

# Quaker Eschatology in Britain through the Lens of Narrative

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## Abstract

To supplement Pink Dandelion's eschatological framing of Quaker history, this study offers the *theatrum mundi* as a metaphor that makes explicit the narrative nature of eschatology. This metaphor is used to chart Quaker eschatology in Britain from its beginnings to the present, showing that, while Quaker ecclesiology has remained relatively consistent, the underlying eschatology has changed significantly. Successive generations of Quakers have continued to inhabit the liturgical 'empty stage' of the First Friends, while the shared theological 'script' has been altered and eventually abandoned. It is then suggested that this lack of a shared 'script' raises significant challenges to British Quakers being a community of hope.

## Keywords

eschatology, narrative, hope, postmodernity, Eternal Now, Jürgen Moltmann

## Introduction

It is almost as if early Friends heard the corporate or global alarm clock of the Second Coming ringing. Over three centuries, the 'snooze' button has been pressed (Quietism); the clock then rewound so the hands were closer to the First Coming than the Second (Evangelicalism and the pastoral tradition); the batteries taken out (by those for whom the First Coming is more important than the Second Coming); and perhaps the clock itself has even been chucked out (twentieth-century Liberal Quakerism, in which people will wake up/find transformation in their own time!).<sup>1</sup>

1 Dandelion, 'B'. P., 'Reframing Quakerism', in Dandelion, 'B'. P., Gwyn, D. and Peat, T., *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming*, Birmingham: Curlew Productions and Woodbrooke College, 1998, p. 158.

Here we have a striking metaphor that provides an eschatological framework for understanding Quaker history.<sup>2</sup> As a pedagogical tool it provides a memorable overview of the various responses to the ringing alarm, showing how Quakers have positioned themselves in relation to the *parousia*<sup>3</sup> over time, gradually receding from an initial immediacy to a discounting of the *parousia* altogether. As eschatology may be a highly significant hermeneutic for understanding the development of Quakerism,<sup>4</sup> this study uses Pink Dandelion's metaphor as a springboard to offer an additional pedagogical tool for communicating the development of Quaker eschatology: the *theatrum mundi*, the 'theatre of the world'.<sup>5</sup> I am not offering a new interpretation of Quaker eschatological thought, and so this study does not feature a return to primary sources. Rather, I am offering an imaginative, revealing way in which to present a prominent contemporary interpretation of Quaker history, represented by Dandelion and Douglas Gwyn, which centres the theological role of narrative.

Like the alarm clock, the *theatrum mundi* indicates how Quakers have positioned themselves in relation to the *parousia*, with the fifth act, denouement and falling curtain corresponding to the ringing of the alarm. Additionally, the *theatrum mundi* affords a richer exploration of the link between eschatology and narrative. Whereas the alarm clock is purely concerned with the eschatological moment, the *theatrum mundi* allows for a connection between that moment and a host of other elements, such as the set, costume, props, script, author, actors and audience. This enables the *theatrum mundi* to incorporate how Quaker ecclesiological practices are connected to their eschatology in a way the alarm clock cannot.

First, I demonstrate the relevance of an explicitly narrative-based metaphor when discussing eschatology. The *theatrum mundi* makes explicit the role of God's judgment, God's active involvement in history, the tension of openness and closure in the *parousia* and the necessity of our own agency. Second, I chart the development of Quaker eschatology in Britain through the metaphor of

2 All mentions of Quakers and Quakerism in this article, unless otherwise stated, refer to the Quakerism of Britain Yearly Meeting, 'the final constitutional authority of the Religious Society of Friends in England, Scotland, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man'. (Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice: the book of Christian discipline of the yearly meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 5th edn, 2013, para 6.12.)

3 I will use the original New Testament Greek term '*parousia*' throughout, rather than the perhaps misleading translation 'second coming', which suggests a temporary absence, and which may be best translated as 'future coming' or 'arrival'. See Moltmann, J., *The Coming of God: Christian eschatology*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1996, pp. 25–26.

4 As has been suggested by Gwyn, D., *Apocalypse of the Word: the life and message of George Fox*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986, and Dandelion, 'B'. P., Gwyn, D. and Peat, T., *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming*, Birmingham: Curlew Productions and Woodbrooke College, 1998.

5 For a detailed explication of this ancient concept, see Moltmann, J., *God in Creation: an ecological doctrine of creation*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985, p. 308.

the *theatrum mundi*. I show how the Quaker movement began with a sense of inhabiting the final act of history and so ‘struck the set’ of meantime ‘props’ and ‘scenery’ such as water baptism and a separate priesthood. Successive generations of Quakers saw a distancing from the experience of the *parousia* and so repositioned themselves to an earlier part of the ‘script’ of God’s drama, altered the script or threw out the script altogether. However, this was not accompanied by a return of the props and scenery. Through the *theatrum mundi* we see a community with a broadly consistent ecclesiology (the empty stage) accompanied by a significantly evolving eschatology (the changing script). Finally, I show how such a focus on narrative raises important questions about the capability of contemporary Quakers in Britain to be a community of hope.

### The *Theatrum Mundi*: Eschatology and Narrative

Eschatological enquiry involves asking about the end of our individual, collective and universal story. Narrative is therefore a central concern of this study, and I position narrative as primary form of revelation. This approach is grounded in a ‘cultural–linguistic’ model of religion.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to an ‘experiential–expressive’ model, where a general ‘primordial’ religious experience forms the core of revelation, which is then secondarily interpreted through the symbols of narrative,<sup>7</sup> a ‘cultural–religious’, or postliberal, approach sees religious experience as formed by language and narrative. This model holds that it is not possible to speak of pure, uninterpreted, story-less revelation, and that context and narrative form part of the same revelatory whole. Stanley Hauerwas states this most clearly when he writes that:

Neither God, the world, nor the self are properly known as separate entities but are in a relation requiring concrete display. That display takes the form of a narrative in which we discover that the only way to ‘know’ God, the world, or the self is through their history.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the early Friends may have said about the secondary authority of Scripture,<sup>9</sup> the phrase ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition’<sup>10</sup> is meaningless apart from the narrative that demonstrates who Christ is.<sup>11</sup>

6 Lindbeck, G. A., *The Nature of Doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 25th anniversary edn, 2009, p. 20.

7 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 17.

8 Hauerwas, S., *The Peaceable Kingdom: a primer in Christian ethics*, London: SCM Press, 2003, p. 26.

9 Barclay, R., *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Farmington, ME: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002, Prop III.

10 Fox, G., *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. Nickalls, J. L.; Philadelphia, PA: Religious Society of Friends, 1997, p. 11.

11 For more on narrative and postliberal theology see Fodor, S., ‘Postliberal Theology’, in Ford, D. and Muers, R. (eds), *The Modern Theologians: an introduction to Christian theology since 1918*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 3rd edn, 2005, pp. 229–48.

Narrative is particularly pertinent to eschatology, as narratives are teleological in nature.<sup>12</sup> It is the end of the story that gives meaning to what has gone before.<sup>13</sup> This is the case for the Christian narrative, where eschatology is ‘the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day’.<sup>14</sup> The Christian story can be understood only in relation to its ending, the coming future of Christ.<sup>15</sup> The alarm clock is teleological in that the time it marks is in anticipation of the alarm, and in sounding it gives duration to that anticipation. The *theatrum mundi* brings an additional connotation of judgment. In anticipation of the end of the ‘theatre of the world’, actors and audience are faced with the question of how the fifth act will turn out,<sup>16</sup> and how the performance will be judged. Theatre mirrors, and allows us to reflect on, our existence,<sup>17</sup> so in the *theatrum mundi* we are both players as well as audience.<sup>18</sup> In waiting for the curtain to fall, we wait to see if the play is worth applauding.

If eschatology is the end of the story, we may then ask who the author of the story is. The Christian narrative is one of God as the author of the world, a God who reveals God’s-self through the story God authors. Narrative can be spoken of as a primary mode of revelation, for the Bible speaks of a God revealed in the history of a nation and the life of an individual.<sup>19</sup> If knowledge of God comes primarily through narrative, then we can only truly know ourselves, along with the rest of creation, when we locate ourselves within God’s story.<sup>20</sup> We can only understand our roles when we know God as the author of the drama and take up ‘a part to play in the still-to-be-completed purposes of God for his world’.<sup>21</sup> In the alarm clock metaphor God sets the alarm, but this might imply a Deistic, distant ‘watch-maker’ God. In the *theatrum mundi* God is author, director and actor, offering a dynamic Divine involvement. Jürgen Moltmann suggests that the subject of God’s drama is God’s self-revelation through the *dramatis personae* of God’s creatures.<sup>22</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar similarly suggests that ‘it is God who acts, on man, for man and then together with man; the involvement of man in

12 MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*, London: Duckworth, 2nd edn, 1985, p. 216.

13 Kermode, F., *The Sense of an Ending: studies in the theory of fiction with a new epilogue*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, new edn, 2000, p. 26.

14 Moltmann, J., *Theology of Hope: on the ground and the implications of a Christian eschatology*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 16.

15 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 17.

16 von Balthasar, H. U., *Theo-Drama: theological dramatic theory. vol. 1: prolegomena*, trans. Harrison, G.; San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988, p. 125.

17 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, pp. 86–88.

18 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 308.

19 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 29.

20 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 27.

21 Bauckham, R. and Hart, T. A., *Hope against Hope: Christian eschatology in contemporary context*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1999, p. 36.

22 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pp. 309–10.

the divine action is part of God's *action*, not a precondition of it'.<sup>23</sup> In the *theatrum mundi* God is not distant, but acts through us.

This does not mean that the ending is fixed. If God is the author of the world, then it is God who writes the ending. There is therefore an openness and provisionality to the Christian story. Not knowing what happens next is a crucial component of dramatic narrative,<sup>24</sup> for only the most trivial of stories progress in an entirely predictable way.<sup>25</sup> Although we can be confident that the end of the story will be one in accordance with the character of God revealed in Jesus, the end of the Christian narrative is not one that can be predicted.<sup>26</sup> Christ has yet to say the last word.<sup>27</sup> The God revealed in Jesus is not the God who has come, but the God who is coming. With God as author of the end, Christian theology needs to hold this openness in tension with closure, combining 'the sense that the end always brings something new ... with the confidence that the end organizes the whole'.<sup>28</sup> We must combine the 'openness of development' with the 'closure of fulfilment'<sup>29</sup> that is found in the *parousia*. The *parousia* may be analogous to the literary trope of *peripeteia* 'whereby a story comes to its expected end, but in an unexpected way'.<sup>30</sup> God authors an expected, unexpected end. In the *theatrum mundi* we both know the play will come to an end but, if it is a good play, cannot predict what the end will be.

If God both acts through us and is the author of our story, are we merely characters with no agency of our own? The open-ended nature of the Christian narrative is necessary to express not only God's freedom but the freedom of God's creation. Although there is a need for certainty that God's justice and mercy will triumph, humanity must be free 'to contribute to God's project in creation'.<sup>31</sup> Although we may trust that the future God has in store is beyond our comprehension, 'new possibilities are not only conceived by God in the divine mind, but emerge from the *interaction between the creator and the created*'.<sup>32</sup> This creative interaction leads 'to actions of resistance and renewal which create "anticipations" of the Kingdom here and now'.<sup>33</sup> We act in the confidence that our participation is invited and worthwhile. A hope founded on God's transcendent future 'neither attempts what can only come from God nor neglects

23 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, p. 18.

24 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 215.

25 Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, pp. 23–24.

26 Fiddes, P. S., *The Promised End: eschatology in theology and literature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 168.

27 Loughlin, G., *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and narrative theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 24.

28 Fiddes, *Promised End*, p. 40.

29 Fiddes, *Promised End*, p. 281.

30 Fiddes, *Promised End*, p. 155.

31 Fiddes, *Promised End*, p. 26.

32 Fiddes, *Promised End*, p. 170.

33 Fiddes, *Promised End*, p. 173.

what is humanly possible. Sustained by the hope of everything from God, it attempts what is possible within the limits of each present.<sup>34</sup> It is the expected, unexpected nature of the end of God's story that gives us the freedom and confidence to act, and therefore allows us to hope. We are not sleeping until the alarm rings. Neither are we a passive audience, fatalistically waiting for the curtain to fall. We are active participants in God's drama. We perform in God's play when we allow God to 'play' through us. We may wrongly use our freedom to perform our roles badly, or attempt to perform a different play altogether. To be a Christian is to join a historic, storytelling people,<sup>35</sup> entering 'a play that has to be improvised on the spot'.<sup>36</sup> We have control over our performance, and we are invited to improvise in a way that is faithful to the Director's vision. The *theatrum mundi* is a metaphor that takes into account the active, dramatic nature of Christian existence.<sup>37</sup>

In summary, the *theatrum mundi* is a rich metaphor for approaching eschatology, in that it gives that which is anticipated evaluative significance, emphasises God as active in the world, maintains the necessary tension between openness and closure and ensures our freedom and ability to hope as active players in God's drama. I will now demonstrate its use as a pedagogical tool by examining the shared story, the 'script' or 'play', that Quakers inhabit, and how this narrative is inhabited and played out both doctrinally and liturgically. I will describe where Quakers have located themselves in the divine drama over time, and how this has altered their understanding of, and relationship to, the fifth and final act.

### Quaker Eschatology in Britain Through the Lens of Narrative

In charting Quaker eschatology in Britain I follow Dandelion's summation of Quaker history,<sup>38</sup> covering the periods designated as 'the First Friends'<sup>39</sup> (1647–1666), 'Restoration Quakerism' (1666–1689), 'Quietism' (1690–1820s), 'Evangelical Quakerism' (1820s–1890s), 'Modernist/Liberal Quakerism' (1890s–1980s) and 'Postmodern Quakerism' (1980s–).<sup>40</sup> Through the theatrical metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* we see the first Quakers located themselves at the end of the drama of history. Their rejection of 'meantime' liturgical and ecclesial

34 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 43.

35 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 97.

36 Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p. 20.

37 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, p. 17.

38 Dandelion, P., *An Introduction to Quakerism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

39 Throughout this study the terms Friend/s and Quaker/s are used interchangeably, as is customary among British Quakers.

40 Although Dandelion designates the current period of British Quakerism as 'liberal-Liberal Quakerism', I consider 'Postmodern Quakerism' to be a more helpful description in this instance, in that it highlights the parallels between this latest expression of the Quaker tradition and the wider postmodern culture it inhabits.

conventions, and the simplifying of their worship, could be thought of as ‘striking the set’, when props and scenery are removed from the stage. Successive generations of Quakers lost this experience of the imminent end of history but retained the simplified end-times ecclesiology. They relocated themselves to an earlier ‘act’ in the Christian drama, but adapted their theological ‘script’ to justify keeping the liturgical ‘stage’ empty.

### Curtain Down and Strike the Set: Early Quaker Eschatology

Although Early Quakers did not hold a unified eschatology, the most consistent belief was that ‘while the Kingdom of God was already beginning to be present in the Quaker movement, a final consummation in the (probably near) future was also to be expected’.<sup>41</sup> Early Quaker eschatology sits on the cusp of a presentative eschatology, viewing the present realising of the end ‘as part of a larger, unfolding reality, neither totally present nor totally future’.<sup>42</sup> The inward unfolding of the *parousia* described by the first Quakers has therefore been termed a ‘realising eschatology’.<sup>43</sup> Friends saw themselves in the vanguard of a dynamic process, with their own inward and communal experience of Christ’s arrival spilling out into the world around them.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, in relation to the inner life of the individual, early Quaker eschatology is difficult to distinguish from a presentative model. For the individual the emphasis is on the present experience of the *parousia*.<sup>45</sup> Friends were discouraged from futurist speculations, as the present, inward apocalypse was the only one that could be entered by the individual.<sup>46</sup> We might then term this a personal, or mystical, presentative eschatology.

On the stage of the *theatrum mundi* the first Quakers found themselves inhabiting the final scene of the final act, the denouement of history. Christ had returned inwardly in a way unexpected by the dominant Puritan culture and so, inwardly, the curtain was coming down.

The Quaker experience of an inward apocalypse revealed the world for what it was. It ‘ended the world’ by revealing the illegitimacy of dominating power structures. Through publicly witnessing to their experience in both words and actions, Quakers hoped to prompt a similar inward apocalypse in others.<sup>47</sup> This

41 Moore, R. A., *The Light in Their Consciences: early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1666*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p. 68.

42 Gwyn, D., ‘Come Again? Early Friends as an Apocalyptic Movement’, in Dandelion, P., Gwyn, D. and Peat, T., *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming*, Birmingham: Curlew Productions and Woodbrooke College, 1998, p. 106.

43 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 31.

44 Gwyn, D., ‘Quakers, Eschatology, and Time’, in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 205.

45 Gwyn, ‘Quakers, Eschatology, and Time’, p. 204.

46 Gwyn, ‘Quakers, Eschatology, and Time’, p. 204.

47 Gwyn, ‘Quakers, Eschatology, and Time’, p. 204.

inward apocalypse had substantial implications for ecclesiology. The experience of the risen Christ as inwardly present meant that all ‘meantime’ practices were discontinued,<sup>48</sup> such as the ‘outward’ communion of bread and wine. The injunction to ‘proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ through bread and wine (1 Cor. 11:26) was superseded. Friends were called to the inward, spiritual marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev. 3:20).<sup>49</sup> The silence of Quaker worship enacted the silence of heaven (Rev. 8:1).<sup>50</sup> The new era that was dawning did not require official liturgies, sacraments or a set-apart priesthood, and so they were abandoned.<sup>51</sup> With the curtain coming down on world history, Quakers began ‘striking the set’, removing the props and scenery that were no longer necessary now the *theatrum mundi* was coming to a close.

### Altering the Script: Restoration, Quietist and Evangelical Eschatology

For Quakers, the decades following the Restoration were a time of persecution and the initial enthusiasm of the movement was tamed to ensure its survival.<sup>52</sup> This involved diminishing claims about the immediacy of the *parousia*.<sup>53</sup> The final consummation was no longer imminent, with the emphasis moving to ‘a slow-burn regeneration of the individual and of the world’.<sup>54</sup>

Restoration and Quietist Quaker eschatology represents a retreat from the end-times to the meantime. Although George Fox and Margaret Fell never lost the eschatological emphasis in their preaching and writing, this emphasis was generally abandoned by Quakers after 1666.<sup>55</sup> Robert Barclay’s highly influential *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, published in 1676, neglected eschatology altogether,<sup>56</sup> concluding instead with exhortations on how to live in the meantime.<sup>57</sup> In Barclay’s organising of his material within a Puritan framework, ‘*the Second Coming impetus of early Quaker witness disappeared*’.<sup>58</sup> Barclay’s detailing of ‘the day of the Lord’, and of the possibility of missing the day, accounts for

48 Dandelion, *Introduction*, pp. 34–35.

49 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 30.

50 Johns, D. L., ‘Worship and Sacraments’, in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 261.

51 Johns, ‘Worship and Sacraments’, p. 262.

52 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 52.

53 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 37.

54 Dandelion, ‘B’. P., ‘From God’s Time to Historical Time: Secular Amillennialism’, in Dandelion, P., Gwyn, D. and Peat, T., *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming*, Birmingham: Curlew Productions and Woodbrooke College, 1998, p. 187.

55 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 42.

56 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 43.

57 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 57.

58 Gwyn, D., ‘From Covenant to Contract: The Quaker Counter-Restoration’, in Dandelion, P., Gwyn, D. and Peat, T., *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming*, Birmingham: Curlew Productions and Woodbrooke College, 1998, p. 125.



the posthumous fate of those who reject Christ,<sup>59</sup> moving beyond the earlier injunction against futurist speculation. There was no longer the expectation that the Kingdom of God would sweep the world in their lifetime, so the boundaries of this Kingdom were restricted to a 'city set upon a hill' symbolising 'a stable, microcosmic order'.<sup>60</sup> In our theatrical metaphor, Restoration and Quietist Quakers still saw themselves as part of God's drama, but they turned back the pages of the script, retreating from the denouement to an earlier act. The final scene of the *theatrum mundi* was yet to be played.

However, this does not result in a restoration of meantime ecclesiology. The liturgical scenery and props that early Quakers 'struck' are not brought back on stage. Although Quakers had ceased to be a 'second coming church', they retained the experience of direct guidance by the Spirit of Christ and the form of worship and church structures that facilitated this.<sup>61</sup> This required a new justification for Quaker ecclesiology to be developed. Barclay defended the Quaker rejection of bread and wine communion with a different interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:26,<sup>62</sup> rather than Fox's reference to the marriage supper of the Lamb. The rejection of a set-apart priesthood was seen as a return to the ecclesiology of the early Church.<sup>63</sup> In order to play an earlier scene in God's drama, and still retain the bare stage of their predecessors in a way that made sense, Quakers adapted their theological script.

This altering of the script continued into the Evangelical period. This saw an end to sectarianism, as Quakers began to see themselves as a branch of the universal church, rather than the only true expression of Christianity.<sup>64</sup> With this opening out to the wider Church, so the microcosmic eschatology of the Quietists waned and mainstream eschatological attitudes, such as post- or pre-millennialism, ascended.<sup>65</sup> After the 1827 schism, Quakers, whether post-millennial or pre-millennial in their theology, saw the *parousia* as a future hope rather than a present experience.<sup>66</sup> In 1824 Joseph John Gurney published his widely read *Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends*,<sup>67</sup> and within his evangelical theology the *parousia* becomes even more distant than it was in Barclay's *Apology*. For Gurney there was no sense of an unfolding *parousia*. Inward intimacy with Christ was available, but as a meantime, rather than an imminent endtime, experience.<sup>68</sup>

59 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 55.

60 Gwyn, 'Quakers, Eschatology, and Time', p. 207.

61 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 63.

62 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 58.

63 Gwyn, 'Quakers, Eschatology, and Time', p. 207.

64 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 80.

65 Dandelion, 'B.' P., 'Why the Pastoral System Makes Sense', in Dandelion, P., Gwyn, D. and Peat, T., *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming*, Birmingham: Curlew Productions and Woodbrooke College, 1998, p. 170.

66 Dandelion, 'Why the Pastoral System Makes Sense', p. 169.

67 Dandelion, *Introduction*, pp. 97–98.

68 Dandelion, *Introduction*, pp. 98–99.

In our theatrical metaphor we may say that Evangelical Quakers turn back even more pages of the script, now inhabiting the same point in the drama as many other evangelical churches. The falling curtain of the *parousia* has receded even further into the future. Yet the stage remains unadorned. As with Barclay and the Quietists, the ecclesiology founded on the early Quaker understanding of the *parousia* remains even when that understanding has been lost. Dandelion notes that this loss ‘does not appear to have been a conscious one. Friends of this period, like the Quietists before them, had simply lost their awareness of the nature of the message and experience of the first Friends.’<sup>69</sup> The theological script is once again adapted to preserve liturgical practice within a changing eschatological landscape.

The trajectory of British Quakerism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century is characterised by an increasingly distant *parousia*, an increasing distance from the inward apocalypse of the first Quakers and a theological move to the meantime. Originally finding themselves inhabiting the denouement of history, Quakers shifted to inhabiting an earlier stage of the drama with other evangelical groups. At the same time, the original end-time ecclesiology remains constant and the justification of this ecclesiology shifts to accommodate the loss of the end-time experience. The meantime ‘set’, ‘props’ and ‘scenery’ of bread and wine, water baptism, set hymns and a separate priesthood are neither returned nor replaced, but the ‘script’ is altered to justify their absence.

### **Losing the Script: Liberal and Postmodern Quaker Eschatology**

Having traced Quaker eschatology from its seventeenth-century roots, we are now in a position to examine Quaker eschatology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I begin by examining the Liberal Quaker adoption of Progressivism and the ways the Quaker ‘script’ was reinterpreted to allow for this adoption. I examine the declining role of Scripture in Quaker communal life, suggesting that it mirrors the collapse of faith in modern metanarratives and facilitates the move to a postmodern pluralism and away from a shared narrative within Quakerism in the latter half of the twentieth century. I then describe three aspects of Postmodern Quaker eschatology: the absence of Christ’s *parousia* and the doctrines of the ‘absolute perhaps’ and ‘Eternal Now’.

### **Returning to a Different End: Liberal Quaker Eschatology**

In 1887 a Declaration of Faith was produced by a conference of evangelical Yearly Meetings in Richmond, Indiana. Although it made no mention of the millennium, it emphasised both the resurrection of the dead and an individualistic, anthropocentric, consequentialist eschatology.<sup>70</sup> The Richmond Declaration was criticised

69 Dandelion, ‘Why the Pastoral System Makes Sense’, pp. 170.

70 Gwyn, ‘Quakers, Eschatology, and Time’, pp. 212.

as a pseudo-creed, opposed by older evangelicals as well as younger liberals, and rejected by London Yearly Meeting.<sup>71</sup> This paved the way for a Liberal ascendance, with the subsequent ‘Manchester Conference’ of 1895, a gathering of over 1,000 Quakers demonstrating the acceptability of Liberal theology among British Friends.<sup>72</sup>

Liberal Quaker theology can be characterised by three doctrinal attitudes: the primacy and sufficiency of religious experience as a source of theological authority; the requirement that faith be relevant to contemporary culture; and an optimistic Progressivism where Friends are to be open to God’s continuing revelation of ‘new Light’.<sup>73</sup>

Progressivism is bound up with the importance of metanarrative within modernity:<sup>74</sup> grand stories such as ‘the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom ... [and] the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience’.<sup>75</sup> Progressivism expresses faith in the liberating power of human reason.<sup>76</sup> It attempts to deal with the horror of history, the evil of the past, by viewing it as a necessary contribution to the brighter future that lies ahead.<sup>77</sup> The happiness of the expected future is worth past and present suffering. Progressivism meets the terror of history and the fear of the future with the confidence that the future is under human control.<sup>78</sup>

This metanarrative is reflected in the Progressivist eschatology of Liberal Quakerism, with the belief in the gradual revelation of God’s truth, with each new revelation improving on the last.<sup>79</sup> Rufus Jones (1863–1948), a key figure in the birth of Liberal Quakerism,

enthused in 1895 that ‘the Spirit of God is in His world, shaping history... putting down evil, and making for righteousness, silently guiding the forces in the great battle of Armageddon’. Here ‘Armageddon’ is not a future cataclysm but the march of liberal progressive triumph over sin and social blight.<sup>80</sup>

The Liberal emphasis on education, evidenced by the Manchester Conference (1895), the subsequent Summer Schools movement and the establishment of

71 Kennedy, T. C., *British Quakerism, 1860–1920: the transformation of a religious community*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 117.

72 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 119.

73 Dandelion, *Introduction*, pp. 129–30. Dandelion lists four motifs of Liberal Quaker theology, but ‘being open to “New Light”’ is so closely connected with ‘Progressivism’ that for the purposes of this study it is simpler to elide them both.

74 Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story*, p. 8.

75 Lyotard, J.-F., *The Postmodern Explained to Children: correspondence 1982–1985*, London: Turnaround, 1992, p. 29.

76 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 10.

77 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 13.

78 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 14.

79 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 132.

80 Gwyn, ‘Quakers, Eschatology, and Time’, p. 212.

Woodbrooke as a centre for Quaker learning in 1903,<sup>81</sup> is entirely in keeping with Progressivism's confidence in the triumph of reason over ignorance.<sup>82</sup>

We can see why Liberal Quakers felt themselves to be reclaiming the message of the First Friends, as this optimistic vision of an inevitably improving future could be seen as a form of premillennialism, a realising eschatology in a new guise. However, various theological shifts demonstrate that the Liberal incarnation of Quakerism is much further removed from the Quaker vision of the seventeenth century than may be initially realised.

Progressivism's optimistic attitude towards the future was accompanied by an optimistic view of the human person. The promised future of a spiritually mature civilisation was seen to naturally evolve from the innate goodness of humanity. However, in the 1670s Barclay insisted that the Divine Light could not be conflated with human conscience, 'for conscience, being that in man which ariseth from the natural faculties of man's soul, may be defiled and corrupted'.<sup>83</sup> Liberal Quakers blurred the distinction, rejecting the doctrine of original sin in favour of 'a kind of original blessing or an innate Godliness'.<sup>84</sup> This optimistic view of human nature was accompanied by two related developments. Firstly, the 'Inward Light' of earlier generations became the 'Inner Light'. 'Inward' suggests that the Light comes from elsewhere 'as if through a keyhole', whereas 'inner' places the Light within the individual.<sup>85</sup> The Inner Light became a Liberal norm through the writings of Jones and 'has been wrongly imputed to earlier generations by countless scholars'.<sup>86</sup> Secondly, Fox's phrase 'That of God in every one'<sup>87</sup> morphed from the human capacity to turn to the Inward Light of Christ to 'a sense that a piece of the Divine resides in everybody'.<sup>88</sup> Both developments suggest a move from participation to possession. Additionally, the concept of being 'open to new Light' enabled Liberal Friends to accommodate the innovations of Progressivism. This is a doctrine contemporary Friends take as normative, but was an invention of the 1931 Yearly Meeting, a development we have good reason to believe would have been strongly opposed by Fox.<sup>89</sup>

Illuminated by the 'noontide Light', Liberal Quakers saw themselves as inhabiting the denouement of history once more. However, in reformulating their understanding of original sin, the 'Inward/Inner Light' and 'that of God in everyone', and in adopting a position of being 'open to new Light', their interpretation of the 'script' had changed significantly from that of the first Friends.

81 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 119.

82 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 11.

83 Barclay, *Apology*, Prop V–VI §XVI.

84 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 132.

85 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 132.

86 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 133.

87 Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice*, para 19.32.

88 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 132.

89 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 131–32.

### From One to Many Stories: Postmodern Quakers and Scripture

In placing authority in experience alone, independent of Scripture, 'Modernist Friends imagined that they were reclaiming original Quakerism but in fact they were to establish in its Liberal variation the biggest departure from the rest of Quaker tradition to date.'<sup>90</sup> If we are examining Quaker eschatology through the lens of narrative, then this side-lining of Scripture in the twentieth century, this (perhaps unintentional) abandonment of a shared narrative that allowed London Yearly Meeting in 1966 to reject 'draft membership regulations as too doctrinally Christian'<sup>91</sup> requires careful examination.

The Liberal positioning of experience as primary and sufficient has led to the virtual disappearance of Scripture from the corporate lives of Postmodern Friends, where 'the practices of individuals and meetings vary widely. Some individuals know the Bible very well ... others scarcely know it at all.'<sup>92</sup> Britain Yearly Meeting's current 'Book of Christian Discipline' exhorts Quakers to 'remember the importance of the Bible, the writings of Friends and all writings which reveal the ways of God',<sup>93</sup> placing Scripture alongside other writings seen to mediate spiritual authority. Scripture has little, if any, corporate function.

A rejection of the Bible, or of the necessity of the Bible for shaping the Quaker community as a whole, could be seen as an expression of the postmodern rejection of metanarrative. Progressivism offered a metanarrative that made sense of history and gave hope for a better future. Jean-François Lyotard suggests that this optimistic metanarrative has been 'liquidated' by the events of the twentieth century.<sup>94</sup> The attempts of Progressivism to deal with the horror and terror of history have failed. No future could possibly justify Auschwitz, and our attempts to control the future through technology have led us into a state of climate crisis and threatened nuclear disaster.<sup>95</sup> This failure of Progressivism saw the collapse of belief in inevitable progress, marking the emergence of postmodernity, defined as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'.<sup>96</sup>

With the failure of Progressivism the horror and terror of history remain, and so postmodernity attempts to erase history itself. In doing so, the postmodern individual lives in a prolonged present, or a series of disconnected presents. The past 'is not part of a story we ourselves are living, merely a theme park we visit for

90 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 130.

91 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 134.

92 Macy, H. R., 'Quakers and Scripture', in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 200.

93 Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice*, para 1.02.5.

94 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, p. 30.

95 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 17.

96 Lyotard, J.-F., *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, trans. Bennington, G. and Massumi, B.; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, p. xxiv.

amusement'.<sup>97</sup> The future becomes 'the future already contained in the present, not the sphere of the unpredictable and the unexpected'.<sup>98</sup> Postmodernity ends history because there are no more grand stories to tell.<sup>99</sup> This creates both a preoccupation with the end of the individual and a sense of living in 'a crisis of perpetual "transition" from one age to another'.<sup>100</sup>

Paul Fiddes suggests that 'if we have lost confidence in an ending to the world and history, there will be a deep suspicion about providing an end to any story',<sup>101</sup> meaning that such suspicions will include the Christian narrative, whose meaning is found in its end. Just as Liberal Friends aligned themselves with a Modernist faith in 'progress', the diminishing role of the Bible among British Quakers suggests they have taken on, perhaps unconsciously, a postmodern distrust of metanarrative.

Just as an eschatology of progress could be mistakenly aligned with the realising eschatology of the first Friends, so the Postmodern neglect of Scripture could be mistakenly thought of as in continuity with early Quaker attitudes. Although it emerged from a Protestant culture, Quakerism was never a sola scriptura movement. The first Quakers placed Scripture in a dialectical relationship with personal experience of the Holy Spirit. Scripture gave them the tools to interpret their experiences as a community, and yet their experience of the Holy Spirit remained the primary source of spiritual teaching.<sup>102</sup> This is typified by Fox, who knew and used the Bible extensively<sup>103</sup> while also witnessing 'that Christ the Present Teacher led him to insights inwardly, not rising from the reading or study of the Bible, that he later found consistent with Scripture'.<sup>104</sup> Although Fox claimed that one could respond to inward revelation without knowledge of the gospel,<sup>105</sup> he still saw that Scripture was fundamental for the formation of the church. The community of faith could be gathered only by the Christian narrative that gave Friends the language to interpret and understand their inward experience and their role in God's work.<sup>106</sup>

Barclay similarly argued that the Scriptures gave a faithful account historically, prophetically and doctrinally, but

because they are only a declaration of the fountain, and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all Truth and

97 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 26.

98 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 27.

99 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, p. 29.

100 Fiddes, *The Promised End*, p. 10.

101 Fiddes, *The Promised End*, p. 11.

102 Macy, 'Quakers and Scripture', p. 188.

103 Macy, 'Quakers and Scripture', p. 188.

104 Macy, 'Quakers and Scripture', p. 189.

105 Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word*, p. 110.

106 Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word*, p. 110.

knowledge ... They are and may be esteemed a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit, from which they have all their excellency and certainty.<sup>107</sup>

So from the beginning of Quakerism there has been a tension between insisting on the importance of the Bible while also maintaining it as subordinate to the Spirit and non-essential to individual salvation. Although we may confidently assume that Barclay would never have intended it, his designation of Scripture as a 'secondary rule' opened the way for the diminishing of scriptural authority among Postmodern Friends.<sup>108</sup> In many ways Liberal Quakerism was very much concerned with Scripture, embracing the methods of 'higher criticism'<sup>109</sup> and holding the influential Scarborough Summer School of 1897 on the theme of 'Quakers and the Bible'.<sup>110</sup> However, although Liberal Friends felt they were restoring 'the Bible to its proper relationship with the Light',<sup>111</sup> the positioning of experience as primary and sufficient combined with the postmodern suspicion of metanarrative has consigned Scripture to the peripheries of Postmodern Quaker experience. In our theatrical metaphor, a shared script has been substituted for a plethora of individual scripts, or no script at all. Although the stage is shared, the enacted drama is not.

### Postmodern Quaker Eschatology

We are now in a position to examine the eschatology of Postmodern Quakerism. We saw how postmodernism deals with the horror and terror of history by jettisoning both past and future. This is reflected in the absence of Christ's *parousia* and the doctrines of the 'absolute perhaps' and the 'Eternal Now'.

#### *The absence of Christ's parousia*

With the declining role of Scripture, the relegating of the Christian story to one among many and the loss of a communal metanarrative, it makes sense that the central figure of the Christian story should lose his significance. Postmodern Quakerism is in many ways post-Christian. Although the current book of discipline states that 'the Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teachings of Jesus',<sup>112</sup> the crucifixion is alluded to only in reference to 'the reality and cost of obedience to God', and the Resurrection and *parousia* are entirely absent. Christ is no longer central to the religious experience of every British Friend.<sup>113</sup> In a religious culture where belief

107 Barclay, *Apology*, Prop III.

108 Macy, 'Quakers and Scripture', pp. 189–90.

109 Macy, 'Quakers and Scripture', p. 197.

110 Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, pp. 171–72.

111 Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, p. 164.

112 Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice*, para 1.02.4.

113 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 203.

is pluralised, privatised and marginalised, the loss of a 'first coming' for individual Friends means that 'the second coming' loses all significance.<sup>114</sup>

### *The 'absolute perhaps'*

In the Progressivism of Liberal Quakers we saw a confidence in the maturation of human civilisation and openness to innovation and 'continuing revelation' through being 'open to new Light'. This prioritising of the new over the old combined with a postmodern suspicion of claims to absolute and universal truth, as well as the loss of a communal teleological metanarrative, has resulted in a doctrine of a perpetual seeking and 'the certainty of never finding'.<sup>115</sup> This rational certainty of the impossibility of theological certainty has been named as a doctrine of the 'absolute perhaps'. For Dandelion it is 'the defining characteristic of the [Postmodern] Quaker and is the key difference between these Friends and the whole of the rest of Quakerism, worldwide today and historically'.<sup>116</sup> In stark contrast to Early Friend Margaret Fell's claim that 'the Truth is one and the same always',<sup>117</sup> for Postmodern Quakers Truth does not endure. Rather than awaiting the advent of Christ, Postmodern Quakers await the continual advent and passing away of temporary Truth.<sup>118</sup> They are a pilgrim people with no destination. The end can never come, for the 'absolute perhaps' requires that we only ever see in a mirror, dimly, and never face to face, only know in part and never fully know (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12).<sup>119</sup>

### *The 'Eternal Now'*

Although a vestigial Progressivism remains in Postmodern Quakerism in the form of the 'absolute perhaps', Dandelion suggests that millennial hope no longer plays a role within British Quakerism.<sup>120</sup> With no end in sight for their pilgrimage, Postmodern Quakers

live not even in historical time but in present-time, the self and its relation to the-now-moment elevated to a congruity with God, 'God', or 'not-God' (he, she or it). An ahistorical atemporal mysticism and the means to 'God' [have become] more important than the end.<sup>121</sup>

114 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 135.

115 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 152.

116 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 152.

117 Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice*, para 19.61.

118 Dandelion, 'From God's Time to Historical Time', p. 189.

119 Fruitful comparisons could be made between Postmodern Quakerism and those dramas that encapsulate the loss of *telos* within postmodernity. See the hopeless stasis of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' (1953), where they wait for the unknown, never arriving Godot, or Pirandello's 'Six Characters in Search of an Author' (1921), which dismantles the *theatrum mundi* metaphor from the inside. For more on Pirandello see Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, pp. 244–48.

120 Dandelion, 'From God's Time to Historical Time', p. 184.

121 Dandelion, 'From God's Time to Historical Time', p. 185.



This is reflected in the following from Britain Yearly Meeting's book of discipline: 'For us it is not so important when the perfect world will be achieved or what it will be like . . . . We must literally not take too much thought for the morrow but throw ourselves whole-heartedly into the present.'<sup>122</sup> We see here the theological equivalent of the postmodern prolonged present.

There is a sense in which the emphasis on the 'Eternal Now' belies a form of realised eschatology, with Postmodern Quakers considering themselves to be at the forefront of religious truth. Present-focussed yet perpetually seeking, this combination of static restlessness represents the end to which Christianity is headed 'once those believers have got over the delusion of a transcendent God'.<sup>123</sup> This could be thought of as an ecclesiological millenarianism. Quaker processes, such as the etiquette surrounding how Quakers worship and make decisions, which were originally the means to the kingdom, become the kingdom itself.<sup>124</sup> The forms of worship and decision-making remain the same while the content is completely open to change. Faith is placed in process rather than what that process reveals. In terms of ecclesiology the end has come. There is nowhere else to go.

### Conclusion: Improvising Individuals on an Empty Stage Forever

In Dandelion's metaphor Postmodern Quakers have disposed of the alarm clock. In the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* the shared script has been abandoned. We have seen that Postmodern Quakers no longer inhabit the shared narrative of Scripture.<sup>125</sup> We have seen how Jesus and his *parousia* have become optional, and therefore peripheral. Avoiding the scandal of particularity that Jesus entails, Quakers have freed themselves from the historical narrative of Scripture, in a sense freeing them to seek truth anywhere and be bound to none. The doctrinal attitudes of the 'absolute perhaps' and the 'Eternal Now' are reliant on this abandonment of historical specificity. As truth is transitory, to be superseded, the only thing we can depend upon is the present moment.

This freedom from history risks the theological stifling of Quakerism. In order for all truth to be provisional, nothing can be said with confidence. In what Dandelion has termed the 'culture of silence', Quakers escape from divisive theological discussions arising within a theologically pluralistic community by simply not talking about it.<sup>126</sup> This 'culture of silence' evidences an extreme apophatic attitude, where the status of theological discussion is 'diminished by the popular Quaker view on the impossibility, and the inappropriateness of speech,

122 Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice*, para. 24.60.

123 Dandelion, 'From God's Time to Historical Time', p. 193.

124 Gwyn, 'Quakers, Eschatology, and Time', p. 217.

125 There may be some form of shared narrative inhabited by Postmodern Quakers, perhaps a particular understanding of their own history as a religious movement, but to examine this would require further sociological research.

126 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 145.

to communicate belief'.<sup>127</sup> This is an end of shared story, for no more stories (or stories with endings at least) can be confidently told. With no shared scripts, Postmodern Quakers find themselves endlessly, silently improvising on a shared stage but each in their own private play.

Finding themselves at the end of history, the first Quakers abandoned meantime liturgical and ecclesial practices. The 'props' and 'scenery', such as bread and wine and water baptism, were removed from the stage now that the *theatrum mundi* was ending. We have seen how successive generations of Quakers continued to inhabit the empty stage of the first Friends, but adapted their interpretation of it to account for the delayed *parousia*. Postmodern Quakers are 'a Second-Coming Church without a Second Coming',<sup>128</sup> and so the empty stage no longer speaks of imminent *parousia*. Instead it offers a blank canvas for the individual. It is the space in which plurality can thrive. Within the context of the Christian narrative, the silence of Quaker worship told a story (cf. Rev. 8:1). Now, the silence points neither forward nor backward, but is an absence waiting to be filled.

With no shared story, there is no shared end. If there is no end of the story to make sense of the whole, what energises action in the present? From a Christian perspective, the present is energised by 'the hidden future [that] already announces itself'.<sup>129</sup> To hope is to be in conflict with present reality and it is our vision of God's future that ignites this conflict.<sup>130</sup> The 'Now' is not enough. A futureless 'Eternal Now' cannot make sense of the horror and terror of history, it can only ignore them. There is no inward groaning for the redemption of creation (Rom. 8:22–23), just script-less, improvising individuals on an empty stage forever.

That the *theatrum mundi* both makes the narrative nature of eschatology explicit and is able to show how Quaker eschatology has shifted dramatically while its original *parousia*-inspired ecclesiology has remained relatively unchanged, demonstrates its usefulness as a pedagogical tool. It is not without its deficiencies. It springs from the narrative nature of Christianity and so will of necessity show a post-Christian Quakerism to be deficient. It also takes the eschatological nature of Quakerism as a foundation. For theologians approaching Quakerism from a non- or post-Christian perspective, or who disagree with the eschatology hermeneutic, other models may be required. Even so, viewing British Quakerism through the lens of the *theatrum mundi* raises some important questions about the need and possibility of Postmodern Quakers inhabiting some sort of shared narrative and its capacity to be a community of hope. What prevents us from being improvising individuals on an empty stage with no end in sight? I look forward to being part of the community that attempts an answer.

127 Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 142.

128 Dandelion, 'From God's Time to Historical Time', p. 194.

129 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, pp. 17–18.

130 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 21.

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