The Egalitarian Paradigm of a 16th century Humanist, Baptists and Quakers of the 17th century

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The classical paradigm of gender in creation, fall and redemption was pioneered, as we have seen, by Augustine. It was followed by medieval theologians and magisterial reformers, such as Luther and Calvin. Its basic pattern combined women’s equality in a gender-neutral image of God with women’s subordination in the original order of creation, worsened into subjugation as punishment for sin. Redemption did not change this subjugation in society, but rather the redeemed woman was exhorted to voluntarily subject herself to it. Only in heaven, when the wifely and reproductive roles of women disappeared, would women be spiritually equal based on their redeemed sanctity in grace.

This Augustinian paradigm was challenged in the 16th and 17th centuries by a Renaissance humanist, Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, some Baptist women preachers and, most importantly, by the theological anthropology of the Society of Friends. Quaker anthropology revolutionized the classical paradigm, although it took two centuries to influence other Christians. American Quaker feminists of the 19th century built on it. Today it has come to be taken for granted by liberal Christians. Conservative or fundamentalist Christians continue to follow the classical paradigm. Yet liberals generally have failed to recognize the crucial role of Quakers in pioneering this progressive paradigm or their own departure from the classical paradigm that was normative in Western Christianity for most of its history.

From the 15th through the 17th centuries a literary debate developed in Western Europe on the respective virtues or vices of women, mostly written by men, although a few women contributed to treatises in defense of women. Both humanists and reformers contributed to a literature decrying women’s vices, including their supposed proclivity to witchcraft. One notable contributor to the defense of women was Cornelius Agrippa, a polymath Renaissance humanist who in 1509 wrote “On the Nobility and Superiority of the Female Sex” to win the favor of Queen Margaret of Austria, Regent of the Habsburg Netherlands. It was published in fuller form in 1529.

In this tract Arippa turned the traditional Biblical and theological arguments about women on their head. He begins by affirming the traditional view that women in their spiritual nature were created equally in the image of God and were destined for equal glory in heaven. But he goes on to
argue that in their specific femaleness Eve was superior to Adam. He points out that her name, Eve, means “life,” while Adam means “dirt.” Her name echoes the female aspect of God or divine Wisdom. She was created from better material, human flesh, rather than clay, and was created in paradise, not outside it like Adam. It was Adam who received the command not to eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil, while Eve was innocent of this command. Satan approached Eve first, not because of her weakness, but because he was jealous of her greater perfection.

Agrippa goes on to argue that Christ came as a male, not because the male is the normative sex, but because it is the guilty one and so more in need of redemption. Christ’s perfection comes from being the son of the Virgin Mary with no aid from the male. Moreover it was women who were faithful to Christ to the end, to whom he appeared first at the Resurrection. The gospel message was given first to women, and they have carried it through the ages. The right to preach was given women at Pentecost, and women in the apostolic age taught in public as prophets. It was male tyranny against the explicit word of Scripture that has denied women the right to preach and kept women from education by which their superior gifts would be evident.

Agrippa sees male monopoly on priesthood as belonging to the old order of the Hebrews, but in the new age of redemption, there is “no more male or female but a new creation.” It is male injustice that denies this. As he puts it:

“Thanks to the excessive tyranny of men, prevailing against divine right and the laws of nature, the freedom given to women is now banned by unjust laws, abolished by custom and usage and extinguished by upbringing. For as soon as a woman is born, she is kept at home in idleness from her earliest years, and as if incapable of any higher employment, she is allowed to conceive nothing beyond her needle and thread. .. Public offices too are denied her by law. No matter how intelligent she is not allowed to plead in court…So great is the wickedness of recent legislators they have made void the command of God for the sake of their traditions, as they pronounce women, who in other eras were more noble by virtue of their natural excellence and dignity, to be of baser condition than all men. By these laws women are forced to yield to men like a conquered people to their conquerors, not by any natural or divine necessity or reason, but rather by custom, education, fortune and tyrannical device.”
Agrippa suggests that this male domination is recent and that women in earlier times had greater dignity and power. He pleads that such unjust laws should be abolished, so women can assume their rightful place in both the political and the cultural spheres. Agrippa’s treatise was a tour de force. It was translated into French, German and English in the 16th century and often reprinted in the next two centuries. Many of his arguments reappear in the pro-woman writers of the debate over women, although few dared to emulate the radicalness of his reversal of the anti-female tradition.

A different genre of writing comes from 17th century English popular female preachers. Many of these women who spoke and wrote as prophets were from the “middling” classes, although some came from the poor. Popular prophetic preaching and writing by women and men flourished particularly in the English Civil War period and protectorate (1545-55) when public censorship disappeared. In her study on women and ecstatic prophesy in 17th century England, Phyllis Mack lists 38 well known women visionaries active in the 1640s and 50s, most of them associated with the Baptists. Modeling their language on the books of Daniel and Revelations, these women (and men) see themselves as living at a time of apocalyptic crisis and crying out to the nation to repent before the time of judgment comes.

These female prophets do not make a special case for women’s right to preach. Rather they declare that the Holy Spirit is no respecter of persons. God gives the power of prophecy equally to men and women, annulling all social hierarchies of class, education and gender. Particular emphasis is put on Acts 2:17-18. God does not tie up the Spirit in law or confine it to priests and the learned. Rather, as promised in the last days, God is pouring the Spirit on all flesh and “your sons and your daughters will prophecy.” Divine judgment is being unleashed against the minions of Satan. The saints, who are presently suffering persecution, will soon be delivered to reign over a redeemed earth. In this apocalyptic moment women of the meanest classes gain confidence to speak as God’s voice to the highest leaders of this land. As one woman prophet, Mary Cary, declares, “I am but a weak instrument, but I am all by the power of the Lord.”

The heirs of this spirit of millennial prophecy of the English Civil War were the Society of Friends, founded by George Fox in 1647 and spreading rapidly in the 1660s. They united radical witness in society with a disciplined familial community. Most Quakers came from the yeoman and small business classes, although some were former servants and other drawn from the landed gentry.
Margaret Fell, converted by George Fox when he visited her home in 1652, together with her seven daughters, was herself an Askew, an ancient landholding family. Married to Thomas Fell, a barrister member of Parliament, she inherited the Fell estate at his death in 1658 and made her home, Swarthmore Hall, the organizational base for the Quaker movement worldwide.

Quaker life and discipline encouraged literacy among members, women as well as men. Women’s meetings kept records of their decisions and disbursements and circulated their decisions to other women’s meetings. Quakers networked with each other through letters, journals and travel diaries intended for community reading and wrote tracts defending their theology and vision. Women were a significant part of the “publishers of truth” from the beginning. Of the 650 Quaker authors during the first 50 years of their history whose works are preserved, 82 are women, some of whom authored numerous tracts. Margaret Fell wrote 24 tracts, while Dorothy White (1630-85) write twenty known tracts. Rebecca Travers did detailed writing to refute attacks on Quaker theology, while Elizabeth Bathurst wrote a systematic presentation of Quaker beliefs, Truth’s Vindication, in 1679. In 1683 she authored a collection of Biblical passages, Sayings of Women, to show that God in both testaments spoke through women as well as men.

Underlying this active ministry of women as preachers, missionaries and leaders of Women’s Meetings was a Quaker theology of spiritual equality of women and men in creation, restored in Christ. According to one Quaker theological tract of the time; “Concerning the Authority and Dominion of the Church and in the Outward Creation, whether it be in the male or female,” Adam and Eve were created “in one mind and soul and spirit, as well as one flesh, not usurping authority over each other . . .and the woman was not commanded to be in subjugation to her husband till she was gone from the power. . .the power and image and spirit of God is of the same authority in the female as in the male. And whereas it is objected against women that their husbands and parents have power to disannull and make void all their vows and resolutions, this was under the law and under the curse, Christ (is) the end of the law...no man hath power...to disannul or make it void.”

We see here the fundamental change that Quakers made in the traditional Western Christian paradigm of gender in creation, fall and redemption. Quakers accepted the traditional view that women at the beginning of creation were given the image of God equally with men, but they rejected the qualifying claim that subjugation of women was also established by God in creation in relation to her sexual, reproductive and domestic roles. For Quaker all such “usurping of authority
over each other” whether of man over woman or master over servant, is the expression of sinful power “under the law” and “under the curse” that began with the fall.

This concept of sin as “usurping of power of some over others” fundamentally shifts the meaning and culpability for sin. The traditional paradigm saw women as culpable of disobedience to God’s command and to the authority of their husband, thereby worsening her inherent subordination into servitude. The Quakers rejected any original subordination and saw sin as “usurpation” of power, there putting the onus of sin on the usurpers, that is, on the people who come to dominate, males and masters, rather than on women. Usurpation of power is illegitimate power, not rightful power. This means that sin is manifest primarily as unjust domination. But in Jesus Christ this unjust power has come to an end, the curse has been overcome and the original equality of persons has been restored. Redeemed women are not told to interiorize subjugation, but rather to speak boldly in the Spirit as those who have been liberated from the “law” and the “curse.”

Margaret Fell, in her formative tract, “Women’s Preaching Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures (1666) echoes the arguments found in earlier pro-woman tracts. Not only did God “put no such difference between male and female as men would make,” but God showed special mercy on Eve as the more innocent of the pair and more truthful in confessing her fault, while Adam tried to blame both God and Eve for his disobedience. Fell and Quakers generally put great stress on God’s curse of the serpent (Gen. 3:15), “I will put enmity between thee and the woman and between thy seed and her seed.” Following the tradition that the “seed of the woman” is Christ, born of woman, Quakers divided humanity between the “two seeds”, the redeemed who belong to the seed of the woman and those in darkness who are “Satan’s seed.”

For Fell this is the foundational mandate for women’s preaching, for if the woman who belongs to Christ does not speak, then the seed of Satan will prevail. Those who oppose woman’s preaching thereby manifest that they belong to Satan and not to Christ.

“Let this word of the Lord which is from the beginning stop the mouths of all that oppose women’s speaking in the power of the Lord. For he hath put enmity between the woman and the serpent; and if the seed of the woman speak not, the seed of the serpent speaks. For God hath put enmity between the two seeds. And it is manifest
that those that speak against the woman and her seed speaking speak out of the enmity of the old serpent’s deed.”

Not only in the time of Christ, but also “in the Age of the Law” God empowered female prophets to testify to the truth, Fell argues, citing the examples of Hulda, Miriam, Hannah, Ruth, Esther and Judith. With the coming of Christ, the power of the Serpent has been dealt the decisive blow. God’s Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, raising both sons and daughters to the restored humanity of the resurrection. Jesus manifested his love for many women, such as the woman of Samaria, and Mary and Martha. But he appeared especially to Mary Magdalene, Joanna and others, making them the apostles of the resurrection to the male disciples who lacked their same steadfast faith.

For Fell the good news of the resurrection hinges on the acceptance of the message of God which he sends by women, hence on the acceptance of women’s preaching. “What had become of the redemption of the whole body of mankind if they had not believed the message that the Lord Jesus sent by these women of and concerning his resurrection?” Fell concludes, “and thus the Lord Jesus hath manifested himself and his power, without respect of persons, and so let all mouths be stopt that would limit him, whose power and Spirit is infinite, that is pouring it upon all flesh.”

Fell deals with the questions about the silencing of women in I Cor 14: 34 and I Timothy 2:12, by claiming that the women referred to in these passages had not yet been converted and so did not have the spiritual authority to speak. These women are still under the law and reveal their unregenerate nature in their “broidered hair or gold or pearls and costly array” and by being “idle, gadding about from house to house….gossips and busybodies” (I Tim. 2:9 and 5:13). Such unregenerate women and also men are the ones commanded to keep silence, so they can listen to regenerate women and men speaking in the Spirit and come to know Christ. But regenerate women and men not only may but must speak and speak boldly in the Spirit.

Fell’s interpretation of Paul reflects standard Quaker exegesis of these texts at that time. In 1656 Mary Cole and Priscilla Cotton wrote a tract from prison, titled “To the people and priests of England, we discharge our conscience,” defending their preaching. They too argue that the women who Paul enjoined to keep silent are those who had not yet been converted. But those are converted, who are in the Spirit, are mandated to pray and prophesy in public to cry down the false church and
state of Babylon. Cole and Cotton add that also unconverted men should keep silent, particularly priests and bishops of the established church. They should listen quietly to the women and men who have received the Spirit so they can come to understand the true Christ. This same argument is found in a Quaker catechism of 1671, *Some Principles concerning the Elect People of God in scorn called Quakers*, in the section “concerning women speaking in church.”

Quakers also drew on the deeply gendered symbolism of the Christian tradition, both to express the true community of Christ and also to decry the evil or false community of “Babylon.” The true church is “the bride of Christ” while the false and evil world is the “Whore of Babylon.” Quakers insisted that both these female symbols are generics that symbolize both men and women. For Fell, all Quakers are symbolically female as bride of Christ, but this femaleness of the church also means that women are included in representing and speaking as Christ, their bridegroom. Redemption dissolves all arrogance, mightiness and usurping of power over others. The redeemed are to adopt the traits of meekness and gentleness traditionally associated with women. God chooses the lowly of the world to confound the mighty. This Christian paradox is used to include women in those lowly who are chosen to confound the mighty, but it also suggests that Quaker men should engage in a kenosis of dominating power and become “womanlike.” One Quaker man even signed his letters, “Your sister in our Spouse.”

For Fell negative female symbols, such as Whore of Babylon, also refer to both men and women, although men more than women have the opportunity to behave in “whorish” ways that “usurp power” over others. In her words, “In this great city of Babylon which is the woman that has sitten so long on the scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy…this woman hath been drunk with the blood of the saints and with the martyrs of Jesus, …that hath ben speaking and usurping authority for many years.”

This double female symbolism of church as Bride of Christ and the evil world as Whore of Babylon shapes early Quaker religious rhetoric. Speaking of religious nurture Quakers use mother-child language of babes being sucked or marital imagery of brides being embraced by their beloved, for both men and women. But when denouncing powerful and evil men in church and state, Quaker women, as much as men, employ an apocalyptic language in which such men are called Jezebels and idolatrous whores. Although Quaker women claim Biblical female prophets to justify their right to
speak, when they speak as prophetic denouncers, they do so in the person of male biblical figures, such as Moses, as mouthpieces of an angry judgmental God.

Thus Quaker religious symbolism dissolves the identification of female and male symbols with biological sex difference. But Quaker spirituality also suggests that the deep inner person, the soul, conscience or inner light, lies below bodily difference and formal social roles. The soul transcends all surface constructions of the self, socially and personally. The soul is the image of God and so is rooted in God’s own being. As Sarah Jones, a poor widow of Bristol, puts it in her 1650 exhortation to other Quakers, *This is lights appearance in Truth to all the precious lambs of life, Dark vanished, Light shines forth*, redemption means “that ye sink down into that eternal word and rest there and not in any manifestation.” Social class, gender differences, all the external babbling of social gestures and inner babbling of thoughts and feelings, are for such Quakers those “manifestations” that are not the “eternal word that was before manifestations were.” Redemption dissolves the outer differences of roles and reroots the person in the divine power of God which is both the true source of its creation and its destiny in eternal life.

When the soul that “sinks down and rests” in the eternal by spiritually emptying itself of all surface appearances, the divine also lays hold of the soul and impels it to speak, despite the weakness of the person who might be a poor serving woman. The Quaker prophet who thunders at the powerful of church and state also negates the personal ego as the source of this power. Margaret Killian haranguing against the presumptions of the “steeplehouse” declares that “I am made in much meekness to declare the truth.”

Sarah Chevers, in her epistle to Friends, describes this process of self-emptying as one which both fills the emptied self with divine power and also sends the reborn self streaming forth to others in the “light,” both to denounce oppressive society and also to build community in the Spirit. In her words “the much more we are broken down into self denial, sealed down forever into the true poverty and upright integrity of heart…wholly ransomed by the living word of life to serve the living God… we cannot hold our peace. The God … of glory doth open our mouth and we speak his praise, utter his voice and sound forth his word of life and causeth the earth to tremble …, my soul and spirit that is wholly joined to the Lord, stream forth to you.”
Quaker spirituality in which the gendered self is dissolved into the pregendered soul rooted in God, its original and true ground of being, has some affinities with medieval mysticism. But Quaker women and men were not celibates who left behind the social and sexual roles of family life. They lived ordinary lives, marrying, producing and raising children, tilling fields, selling goods. The combination of self-dissolution into the transcendent light of God that impelled a person into missionary travels, confrontations with authorities in the state and church and imprisonments also was living an ordinary life as spouse, parent and worker. This combination created tensions for both men and women, but particularly for women. The woman who sunk herself into God and barred her back to the whip, having denounced the priest in the "steeplehouse" as a “painted beast,” was also expected to maintain her roles as fond wife, nurturing mother, providing services for her husband and children, as well as Itinerant Friends that might arrive at her house under duress.

From 1662 to 1688 Quaker experienced severe persecution. Thousands were imprisoned, suffering beatings and terrible jail conditions and many died. Quakers women suffered alongside men, and sometimes bore the brunt of particular savagery. Some accused of being witches were stripped and tortured. During these years of persecution Quakers shaped a form of church life that enabled them to both survive and give enlarged roles in ministry to women. The system of Men’s and Women’s Meetings gave women a sphere of ministerial work that in some ways collectivized the work of matriarchs in the family: the disciplining of the disorderly, especially women and girls, supervision of marriage, to prevent Friends from marrying outside the fold and to assure suitable partners, and the administration of funds, particularly for the poor, for those in prison and for widows with children, for the sick, the infirm and the aged. The creation of Women’s Meeting created some controversy among some Quakers. Women who cried out as prophets denouncing oppressive authorities were exercising occasional charismatic gifts, but the Women’s Meetings gave women an established public office in the church.

Quaker women at the end of the 17th century present us with a paradox. Retired to a more inward family life in her community, Quaker women resembled the Puritan “goodwife” playing her helpmeet role in the family and the church. But under the plain dress and speech lurked a crucial shift in theological anthropology. Not only was she understood as having been created equal in the image of God to be redeemed to equal glory in heaven. But there was no basis for her subordination either in creation or redemption in Christ. Rather all subordination of class or gender was a sinful usurpation of wrongful power already overcome in Christ.
17th century Quakers did not translate this theology into social reform. Rather as apocalypticists they expected Christ to return soon and injustice to fall under the rod of divine judgment. At the end of the 17th century they withdrew from the world to their own sanctified community, allowing an enlarged space for women in church work, but tacitly accepting the class and gender hierarchy of the larger society as the present shape of things “under the law.” It would be another century before Quaker thought would be joined to political liberalism when a new generation of Quaker women began to apply this theological shift to political struggles to overcome slavery and female subjugation in society.