleboy then appears to reject his previous statement and outlines a realising eschatology where the Spirit is both the ‘very self’ of Christ and a separate emanation active in a post-resurrection world.⁶⁴ This demonstrates an ambiguity latent in Liberal Quaker theology, rooted in the line that Liberal Quakers straddle between apophatic and cataphatic theology. Liberal Quakers insist that they experience God as both appearing to inhabit all spaces, while also remaining mysteriously unknowable.

Rufus Jones made a link between Jesus Christ and what Jones terms the ‘Divine Spirit’. Jones appeared to subscribe to a procession theory of the Spirit, claiming that the ‘real presence’ of Jesus exists as the Spirit, continually emanating from Jesus into the lives of people and demonstrating God’s care for all of creation.⁶⁵ Jones claimed that the most important and central tenet of Quakerism is this theme

61 ‘Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain’, *Quaker Faith and Practice* 26.56.

62 Moore, *The Light in their Consciences*, p. 109.

63 Moore, *The Light in their Consciences*, p. 109.

64 Littleboy, W., *The Day of Our Visitation*, London: Headley Brothers, 1917, p. 18.

65 Jones, R., *Quakerism: a religion of life*, London: Headley Brothers, 1908, p. 17.

of the 'real presence' of Christ in the Spirit. This imprecision in early Swarthmore lecturers became a subsequent theme, such that lecturers are generally vague as to the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, or even whether 'Trinity' is the most accurate way to describe the different ways that God exists and interacts with humanity.

Brenda Heales and Chris Cook root this ambiguity firmly in the apophatic tradition, claiming that such a tradition would avoid making any claims about God other than the experience of the 'ultimate apophasis', which is not multiple, but unified.⁶⁶ Janet Scott acknowledges the apophatic as well, yet from the stance of critique. She states that the Trinity is only useful as a means of coming to terms with a multi-valent God; the specifics of the Trinitarian doctrine are flawed due to their dependence on outmoded Hellenistic philosophical models.⁶⁷ Scott makes the claim, contra Richards, that the Trinity must therefore be discarded in an attempt to develop new ways of explaining the experience of God.

Spirit Christology

William Charles Braithwaite claimed that the Spirit is defined by its relationship to Christ, using the term 'Christ's Spirit' to describe the form that God takes when God is seeking to guide humanity towards living into the pattern of Jesus' life.⁶⁸ Braithwaite appeared to suggest that the Spirit was fully present in Jesus as the Incarnation, and then was imparted upon the world during Pentecost.⁶⁹ Most lecturers accept this vagueness as an inherent aspect of a mysterious God and do not seek to define the relationship between Jesus and Spirit any further than to state that they do, in fact, have a close relationship. This aversion to specificity reflects the Quaker experience of a mysterious, interconnected relationship between the incarnate Jesus and the Spirit and the Quaker insistence on leaving that mystery doctrinally undefined. This interconnection between Jesus and Spirit places Liberal Quaker tradition in conversation with Spirit Christology and would appear to establish Liberal Quaker Christology as a form of Spirit Christology.

Carl Heath placed two potentially contradictory theological statements about the Spirit and Jesus together, stating that Quakerism must see 'the Spirit of the Living God, Christ the Incarnate Love, suffering and dying and being crucified again'.⁷⁰ Heath claimed that the Spirit is both a separate expression of an active God and the Incarnation itself. Richenda Scott made a similar argument, stating

66 Heales, B. C. and Cook, C., *Images and Silence: the future of Quaker ministry*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1992, p. 74.

67 Scott, J., *What Canst Thou Say? Towards a Quaker theology*, London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1980, p. 49.

68 Braithwaite, *Spiritual Guidance in the Experience of the Society of Friends*, p. 99.

69 Braithwaite, *Spiritual Guidance*, p. 28.

70 Heath, C., *Religion and Public Life*, London: Woodbrooke Extension Committee, 1922, p. 83.

that 'the life which was in Christ, the Holy Spirit, can still lay hold of human lives and transform them'.⁷¹ Jesus and Spirit, in these constructions, could be interpreted to be the same divine expression. This definitional ambiguity is representative of the lecturers and their approach to the issue of Jesus' relationship to the Trinity. The lecturers demonstrated a paradoxical insistence on explaining in both specific and metaphorical terms the inexplicable experience of a Spirit who exists as both emanation and as distinct 'person'.

Hibbert strives to bridge this gap by first acknowledging that the New Testament offers conflicting visions of the relationship, either a modified form of adoptionism or the high Christology described in John 1. Faced with this confusion, and acknowledging the significant challenges for Quakers present in both positions, Hibbert seeks to transcend the debate by claiming that resolving the relationship between Spirit and Christ is not essential in order to know Christ and live a Christian life, as Hibbert understands it.⁷² Interestingly, while Hibbert calls upon Christians to stop concerning themselves with the development of theological constructions of Christ and the Spirit, he accepts his own inability to extricate himself from the debate. Hibbert accepts that it is essential to come to terms with certain aspects of God's relationship to humanity in order for Jesus' life and death to have any meaning.⁷³ Thus, Hibbert claims, Quakers must engage in this debate reluctantly, with great humility, and a recognition that any answers will be partial and potentially false.

Similarly, Beatrice Saxon Snell seeks to move the focus in Quaker theology from arguments about the exact natures of Jesus and the Spirit, and the divisions in their activities and roles within God, towards what she argues is the more important issue: how Jesus and the Holy Spirit impact the lives of humans.⁷⁴ As Snell relates, the method of apprehending these two aspects of God is far less important than apprehending them in the first place, allowing them to guide human behaviour towards peaceful action. Distinctions amongst the Godhead are unimportant for Liberal Quakerism's reflection on the meaning of God, for all is God and Spirit in a unity. John Hughes presented this vision differently by emphasising the pantheistic implications of this grand unity. Hughes presented an expansive and interdependent vision of the Spirit as the unifier of all of creation. Hughes argues that the Incarnation of God within the creation draws all of the creation into unity God.⁷⁵ This action occurs first through the immanent drawing in of the entire universe into the 'One Spirit' of God, and then by the 'irradiation' of the transcendent Spirit of God out into the universe.⁷⁶ In this way,

71 Scott, *Tradition and Experience*, p. 70.

72 Hibbert, *The Inner Light and Modern Thought*, p. 58.

73 Hibbert, *The Inner Light and Modern Thought*, p. 62.

74 'Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain', *Quaker Faith and Practice* 26.77.

75 Hughes, *The Light of Christ in a Pagan World*, p. 67.

76 Hughes, *The Light of Christ in a Pagan World*, p. 67.

the ontology of the human person in Christocentric Liberal Quakerism is based on a Pneumatological God who is in mystical union with all of the creation.

Inconsistency and the Apophatic

Early Quakers were forced to wrestle with a particularly challenging paradox in the movement of the Spirit: they were committed to the complete freedom of the Spirit to do as the Spirit willed, yet they were also just as committed to the 'abiding consistency' of the Spirit. Gwyn argues that this meant that Quakers were often faced with a situation where the Spirit inspired them to believe something that appeared inconsistent with what the Spirit had inspired other Quakers to believe.⁷⁷

Modern Liberal Quakers are faced with the same challenge. The Liberal Quaker response is most often to place both inspirations at the heart of the meeting and to attempt to come to an understanding of the meaning of the new inspiration through the use of silence, prayer, and a highly attuned system of discernment practices. Heales and Cook argue that Liberal Quakers do not always come to a position of unity or comfort when dealing with such situations of paradox, and they have even permitted issues to remain unresolved. They note that this stems from the necessity to 'test the promptings' of the Holy Spirit against one's own reason, as well as the reason and experience of others in the meeting. When 'promptings' come from the reasoned movement of the intellect and not from a mind kept 'low', and apparently intellectually humble, Heales and Cook argue that the prompting might not actually stem from the Spirit.⁷⁸

This focus on paradox and inconsistency suggests a profoundly apophatic strain in Quaker theology. This aversion to reflect with any specificity on the nature and action of the Spirit seems strange in light of the profoundly Pneumocentric aspect of the Liberal Quaker experience of God and the consistent use of Spirit language to narrate that experience. As George Gorman argued, Liberal Quakers often emphasise that any theological statement about the nature of God must prioritise reflection on the interplay between the manifestations of the Spirit in silent worship and the process by which the Spirit draws humanity into greater union with God and God's will.⁷⁹ This interplay of the Spirit and humanity is an experienced reality first, which is then imperfectly slotted into an area of theological inquiry. As one Friend relates, this feeling is most often experienced intentionally, especially during Meeting for Worship.⁸⁰ An account from another

77 Gwyn, D., *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the rise of capitalism*, London: Quaker Books, 2006, p. 240.

78 Heales and Cook, *Images and Silence*, p. 25.

79 Gorman, *The Amazing Fact*, p. 71.

80 'When I go to MFW [Meeting for Worship] I am reaching inwards and outwards towards what is beyond the Silence. This sometimes feels like reaching towards another dimension; one which is always there, but which I am not always aware of and don't always pay attention to. (For shorthand, I sometimes refer to this as "God".) In a gathered

Friend speaks of the meeting as an expression of the universal conscience, reflecting the Universalist strain of Liberal Quakerism.⁸¹

The experience is not often a product of daily existence, instead occurring as the gathered meeting welcomes in the divine presence in silence. Liberal Quakerism recognises that the Spirit is always present, yet humanity is not able to fully comprehend and recognise the presence in the busyness of daily existence. Scott argues that the gathering together is essential, therefore, to reconnect with the Spirit and to reflect on the morals and ethics of daily existence that stem from the mystical union with the Spirit.⁸² The experience of unity in meeting also serves to remind Friends in a very palpable way that the Spirit brings all of creation into unity with God.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examine Christology and Pneumatology from the perspective of Liberal Quakerism, with a particular focus on the means by which Liberal Quakers use the experience of God as a means for developing theology. I argue that Liberal Quakers base their unique theological anthropology of God upon their experienced reality of divinity immanent within creation and interdependent upon the creation.

Liberal Quakers recognise the transcendence of God beyond creation as an inherent aspect of what could be considered divinity, yet due to their emphasis on the epistemological primacy of direct religious experience of the Divine, Liberal Quakers stress the immanence of God within the creation to a much greater degree. This stress on immanency colours their view of the Christian

meeting I sense that those present are doing this also; worshiping thus with others helps me become more fully present and aware of being in the Presence. There's a sense of being in love with, and loved by what's beyond the silence. Sometimes there is something I bring consciously to hold in the silence—perhaps someone who needs upholding or an issue that needs to be dealt with. I hold this in the silence, and then let go. Sometimes it feels as if, just for a moment, something crosses from beyond the silence.' Dandelion, P., *The Liturgies of Quakerism*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005, p. 90.

81 'I send my "aura", "essence", "spirit" outwards, expanding to join the general "conscience collective". I stay with that until someone ministers (or not). If there is ministry, I use that as a focus for my energy, if it "does not speak to my condition", i.e. I am out of synch with it, I focus on the person that was led to minister and "send" love. If I cannot be "gathered", i.e. settle down my thoughts, I read from *Faith and Practice* until I find something to link to. I always have *Faith and Practice* with me in Meeting. When I first attended Meeting, I read more. My relationship with "God" has strengthened through this time and recently I have been able to "pray". What happens for me is that I feel (not always) that the barriers between us and God are thinned in Meeting, that we can be attuned to each other and each other's needs and through Ministry and shared silence tended. I send thanks to God for this. I feel attending Meeting brings me nearer to God and this stays with me.' Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism*, p. 89.

82 Scott, *What Canst Thou Say?*, p. 3.

anthropological categories, causing them to place greater emphasis on anthropological theories of interdependence, immanence within the creation, and intimate love of the creation than on theories of the transcendence of the 'wholly other', distance from the creation, and stern judgement of human sinfulness.

This emphasis on immanence, coupled with their deliberately conceptual experiential theology, influences the types of models of God which Liberal Quakers find most compelling. The Liberal Quaker construction of an intimately incarnate Christ and the universal immanence of the Holy Spirit are models rooted in metaphor, deliberately left open to re-interpretation and re-evaluation.

Author Details

Christy Randazzo is currently serving as affiliate faculty in the Department of Religious Studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey, USA. Randazzo is a theologian and minister, whose work has been engaged in bridging the divide between the contemplative nature of theological writing and the active, lived theology of congregational life. They have done ministry across multiple religious communities in diverse settings, including Episcopal youth ministry, teaching in Friends schools, and chaplaincy in pluralistic religious settings. Their degrees include an MA in Theology (St. Mary's Seminary and University, 2010), an MPhil in Reconciliation Theology (Trinity College Dublin, 2011), and a PhD in Quaker theology (University of Birmingham, 2018).

Mailing address: 6103 Cedar Avenue, Pennsauken, NJ, 08109, USA

Email: danchristy.randazzo@gmail.com