

An Ever-Branching River: The Beautiful Watersheds of the Quaker Theological Ecosystem

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This article proposes a new, explanatory metaphor – emerging from within Quaker metaphorical ecotheology – that offers a sense of the context within which Quakers develop theology: the watershed ecosystem, a method which speaks to Quaker history, theology, and context, especially the particularities of Quaker theological method in Liberal Quakerism. In the world of this metaphor, the particular life experiences of each individual Quaker (the lens through which Friends construct theology) is understood to be shaped by every aspect of their context, which is in turn shaped by their choices as they grow into the embodied practice of living a particular form of life (a testimony) shaped by the core Quaker theological doctrine of the universal presence of the Divine within the creation. Watershed is the wider 'region' of one's context (the structures, environment, and relationships that impact the world in which we exist), while ecosystem is the ways that one's decisions – both individually and in community with others – impact the form that one's life takes, as well as the theology which emerges from that life. The metaphor of watershed ecosystem thus encapsulates the wider community of individuals all immersed in a theological ecosystem.



Quaker theology is a dizzyingly complex web of concepts,¹ sources,² and experiences,³ built upon the inherently ambiguous ground of metaphors⁴ whose definition has shifted dramatically over time and space.⁵ The sources of the tradition and its definitions are numerous⁶ and vigorously defended by an impressively-wide spectrum of communities⁷ who all claim to belong⁸ to the Quaker tradition.⁹ It is a theological tradition seemingly immune to systematisation.¹⁰ How, then, might one go about defining, describing, or engaging in Quaker theology? This article¹¹ argues that when the complex dialogue of metaphor and experience in Quaker theology is viewed through the lens of the synthetic model of contextual theology, and rooted in the central ecological metaphor of a watershed ecosystem, a theological framework emerges which, while rooted deeply in Quaker tradition, offers a new metaphorical palette for Quaker theological construction and meets the current moment with regard to the ecological and climate crises.

I suggest here the framing of a model for Quaker theological construction that brings the fields of contextual theology and ecotheology in dialogue, read through the particularities of the Liberal Quaker theological tradition, and emphasising the central role in Quaker theology of naturalistic metaphors for Divine experience. I call this framework a watershed ecosystem, and I describe individual Friends as trees rooted in a particular place, expanding the metaphor by describing climate, bodies, leaves, flowers, fruit, and seeds as constituent metaphors representing the theological categories of (respectively) story (or narrative), experience, interpretation, testimony,

¹ Grant, R., *British Quakers and Religious Language*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2018.

² Punshon, J., 'The End of (Quaker) History? Some Reflections on the Process', in Pink Dandelion, B., (ed.), *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004, pp. 32–33.

³ Daniels, C. W. and Grant, R., 'Introduction', in *The Quaker World*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2023, pp. 1–2.

⁴ Angell, S. W., 'God, Christ, and the Light', in Angell, S. W. and Pink Dandelion, B., (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 158–171.

⁵ Mellor, K., 'The Question of Christianity', in Pink Dandelion, B. and Collins, P., (eds.), *The Quaker Condition: The Sociology of a Liberal Religion*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 70–71.

⁶ Spencer, C. D., 'Quakers in Theological Context', in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141–157.

⁷ Burdick, T. and Pink Dandelion, B., 'Global Quakerism: 1920–2015', in Angell, S. W. and Pink Dandelion, B., (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 49–65.

⁸ Kennedy, M. H., *Irish Quaker Hybrid Identities: Complex Identity in the Religious Society of Friends*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2019), pp. 38–39.

⁹ Pink Dandelion, B., 'Conclusion: The Nature of Quaker Studies', in Pink Dandelion, B., (ed.), *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004, p. 226.

¹⁰ Muers, R., *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics*, London: SCM Press, 2015, pp. 1–2.

¹¹ This essay is adapted from my keynote address at the 'Friendly Witness: The Spiritual Ground of Quaker Social Action' conference, held at Boston University and Beacon Hill Friends House (Boston, MA) on 19 April 2023.

doctrine, and hope.¹² Through offering a framework for viewing Quaker theology as a complex dialogue amongst interdependent elements and approaches, the watershed ecosystem metaphor offers a holistic vision for Quaker contextual theology responsive to the dynamic interplay between the roots of Quaker traditions and the continuing revelation of the Divine.

Contextual Theology and the Synthetic Model

The Quaker watershed ecosystem framework I develop in this article can be situated within the methodology termed contextual theology, specifically making use of the synthetic model of contextual theology. In an effort to begin the work of applying Quaker theology to the synthetic model, it is necessary to first situate Quaker theological method within the broader project of Christian theologies, with a specific focus on contextual theology.

Contextual theology exists as both an experienced reality for those who engage with theology contextually, as well as a specific field of study within the academic discipline of theology.¹³ Arguably, all theology is engaged contextually.¹⁴ Contextual theology argues that theology is a human endeavour, and humans are irrevocably and inextricably contextual: everyone is born into a specific context, an amalgam of time, place, culture, language, climate, personal characteristics, and every other aspect of the specific moment in which we each find ourselves. This is a fundamental presumption of the discipline of contextual theology, especially the methodological family of theologies which have emerged in response, including Black, feminist, womanist, mujerista, minjung, queer theologies (along with ecotheology, of course).¹⁵

The approach one takes to the sources of theology, therefore, has a significant impact on the methodological approaches which one emphasises.¹⁶ While it can

¹² Randazzo, C., *Divine Ecosystem: A Quaker Theology*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2025, p. 32. This text explores the world of this metaphor in greater depth, demonstrating its viability to serve as a central metaphor for Quaker theological development, construction, and evolution. This article, therefore, is but a precis of that larger exploration.

¹³ David Tracy argues that constructive theology can be informed by critical theory, which in turn connects contextual theology as a type of constructive theology. See Tracy, D., 'Theological Method', in Hodgson, P. C. and King, R.H., (eds.), *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, rev. edn., Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 35–60.

¹⁴ Bevans, S. B., *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3. This is in contrast to modernist assumptions of objectivity in theological method.

¹⁵ Cone, J., *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990.

¹⁶ Kärkkäinen, V., *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013, p. 5. Broadly speaking, the different emphases of Christian theology on the sources and methods of theology are embodied in the differing theological approaches of Roman Catholic tradition (insistence on a dialogue between Biblical revelation and ecclesial tradition) and the Protestant emphasis on scripture

be argued that every Christian tradition uses all four elements in some fashion in the development of their theology, and while recent trends in theology recognise the inherent contextuality of any theology which emerges from, and responds to, human concerns and experience, it is not common to place experience as the first lens through which theology is analysed.¹⁷ This is often due to human experience being seen as inherently fragmentary, dynamic, and individuated: it is thus seen as an unreliable foundation upon which to say anything certain and universal about God.¹⁸ Instead, experience can provide a (or the) necessary framework within which biblical interpretation and the doctrines of tradition emerge without being the main, or even primary, ground from which theology emerges.¹⁹ One recent example of this is found in the post foundationalist contextual approach developed by the Finnish Lutheran theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, which gives Christian theology the freedom to respond to its context — including our own, with the provisional epistemology assumed by postmodernism and its subsequent rejection of objective truth — without losing the central role God’s truth plays in theological construction.²⁰

When one expands this idea (that human experience is inherently contextual, and is thus individually particular) to its (potentially) logical conclusion — that there are as many perspectives on theology as there are human beings — this approach has the potential to dissolve theological community into an ever-disintegrating individuation of belief.²¹ This potential descent into relativism is one of the main critiques of contextual theology, particularly in religious communities that stress the importance of rooting theological construction in the two most common sources of Christian theology: scripture and church tradition.²² Paradoxically, perhaps, it is the communal nature of scripture and tradition that makes individual experiences of these elements possible. It is this conversation between the experiences of the present (the current cultural and

first (*sola scriptura*). As Dietrich Ritschl notes, these two approaches also represent two main strategies for construction in Christian theology: the loci method, where a list of potential theological topics is gathered together in an interdependent schema; and the monothematic method, which gathers theology into a unified schema bound to a single focal theme or doctrinal nexus. See Ritschl, D., *The Logic of Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2012.

¹⁷ Kärkkäinen, V., *Christ and Reconciliation*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Kliever, L. D., ‘Experience-Religious’, in Musser, D. W. and Price, J. L., (eds.), *New & Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 190.

¹⁹ Shults, F. L., *The Post Foundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999, p. 43.

²⁰ Kärkkäinen, V., *Christ and Reconciliation*, p. 10.

²¹ Bevans, S. B., *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 7. Bevans actually extends this critique within his own exploration of contextual theology, noting that even the most (potentially) individuated contextual model, the Anthropological model, still seeks to root itself in a Christian identity.

²² Horrel, D. G., ‘Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21 (2008), pp. 219–38.

social context) and the experiences of the past (scripture and tradition) that actually provides contextual theology with the creative tension necessary to respond creatively to current context while remaining rooted in a theological community.²³

This tension can be seen in Quaker theology in that Friends tell and enact theology more than they construct it: when asked about Light, for example, Friends are far more likely to tell the story of their experience with Light than to offer a theological statement about the nature and meaning of Light.²⁴ Liberal Quakers insist that God can only be ‘known’ in any meaningful sense through the personal experience of the Divine.²⁵ This forms what could be termed an ‘experiential epistemology’, where theological statements about God must reflect the Liberal Quaker experience of God, both individually and communally.²⁶ This stance of ‘experiential epistemology’ is reflected in the hazy outlines of much of Liberal Quaker theology, where metaphor is a more effective theological tool than the precision of doctrine, where all ‘truth’ about God is open to continuous re-interpretation.²⁷ This aversion to establishing rigid doctrinal statements does not mean that Liberal Quakers deny the possibility of universal ‘truth’ about God, nor that such truth cannot be expressed on a human level.²⁸ Rather, Liberal Quakers shift the ‘proof’ of the ‘truth’ of its theology to the experience of God: if a theological construct can aid Liberal Quakers to experience God in a more complete manner and demonstrate that experience in a reformed life, the theological construct has been demonstrated to be ‘proven’.²⁹

‘Experience’ is thus comprised of two elements: the relationship that humans have with the ‘outer’, physical environment, which is mediated through the use of the

²³ Daniels, C. W., *A Convergent Model of Renewal: Remixing the Quaker Tradition in a Participatory Culture*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 2015, p. 53.

²⁴ Bock, C. and Randazzo, C., *Quakers, Ecology, and the Light*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2023, p. 42.

²⁵ This is a core tenet of Liberal Quakerism. It is stated as such in the first passage in *Faith and Practice*: ‘Friends maintain that expressions of their faith must be related to personal experience’. This is repeated continuously through the Swarthmore Lectures, with Charles Carter being the best example of this line of thought: ‘What I have said so far is an assertion that the source of authority in religion is to be found through the experience of the individual’. Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1994, p. 1.01; Carter, C. F., *On Having a Sense of All Conditions*, London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1971, p. 3.

²⁶ Gorman, G. H., *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship*, London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1973, p. 2.

²⁷ Alex Wildwood represents an expression of this perspective which is non-Christian: ‘I felt I was finally beginning to square the circle, to bring what I had experienced in diverse other places and forms: experiences of the Spirit in spontaneous rituals, in seasonal circles, in being real with one another and in simple acts of human kindness – with the faith and practice of the Quaker-Christian community which I had felt led amongst. For Hicks was pointing to an experience central to Quaker faith: not a *belief* in something external but an inner knowing; Truth not as a concept, an idea or a doctrine, but as a reality we experience’. Wildwood, A., *A Faith to Call Our Own: Quaker Tradition in the Light of Contemporary Movements of the Spirit*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1999, p. 5.

²⁸ Priestland, G., *Reasonable Uncertainty: A Quaker Approach to Doctrine*, London: Quaker Books, 1982, p. 21.

²⁹ Thompson, S. P., *The Quest for Truth*, London: Headley Brothers, 1915, p. 14.

physical senses and can be termed the material experience; and the relationship that humans have with the ‘inner’ environment of emotions, thoughts, and ‘those frontiers of consciousness beyond words’, which is mediated through the mind and spirit and can be said to be the emotional and spiritual experience.³⁰ These two elements combine in a unified human experience of the body in space and the soul in God. The human person is not simply receiving experience as a response to sensory and spiritual input, but the person is also actively interacting with their environment in a dialogic exchange. This necessarily applies to the human experience of God.

This is an approach to theological construction that necessarily demands flexibility in the individual expression of certain commonly-accepted (and communally-interpreted) ethical frameworks and theological language. In other words, Quakers seek to experience God first, unmediated, in their own inherently individual and unique selves. This individual experience occurs, however, in the context of community.³¹

In his seminal work on contextual theology, Stephen Bevans outlines six different models, or approaches, to engaging in theologising contextually, with each model sited along a line that moves both from creation-centred to redemption-centred as well as from context-centred (present experience) to tradition-centred (past experience).³²

As Quaker theologian Wess Daniels’s work argues, the synthetic model of contextual theology is an effective framework for envisioning Quaker theology.³³ Daniels recognises the three main elements of the model that Bevans outlines (tradition, culture/context, and dialogue) while highlighting a fourth, an orientation towards praxis, which Daniels argues is present, and central to the model and to Quaker thought.³⁴

Applying the synthetic model to Quaker theology demands that one begin first in the realm of metaphor and story, specifically the recognition that Quaker theology is constructed at the point where the metaphors of Divine Presence (especially the metaphor of Light), Quaker testimony, and the practices and habits of daily life all converge, with awareness of the current context of the ecological and climate crises. Quaker theology is metaphorical and narrative, in that it is continually constructed through the narration of the experiences of individual Quakers across time, and often engages with the Divine through commonly used metaphors such as Light. Since it is so connected to personal experiences, Quaker theology chafes against systemisation and rigid definitional structures, always seeking — I would argue — to frame itself using

³⁰ Scott, R. C., *Tradition and Experience*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964, p. 2.

³¹ Muers, R., *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics*, London: SCM Press, 2015.

³² Bevans, S. B., *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 32.

³³ Daniels, C. W., *A Convergent Model of Renewal*, pp. 43–62.

³⁴ Daniels, C. W., *A Convergent Model of Renewal*, p. 58.

the logics of metaphor, poetry, and narrative.³⁵ This is especially so with narratives of individual experience: personal experience is arguably the central arena for Quaker theological development and construction.³⁶ In this way, Friends theology is an example of contextual theology that can be described using Bevans' synthetic model.

Hopefully, all one needs to do to learn about the beliefs of a Friend is to read the story told through that Friend's life: thus, telling the story of their theology through their testimony, told across their entire life cycle. What makes that enactment a communal act, however, is the superstructure of Testimony: the way of life shaped by a core, common Quaker theological belief of the Light Within all, the continuous and universal Divine Presence throughout creation.³⁷ As Quaker theology can be seen through this synthetic model, I seek here to bring together different theological streams in the watershed ecosystem framework, including Quaker theology, ecotheology, interdependence theology, and watershed discipleship, each of which I show as I describe the watershed ecosystem.

Ecotheology, Interdependence, and Watershed Discipleship

Ecotheology emerges out of recognition of an existential threat, and the conviction of people of faith that our traditions can offer aid toward the social transformation required for humanity to continue living comfortably on this planet. As such, the hope inherent in ecotheology is that it be lived. As Deane-Drummond states, ecotheology is 'a particular expression of contextual theology that emerges in the particular contemporary context of environmental awareness that has characterised the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries'.³⁸ Viewing ecotheology as a form of contextual theology is not universal, even amongst ecotheologists. Theologians writing about the environment, however, are noticing a pressing ecological need in our time and place, and looking for (and finding) resources in the Christian tradition that speak to this issue. It is unlikely that a consciously ecological or creation-focused interpretation of the Christian story would have emerged apart from the environmental context in which we now reside; therefore, ecotheology is contextual.³⁹

³⁵ Randazzo, C., *Divine Ecosystem*.

³⁶ Grant, R., *Theology from Listening: Finding the Core of Liberal Quaker Theological Thought*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2020, p. 14.

³⁷ Scully, J. L., 'Virtuous Friends: Morality and Quaker Identity', in Pink Dandelion, B. and Collins, P., (eds.), *The Quaker Condition: The Sociology of a Liberal Religion*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p. 119.

³⁸ Deane-Drummond, C., *Eco-theology*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008, p. 2.

³⁹ Bock, C. and Randazzo, C., *Quakers, Ecology, and the Light*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2023, p. 17.

One notable resource for ecotheology to envision the relationship between creation and the Divine is the field of Christian interdependence theology, specifically the *Ubuntu* theology of South Africa — a theology which has also greatly impacted the theology of Friends in South Africa, and through them, Quaker theology more generally.⁴⁰ *Ubuntu* theology claims that human beings are created by God as inherently social and relational, made to be in relationship with each other and with God.⁴¹ As social beings, therefore, human beings cannot exist without those three elements (self, others, and God), nor outside of them. It is in relation to persons and personal community that the concept of God is formed. One cannot speak of God without implying community as well as person, for neither community nor person exists without God, or each other.⁴² Each person is therefore inextricably linked with both God *and* with every other person, for while God's existence is not dependent on community or persons, the individual person cannot really be said to exist without relation to their community — or to God. The community lives within the person, and the person within the community, with Jesus Christ as the force which gives it purpose and meaning.

This framework of interdependence sets the paradigm for the existence of creation, therefore, where creation is interdependent with itself. This can only occur due to the communal nature of the creation.⁴³ Through the Incarnation of Christ, all of humanity is created to be interdependent upon both God and on other people. Both Christ and the Holy Spirit are active in bringing humanity into a full experience of the life of God. This occurs through a process of theosis, where the transcendent God immanently interpenetrates the entirety of creation, sanctifying it. The Spirit acts in concert with Christ, unifying all pieces of the sanctified creation into one, holy, communal person.

The consequences of interdependence do not only impact human relationships and the inevitable necessity for continuous peacemaking and reconciliation. Therefore,

⁴⁰ Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meeting, *Living Adventurously: Quaker Faith and Practice*, pp. 60–61, <https://www.quakers.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Living-Adventurously.pdf>.

⁴¹ Battle, M., *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997, p. 144. *Ubuntu* has been applied to computer science (*Ubuntu* is an open-source computer operating system, so named due to the cooperative nature of the open-source model of software design), restorative justice concepts, African philosophy, political theory, and foreign policy, as well as political reconciliation. The concept of *Ubuntu* underpinned much of the thought around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, and has become a common term used in South African public discourse to describe the approach and goals of the ongoing reconciliation project in South Africa. Luke Lingilo Pato contends that Tutu can be seen to reside within an African tradition of using *Ubuntu* as a theological construct, including John Mbiti from Kenya, Charles Nyamiti from Tanzania, Kwesi Dickson from Ghana, and Gabriel Setiloane from South Africa. See Pato, L. L., 'African Theologies', in de Gruchy, J. W. and Villa-Vicencio, (eds.), *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, p. 156.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, D., Kelly, G. B., and Nelson, F.B., *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, New York, NY: HarperOne Publishers, 1995, p. 68.

⁴³ Tutu, D., *No Future Without Forgiveness*, New York, NY: Image Books, Doubleday, 2000.

interdependence also demands an awareness of ecological interdependence as well as an ethic — and resultant practices — of ecological care. The emphasis on the marriage of the practices of building just and interdependent human communities with a theology of Divine/human interdependence strongly reflects the same marriage in Quaker practice and theology, and thus deserves some exploration as we note where Christian interdependence theologies can help inform a Quaker ecotheology.⁴⁴

A notable example of the various ways that the field of ecotheology explores the intersection of care for the creation with a focus on the impact of human activity on the ecosystems of a place is the Christian ecotheological framework of watershed discipleship, originating in the work of activist-theologians Ched Myers and Elaine Enns.⁴⁵ Their work seeks to not only shift public perception towards a greater awareness of the impact of humans and urban development patterns on specific locations, but to go far deeper: for people to become ‘disciples’ of the watersheds in which they inhabit, where they become so intimately aware of the patterns and aspects of the specific land and water upon which they reside and depend, that every aspect of their lives is attuned to prioritising the health and well-being of these areas. Their concept of watershed discipleship has significantly influenced my understanding of a watershed ecology framing for Quaker theology.

Watershed discipleship engages in the same work as the synthetic model, for it weaves together the context of present experience (the lived reality of being rooted in a specific location, with specific relationships within the multiplicity of an ecosystem), the universality of the human need for clean water and environment, the interdependence of all beings within the bounded ecosystem of watersheds, the traditions and central texts of communities currently rooted in the watershed, and finally, the perspectives of all of those communities who have ever held care for the watershed.

It should be noted at this stage that these strands, and their emphasis on the specificities of place as both physical and theological context, also intersect with numerous other themes which have been explored in the fields of urban studies and planning, religion and cities, and environmental engineering.⁴⁶ Envisioning the built environment and human interactions with (and rootedness within) it, as well as exploring the interdisciplinary concept of ‘space’ as a specific place, defined by a specific context, and expressed in specific design form, is the focus of the fields of

⁴⁴ Bock, C. and Randazzo, C., *Quakers, Ecology, and the Light*, pp. 55–62.

⁴⁵ Myers, C., (ed.), *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016.

⁴⁶ This includes such thinkers as Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Law Olmsted, Le Corbusier, and David Harvey. See LeGates, R. T. and Stout, F., (eds.), *The City Reader, Sixth Edition*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2016.

urban planning and design.⁴⁷ The field of religion and cities is highly engaged in the exploration of the impact that urban form — and the design philosophies which inform the construction of urban space — has on religious communities in cities, as well as the obverse: the impact that religious communities have on the construction of urban space and the impact such spaces have on the people who reside there.⁴⁸

Scholars have recently demonstrated the viability of exploring the built environment from the perspective of Quaker testimony, through an examination of the impact of Quaker ideals, theology, ethics, and aesthetics on the construction of specific locations. These include recent work examining testimony in the planning, construction, and management of the Bournville Model Village, built by the Cadbury Chocolates Company to house their workers.⁴⁹ From a specifically ecotheological angle, scholars have examined the design of the Friends Committee on National Legislation Building through the lens of both simplicity as well as sustainability and ecological impact.⁵⁰ My own work explores how these disparate elements all combine in what could be understood as both a testimony of place (the specificity of context and location) and a theology of the city, practical theologies bringing the complexities and ambiguity of Quaker theology to bear on the experience of expressing Quaker testimony in a specific and particular location.⁵¹

Quaker theology and ecotheology could thus be seen as natural conversation partners, especially when considered in the context of the primary place that the naturalistic metaphor of the Light plays in the Quaker theological imaginary, most especially in the creation of an anthropology of Divine-human interdependence

⁴⁷ Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* and Tony Hiss's *The Experience of Place* serving as two foundational texts offering frameworks for designing cities from the perspective of the impact of interplay of specific urban and architectural forms on the 'look' and 'feel' (or 'experience') of built environments. See: Lynch, K., *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1960 and Hiss, T., *The Experience of Place*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. The work of Richard Sennett expressly engages questions of the impact of foundational principles and human culture on the built environments within which humans live, with the specific argument that urban design can either aid or hinder the development of democratic principles and values within populations. See Sennett, R., *Democracy and Urban Form*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Design Press, 2025.

⁴⁸ Notable recent works include Day, K. and Edwards, E. M., (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Cities*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2021, and Beaumont, J. and Baker, C., (eds.), *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory, and Practice*, New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.

⁴⁹ Bailey, A. R. and Bryson, J. R., 'A Quaker Experiment in Town Planning: George Cadbury and the Construction of Bournville Model Village', *Quaker Studies* 11 (2006), pp. 89–114.

⁵⁰ Abbott, M. P. and Abbott, C., 'Redefining Quaker Simplicity: The Friends Committee on National Legislation Building, 2005', *Quaker Studies* 12 (2008), pp. 230–252.

⁵¹ Randazzo, C., 'A Quaker Theology of the City: Placing Quaker Testimony, Ecotheology, and "place" in Conversation', in *Quaker Religious Thought* 140 (2023), pp. 15–23.

across the creation.⁵² Watershed discipleship helps ground theory in a particular place and context. As I am developing a metaphorical theology, I explain the metaphor of watershed ecosystem in the terms of the field from which it originated: ecology.

After having described how the method of Quaker theology of a watershed ecosystem relates to and is situated within the broader theological milieu, I turn to exploring the metaphor of a watershed ecosystem to describe Quaker theology. I begin with explaining what makes up a watershed and then share how this can be seen as a theological metaphor.

The Ecology of Watershed Ecosystems

The official definition of watershed, from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is: ‘a land area that channels rainfall and snowmelt to creeks, streams, and rivers, and eventually to outflow points such as reservoirs, bays, and the ocean’.⁵³ Smaller watersheds are considered part of larger watershed systems. For example, water draining from my house trickles first into the Cooper River, and then in rapid succession is carried out to the Delaware River, the Delaware Bay, and — finally — into the Atlantic Ocean. So, my watershed is the Delaware River watershed, linking me to four states (Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York), the Catskill and Blue Mountains/Kittatinny Ridge sections of the Appalachian Mountains, the Delaware Valley, and the Atlantic Coastal Plain. Water from the Delaware River watershed provides drinking water for both New York City and Philadelphia, but also for a significant portion of the densely-populated Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.⁵⁴ Millions of people depend upon the water from this watershed, but so does literally everything else living in this massive region, as life depends on water. I am inherently vulnerable to whomever lives upstream from me, because the river will carry whatever is in the water and the soil — and thus, whatever is in their environment — downstream to me. In other words, a watershed defines a landscape and everything that exists within it.

Watersheds are places defined by the continuous movement of light energy and water through the life cycles of the beings living in the constituent ecosystems. Rivers join at places known as confluences, where the waters of (at least) two watercourses (rivers, creeks, and streams) meet and interact, where the soils, pollens, seeds, pollutants, chemicals, minerals — everything being carried along by the water and wind — all bang up against each other and create a new river, something hybrid that is

⁵² Bock, C. and Randazzo, C., *Quakers, Ecology, and the Light*.

⁵³ National Ocean Service, ‘What is a Watershed?’, accessed 20 June 2024, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/watershed.html>.

⁵⁴ American Rivers, ‘Delaware River’, accessed 20 June 2024, <https://www.americanrivers.org/river/delaware-river/>.

neither wholly one tributary nor the other. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania famously began at the confluence point of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers; conveniently enough, the triangle spit of land at this confluence is known as the Point. These intersections are points of significant ferment, where separate streams can join, mix and remix, eventually creating a new river, mighty and powerful, that is more than the sum of its parts.

Downstream will receive whatever seeds are dropped in the river upstream. Should one seed, floating downstream, find itself along the riverbank and take root, the bank has been changed — as it is changed continuously, with each new infusion of whatever the water carries downstream: soil, minerals, organic matter, and seeds.

The life cycle begins.

The seed germinates, stretching out its roots into the soil underneath, and pushing the new shoots of the plant body above ground. Each seed that takes root along the bank is an individual plant from a specific species, with an individual body, rooted in particular soil, surrounded by whatever other plants also took root in that specific location. The roots reach out, developing symbiotic relationships with mycorrhizal networks woven throughout the surrounding soil that transfer nutrients, news (messages or signals), chemicals, and carbon between plant roots and fungus. The body stretches its leaves outwards and upwards, encountering the light energy streaming down from the sun. The process of translating the light energy into chemical energy — photosynthesis — can vary considerably, depending on the organism. Yet, all photosynthesis involves an encounter with light, to which the organism responds.

Once the plant reaches the growth required to begin to reproduce, the buds for the flower structures (blossoms) open, and — whether through symbiotic relationships with pollinators, or through the action of wind and water — begin to release pollen into the environment. As the movement of pollen grains is difficult to predict, the act of pollination is not guaranteed — introducing an element of risk and dynamic indeterminacy into the act of reproduction. Once the blossom is pollinated, the fruit begins to form, which will carry the seeds: the hope of new life. The fruit is an energy-dense product of the tree's interactions with every aspect of its environment, reflecting in its chemical makeup the composition of the soil, water, and air of the specific location where the tree is rooted. Fruit is designed to be portable, encouraging the seeds inside the fruit to spread far and wide, ensuring genetic variance and — hopefully — flourishing, with the seeds of the tree taking root across the watershed, thus beginning the life cycle all over again.

Each of these aspects of the plant's life cycle connects the plant body to a series of ecological communities — or ecosystems — whose reach (and size) expands in

ever-widening circles. In this way, every living thing in watershed ecosystems is bound up in an inextricable web of interdependence with everything else. I am — however remotely — connected to every tree, insect, blade of grass, and bird that lives in this vast region, in ways both quantifiable and ineffable. Each individual plant is unique and connected to the broader community.

Nothing can lay claim to being representative of the watershed as a whole: no piece of land, no watercourse, no source, no creature, no human, no city. The Delaware River watershed is everything that exists within its bounds, such that the forests of the Catskills Mountains are as much the watershed as are the Cooper River, the Delaware Bay, and me — living near the banks of the Cooper River, making my own contributions to the watershed, and being affected by it in turn. The watershed is also the web of relationships that exists between and among everything within the geographic boundaries of the watershed.

The abiotic (non-living) elements are the inherited traits and pre-existing factors which constitute the climate surrounding the tree, the soil within which it is rooted, and the processes of evolution which cause the ecosystem to continue to adapt to a dynamic world. For example, there's a vast difference between the watersheds of the Delaware River and the Nile River — you need only look at satellite pictures of both watersheds to see that one is caught up in a complex bioregion of numerous watersheds butting against each other, while the other is a long, straight, green line through a massive desert. The climate and soils of each watershed frame what species are capable of thriving there.

In a similar way, a Quaker community is an interdependent community defined by adaptation to — and dependence upon — the continuous movement of the energy of Light through the community. Each individual Quaker experiences Light in their own specific — and unique — context, yet shares the universal experience of Light. This complex interplay of individuals experiencing Light moving through the cycle of their lives is the universal reality of the Quaker theological ecosystem, embedded also within the physical ecosystem and connected to the beings who share their physical (not only metaphorical) watershed. What is that life cycle?

Life Cycles

The fundamental truth of Quaker theology — again, especially Liberal Quaker theology⁵⁵ — is the experience of opening oneself to the movement of the Light Within⁵⁶ — the energy of the Divine Presence encountered in so many active and passive ways

⁵⁵ Randazzo, C., *Liberal Quaker Reconciliation Theology*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2020, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Bock, C. and Randazzo, C., *Quakers, Ecology, and the Light*, pp. 1-2.

throughout daily life,⁵⁷ which connects all of creation together in an interdependent relationship: an ecosystem.⁵⁸ Just as a tree's experience of life within a watershed is defined by the rivers that join together to form it (and thus the impact that those rivers have on the climate, soil, and air into which each tree is embedded, and is influenced by), Friends' experience of the Divine Light is defined by the underlying stories that are foundational to their understanding of their place in the world and their relationships with God and others.⁵⁹

Each individual Friend is thus rooted in a watershed ecosystem: a specific location, within a specific context of stories and concepts which give meaning and structure to the overall climate (soils, water, and air), and in turn shape the experience that each individual body (with all of its particularities and uniqueness) will have in that location. Each body interacts with this watershed ecosystem in different ways that evolve over its life cycle: from seed, to root, to body, to the growth of leaves and the subsequent infusion of light energy into the body, to the direct interaction each body has with its environment through the ecosystems which depend upon the body (both micro and macro — from the microbiomes that envelop each body's root system to the flow of water and energy across an entire landscape). When the body has reached the point in its life cycle when it's ready to begin the process of reproduction, it opens itself to others in the intimate interaction of pollination, from which emerges the fruit which protects and provides energy to new life, seeds rooting themselves in new locations, continuing the cycle of life born anew. Even the organism's death contributes to the ecosystem through providing fertile ground for new growth.

Exploring the Metaphor of the Watershed Ecosystem

In this way, Friends are also rooted in a theological watershed ecosystem: individual people rooted in specific contexts shaped by the underlying stories that dominate the experience of life in these specific locations (i.e., climate). Through the process of rooting and growing their bodies, Friends experience the Light, and begin to interpret its meaning through the mechanism of continuing revelation, one of the main leaves of the Quaker life cycle. When Friends have grown in their Quaker life, they begin the process of reproducing this experience of life through the intimate interaction of living lives directly alongside others, the messy exchange of ideas and energy and life that

⁵⁷ Randazzo, C., "The Divine Light of Creation": Liberal Quaker Metaphors of Divine/Creation Interdependence', in Bock, C. and Potthoff, S., (eds.), *Quakers, Creation Care and Sustainability*, Longmeadow, MA: Full Media Services, 2019.

⁵⁸ Randazzo, C., *Divine Ecosystem*, pp. 2–3.

⁵⁹ Randazzo, C., 'Christian AND Universalist?: Charting Liberal Quaker Theological Developments through the Swarthmore Lectures', *Quaker Religious Thought* 131 (2018), pp. 33–42.

constitutes pollination in flowers, and is known as testimony. What emerges from this cycle of experiencing the Light and passing along that energy to others in the watershed is doctrine, the fruits of a life lived, and reflected upon, in light of interconnected relationship with others. Within these doctrines lies the light energy needed to take root (i.e., seeds), and which represent the hope of the future.

For example, is God an energy to be experienced, or are they a truth to be known?⁶⁰ Is the Incarnation of God unitary (i.e., only one Divine Incarnation can be the one, ‘true’ expression of the Divine Presence in material form — Jesus Christ or Krishna, for example), or is the Divine present throughout creation, in every single body?⁶¹ Are humans fundamentally individuals who choose to covenant into a community, or are they fundamentally communal, individual bodies rooted in a community of all the species in their ecosystem, from which they grow and flourish?⁶² Where your seed lands within the vast networks of rivers that comprise the watershed of world Christianity will have great significance on how your body interacts with the Divine energy, and the meaning you derive from your encounter with the specific aspects of the rivers or confluences that define the watershed in which you take root.⁶³

Each individual person begins as a seed, which takes root in a specific location.

This perspective plays itself out through the five other elements. Just like the complex and innumerable interactions that combine to make the unique climate of a particular location, climate is the narrative context, the sum total of all background and foundational elements that ground the experience of Spirit in a cohesive and holistic story. Akin to a tree, our bodies root us in our experience of the world and give meaning to the diverse and unique ways that our bodies are shaped as we each listen — and respond — to the experience of engaging Spirit’s wisdom. Leaves are the location where we use specific processes and methods in the interpretation — and thus transformation — of the energy of Light’s Divine Revelation into resources we can use to exist, survive, and thrive. Flowers are the physical embodiment of our interactions with the world, with the blossom being the framework of practices and stories that inform and shape Quaker testimony, and pollen being the specific forms and expressions of testimony that can fertilize both our own lives and those we encounter when living into these

⁶⁰ Randazzo, C., ‘Non-Theism’, in Angell, S. W. and Pink Dandelion, B., (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 274–289.

⁶¹ Randazzo, C. and Russell, D., ‘The Inner Light and the Light of God: Islamic and Quaker Mysticism in Dialogue’, in Kershner, J., (ed.), *Quakers and Mysticism: Comparative and Syncretic Approaches to Spirituality*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 161–80.

⁶² Gwyn, D., *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and The Rise of Capitalism*, London: Quaker Books, 2006.

⁶³ Randazzo, C., ‘Liberal Quaker Pneumatology’, in Daniels, W. and Grant, R., (eds.), *The Quaker World*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, pp. 240–247.

particular testimonies. Finally, fruit is the bodies/beliefs/doctrines that emerge after our lives are fertilized by testimony and which can serve as mobile carriers of the seeds of Quaker hope, thus completing the circle.

These elements are in an inextricable relationship, therefore, in which each part informs each other in ways both systematic and seemingly random. The Quaker watershed ecosystem is thus a unique theological language, with specific, fundamental elements that form its basic building blocks but which nonetheless also offer the potential of infinite variety: akin to the four letters of genetic code or even the universe of potential inherent within the framework of the letters used in a language. Quakers feel free to play with these fundamentals, bringing them together in often surprising, creative, and complex ways. This language is marked by flexibility, creativity, and adaptation, and is thus highly dependent on metaphor, ambiguity, and even paradox.

Climate/Story

The stories that serve as the climate and soil of our lives, the ones that are so pervasive that they are the literal bedrock upon which our understanding of the nature of reality is built, are the stories that we address in this chapter. These stories are powerful because they define what it means to be human, at its most fundamental. These are the stories that are so pervasive that they somehow disappear, where we do not realize their impact upon everything because they have extended their influence everywhere. The answers they give about the nature of human existence, the meaning and boundaries of the term and concept of person, the relationships among the individual, the communal, and the Divine: each, in turn, impacts the climate and soil of Liberal Quaker theology, and is impacted by them. In this sense, these stories are the landscape upon which society is built.

What it means to exist at a specific location in time and space is shaped by the conditions that underlie it: the climate is the combination of the stories Friends tell about reality in general and the soils of the communities — and their cultures — in which each Friend is individually rooted. The rivers that flow through a particular region represent different streams of tradition, such as whether a group believes all human beings are equal, or that people are fundamentally stratified in hierarchical relationships.

One example of the interplay of context, place, and theology that is central to the concept of climate is the impact that my own specific watershed — the Delaware River — has had on Quaker theological construction. In many ways, the Delaware Valley is seen as a heartland for Quakers. In 1681, King Charles II extended a land grant of a massive parcel of land along the western shore of the lower Delaware River to William Penn for the purpose of repaying a debt Charles owed to Penn's father, Admiral William

Penn. The king named it Pennsylvania ('Penn's Woods') in honour of the Admiral, and the colony of Pennsylvania was born.⁶⁴

The period of Quaker control of Pennsylvania left indelible marks, from settlement patterns defined by Penn's treaties with the Lenni Lenape people, to the culture — and laws — of religious tolerance which eventually expanded into a generally pluralistic culture of tolerance for cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity.⁶⁵ This tolerance has its roots in Quaker theology, and its foundational idea that all people have the potential to possess the Divine spark, or presence, within themselves.⁶⁶ Amongst the various ripple effects of this idea is the understanding that the individual has inherent value and worth. When this idea was coupled with the critique of class inherent in the idea that all are equally worthy in the eyes of God, it led to an egalitarian culture that dovetailed well with the development of democracy as the preferred political framework for the nascent United States of America.⁶⁷

This 'middle' approach was reflected in the combination of Philadelphia as middle place geographically for the American colonies, and middle place culturally between the slave society of the South and Puritan New England. This specific geographical and cultural place led to the choice of Philadelphia as the location for the First and Second Continental Congresses, the capital of the United States until 1785, and the location of the drafting and ratification of the Constitution in 1789. Quakers provided the political and cultural ground for the development of the peculiarly American framework of the individual, and the literal ground upon which the foundational ideas of the new republic were developed.⁶⁸

Bodies/Experience

Bodies are the specific forms people take — with all of the particularity and uniqueness inherent in being an individual — with which people experience the world. Bodies are the foundational narratives that address the story of reality at the level of social structures, and the ways those structures impact how Friends experience hearing the voice of God.

⁶⁴ Woodard, C., *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011, p. 92.

⁶⁵ Woodard, C., *American Character: A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good*, New York: Penguin Books, 2016, pp. 67–69.

⁶⁶ Pink Dandelion, B., 'The Layered Theoscape of Philadelphia: The Quaker Experiment as a Religious Crucible', in Nelson, E. and Wright, J., (eds.), *Layered Landscapes: Early Modern Religious Space Across Faith and Cultures*, New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 150–165.

⁶⁷ Murphy, A. R., *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁶⁸ Randazzo, C., *Divine Ecosystem*, 56–7.

The variety of plants that take root along a watershed is akin to the various forms and shapes our bodies can take, and the ways that these forms respond to the environmental conditions present in the particular location. For example, if I take root in clay soil, but the form of my body thrives in sandy soil, I will be forced to adapt to my environment — the structures of my environment are not designed to serve me, creating a situation of unequal flourishing between me and other beings for whom the environment is either designed, or who can more easily adapt to these conditions. This is where the narratives of society meet the glorious diversity of human life: the ways that the presentation and form of our bodies intersect with the big narratives that define existence, the grand social constructs that many people share, but which each individual person is going to express and interact with differently. These include race, gender, sexuality, shape, aesthetics — amongst others. This is the first place where systemic injustice impacts certain bodies, and the narratives we attach to them.

One example of the impact of environment and context on a Quaker understanding of bodies and justice is the proto-ecological thought of John Woolman, who was himself rooted in the Delaware River watershed (he lived in what is now Mt. Holly, New Jersey). The roots of Woolman's concern for the created order lay within his experience of the Divine present in both the beauty of the natural world around him, as well as his vision of the world as a complex, harmonious web of relationships upon which humanity depended, and which human beings disturbed at their peril.⁶⁹ Woolman continuously remarked on the beauty of creation; yet as befits his context in the colonial agricultural economy of eighteenth-century New Jersey, he understood that human agricultural activity played a necessary part in that Divine order. Uncommonly for his time, perhaps, was his absolute rejection of the narrative of dominion common to European settler-colonialism, where 'wilderness' was seen as a savage place, useless until it was 'improved' by human interference.⁷⁰

Woolman consistently acknowledged the human capacity for cruelty, particularly toward creation, and insisted that people consider the consequences that rippled out from every human action. In this way, Woolman demonstrated an awareness of the structural nature of injustice, where something as simple as riding a horse involved an entire spiral of injustice: not just the harm done to the horses, who were often mistreated and overworked, but also to the stable hands — among whose number

⁶⁹ Heller, M., 'John Woolman's Environmental Consciousness', in Bock, C. and Pothoff, S., (eds.), *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, Philadelphia, PA: Friends Association for Higher Education, 2019, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Kershner, J. R., *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A Colonial Quaker's Vision for the British Atlantic World*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.

were often enslaved people.⁷¹ In a nod to the future concern for the impact of cities on ecosystems, Woolman developed a creation-centric eschatological vision, built upon his understanding of the 'Kingdom of Christ' as equally comprised of both spiritual and practical elements: a spiritual reign of God reflected in a practical re-ordering of society around justice, equality, and peace, perhaps most importantly reflected in the dismantling of the slave economy upon which Woolman perceived the entire colonial enterprise depended. In this way, Woolman's ecotheology was inherent: while not explicitly expressed as a specific focus on the creation as an ecological place, Woolman's systemic critique (coupled with his awareness of the cruelty of human domination of others) led him to see an inextricable bond between the injustice wrought upon enslaved people and the injustice wrought upon the creation by the human desire to dominate and control creation.

Leaves/Interpretation

Quaker theology is built upon metaphor as its central pillar, with the metaphor of 'Light' as a main way that Friends have expressed the experience of the Divine Presence within each person, across the history and breadth of the Religious Society of Friends.⁷² As humans are individuals only capable of having their own, inherently unique experiences, how can Friends explain their individual, unique experience of the universally-present Divine Light except somewhat sideways, through story, metaphor, and poetry?⁷³

Continuing revelation — the main interpretive approach (leaf) of Quakers — is born from the intersection of an emphasis on the continuous evolution of the human experience of the Divine, and an insistence that every person has the equal potential to experience the Divine. Leaves are where people first encounter — and attempt to interpret (make sense of) — the Divine Light. Leaves are the methods, processes, and structures Friends use to make meaning of their experience of the Divine Light within. Do Friends stress the experience of encountering Divine Light in Scripture — Christian or otherwise? Do they instead stress the ways their community has responded to these experiences in the past? As Friends place experience as the primary way that they

⁷¹ Woolman, J., 'Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes', in Moulton, P., (ed.), *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989, pp. 198–209.

⁷² I must note that this is not unique to Quakers: the metaphor of Light appears numerous times in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. A variety of Christian thinkers and mystics from every corner of the Christian theological universe (including and especially Friends) have experienced, and described their understanding of — and encounters with — the Divine using imagery of Light, and Light continues to serve as an accessible way of understanding the Divine Presence for Christians in the present day. See Angell, S., 'God, Christ, and the Light', p. 171.

⁷³ Bock, C. and Randazzo, C., *Quakers, Ecology, and the Light*, p. 29.

encounter the Divine Light, they are inherently prioritising immediacy and change, because experience is irrevocably individual (no one else can experience what it means for a specific person to exist besides that specific person) and also continuously shifts and changes from moment to moment.⁷⁴ Therefore, experience is itself a form of continuing revelation, where people must continuously grow and adapt as their experience changes — leading to a continuous growth in a Friend's awareness of the world, and the Divine's continuous adaptation to this growth.⁷⁵ The energy of the Divine Light is thus converted into meaning and energy for a Friend's own life, through whichever interpretive mechanism (leaves) they use.

One example of the mechanism of leaves is the impact of Quaker theological flexibility on the variety of perspectives of Quaker Christology, particularly relating to the paradox of immanence/transcendence framing the dual nature of Jesus Christ. Liberal Quakers recognise the transcendence of God beyond creation as an inherent aspect of what could be considered divinity, yet due to their emphasis on the epistemological primacy of direct religious experience of the Divine, Liberal Quakers stress the immanence of God within the creation to a much greater degree. This stress on immanency colours their view of the Christian anthropological categories, causing them to place greater emphasis on anthropological theories of interdependence, immanence within the creation, and intimate love of the creation than on theories of the transcendence of the 'wholly other', distance from the creation, and stern judgement of human sinfulness.⁷⁶ This emphasis on immanence, coupled with their deliberately conceptual experiential theology, influences the types of models of God which Liberal Quakers find most compelling. The Liberal Quaker construction of an intimately incarnate Christ and the universal immanence of the Holy Spirit are models rooted in metaphor, deliberately left open to re-interpretation and re-evaluation.

Flowers/Testimony

I use the ecological metaphor of flowers to refer to the foundational elements of the Quaker concept of testimony, because testimony can be the framework that Quakers use to show their way of life to the world, as well as the necessary element to ensure that the Quaker tradition remains vital, reproduces, and flourishes — the desire of all life.

⁷⁴ Brown, A. B., *Democratic Leadership*, London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1938, p. 18.

⁷⁵ Silcock, H. T., *Christ and the World's Unrest*, London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1927, p. 19. Similarly, Margaret Harvey suggested that this openness to the truth from other traditions is the logical outgrowth of the idea of continuing revelation: once a group is open to new revelation coming from any of its members, even revelation with the potential to dramatically change the theological perspective of the group, it is a logical next step to find new revelation within the wisdom of other traditions. Harvey, M. M., *The Law of Liberty*, London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1942, p. 41.

⁷⁶ Randazzo, C., *Liberal Quaker Reconciliation Theology*.

The practical expression of this testimony involves any number of ethical and moral norms, including behaviour and (historically) outward appearance (hence, flowers); yet, the norms are still understood to be aspects of an overall testimony of the person's alignment with the will of God for the building up of the eschatological kin-dom of God.

Quakers express a significant concern for balancing theology and ethics, where the human interdependence with the Divine is expressed in the embodied theology of testimony. Testimony is the human acknowledgement of, and response to, the interdependent relationship between humanity and the Divine.⁷⁷ Quakers term this response 'testimony' because it entails speaking truth about the human condition. Quakers view testimony as a form of faithful witness, where they interpret the work of the Spirit and the Spirit's call for humanity to live into the truth of that work.⁷⁸ This multifaceted, holistic, embodied theology encompasses all aspects of a Quaker's life — that intersection where belief, ethics, individual, community, spirituality, and practise all meet — such that one can read a Quaker's theological convictions through the text of their life.

Continuous discernment must occur to identify specific ways of living out the wider Quaker testimony in one's context. This ensures that Quaker embodied theology reflects the continuing revelation of God's voice to humanity: as the Divine is continuously revealing their voice to the world, Quakers insist on remaining open to adapting all aspects of their theology — including and especially their testimony — in light of this continuous movement.

What this specifically means, in terms of Quaker testimony, is that Quakers must remain open to the emergence of new aspects of testimony — or, new flowers budding on the plant, and thus new avenues for engaging in the intimate work of living truthfully with others. This is itself a form of beauty: where beauty is that which is most true, lived in a way that is most true. This requires both individual and corporate discernment: while no *one* Quaker can declare new testimony as imperative — Quakers work together in community to affirm new understandings of truth — Quakers are expected to continuously reflect on what new testimony might be emerging, and to discern new testimonies which would frame this emerging theological truth.

If the call to accept a new expression of testimony is borne out through this entire process of reproduction (communal discernment in worship, informed by the gathered wisdom of the broader Quaker testimony that has developed both within

⁷⁷ Gwyn, D., *A Sustainable Life: Quaker Faith and Practice in the Renewal of Creation*, Philadelphia, PA: FGC Quaker Press, 2014, p. 114.

⁷⁸ Muers, R., *Testimony*.

that community, and in the wider community of Quakers), it is then incorporated into Quaker testimony. Quaker ethical theory is thus robust, central to framing Quaker discernment about how to live, and is vital to reproducing new life that will itself channel the energy of the Light out into the watershed ecosystems within which each Quaker lives and is rooted.

Fruits/Doctrine

Interpretation and doctrine have an interdependent relationship in theology generally, but especially in the Quaker theological tradition: how one interprets one's experience of the Divine impacts the teachings/doctrine that will emerge. Quakers have specific teachings central to the tradition; therefore, Quakers have doctrine. As the Liberal Quaker tradition has a particularly marked scepticism of the concretising of Quaker belief into any permanent form (such as a creed or dogma), Quaker theology explores definitions of doctrine which permit Quaker belief to be definable, but to also be flexible and dynamic — like fruit, which is meant to be consumed while alive, and which helps continue the cycle of Light energy across the life cycle of the individual Friend through the Light energy present in the densely-packed fruit structure.

Doctrines (or teachings) are the portable ideas and concepts that emerge from a life cycle framed by the movement of Light energy: the seed taking root, growing a body, responding to the environment, experiencing Light energy (in worship as well as through the interactions with others in our daily lives) and interpreting its meaning through specific mechanisms, growing tall through the energy gained through continuous infusion of Light, and interacting with the world through the reproductive intimacy of flowers — where lives are 'pollinated' by direct engagement in the lives of others through the beautiful structures of life known as testimony. As each person gains wisdom as they grow, and learn about the Light from both the Divine and others around them, Friends produce teachings that can be shared with others, and which carry within them all that is necessary for new life to take form in new people. As these would be the 'products' of the theological ecosystem, and as such would be the most 'portable' aspects of this process, Quaker doctrine is framed using the metaphor of fruit.

The Quaker tradition centres itself within the broad theological span present between the two arguably central Quaker doctrines: 1) there is 'that of God', the Divine Presence, within all, and 2) Friends must 'let their life speak' to this truth through their actions. In other words, the Divine exists in all humans, and that presence demands a response expressed through human actions. These statements all speak to a specific understanding of God, of the purpose of humanity, and of the kind of life which inexorably emerges from these foundational theological statements. Akin to the Peace

Testimony, which has weight due to its consistency throughout Quaker history, the doctrine of ‘that of God’ has weight due to the consistency with which Quakers have confirmed their experience of this doctrine since the beginning of the movement.⁷⁹ The theological import of this term has expanded and evolved over the years, meaning that this doctrine has been expressed in various ways across the entire Quaker theological watershed. When read through the ecosystem, however, a few central elements emerge.

For one, as that of God is understood to be present within us, it involves an intensely intimate interdependence between creation and the Divine, demanding a vision of the Divine that transcends boundaries, while also being immanently present and alive. Take the implication to its logical conclusion, and you have the Divine fully present in every atom, and every subatomic particle, down to the electrons that carry the energy of life, and the particles that are the foundation of matter.

The other implication of ‘that of God’ is the incarnation of the Divine in actual people, and the ways that those people respond to that presence. This includes the Christian doctrine of Jesus as Incarnation, and the implications of the historical witness of Jesus the human on our understanding of the Divine as *particular*, and present in specific individuals.

Seeds/Hope

Seeds are the vessels which carry the hope of a future — new life — so seeds are also the ways that Quakers carry the central aspects of the Friends tradition into the future. The metaphor of seeds is essential because communities must recognise that time itself is in flux, an ‘already/not yet’ paradox where the seeds of the future live within the soil of the past and the branches and trunks of the present. This is where the metaphor of seeds is so valuable, because within these tiny nuggets, wrapped in carapaces and shells, is everything that is needed for new life. These seeds provide a framework for planting core theological constructs — and of course our theological method — into existing Quaker communities, thus renewing them with new life. These seeds also hold the potential of being planted into new communities which may not even be born yet, and which could use this theological model as a framework for developing their own beliefs and practices. This reflects traditional Quaker use of ‘seed’ as a metaphor for the existence of the Divine within the person, waiting to be ‘planted’ within the person’s soul.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Boswell, M., ‘Loving “That of God”: Participatory Love and the Quaker Way,’ in Daniels, W. and Grant, R., (eds.), *The Quaker World*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, pp. 195–202.

⁸⁰ Angell, S. W., ‘God, Christ, and the Light,’ in Angell, S. W. and Pink Dandelion, B., (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 160.

The Quaker theological approach of seeds exists in the same space as hope: aware of the immanent presence of profound change, always happening now, yet offering hope for a future, as seeds are small pieces of the future, held in a continuous stasis state of potential life (potentially for years), carried around by wind and water and creatures and fire until it is ready to open itself to the hope that is planting: being rooted in specific soil, with the vulnerability to change inherent in being stuck somewhere specific. Seeds carry the promise of a future. Apocalypse, in Greek, simply means ‘revealing’ (or ‘revelation’) a future reality — it needn’t inherently mean the end of the world. Thus, seeds offer hope for a future in the face of the uncertainty and vulnerability of being alive. Seeds, for Quakers, is therefore an eschatology of hope: both tied together, with neither speaking without the other responding.⁸¹ In this way, Quaker theology is conversational, where the conversation itself — the engrossing and immersive dance at the intersections of experience, thought, ethics, action, where these elements all interweave — is itself the method used to construct theology.

Conclusion

This article situates Quaker theology within the broader Christian theological tradition through demonstrating the effectiveness of examining these interwoven elements of Quaker theology through the framework of the synthetic model of contextual theology. The central theological idea presented here is that the foundational elements of Quaker theological method work together as a community, all contributing their own perspective to the experience of engaging theologically in the world as a Quaker, in an infinitely complex interweaving of relationships and encounters between every element. Each element of the watershed ecosystem metaphor also represents an overarching theological category within which it exists. The central metaphor of watershed ecosystem is a new description of Quaker theology that seeks to meet the current moment of climate crisis, which also fits within the stream of Quaker theological tradition.

⁸¹ Jurgen Moltmann’s ideas about hope as eschatology has been deeply influential in this framing of seeds as eschatological hope. See Moltmann, J., *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, London: SCM Press, 1967.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.
