

Science, Revelation, and Quaker History

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Friends have always been open to scientific understanding and as a result, we have produced a lot of scientists and quite a few important ones. Historical circumstances have encouraged this interest and so has the peculiar character of Quaker culture. But our embrace of scientific advances and ways of thinking have also at times energized the forces that have divided us. Ironically, although our community has been in a unique position to build a bridge between science and religion, we have at times looked at each other across that chasm and found ourselves unable to cross.

We turned to science early in our history, producing several notable scientists by the mid-1700s. In the very beginning, most of the Children of Truth were yeoman farmers (small farmers cultivating their own land, a class of freeholder below the gentry) and small town trades people. But the persecutions that began with the Restoration of the monarchy and the collapse of the Puritan project beginning in the 1660s drove Quakers off the land in large numbers and into business and commerce.

By the time Friends emerged from the persecutions, they had helped to jump-start the modern capitalist economy. They were very well-to-do, notwithstanding the incredible economic deprivations they had endured. These Friends—upper middle-class, if not upper class—had time and resources to devote to—what? The pastimes that others of their class could enjoy—games, music, theater, the arts, and *things*—the superfluities of upscale lifestyle now available to them—these were denied them by their religious convictions. But scientific and technological experimentation and inquiry—these things contributed to human betterment. Some Friends found this option not only morally attractive but personally fulfilling, a good match for their temperaments.

However, just as some Friends were joining the swelling ranks of the curious and ingenious explorers of natural truth, the truths these and other pioneers were discovering began gradually to undermine elements of revealed religion that seemed to many at the time basic to Christian faith. And the *scientific worldview* began to replace the religious worldview—challenging not just the specifics of revealed religion like the creation story or the virgin birth of Jesus, but the preeminent authority of revelation itself. You could *prove* stuff with science, and more and more, scientists were uncovering a world governed by laws not defined in the Bible. Moreover, science elevated *reason*, and reason was increasingly free to question faith, or at least to demand that one's faith be reasonable.

We are, of course, talking here mostly about the Bible. It was the clash between science and *the Bible* and with the until-then unquestioned faith in its unreasoned authority that would sometimes drive a wedge between Friends.

The conflict first surfaced, I think, in the so-called Irish separation of 1801. The key figure in this division was Abraham Shackleton of Ballitore, County Kildare. For Shackleton, the problem was his reasonable approach to ethics and the immorality he saw in the Bible. He simply could not square some of the to-his-mind “perfidious, cruel and unjust”¹ demands and actions of the Old Testament god with the loving Father of Jesus. He concluded that the writers of these

¹ From *Portrait In Grey: A short history of Quakers*, by John Punshon, page 157.

accounts in Hebrew Scripture were rationalizing their own immoral actions and were not passing on divine revelation. However, if you doubt some particulars of Scripture, how can you trust the rest? Shackleton did not abandon his Christianity—far from it. But he did abandon the worldview of faith based on a straightforward reading of the Bible. He insisted on practicing a reasonable faith.

He was not alone in his feelings and, for its part, Ireland Yearly Meeting was already on a campaign to tighten discipline in an attempt to address a more general slackness among Irish Friends that they felt had been undermining the faith over the century and a half since the movement's prophetic beginnings. The Yearly Meeting tried to elder Shackleton and he withdrew from meeting life. In 1801, they disowned him and soon, so many influential Irish Friends had either withdrawn from the Society or been disowned that only two monthly meetings continued to report to the Yearly Meeting in Dublin and only one recorded minister remained in Ulster Quarterly Meeting.²

The Irish separation reflected the conflict between two rising movements of thought and feeling, the Enlightenment and the Evangelical Revival. The point of contact for that friction was the Bible.

In America, Hannah Barnard was also disowned in New York Yearly Meeting (also in 1801) for holding views on Scripture that were similar to Shackleton's. The course was set for the Hicksite separations of 1827-28.

Barnard and Shackleton brought the *spirit* of the Enlightenment to their religion and to their treatment of the Bible in particular. But it took a while for specific scientific developments to challenge specific aspects of the text. In the fifty years following the Hicksite separations, two scientific developments rose to special prominence in this conflict: Darwin's theory of evolution and the so-called "higher criticism," the scientific application of the new tools of literary criticism to the Bible.

Evolution challenged biblical faith in ways that we still know all too well today. Biblical criticism, however, posed a much more subtle threat. There was *evidence* for the theory of evolution, though it was a kind of evidence that no one had thought to consider before. But it was another matter to claim that Moses could not have written some of the books attributed to him, or that there were two authors of the book of Isaiah (we now believe there were three), or that the creation story, aside from being unscientific, was also actually a rehash of an ancient Babylonian creation myth. It was much harder to accept the "evidence" for these conclusions, especially since these ideas contradicted centuries—millennia, really—of tradition.

However, many Friends found these developments extremely exciting, even inspiring. By the time of the Manchester Conference in England in 1895, many British Friends were ready to embrace the idea that

. . . modern thought, far from being evil, was largely a blessing to be accepted and used, and not forlornly to be opposed. Included in this was the principle of evolution, which need by no means to be regarded as subversive of religious belief. On the theological level, it was argued that the doctrine of total depravity was no part of Quakerism, and the shades of Abraham Shackleton and Hannah Barnard might have beamed to hear it said that there was 'no need to accept Hebrew cosmogony or chronology as a necessary part of an all-round and infallible word of God.' . . . The task was to release the talents of the Society and to show that modern scriptural knowledge and biblical criticism could be used to enhance and not to hinder faith.³

² Punshon, page 158.

³ Punshon, page 210.

As Punshon relates, the Manchester Conference also unleashed a passion for adult religious education in the form of the summer school movement. This soon led in turn to the establishment of Woodbrooke, a permanent center for Quaker study in England. Both teachers and students in this movement were eager to apply the tools of biblical criticism and they welcomed the new biblical knowledge that 'scientific' study of the Bible was revealing. These Friends saw "criticizing" the Bible in these new ways as a breakthrough opportunity and a joyous extension of their Christian faith rather than as a threat.

Yet once again, tension arose. Here's John Punshon on this new outbreak of conflict between science and religion, reason and faith:

The Manchester Conference, the summer school movement, the principles and curriculum of Woodbrooke were all optimistic, idealistic, and immensely compassionate. They truly reflected the values of Friends of the time. Yet the principles on which these attitudes were based were sharply at variance with those of the Quakers who adopted the Richmond Declaration, and raised the same question: how far were their principles Quakerly and how far did they arise from some other influence? The basic principles of Quaker renewal in Britain early in the century have a family resemblance to what is known as 'liberal theology', the first conscious attempt to come to terms with modern secular thought.

The clearest difference between liberalism and evangelicalism lies in its attitude towards the Bible. Throughout the Nineteenth Century, a considerable body of critical scholarship had been built up to show that the Bible should not be taken at face value. Parts of it were simply incredible. It contained proven inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Some of the books could not have been written by the people to whom they were attributed. Scripture was found to contain a wide variety of literary forms, some elevated, some crude. Archaeology began to show how there was a cultural assimilation from non-Hebrew societies, and marked parallels were noticed between many biblical narratives like the Flood story and the literatures of other near-eastern civilizations. So, many convinced Christians came to the conclusion that if the Bible were authoritative, the authority lay elsewhere than in its infallible text. This is very close to one of the traditional Quaker positions, so it is easy to see why Friends proved particularly receptive to the principles of liberal theology.⁴

However, many Friends, especially in the U.S., stepped back from this path, sure that it led to a weakening of faith and to an unacceptable break with the saving gospel that God had given us in Scripture and tradition. At the Richmond Conference, these Friends re-embraced their evangelicalism, as evidenced in the Richmond Declaration's section on The Scriptures:

It has ever been, and still is, the belief of the Society of Friends that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were given by inspiration of God; that, therefore, there can be no appeal from them to any other authority whatsoever; that they are able to make wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Jesus Christ. "These are written so that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name." (John 20:31). The Scriptures are the only divinely authorized record of the doctrines which we are bound, as Christians, to accept, and of the moral principles which are to regulate our actions. No one can be required to believe, as an article of faith, any doctrine *which is not contained in them* (emphasis mine); and whatsoever anyone says or does, contrary to the Scriptures, though under profession of the immediate guidance of the Holy Spirit, must be reckoned and accounted a mere delusion. To the Christian, the Old Testament comes with the

⁴ Punshon, page 212.

solemn and repeated attestation of his Lord. It is to be read in the light and completeness of the New; thus will its meaning be unveiled, and the humble disciple will be taught to discern the unity and mutual adaptation of the whole, and the many-sidedness and harmony of its testimony to Christ. The great Inspirer of Scripture is ever its true Interpreter. He performs this office in condescending love, not by superseding our understandings, but by renewing and enlightening them. Where Christ presides, idle speculation is hushed; His doctrine is learned in the doing of His will, and all knowledge ripens into a deeper and richer experience of His truth and love.⁵

Still, a new light beckoned down the road to modern liberal thinking and many Friends felt its call. In 1902, American meetings that embraced the modern, "scientific" approach to the Bible and the other liberalizing trends of the time formed Friends General Conference.

Since then, the moderate evangelical branch of Quakerism has itself embraced much of the scientific worldview and the value and tools of modern biblical criticism. These latter were clearly at work at Earlham School of Religion when I sat in on Bible classes there in 1995. Because Friends have always emphasized the personal and inward experience of Christ as the foundation of Christian faith, they have been less attached to the outward details of the biblical narrative in the fundamentalist mold. Emblematic of this spirit is the relatively unbegrudging acceptance of evolution by many Quaker Christians—long the pivot-point for the fundamentalist-scientist conflict.

At the same time, one still sees the divide at work. This is especially true, I think, in our different approaches to witness. The evangelical focus on individual sin and sinfulness has often distracted Evangelical Friends from the *structural* causes and patterns of social, political, and economic injustice, to the societal dimensions of social ills and ecological degradation, that the social sciences have revealed to us. This often has muted our Christian witness in response to these ills in favor of missionary work.

On the other hand, Liberal Friends have increasingly found the scientific worldview so compelling that they often shy away from explicitly moral and religious language and arguments for our work in the world, and especially for our witness. Instead, we often rely on the legal/political language of rights, on the arguments of the social and physical sciences and statistics, and on secular and humanistic appeals to conscience. All too often, one could read one of our witness minutes without ever realizing that it had been written by a religious organization, let alone by Quakers.

Why? Why are we abandoning moral and religious motives, language, and arguments for 'scientific' ones, or at least for secular ones? I think it partly comes down to *revelation*. To the degree that the wider Christian tradition of which we are a part has equated revelation with the contents of the Bible, science has helped to undermine our faith in revelation—or at least in *religious* revelation.

Scientific revelation, on the other hand, is a continuing revelatory success. Every year we penetrate deeper into the secret heart of the universe. Every year our mastery of certain aspects of our world increases. Every year science and the technologies it produces improve our lives in concrete ways that do not have to be taken on faith. (Of course, every year, science and technology also augment our terrible powers for destruction.) The most powerful advances, in terms of our positive social psychology, I think, are in the medical sciences and the other breakthroughs that protect us from the dangers and discomforts that our ancestors took for granted just a hundred and fifty years ago.

⁵ quakerinfo.com/rdf.shtml

Take just three things as examples: eyeglasses, painkillers, and antibiotics. Think how many of us would have been “blind” in Jesus’ time. Throughout the 1,500 years of biblical history, “the blind” were one of the classic categories of the poor. You get the point. Divine revelation can only touch these givens of the human condition by helping to structure a more just and caring society and by offering spiritual solace.

Likewise, pain and disease have been an unavoidable part of human existence for a million years until the past century. This suffering required some explanation. The religious (or at least, the Christian) explanation has been that pain and disease are the just consequence of “the Fall,” of the inherent sinfulness we inherited from Adam and Eve. “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—[Jesus] then said to the paralytic—“Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” (Matthew 9:6) But when you know that polio causes paralysis and you have a vaccine that prevents it, you have switched your worldview. When you know what causes pain organically and you can eliminate it almost at will, you begin to question the traditional explanations for its existence. You have reassigned your faith in revelation in a certain really important way.

There are two other things at work in our increasing faith in science over religion. One is that science conducts itself like a religion in many ways. Its ‘priests’ wear special garments. Scientific experimentation is exceedingly ritualistic: everything must be done just so, and the same way every time. It takes place in ‘temples’, dedicated places with controlled environments and exotic accoutrements. It has its own language, vocabulary, specialist educational training, and hierarchies. It has its ‘saints’ chosen by the Nobel committee and a range of other scientific societies. Some of it even relies on animal sacrifice. It almost feels natural to switch our faith to this new source of revelation.

Finally, I think we feel increasingly bereft of revelation ourselves. We claim to be a ‘mystical’ religion. We believe that there is something within us that can have direct communion with a Source of revelation. But, especially for Friends who have seriously downgraded the Bible as a source of revelation, we are left to our own experience, and our own experience does not very often deliver the kind of revelation that would keep us personally, intensely committed to divine revelation as a source of truth. Most of us, I suspect, have had the kind of little revelations that help us keep our faith. And perhaps a lot of us have had revelations that really transformed our lives. And some of us have had revelations that have led to real transformation in the wider world, thinking here of the Friends who started AVP, for instance, or AFSC.

But how often do we recognize these personal revelations as divine inspiration? Do we honor them by understanding them and treating them as gifts of the Spirit? Do we share them with Friends and with the world in a conscious embrace of the faith and practice of Quaker ministry? Do we order our lives in ways that invite such “good news” and prepare us to be faithful to the call when revelation comes? Does the experience of divine revelation shape our view of the world and the way we walk in it the way that secular science has come to do?

When divine revelation has pride of place in our lives—when we know God experimentally—then the so-called conflict between science and religion is a non-issue. The Quaker “faith” is experiential in ways that transcend the need for proof. This is true for personal experience, but it is also true of our collective experience: we cannot scientifically explain the experience of a gathered meeting, but we also cannot deny its truth. This is where Friends have a unique contribution to make in this debate: *our approach to religion cannot be undermined by science.*

Not yet, anyway. A time is probably coming when the science of the brain will identify the neurological mechanisms of religious experience and then it will only be a matter of time before we find ways to induce ‘religious experience’ artificially. This will replace evolution, I suspect, as the greatest scientific threat to the religious worldview.

But who knows? Maybe those neurological mechanisms are “that of God” in every person and these methods will open the floodgates of revelation and bring a new age. Then science and religion will finally merge.