



**Brian T. Blackmore, *To Hear and to Respond: The Quakers' Groundbreaking Push for Gay Liberation, 1946–1973* (Leiden: Brill Research Perspectives, 2025), pp. 102. ISBN: 9789004727601. Paperback, €70.00.**

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Review of Brian T. Blackmore, *To Hear and to Respond: The Quakers' Groundbreaking Push for Gay Liberation, 1946–1973* (Leiden: Brill Research Perspectives, 2025), pp. 102. ISBN: 9789004727601. Paperback, €70.00.

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This work is fascinating, well-researched and a joy to read.

It examines the contributions made by liberal Quakers between 1946 and 1973 in the United States, to the advancement of lesbian, gay and bisexual rights, and also in the United Kingdom to one, apparently unprecedented Christian understanding of same-sex sex (that put forward in *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*).

The first chapter describes the work of Josiah Marvel, and the Civilian Readjustment Committee of the Quaker Emergency Service in New York, whose psychiatric clinic worked to help men arrested for same-sex sex avoid being charged and convicted. For much of its life, the clinic was held in a Quaker Meeting House, and men who were helped spoke highly of the considerate treatment they had received. The Court stopped sending men, and the Quakers closed the clinic, very soon after Marvel's own arrest for soliciting sex from an undercover police office.

The second chapter outlines aspects of the career of Bayard Rustin, well known for his work advancing peace and non-violence with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Friends Service Committee. When he was convicted of refusing to appear at a draft office, Quakers wrote him letters of support. Things were different when he was arrested for performing oral sex on two men in the back of a car. The focus was on his moral failings and his willingness to sabotage his vocation, and Quakers accepted—rather than questioning or challenging—the intervention of the criminal justice system and the harshness of its impacts on individual men's lives.

The third and longest chapter examines the Quaker Group on Homosexuality and the work that culminated in *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*. The Group worked together for years, explicitly basing their approach on foundational aspects of liberal Quakerism, and starting all of their meetings with sustained periods of unprogrammed worship. This is not history as hagiography: tensions and missteps are addressed. What is also made clear is the group's sustained and practical commitment to 'be the companion of Christ in discovery'.

The fourth chapter examines Quakers and the American gay rights movement. It is packed with detail, such as the direct action taken against New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, which required gay taxi drivers to provide a letter from a psychiatrist that they were fit to drive. Gay rights activists delivered a lavender couch to the Commissioner's office, dressed as psychiatrists, offered the Commissioner advice on cures for homosexuality, and suggested he consider a lobotomy. The policy changed. Another detail is of horrific sexual violence against Stephen Donaldson, a bisexual Quaker activist. The chapter ends triumphantly with the assessment that by 1973 a consensus had been reached in the American liberal stream of Quakerism in support of gay and lesbian people.

Blackmore is clear-headed and gives example after example of Quakers who have expressed strong opposition to same-sex sex and relationships. He is explicit that he does not consider that there is an inherent tendency in liberal Quakerism towards concern for gay and lesbian people.

I would have been interested to know more about Blackmore's view on another question: the relationship between 'gay rights' and 'gay liberation'. The latter is the phrase used in his subtitle, but the terms are used interchangeably throughout the book. Many have thought that women's liberation requires more than mere legal equality with men within an inherently oppressive society, and some have thought the same about gay liberation. It is clear from chapter four that Blackmore thinks of the gay rights movement, at this time at least, as being concerned with decriminalisation and equal treatment before the law. Vitally important as that is, Quakers might well think that *liberation*—both within religious bodies in particular and society more generally—requires more. Stephen Donaldson, as Blackmore presents him, seems to have agreed.

The Quakers' early contribution in this area is not unknown. In his wide-ranging history of sex and Christianity, Diarmaid MacCulloch notes that the Quakers were early pioneers and founded the Friends Homosexual Fellowship in 1973 (MacCulloch, D. *Lower than the Angels a History of Sex and Christianity* [London: Allen Lane, 2024]). But there is nothing to rival this detailed and sustained examination of that contribution, which can be wholeheartedly recommended.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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