

GNOSTIC METAPHYSICS IN THE DYNAMICS
OF FOXIAN LIGHT AND THE REUNION
OF THE SOUL WITH GOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses prior scholarship surrounding the emphasis upon, and interpretation of, the moral and ethical dynamic within the Light theology of George Fox, and advances it by suggesting a metaphysical approach which is remarkably similar to that found in Christian (Valentinian) Gnosticism. This similarity is particularly illustrated in an examination of Fox's theology pertaining to the nature and disposition of the divine soul and its reunion with God.

KEYWORDS

Christian (Valentinian) Gnosticism, Gnosis, George Fox, Light, Union with God, soul, metaphysics

A keystone to Foxian theology (that of a sense of union with the divine) can be interpreted as ethically defined and/or a matter of philosophical, metaphysical speculation. While the early Quaker preoccupation with concrete sinfulness cannot simply be shrugged off, Fox¹ does however claim to be free of sin, a permanent and irreversible state of being from which he suggests he would not fall. This paper considers the interpretation and consequences of this bold statement which bears a remarkable similarity with the metaphysical dynamics found in Valentinian (Christian) gnosis and Gnosticism (an alleged early Church heresy founded by the second-century Egyptian teacher, Valentinus). Valentinus narrowly lost out in an election contest for the Bishop of Rome and it is fascinating to speculate what would have been the history of Christianity, indeed of Western culture, had Valentinus won that election and become a Gnostic Pope.

This paper employs a working definition of 'gnosis' as being an individual's realisation, arising from revelatory knowledge and spiritual baptism (received in a Christian context from the redeemer figure of Christ), that a divine ontological component exists within the human body which needs to reunite with a consubstantial

eternal heavenly Light/Christ. The soteriological and eschatological implications arising from Valentinian Gnostic revelation are:

1. supernatural reunion of the divine element in the individual with Christ, awakening the individual to their divinity, resulting in spiritual perfection and freedom from the power and temptation of sin on earth;
2. the consequential devaluation of calendrical time/events (as significant aspects of theological exegesis) in pursuance of an anti-cosmic/historical emphasis upon inward revelation, thus limiting the authority of (a) Scripture and (b) communion and baptism to the extent that they are historically particular outward rituals.

There is no evidence that Fox used or was influenced by Gnostic texts, Christian or otherwise. However, in relation to the Foxian concepts of Light and the reunion of the soul with God, this paper argues that Fox claimed to restore primitive Christianity, yet unconsciously renewed aspects of Valentinian Christian Gnosticism. His quest for divinity, perfection and a realised eschatology is readily transferable (perhaps by way of parallel evolution) to the early Church context of Gnosticism in which (in opposition to the authority of the developing orthodoxy) reunion with God is a realisable eschatological aim on earth. The conclusions of this paper place Fox's theology in a Valentinian context, as opposed to the purely apocalyptic framework identified below, in modern research. As the modern day historian Richard Bailey has queried regarding a recrudescence of one aspect of Gnosticism, that is, the divine within—'did Fox manage to salvage overlooked Gnostic elements from the New Testament?'² Not least in terms of Fox's concept of the soul and reunion with God, this paper suggests that he did.

Of enormous benefit in comparing and contrasting Foxian theology and Valentinian Gnosticism is the discovery in 1945 of what is now known as *The Nag Hammadi Library*³ (or NHL—the English facsimile published 1972–78), following which we now know substantially more about the nature of Gnosticism and how it was interpreted by patristic commentators such as Irenaeus. For example, despite recent misconceptions, the NHL has illustrated that Valentinian Gnosticism *did* incorporate conduct and ethics as being of relevance as to whether the recipient or Gnostic would receive gnosis (see below). For example, Stroumsa,⁴ a leading scholar of Gnosticism, states that there is now seen in Gnosticism 'an obsessive preoccupation with the problem of evil' in order to preserve the state of divinity once realised. This concern leads to conduct and sin-related considerations within Gnostic communities.

Another pioneering researcher of Gnosticism and writer of seminal works, Elaine Pagels, has recently strongly argued that the early Church commentators' perception of the 'heretical' aspects of Christian or Valentinian Gnosticism (essentially concerning the potential for divinization on earth, the Gnostic hostility/aversion towards flesh, matter, the world and the creator God or Demiurge), have been misconceived in the context of theological rivalry, an evolving Biblical Canon and church politics: 'what Christians have disparagingly called Gnostic and heretical sometimes turns out to be forms of Christian teaching that are merely unfamiliar to us...'⁵

This paper considers Fox's distinctive use of the nature and function of Light in drawing comparisons with Valentinian Gnosticism. In analysing Foxian theology and

its relationship with Gnostic 'light-metaphysics' the historical bias towards an ethical dimension to 'Light' in Fox's message is illustrated by Rachel Hadley King. Albeit 65 years ago, King makes remarkable reference to Foxian Light incorporating a scientific terminology, and as will be demonstrated below, recognised the organic, graphic and extreme nature of Foxian thought while dismissing a connection with metaphysics *per se*: 'in *Lichtmetaphysik* the light is thought of in terms of being [i.e. as in gnosis], with the distinction of right and wrong as secondary considerations; with Fox the distinguishing feature of the Light is that it has to do with moral right and wrong'.⁶ This paper challenges that view and will argue that morals were, for Fox, a secondary and consequential aspect of the metaphysical state of being arising through the function of revelatory Light.

In relation to *Lichtmetaphysik*, the above generalised view of King fails to appreciate the necessary conduct required to be receptive to the lifetime workings of gnosis. The prior research emphasis upon ethics rather than the metaphysics of a divine state in Fox's Light theology is in stark contrast to the identification with the divine by Fox when stating of God: 'As he is, so are we in this present world'.⁷ In essence, without the spiritual transformation, the ethical significance is redundant. As King acknowledges, concluding with a reference to 1 Jn 3.9:

Regeneration for Fox is a change of state. A sum of good deeds does not make a good man, but he only is a good man whose whole will has turned towards the light in obedience, which act brings man into a state in which he can be supernaturally born again. The regenerate man is born of God and does not commit sin, neither can he.⁸

Filoramo, a modern day scholar of Gnosticism who has examined its relationship to the science of metaphysics, illustrates the scientific approach to Light dynamics within Gnosticism to which Fox's Light theology is better compared:

The presupposition of the Gnostic theory of enlightenment is a metaphysics of the light that arises and is established throughout the Christian era. Instead of simply being a means of knowledge, a 'how' of existence, as is typical of the classical tradition, the light becomes its privileged object. It is transformed in fact into a force, a power that is life, incorruptible divine life... A desire is born, an acute longing to open itself to that light world of the divine life, to return once again to rest in the calm, tranquil bosom of primordial light. In its more radical formulations, this nostalgia for its openness means only the drive to become and to be light, to participate in that particular life to the point of identifying with the divine light that constitutes the substance of the world of the pleroma—that is, of the fullness of the divine reality.⁹

Fox identified himself with the Light as evidenced by his fully realised eschatology, his claims to be a Son of God, his perfection and the state of paradise in which he found himself in 1648:

Now I was come up in spirit, through the flaming sword, into the paradise of God. All things were new, and all the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness, innocency, and righteousness, being renewed up into the image of god by Christ Jesus; so that I was come up to the state of Adam, which he was in before he fell. The creation was open to me; and it was showed me, how all things had their names given them, according to their nature and

virtue... But I was immediately taken up in spirit, to see into another or more steadfast state than Adam's in innocency, even into a state in Christ Jesus, that should never fall...¹⁰

Significantly for the purposes of a comparison with Gnosticism, the consequences of such an experience (i.e. for Fox, an irreversible state of divine being within a realised eschatology) is characterised exclusively in the context of early Christianity by those movements designated as Gnostic.¹¹ Fox witnesses redemption from the world and freedom from sin.¹² Quakers believed they were possessed by the Risen Christ who was perfect in nature. However, both Fox and the Valentinians are extremely conscious of ethical concerns in preserving that realised state/knowledge once received. According to the Gnostic scholar, Kurt Rudolph,¹³ 'Christian' gnosis fully justifies its epithet on the grounds that the Gnostic and Christian ethos can be seen as non-contradictory. The Gnostic that is free from the world and has dominion over sin is also the Gnostic that can love those without gnosis until they too are free. This is illustrated by the Valentinian *Gospel of Philip*:

He who has the knowledge (gnosis) of the truth is free. But the free does not sin. For he who sins is the slave of sin... Those to whom it is not permitted to sin, the world calls 'free'...knowledge lifts up (their) hearts, which means it makes them free, and makes them be lifted up above the whole place (of the world). But love (agape) edifies. But he who becomes free through knowledge is a slave for love's sake to those who have not yet been able to take up the freedom of knowledge. But knowledge makes them worthy so that (it causes them) to become (free).¹⁴

Fox opposes those who plead for sin and imperfection as permanent features to life on earth. Sin could be avoided permanently if the individual were open to the spirit or Light of Christ. Fox, too, encourages adherence to nothing save the eternal guidance from, and quest for union with, the Light. King (by way of an apparent contradiction with the statement above on *Lichtmetaphysik*) believed that Fox came close to the type of Light dynamic illustrated by Filoramo. King states that Fox's ultimate relationship of unity is one of fellowship 'but more intimate than this—God and man are now at one... It is near to the deification of man'.¹⁵

However, Fox's sense of union and consequent salvation is later described by King in less cautionary terms as 'the deification of humanity'.¹⁶ King's conclusions are inconsistent when also stating that 'Fox's unity with God is never the merging of the human with the divine, never a swallowing up of the human in the divine'.¹⁷ While use of the term 'deification' is not considered appropriate to the seventeenth century, King appears reluctant to accept that Fox pursued a theology that incorporated the possibility of 'deification', or better put, 'divinity'; perhaps an illustration of the caution of scholars suggested by Ingle when referring to Fox's 'hidden faith' as an embarrassment to the Quaker establishment, then and now.¹⁸

The 'unity' Fox advocates is that reached via the divine Light, soul or seed, which exists within all individuals.¹⁹ In Valentinianism, the Light, divine spark,²⁰ seed²¹ or soul within the individual is 'awakened' (typically symbolized within Gnostic mythological texts as being from sleep or drunkenness) by the call/revelation of the redeemer figure of Christ. Similarly in relation to Quaker 'Light', King²² states that

the divine within every individual is in death prior to regeneration (for which organic garden symbolism is employed²³) and unity with the divine follows.

Fox described this regeneration in terms of a physical sensation and process, that Christ gives his blood to the Saints constantly for their nourishment.²⁴ This is not simply figurative as Fox asserts he can mystically feel the blood within as he can feel the Light within.²⁵ Significantly, King believes that this transformed state is the 'extreme and atypical position of Fox'.²⁶

The literal as opposed to figurative presence of Christ in the theology of Fox occurs because some, or at least an as yet undermined number, of early Quakers had a tendency to interweave references to the earthly creature with that of the glorified inner being of the believer (a common usage of such terminology at the time).²⁷ For Fox, there was little distinction expressed between the physical and the spiritual; the relationship between Christ and the believer was very close, described as being 'flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone'.²⁸ This state arguably results in the unqualified claims for the sinlessness and perfection of regenerate individuals most radically and provocatively referred to in *The Great Mystery*.²⁹

A semantic study by Seppanen states that while the idea of 'perfection' is prominent in Fox's theology, it has no 'distinctive' use in Fox's language.³⁰ This is arguably indicative of Fox's inconsistent language (as in that of 'Light' employed by Fox) in which Fox's experiential belief is inadequately suited to the confines of description and vocabulary. Additionally, the lack of distinctive usage has arguably fuelled the interpretation of 'perfection' in primarily ethical terms. However, analysis of the term has led Randall and Wallis to suggest that the Greek word translated as 'perfect' in Mt. 5.48 can mean 'complete' or 'whole'—that people are called to be complete human beings just as God acts out of a sense of complete divinity.³¹ The author of seminal works on early Quakerism, Douglas Gwyn,³² concurs that perfection (as an image of the ascent back to paradise, i.e., reunion with God) illustrates how original wholeness plays an important part in Fox's understanding of final, apocalyptic fulfillment. Indeed, both Randall and Wallis conclude that the interpretation of 'perfect' in Mt. 5.48 was extended by Quakers and Puritans to indicate divinity beyond the intention of Jesus as described in Scripture.

This position adopted by Fox (as to the supernatural workings of Light) is similar to that of gnosis and illustrates Fox's belief in the possibility of immediate realized perfection and union with Christ by the Light. While the concepts are connected, unlike the 'degrees' or 'measures' of perfection as expressed by Fox, the individual is either in the Light or out of it. Although pre-dating modern Quaker scholarship, Maurice Creasey advanced a connection with Gnostic metaphysical, organic criteria and Foxian theology, observing that in the matter of perfection, Quakers generally regarded it as a real possibility *in proportion* to the Light which was obeyed and followed.³³ However, the modern view of Quaker scholar Rosemary Moore suggests Fox's greater calling (as evidenced by his revelations, not least that of 1648) was recognised by other Quakers as Fox having a greater union with Christ than they did:

in principle all Quakers were sons or daughters of God and united with Christ, but everybody's 'measure' was not equal and Quakers recognised that some people had a

special calling as Elders or Ministers to the flock. George Fox had an extra special calling, and few Quakers quarreled with this assumption.³⁴

As evidence of Foxian metaphysics in terms of mechanics and imagery in pursuit of the 'fullness of Christ', in the following 1658 publication Fox includes cautionary guidance against activity and declarations which are beyond a person's spiritual 'measure':

Every man that hath a measure of the spirit of God, in the least measure or degree, it is infallible, and so far may they teach infallibly, and know scriptures; but they cannot know all scriptures, but as they attain to the full measure of the spirit of the prophets and apostles, and to the measure, and stature, and fullness of Christ. And if they do not attain to all this, they are not able to know all the scriptures. And take heed of any of you going beyond your measure.³⁵

From the above it is clear that individuals may fail in attaining paradisiacal perfection yet come close to it, as if on a metaphysical sliding spiritual scale. The cautionary addition of exceeding one's measure relates to those who claim a degree of spiritual or scriptural understanding without merit, that is, through arrogance or hypocrisy. What is significant in this context of a comparison with gnosis and Gnosticism is that a real and non-figurative union with Christ, however expressed, was fundamental to Fox, indeed, the 'keystone'³⁶ of his theology. Moore suggests that in 1650 Fox employed a distinctive language of 'unity with Christ'³⁷ not discernible in his later published *Works*: 'The more extreme language describing union with God or with Christ was confined to letters, while material for publication was more cautiously expressed'.³⁸ Notably, this caution in the 'public' expression of Fox's views arguably marked the beginning of a theological retreat. The early language and 1650 enthusiasm was at risk of being found contrary to legislation, namely, the Blasphemy Act of that year. This Act prohibited anyone to claim 'to be very God, or to be infinite or Almighty, or in Honor, Excellency, Majesty and Power to be equal, and the same with the true God, or that the true God, or the Eternal Majesty dwells...in them and nowhere else'.³⁹

Regardless, Fox used biblical language involving union or identification with God seemingly in contravention of this legislation. Yet Fox may have been referring to Jn 1.12 or Ps. 82.6 in his 'Godded' language when stating:

God is pure who hath spoken it, and as many as received the word, I say unto you, ye are gods, as it is written in you...now wait all to have these things fulfilled in you, if it be never so little a measure wait in it, that you may grow up to a perfect man in Christ Jesus, there is a feeding upon the milk of the word, before you come to the words.⁴⁰

However, the response from contemporary anti-Quaker tracts⁴¹ demonstrates that: 'the earliest Quaker teaching was mainly concerned with direct union with Christ or with God, expressed in terms of the body of Christ, or of divine indwelling'.⁴² While this view was not universally held by Quakers, some such as Fox did hold a distinctive belief that this direct union was not merely a vague sense of undefined spiritual unity. Body and spirit together were literally one with Christ. Fox employs a language which linked the spiritual with the physical: 'The blood of Christ which satisfies the Father, which the saints drink, and his flesh which they eat'.⁴³

Ingle states that early Quakers were ‘enthusiasts’, that is, they were similar in belief to those Spiritualists of the fifteenth century who believed they were possessed by God:

Two of their [Quaker] central teachings, that Christ was present to teach and lead his people and that every person possessed the Inward teacher, easily shaded over into the view that Christ was within each individual. Hence the Quaker assertion that the divine Christ lived in them seemed an obvious attempt to identify with the messiah, perhaps even to claim divinity.⁴⁴

When rumours circulated that Fox had been calling himself Christ, Fox denied the charge but confused the issue by calling his accuser a ‘Judas’.⁴⁵ Fox continued to use the expression that he was, and others could be, sons of God;⁴⁶ he agreed with the charge that he was the son of God at Carlisle in 1653⁴⁷ and stated as such in a letter to Oliver Cromwell in 1654.⁴⁸

An editorial process of moderating Fox’s theological approach in the early Quaker record, led to the 1694 edition of Fox’s *Journal* (edited by Ellwood) excluding reference to these passages and such ‘enthusiastic’ language. Ingle suggests that Ellwood and other editors did this because they wished to make Fox appear respectable to the established Church.⁴⁹

The ‘son of God’ language (while rare) provides a better understanding of the early ‘union with God’ theology of Fox than that published at the end of the seventeenth century.⁵⁰ The following 1653 Epistle was addressed to ‘Margaret Fell and evry [*sic*] other friend who is raised to discerning’ and represents a statement of Fox’s belief in God-possession following his revelations of 1647/48:

According to the Spirit I am the Sonne of God and according to the flesh I am the seed of Abraham which is Christ, which seed is not many but one, which seed is Christ and Christ in you. The mystery which has been hid for ages is now made manifest... which seed bruised the serpents head... According to the spirit I am the Sonne of God before Abraham was, before Jerusalem was, the same which doth descend, the same doth descend...⁵¹

Irrespective of the possibility that Fox may have been referring to the language of Jn 1.12, the later Quaker embarrassment with the Epistle is illustrated by the revised opening line given to it by the anonymous seventeenth-century compiler of the *Annual Catalogue of George Fox’s Papers*.⁵² Instead of reading ‘I am the son of God’, the compiler gives two alternative readings: ‘I am chosen’ and (more significant still, for this wording completely undercuts the force, power and meaning of the Epistle according to Ingle⁵³) ‘Christ is’ the son of God.

Richard Bailey similarly and controversially incorporates a metaphysical approach in early Quakerism by extending the Radical Reformation and Eastern Orthodox doctrine of ‘celestial flesh’ to Fox’s use of celestial inhabitation, suggesting the term ‘Christopresent’ to indicate Fox’s claims that he was the very Son of God:

Fox was casting himself, not only as an eschatological prophet but as a magus, avatar—a new incarnation of Christ representative of the culmination of God’s dealing with human history... It was his claim to divinity above all else that prompted the charges of heresy and blasphemy.⁵⁴

Bailey argues that the following statement of Fox indicates the operative theme of celestial inhabitation in his theology—that there were no distinctions in the Godhead as ‘leading early Quakers refused to separate Christ’s body and Christ’s spirit’.⁵⁵ Fox stated:

And you say the spirit is distinguished from the Father and the son from eternity, and Christ saith it proceeds from him and the Father, and he is the God and the Father of all spirits of all flesh, and the substance of all things... And are there not three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the word, and the spirit, and are they not all one? How then are they distinct?... And Christ saith, ‘I and my father are one’...and he is in the saints and so not distinct.⁵⁶

Bailey states that the ‘context of celestial inhabitation really implied deification at least until the time of the transformation of the doctrine of the inner light’.⁵⁷ Bailey adapts the doctrine of celestial flesh and uses ‘Christopresentism’ to describe the displacement of the human body when the spirit or Light was in the believer;⁵⁸ this term means present as in ‘flesh and bone’ or ‘in fact’, rather than ‘in essence’. Of significance for this paper’s hypothesis is that conversely, within Valentinianism, Irenaeus stated that the Gnostic emphasis upon the spiritual dictated that the transformation is a realised divinity without physical or corporeal connotation for the body, bone or flesh, save that it is the acknowledgement/realisation and growth of the divine element, nature and essence of Christ/God in the individual’s soul or a part of it.⁵⁹ Bodily deportment and human metamorphosis within Valentinian Gnosticism is not significant in a theology where body, flesh and matter were to be cast off before eschatological completion.

The following extract of Fox is relied upon by Bailey in identifying a concept of ‘celestial inhabitation’ in Fox’s theology:

And the scriptures do witness heaven within... And if the saints sat in heavenly places with Christ Jesus; and if the saints in heaven must have a heavenly body, and Christ a human body, (which I say is earthly), how doth this agree with scripture, that says Christ’s is a glorious body? And is it an earthly body the saints eat, when they eat the flesh of Christ? And are not people in their first state, in the earthly, before they come to witness a spiritual body like unto his glorious body? How do you divide the word aright? And they that have the spirit of Christ, their spirits are in heaven, and they have unity with the Father.⁶⁰

Bailey suggests that in Fox’s theology more than grace is infused into the believer; ‘the inhabitation of the celestial Christ within effects a pervasive and permanent transformation wherein the saint is divinized’.⁶¹ Bailey is explicit in his belief (with which this paper concurs) that Fox’s emphasis upon unity is similar to Gnosticism in character, and further states that: ‘like some ancient Gnostics, Fox stressed unity and identity with the divine rather than distinctiveness from the divine’.⁶²

However, whereas Bailey correctly observes that ‘deification was a natural corollary to celestial inhabitation’,⁶³ Gnostic perfection, union and gnosis is not concerned with making the *flesh* holy, which is seemingly at the heart of Bailey’s argument. Gnostic salvation is by nature as well as by grace⁶⁴ and this illustrates a difference between Bailey’s interpretation of Fox and the salvation or soteriology crucial to

Gnosticism. It is the Gnostic realisation of a divine element within (the potential for salvation by nature) and its reunion thereafter with the external consubstantial Christ (through a process of grace) which is so fundamental to gnosis and Gnosticism as illustrated by its complex mythology in the NHL. The Gnostic mechanics of salvation are missing from Bailey's concept. Bailey's observations on the similarities between Foxian and Gnostic thought are based essentially on generalities surrounding divine union, but it lacks specific evidence, the detailed analysis of which may have been beyond the scope of Bailey's own research. In addition, the object of salvation in Bailey's interpretation—the divinisation of 'matter', that is, flesh and bone as distinct from the perfection and maturity of the pneumatic or spiritual element (seed, spark or soul)—would be anathema to Gnostic soteriology.

Bailey asserted that scholars such as Creasey, Benson and Gwyn saw the 'Christopresentism' in Fox but they failed to draw out the most radical implications of Fox's celestial adoption theory—that the inward-dwelling Christ literally transformed and perfected the saints so that they became flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone.⁶⁵ Moore supports Bailey's analysis of the Quakers' understanding of their relationship to Christ (in terms of the non-figurative sense of union) describing it as 'probably as nearly accurate as it is possible to come'.⁶⁶

While Nigel Smith reaches the same conclusion as Bailey regarding Fox's combined use of spirit and body in language, he argues that 'since so much of early Quaker protest depended upon bodily as well as verbal gesture, body and language were inextricably linked as the sites in which the workings of the inner Light were known'.⁶⁷ Additionally, Smith states that Bailey's view of Fox developing a doctrine of 'Christopresentism', with the possibility that the inward Light makes the flesh holy, 'seems an exaggeration or the result of too willing an ear given to Fox's Puritan opponents, but the fact is that such concerns are important'.⁶⁸ Recently, Melvin Endy, in remarking upon Bailey's 'Christopresentism' and Fox's language, states: 'Fox lacked the theological background needed to understand how his views related to monotheistic metaphysics. When he learned what was at issue, he seemed to have backed off, if not consistently'.⁶⁹

Perhaps typically, Fox's views on celestial inhabitation were obscure and ambiguous and as Endy notes, perhaps Bailey

does not adequately observe [Nigel Smith's] warning against attributing a fixed position to [Fox] on the basis of certain concepts he used, especially when the concepts are inherently ambiguous and metaphorical as a doctrine of inhabitation by the glorified heavenly flesh of Christ that is incorporeal and yet tangible.⁷⁰

The ambiguity in Fox's use of 'flesh and bone' language remains as it appears to be clearly motivated by Old Testament references and Fox's visionary experiences, as opposed to the more metaphorical and 'body of church' language of the New Testament. Fox's view was expressed that Christ's flesh is within the saints as a reality, just as material from Adam's rib was present in Eve's body when he called her 'bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh' (Gen. 2.23). There was an immediacy to the earliest Quakers sense of almost physical identification with Christ, who spoke in them as he had spoken in Galilee, and suffered in them as he had suffered at Jerusalem.

Certainly, Bailey⁷¹ appears to have more recently moderated his interpretation of the radical nature of Fox's position, to emphasise the 'celestial flesh' concept, that the believer's *spiritual* body or soul was not distinct from Christ who had a *spiritual* or celestial, yet 'flesh and bone' body; that is, a spiritual substance and *spiritual metamorphosis* lay behind Foxian theology (which in its negation of a flesh-and-matter transformation, is arguably more conducive to a Gnostic comparison).

A significant contribution to analyzing the debate concerning the nature of the transformation (including moral and ethical), which occurs in the person with the presence of the Risen Christ, has been researched by Lawrence Kuenning in a dissertation examining a discourse between the Puritan John Bunyan and the Quaker Edward Burrough, but including reference to Fox.⁷² For Burrough and Fox, the presence of the ascended Christ in the saints includes his flesh as well: 'In replying to Bunyan's repeated statements on Christ's physical absence, Fox mentions seven times that the saints eat Christ's flesh and seven times that they are 'flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone'.⁷³ Kuenning considers the difficulties encountered by Quakers, including Fox, in expressing resonances which the concept of the church as Christ's body carries in early Quaker theology:

The sense of moral and spiritual transformation so evident in Quaker conversion stories is accompanied, in the 1650s, by a vivid sense of bodily transformation as well, as evidenced in the physical manifestations such as quaking and trembling that so often seized upon those who underwent conviction of sin by the Light. It is as if the participants were being transubstantiated into the flesh of Christ... Quakers of the 1650s...experienced identification with Christ in a physical as well as a spiritual sense. They witnessed the flesh of Christ manifested in their own bodies, and were convinced it was the same flesh that had been crucified at Jerusalem.⁷⁴

Kuenning observes that Fox also speaks of Christ as being human not only during his earthly life and as risen as ascended, but even in his pre-incarnation existence, although acknowledges that the evidence is scanty. Nevertheless, such attachment to the carnal flesh by Fox in terms of Christ's pre-existent humanity and descent from heaven as man, was reignited in by Barclay who reiterated Fox's doctrine in more educated terms—the flesh of Christ that comes from heaven is not his manhood but a purely divine principle.⁷⁵

Michelle Tarter's research emphasizes the bodily and deportment issues referred to by Kuenning, above. Fox's principle of unity is argued in terms of flesh and 'fusion' with Christ, stating that Friends 'waited to receive divine movement within, and upon feeling this ecstatic embodiment, they in a sense became transubstantiated—Christ as flesh and bone inhabiting them, fusing with them'.⁷⁶ This 'embodied spirit theology' recognized by Tarter employs the scriptural reference from Joel 2.28-29: 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophecy... even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit'. As Tarter states, 'in Fox's theology of Christopresentism, when the spirit poured onto flesh, Friends magnified the indwelling Christ and became celestial flesh'.⁷⁷ While both Bailey (in terms of his revised approach) and Tarter adopt theological positions for Fox which are similar in a divinization process to that of gnosis, the

emphasis upon flesh (albeit celestial), and to bodily reactions, is not conducive to Gnostic soteriology which is limited to the divine element trapped in the body which is, or becomes, the divine soul.

Tarter states that Fox told his followers that the eternal Christ was with them, inhabiting *every* particle of their body: 'The eternal Christ was located within every human being and accessible to any who waited and listened in silence to feel the voice of inward Light'.⁷⁸ Conversely, the Valentinian Gnostic divine spark, seed or soul is identifiable and distinct from the obstacle that is the surrounding shell of flesh and matter, regardless of the transformation of the Gnostic's conduct following their newly discovered inherent divinity. Additionally, Tarter identifies the bodily reaction (such as quaking with the power of prophecy) to the transformation, another aspect which is not apparent in Gnostic texts. Kuenning notes that this quaking and trembling was 'often seized upon those who underwent conviction of sin by the Light'.⁷⁹

Scriptural language according to Smith (such as the flesh and bone of Eph. 5.30) becomes an allegory for the workings of the inward light and the change in anatomy for a regenerate Quaker.⁸⁰ This may explain Fox's possible interest in Hermetic writing—what is usually seen as metaphorical becomes something much more challenging: a real transformation. However, the transformation was arguably spiritual or celestial and not identified with the physical. Fox was interested in the eternal rather than created and physical matter, however inadequately he expressed himself.

Fox imagined that he had transformed his entire being: he was in a pre-Fall Adam and Eve state in a perfect natural world. Fox explains how he 'under a great work of the Lord fell into a trance for a fortnight and was very much altered in countenance and person as if my body had been new moulded or changed'.⁸¹ During the 1650s the definition and comprehension of concepts relating to matter and substance, the body and its relationship with the soul, was at the heart of the sectarian debate. Early Quaker writing expressed an interest in such matters in common with the milieu of the time.⁸²

In conclusion, the development of Quaker theology in terms of this debate is more understandable if seen as an attempt to make the concept of heavenly flesh more respectable and intellectually resonant in a changing scientific and historical context. 'The heavenly flesh concept could not be discarded, for it was too close to the heartbeat of the movement's earliest stages. Yet its earliest formulations... were hard for educated minds to assimilate unaltered'.⁸³

The metaphysical aspect of Fox's theology is best illustrated by his distinctive concept of the divine in the soul, the mechanics of which are now argued as remarkably similar to the reunion/perfection aspects of Valentinian soteriology.

THE REUNION OF THE DIVINE SOUL

A distinctive aspect of Fox's concept of the Light is now demonstrated as similar to an essential basic soteriological concept of Valentinian Gnosticism. This aspect relates to Fox's interpretation of the divine in the individual, and its relationship with Light, and the immortal soul. The main contention concerning the reunion of the divine soul is that while the soul has human connotations, it is identified so closely with the

divine as to amount to an emanation from God. The unity of the individual with God (albeit containing an element of conduct related fellowship) involves, as illustrated below, a degree of the individual being identified with God.

In 1653 Fox states: 'And know the word of God abiding in you, which was in the beginning, and brings to the beginning; which word being ingrafted, it saves the soul, and hammers down, and throws down, and burns up that which was against it'.⁸⁴ In a significant observation, Rufus Jones stated that Fox believed 'there was something of God, which may be called a divine seed or a divine Light, laid down in the nature and disposition of the soul'.⁸⁵ The caution suggested by Rachel King above (regarding the potential for 'deification' of the soul in Fox's theology) is not reflected in the following language used by Fox in 1658 (in the context of Fox's answers [A] to principles [P] offered by opponents):

P. That is the weak, ignorant, dark, and the wicked sect of the devil, that maintain an equality with God; the soul to be one being with God, or part of God... The Quakers say, there is no scripture speaks of a human soul, and the soul is taken up into God and God is all in all.

A. The assembly, or synod of priests, put forth a catechism, and say that the holy ghost and the son are equal with the Father in power and glory: and this they put forth that people should learn it: then, if any come to witness the holy ghost, they come to witness that which is equal in power and glory with the Father? If any come to witness the son of God revealed in them, (which he that hath not, hath not life,) do they not come to witness him who is equal in power and glory with the Father? This is your own catechism. And is it blasphemy to confess your own words, that ye have given people to learn? God breathed into man the breath of life, and he became a living soul. God, who hath all souls in his hand... And is not this [breath of life] that cometh out from God, which is in God's hand, part of God, of God, from God, and goes to God again? Which soul Christ is the bishop of. And dost not [opponents of Quaker theology] speak of a human soul, an earthly soul, and is earthly immortal? Cannot it die nor be killed? And is not that which came out from God, which God hath in his hand, taken up into God again, which Christ the power of God is bishop of, is not this of God's being? And dost not the Scripture say, God is all in all?

P. It is a wretched doctrine to say men have not a human soul in them, and to say that the soul is part of the divine essence.

A. Is not that of God that came out from him? and is not the earthly and human of the ground? and is that not mortal? and is that which is immortal human? And dost thou say it is human, and is that not earthly? And where doth the scripture of the prophets, Christ or the apostles, tell people of a human soul; and of Christ having a human body in heaven? And doth not the apostle speak of his glorified body?⁸⁶

Fox is clear that the soul receives part of the divine essence at the birth of the individual. He emphasises that 'God breathed into man the breath of life', not the possibility that God *may* do so. In a Gnostic context, Filoramo has stated:

revelation is possible only because within the Gnostic there somehow pre-exists a disposition, a capacity, a potential fitted for testing and getting to know that particular reality [the revealer, i.e., Christ]. Only like can in fact know like. Only spiritual beings can perceive, receive and understand the spiritual.⁸⁷

This 'disposition, capacity, a potential' is the divine essence breathed into the soul of the individual, that of God in the 'nature and disposition of the soul', as recognised by Rufus Jones in the theology of Fox. This is illustrative of the ontological perspective, namely, the significance of the nature and quality of the divine component within a metaphysical context. Fox states that while available to all from birth, that of God in the soul was still capable of being rejected by the individual who would be reprobated.⁸⁸

The divine element of the soul is a separate and distinct entity, emanating from God and sharing the divine existence to the extent that it is equal with God in nature and substance. It is this divine element that Penn and Barclay subsequently set out to 'de-gnosticise' from Fox's theology. Put in other words, as Bailey asserts: 'it was the glorified soul that Quaker theologians de-divinized'⁸⁹ from Fox's message.

Fox's view of the eternal nature of the immortal divine soul within the individual, consubstantial with Light and alien to darkness, is graphically represented in the following:

The ministers of the spirit watched for the soul, the prophets and apostles knew its state, and knew Christ the bishop of it, and saw when the soul was in death, and saw when God saw pleasure in it, when it lived... For who have the mysteries of the gospel, which is the power of God, which gives liberty to the captive soul... Such a one is a true workman, that divides his work aright, and is not ashamed of his work, of his building, but presents his soul to God, and knows when it is in death, and when it is living. And so they who are come up into the bishop, Christ, are one soul, they know the hand of God which the soul lives in (which is the power) and so know it from eternity to eternity... And so what fellowship hath the light with darkness? It hath no fellowship with it... And you are stumbling at such as are become the sons of God, adopted sons and heirs, and of the flesh and bone of Christ, and of his mind and spirit, who are in possession of the scriptures, the durable life of the saints... The soul is that which came out from God, and is in God's hand... And appetite and pleasure are human; these are not immortal, which the soul is.⁹⁰

Later, in 1677 (indicative of the de-gnosticising of Foxian theology) Fox appears to adjust his position with regard to the nature of the soul to the more conservative post-Restoration climate of the time: the individual's spirit, body, mind, soul and conscience became identified with the created human body (rather than emanated from God) until lit by the revelatory Light of Christ:

And so Christ, who is the light, who enlightens every man that comes into the world with his divine light, which is called, the life in the word, which was in the beginning, who is the light of the world; which is not a natural light, or a created light, but a spiritual, heavenly, and a divine light, which enlightens every man's spirit that comes into the world, his candle; for the spirit of man, is the candle of the Lord, and the candle stick is every man's body, mind, soul and conscience, that with this spirit their candle being lighted, and set up in its candlestick, they may see all that is in the house; and with this light they may see Christ that died for them, and is risen for them: so come by this light, which is life in the word, to be grafted into Christ the word, which was in the beginning, which lives and abides, and endures forever...⁹¹

The 'spirit of man' (i.e. not the Holy Spirit) was the candle, that is, a vehicle (natural and created) which was present from birth and when receptive of the Light

of Christ, enabled the believer to be grafted into Christ and perfected. But the natural and created soul still contained something of the divine essence, with the potential for divinisation as it awaited receipt of the divine Light. As Bailey notes: 'the soul was divinized at the birth of Christ within... Fox's inner light never changed. It always remained the presence of the celestial Christ'.⁹² In terms of a similar approach within Gnosticism, the divine element in its possession of the divine essence or heavenly Light, is metaphysically distinct from the natural and created body.

Prior to the late 1970s publication of the NHL and the Gnostic texts therein, the classic Gnostic scholar, Hans Jonas,⁹³ seemingly identifies the soteriological significance of the soul within Valentinian texts in which it is viewed in negative terms as a product of hostile or cosmic powers. However, identical to Fox's concept of the soul, enclosed in the natural human soul is the portion of the divine substance which in various complex schemes within Gnostic literature awakes to the presence of the light-power.⁹⁴ In relation to the non-Valentinian Gnostic text, *The Apocryphon of John*⁹⁵ (a text which arguably influenced subsequent Valentinian thought and texts), Alastair Logan identifies the light-power which descends and works upon the soul present in humanity to ensure its essential salvation.⁹⁶ For the Valentinian it is the divine element, seed or spark that ultimately unites with the pleroma or heavenly realm. There is some complexity surrounding the moment of actual completion of the reunion since it varies in Gnostic texts. For example, Rudolph suggests that in Gnosticism, perfection is only capable of completion and fully realised at death, when the spirit or soul as descriptions of the divine particles of light are separated from the body.⁹⁷ This process is illustrated in the *Book of Thomas the Contender*⁹⁸ when the Light withdraws to its true beginning and its true liberation.⁹⁹

CONCLUSIONS

In summation, Fox's distinctive view of the soul is that it is, or consists of, an emanation from God (Light) in the individual. The Light affects the nature and disposition of the soul which is, in Foxian thought, immortal and divine. The divine Light in the soul is consubstantial with Christ (the heavenly redeemer) who in Fox's theology and in Gnosticism seeks out the divine element trapped in the human body which needs to be reunited with God, with the realm of the eternal Light. The metaphysical language employed by Fox above,¹⁰⁰ is used to illustrate his principle of the soul's reunion with God. It bears a close resemblance to the metaphysical union of the consubstantial divine Light in the individual with God and the Redeemer in Valentinianism. Complete salvation for the Gnostic is, according to van den Broek,¹⁰¹ fully attained after death when the soul ascends to God *but can also be an inner experience during this earthly life*. The first section of this paper has demonstrated the ongoing significance of conduct and the avoidance of evil, in maintaining the gnosis received throughout the lifetime of the Gnostic. The Gnostic recognizes that they are divine and strives to maintain that divinity. As Kuenning observes for early Quakers such as Burrough (if not for Fox who may have adopted a more literal, flesh-and-bone approach) nothing perceptibly changes in terms of a bodily transformation of the non-corporeal, yet there is nevertheless an

imaginative sense of popular Catholic piety in which the transubstantiated bread may sometimes be seen to bleed. Quakers of the 1650s *were* the bread: they experienced identification with Christ in a physical as well as a spiritual sense.¹⁰²

The realised immediacy of this experience is contained within the theology of Fox. For the Valentinian, there is an identical experience of unity with Christ that has been revealed to exist in them through gnosis, that exists in a real metaphysical sense capable of increase and decrease dependant on future gnosis and conduct. In language, if not science, Fox can be seen in the above analysis of the soul to have used a metaphysical element of unity with God. The metaphysics concern the emanation of the divine from God becoming engrafted in the human soul, which itself is, or becomes, divine through a process capable of increase and decrease.

NOTES

1. Fox, G. *The Works of George Fox*, I, Philadelphia: Gould; New York: Hopper, 1831; Repr., ed. Wallace, T.H.S., State College Pennsylvania: George Fox Fund, Inc. and New Foundation, 1990, p. 84. As a result of variations in the different published versions of Fox's writings, the following citations will be employed throughout this paper: NJ = Fox, G., *Journal*, ed. Nickalls, J., Cambridge: University Press, 1952; BJ = Fox, G., *Journal*, ed. Penney, N., 2 vols.; London: Friends Tract Association, Bicentenary Edition, 1891; CJ = Fox, G., *Journal*, ed. Penney, N., 2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911; *Works* = *The Works of George Fox*, 8 vols.; Philadelphia: Gould; New York: Hopper, 1831; Repr., ed. Wallace, T.H.S., State College Pennsylvania: George Fox Fund, Inc. and New Foundation, 1990. The above citations, followed by a colon, volume and page number, provide the location of materials quoted or referred to in this paper.

2. Bailey, R.G. 'Seventeenth-century Quaker Christology', in Dandelion P. (ed.), *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, p. 71.

3. *Nag Hammadi Library*, Facsimile Edition; 13 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1972–78; *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [NHLE], trans. members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA; gen. ed., Robinson, J.M.; Leiden: Brill; New York/San Francisco: Harper Row, rev. edn, 1978 (1988). The library is hereinafter referred to as 'NHL'. From the NHL, references are made in this paper to Nag Hammadi Codices 'NHC' with recognised standard scholarly abbreviations for each Coptic text included in the NHL. The citation 'NHC' in this paper will therefore be followed by a colon and the Codex (Roman numeral), tractate (italicised numeral), page and (if necessary) line number. All NHL references in this paper are to those based on the texts of the NHLE. For example, in relation to the three versions of *The Apocryphon of John*, the page and line number references relate to the English translation of the long recension in Codex II.

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5. Pagels, E., *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, New York: Vintage Books, 2003, p. 73.

6. King, R.H., *George Fox and the Light Within 1650–1660*, Philadelphia: Friends Book Store, 1940, p. 85.

7. *Works*: 1:65.

8. King, *George Fox and the Light*, 46. Moore, in *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain 1646–1666* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p. 87 and 264 n. 39), refers to Fox's contemporary Martin Mason in *The Proud Pharisee Reproved* (London: n.p., 1655) as stating: 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin', claiming that Mason suggests that: 'the plain meaning of the Greek word translated as "commit" is that those "born of God" do

not commit any sin at all, not that they do not practice sin or make a habit of sinning, which was the usual interpretation put forward by most biblical commentators’.

9. Filoramo, G., *A History of Gnosticism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. 44.
10. *Works*: 1:84.
11. Aune, D.E., *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity*, Supplements to *Novum Testamentum*, 28; Leiden: Brill, 1972, p. 13.
12. *Works*: 8:18.
13. Rudolph, K., *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. R. McL. Wilson; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987, p. 64.
14. NHC: II 3.77 (125), 15–35.
15. King, *George Fox and the Light*, p. 46.
16. King, *George Fox and the Light*, p. 68.
17. King, *George Fox and the Light*, p. 120.
18. Ingle, H.L., ‘On The Folly of Seeking the Quaker Holy Grail’, *QRT* 25/1 (1991), pp. 17–29 (17).
19. King, *George Fox and the Light*, p. 123.
20. Jonas, H., *The Gnostic Religion*, London: Routledge, 2nd rev. edn, 1992, p. 44 (1st edn, Boston: Beacon, 1958; 2nd edn 1963; 3rd edn 1970); Jonas notes from Gnostic texts that as part of Gnostic anthropology: ‘Enclosed in the soul is the spirit, or ‘pneuma’ (called also the spark), a portion of the divine substance from beyond which has fallen into the world’ (p. 44).
21. The use of ‘seed’ as divine particles to be united with and returned to the Pleroma is discussed in Pagels, E., ‘A Valentinian Interpretation of Baptism and Eucharist – and its Critique of “Orthodox” Sacramental Theology and Practice’, *HTR* 65/2 (April 1972), pp. 153–69.
22. King, *George Fox and the Light*, p. 121.
23. King, *George Fox and the Light*, p. 76.
24. *Works*: 3:49, 345.
25. *Works*: 3:268.
26. King, *George Fox and the Light*, p. 69.
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28. *Works*: 3:2, 46, 51.
29. *Works*: 3:268.
30. Seppanen, A., ‘The Inner Light in the Journals of George Fox: A Semantic Study’, PhD dissertation, Helsinki University, 1965, p. 181. Published by the Department of English Philology, University of Tampere, 1975.
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33. Creasey, M., ‘Early Quaker Christology: With Special Reference to the Teaching and Significance of Isaac Pennington 1616–1679’, PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 1956, p. 160.
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35. *Works*: 3:347.
36. Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences*, p. 109.
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47. Penney, *Short Journal*, p. 33.
48. CJ: 1:161–62, 425–26.
49. Ingle, 'George Fox as Enthusiast', p. 266.
50. Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences*, p. 76
51. SMSS II, 55.
52. Cadbury, H.J. (ed.), *Annual Catalogue of George Fox's Papers*, Philadelphia: Friends Book Store, 1939, p. 42 (item 19, 67A).
53. Ingle, 'George Fox as Enthusiast', p. 269.
54. Bailey, *New Light on George Fox*, p. 19.
55. Bailey, *New Light on George Fox*, p. 78.
56. *Works*: 3:180. Further examples of Fox's combined use of Christ's spirit and body in texts are at *Works*: 3:206, 243–44, 291–92, 340, 397, 399, 402.
57. *Works*: 3:123, n. 129.
58. Bailey, *New Light on George Fox*, p. 80.
59. Referred to by Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 176.
60. *Works*: 3:183.
61. Bailey, *New Light on George Fox*, p. 79.
62. Bailey, *New Light on George Fox*, p. xii.
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78. Tarter, *Sites of Performance*, pp. 27-28.
79. Kuenning, 'The Bunyan-Burrough Debate', p. 178.
80. Smith, 'Hidden Things Brought to Light', p. 57.
81. *Works*: 1:80.
82. Smith, 'Hidden Things Brought to Light', p. 65.
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91. *Works*: 5:341-81, 346.
92. Bailey, *New Light on George Fox*, p. 228 n. 25.
93. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 44.
94. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 44.
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100. *Works*: 3:181.
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