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THE CHRISTOLOGY AMONG SMITH'S FRIENDS:
A MISUNDERSTOOD IMPULSE
FROM THE KESWICK TRADITION?

Geir Lie

1. Introduction

They are a church without membership rolls, clergy, central administration, tithing, or even a name. They are called "Smith's Friends" after their founder, Johan Oscar Smith. Although there are many thousands of them in churches throughout the world, they are virtually unknown. When some Norwegians hear the expression "Smith's Friends," they think the speaker is referring to the Mormons, who follow the teachings of Joseph *Smith*. When some Americans hear the term, they think they are being told about a Quaker offshoot, a branch of the Society of *Friends*. They often ask how a Norwegian religious reformer could have the very un-Scandinavian name of Smith. Answer: Because his father planned to immigrate to New Zealand and adopted an appropriate name for the planned, but never taken journey.¹

The indigenous Norwegian denomination The Christian Church² (or Smith's Friends, as they are known to outsiders) was founded by a non-commissioned officer in the Norwegian Navy, Johan Oscar Smith (1871-1943). By 1996 this unique denomination claimed 211 churches in 50 different nations, and the Norwegian researcher Knut Lundby estimated

¹ Lowell D. Streiker, *Smith's Friend: A "Religion Critic" Meets a Free Church Movement* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), pp. 1-2.

² "Outside of Norway, besides 'the friends' or 'the fellowship,' the church is known as 'the Norwegian Brethren,' 'the Norwegian Movement,' or simply as 'the church' (USA and Canada)." Kjell Arne Bratli, *The Way of the Cross: An Account of Smith's Friends* (Tananger, Norway: Skjulte Skatters Forlag, 1996), p. 4.

its membership at 25,000 to 30,000 and growing.³ As much as two-thirds of the members live outside of Norway. The success of this Norwegian denomination in establishing itself on all continents of the world is in itself quite amazing.

The Friends have not been able to escape media attention and have even been the subject of some scholarly analysis. One of the first attempts of the latter was an article by Nils Bloch-Hoell which provided “an overview of the movement in order to assist researchers who might desire to obtain a deeper understanding of the movement’s history and characteristics.”⁴

My main concern in this article is not primarily to write the movement’s institutional history, but rather to document its confessional roots. This documentation takes as its point of departure the Christological views of the group’s members. However, these Christological views are not treated as isolated doctrinal themes. Rather, they will be analyzed as an extension of hamartology (and particularly the movement’s understanding of sanctification) and anthropology.

2. The Understanding of Sanctification Compared with Related Movements

Many of Bloch-Hoell’s observations are interesting and should be carefully considered. This particularly holds true for his treatment of the movement’s sanctification doctrine. Bloch-Hoell suggested a certain similarity between the “old-Methodist teachings on Christian Perfection and Pentecostalism’s emphasis on cleansing, on the one hand (since inherent in these teachings was the expectation that it was possible to live one’s life without incurring personal guilt, while at the same time taking into account the possibility of defection from one’s ethical standard, including the possibility and necessity of growth in ethical cognition”),

³ Knut Lundby, “Religion, medier og modernitet. Kommunikasjonsmønstre i sekt og kirke i en norsk kommune” [Religion, Media and Modernity: Communication Patterns in Sect and Church in a Norwegian Municipality], *Sosiologisk tidsskrift* 4 (1996), pp. 265-84 (266).

⁴ Nils Bloch-Hoell, “Smiths Venner: En eiendommelig norsk dissenterbevegelse” [Smith’s Friends: A Peculiar Norwegian Non-conformist Denomination], *Tidsskrift for teologi og kirke* 27 (1956), pp. 165-77 (165).

and on the other, the distinction made by Smith's Friends between "sins that lead to guilt and errors committed through ignorance."

Even Christ during his walk on earth grew in cognition and—according to the Friends—did not sin against the fourth commandment during his stay in the temple as a twelve-year old, because it was, as Bloch-Hoell put it, an "error of ignorance."⁵

Of particular relevance here is the Friends' early contact with the Pentecostal movement in Norway, and with the related indigenous movement De Frie Evangeliske Forsamlinger.⁶ Johan Oscar's younger brother, Mr. Aksel Smith, cooperated with T.B. Barratt (Pentecostalism's founder in Norway) during the first few years after Barratt introduced Pentecostalism to Norway in 1906-1907.⁷ Indeed, Aksel experienced Spirit baptism and spoke in tongues.⁸ Johan Oscar Smith was baptized in water by Mr. Erik Andersen Nordquelle, the founder of De Frie Evangeliske Forsamlinger. However, in his dissertation on the Pentecostal movement in Norway, Bloch-Hoell documented an ever-increasing disassociation of the Pentecostals from the Friends. In the city of Ålesund, for instance, the Friends according to Barratt were the cause of internal schism.⁹ Similarly, the Friends grew wary of the Pentecostals.¹⁰ Consequently, Bloch-Hoell wrote, "Oftentimes there has

⁵ Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths Venner," p. 172.

⁶ Audun Erdal, "'Smiths venner': innblikk i en norsk frimenighets oppkomst og egenart" [Smith's Friends: Insights into the Origins and Characteristics of an Indigenous Norwegian Denomination], *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 2 (1987), pp. 81-101 (83).

⁷ Kjell Arne Bratli, *En Herrens tjener. Sigurd Bratlie 1905-1996* [A Servant of the Lord: Sigurd Bratlie 1905-1996] (Tananger: Skjulte Skatters Forlag, 2003), pp. 34, 38-39; Kjell Arne Bratli, *Seilas mot Himmels Kyst. En beretning om Johan Oscar Smith* [Navigating towards the Coasts of Heaven: The Story about Johan Oscar Smith] (Tananger: Skjulte Skatters Forlag, 1997), pp. 140-41.

⁸ Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths Venner," p. 166.

⁹ Nils Bloch-Hoell, *Pinsebevegelsen. En undersøkelse av pinsebevegelsens tilblivelse, utvikling og særpreg med særlig henblikk på bevegelsens utforming i Norge* [The Pentecostal Movement: An Analysis of Its Origins, Development and Characteristics with Particular Emphasis on Its Appearance in Norway] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1956), p. 236 n. 149.

¹⁰ Elias Aslaksen, *Et ugudelig overgrep. Kirke- og pastoruvesenet. En av den religiøse verdens største synder* [An Ungodly Violation: The Nuisance of Churches and Pastors: One of the Most Serious Sins of the Religious

been a warlike situation between the two related movements. The war was carried on both in *Skjulte Skatte* [that is, the Friends' official journal] and *Korsets Seir* [that is, the Pentecostals' official journal], as well as in specific polemical writings."¹¹

Despite their similarities and the close but conflicted relationship between them, Bloch-Hoell was right, in my opinion, to emphasize the differences between original Methodism and Pentecostalism on the one hand and the Friends on the other, on the point of sanctification:

The Old-Methodism and the Pentecostal movement, particularly during their first phase, taught instantaneous sanctification. Among the Friends, however, it is rather a matter of a gradual *mortificatio carnis*.¹²

It is correct, as most outside observers have noted that Johan Oscar Smith had Methodist roots from his hometown of Fredrikstad. And, we cannot dismiss the possibility that he was influenced by Fredrikstad-born Ole Peter Petersen (1822-1901), the founder of Methodism in Norway. I agree with the late Norwegian researcher Tore Meistad, who claimed that Petersen's teachings found a receptive audience among Norwegians familiar with Pietism because these same teachings united elements of Haugeanism, Methodism and the "entire sanctification" teachings that characterized the Methodist branch of the American Holiness movement.¹³

The American Holiness movement, in turn, was Pentecostalism's predecessor. Most of the latter's adherents had a Methodist background that appealed (rightly or not) to founder John Wesley's teachings on sanctification—thus the somewhat misleading term "Old-Methodism" (*gammelmetodisme*). It is a matter of record that in the U.S. Wesley was read in the light of his successor John Fletcher, the latter having radicalized the former's views on sanctification by insisting that the believer must receive the "baptism with the Holy Spirit"—a reference to

Community] (Hønefoss: Privately printed, 1953), pp. 9-11. See also Elias Aslaksen, *Svar på S.H. Lærums og T.B. Barratts angrep på Jesu Kristi disippelskap* [A Response to S. H. Lærum and T. B. Barratt's Polemics against the Discipleship of Jesus Christ] (Hønefoss: Privately printed, 1937).

¹¹ Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths venner," p. 166.

¹² Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths venner," p. 172.

¹³ Tore Meistad, *Methodism as a Carrier of the Holiness Tradition in Norway* (Alta: ALH-forskning, 1994), p. 138.

a specific experience of sanctification which eliminated the believer's sin nature and consequently made it possible to conquer conscious sin.

Despite Johan Smith's Methodist background, the Friends' gradual *mortificatio carnis* reveals a striking doctrinal affinity with another branch of the broader holiness movement: the British Keswick tradition.¹⁴ Perhaps the clearest evidence of the connection between the Keswick tradition and Smith's Friends is seen in the 45 articles by the Welch devotional writer Jessie Penn-Lewis published in the official Friends' journal, *Skjulte Skatter*.¹⁵

Just as within the Methodist branch of the Holiness movement, Keswick adherents also considered it possible to conquer conscious sin. This possibility, however, was not anchored in any specific sanctification experience, whereby God removed one's sin nature, but rather in the fact that the believer, by the indwelling Spirit's endowment, could subdue his ever-existing sin nature.

I am not disputing Bloch-Hoell's suggestion that the Friends' teachings on sanctification "developed as a conscious response and reaction against the seeming absence of practical holiness within Norwegian Christendom, and after a while, with specific opposition against the sanctification views which were taught within the Pentecostal movement."¹⁶ Barratt's own background was Methodist, and throughout his entire life he embraced the sanctification views that were taught within the Methodist branch of the American Holiness movement. However, I cannot follow Bloch-Hoell when he implies that the Friends arose as "a more or less conscious reaction against the one-sided emphasis on grace within the Scandinavian Neo-Evangelicalism" and that it reflected "the tension between a more Rosenian understanding of grace and an older understanding of penance leading to sanctification."¹⁷

I find Bloch-Hoell's suggestions just as speculative as Norwegian researcher Steinar Moe's attempt to locate the Friends within the same confessional tradition as the Lutheran Pietists Spener, Francke and

¹⁴ Geir Lie, "Hellighetsbevegelsen i USA og Storbritannia: et historisk riss" [The Holiness Movement within the U.S. and the UK: A Historical Overview], *Refleks* 2:1 (2003), pp. 3-20.

¹⁵ All 45 articles appear between 1913 and 1938.

¹⁶ Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths venner," p. 172.

¹⁷ Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths venner," p. 172.

Pontoppidan.¹⁸ Certainly, Moe, in another context, was quick to admit that “Much basic and time-consuming labor remains—at least as far as [the movement’s] historical roots and doctrinal background are concerned.”¹⁹ Naturally, I do not debate the movement’s Pietist roots. My concern, rather, is to give the movement a much more precise confessional location in the Keswick branch of the Holiness movement.

Moe’s somewhat imprecise confessional location prevented him from forming a theory to explain “whether [including how] there exists a specific connection between this type [Lutheran] of Pietist reasoning and the understanding of the Gospel which one later finds among the Friends.”²⁰ It is important to point out here that Moe has not identified a single reference to any of the Lutheran Pietists that he claims have influenced the Friends (although Francke’s name does show up a time or two in the Friends’ devotional writings). By contrast, I would suggest that the Friends were most influenced in this respect by the Keswick tradition. In the pages ahead, I will develop a theory that can explain how a connection existed between the Keswick tradition (e.g., via Jessie Penn-Lewis) and the Friends so far as the doctrine of sanctification is concerned.

Bloch-Hoell described the movement’s characteristic Christology as “a consequence of their understanding of anthropology and sanctification.”²¹ My thesis is that Keswick-influenced anthropology and holiness teaching [including the implicit understanding that the believer’s sin nature is not eliminated during his/her walk on earth] shaped the distinctive Christology of Smith’s Friends in which Jesus also partook of an indwelling sin nature. This particular dogma will be carefully considered in the following paragraphs.

¹⁸ Steinar Moe, “Fokus på Smiths Venner” [Focus on Smith’s Friends], *Tønsberg Blad* 5 (March 1996), n.p. Moe’s suggestion is repeated in his article “Evangelieførståelsen i Den kristelige menighet. Et bidrag til konfesjonskunnskap” [The Understanding of the Gospel among Smith’s Friends], *Tidsskrift for teologi og kirke* 2 (1996), pp. 111-30 (122).

¹⁹ Steinar Moe, *Hva lærer Smiths venner? Et bidrag til konfesjonskunnskap* [What Do Smith’s Friends Teach?] (Larvik: Færder Forlag, 2002), p. 5.

²⁰ Moe, “På leting etter røtter” [Searching for Roots] (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), p. 1.

²¹ Bloch-Hoell, “Smiths venner,” p. 175.

3. Christology among Smith's Friends

The Friends believe that the pre-existent Christ was “divinely united with the Father and not subordinate to Him or a different being than Him.”²² The Incarnation, however, involved a kenotic process whereby Christ temporarily laid aside some of his divinity so that Jesus as “true man” could receive a truly human will. Certainly, Jesus did not receive “sinful flesh,” but he purportedly had “sin in the flesh,” i.e., he was actually tempted by sin, but chose not to submit to these temptations. During his entire walk on earth he was “holy and pure in thoughts, words and deeds.”²³ As one of the movement's leaders explained in polemics against Pentecostals Lærum and Barratt: “If Christ without exception had not been pure and blameless in thoughts, words and deeds, then he could never have saved neither us nor anybody else!”²⁴ With his point of departure in Hebrews 5:7,²⁵ Elias Aslaksen claimed that Jesus' human will, which he had voluntarily taken on, was “in disharmony with the Father's will,” but that it was always “submitted (albeit under internal struggle) under the Father's will.”²⁶

Accordingly, it seems likely that Smith's Friends applied Keswickian anthropology and holiness teachings to Christology—possibly without being consciously aware of their actual departure from Keswickian Christology. Of course, I do not mean to imply that these doctrinal impulses have come exclusively from the Keswick tradition. As we have seen, proof texts like Hebrews 5:7-8 also played a role. However, to the extent that Smith's Friends during the early phase of their history may have been conscious of their indebtedness to the Keswick tradition and have desired to maintain doctrinal fidelity towards it, the discontinuity (as far as Christology is concerned) may possibly be

²² Moe, *Hva lærer Smiths venner?* p. 37.

²³ Elias Aslaksen, “Åpent brev til Ivar Welle, Håkon E. Andersen, S. Anker-Goli og andre likesinnede” [Open Letter to Ivar Welle, Håkon E. Andersen, S. Anker-Goli and Other Likeminded Ones] (tract/brochure, n.d.), p. 2.

²⁴ Aslaksen, *Svar på S.H. Lærums*, p. 9.

²⁵ “Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.”

²⁶ Aslaksen, *Svar på S.H. Lærums*, p. 11.

explained by the Friends' lack of understanding of the importance of theological reflection about Jesus' character.

In his 1956 dissertation on Pentecostalism, Bloch-Hoell critiqued Pentecostal believers, not only for their "one-sided emphasis on the second person within the Godhead,"²⁷ but also for their accentuation of Jesus' utilitarian value as "savior and friend, shepherd and comforter and as the individual's bridegroom."²⁸ However, as Bloch-Hoell himself noted, "This one-sidedness" (the undue emphasis on Christ leading to the implicit belittling of the Father and the Spirit) is hardly unique to Pentecostals. Indeed, Bloch-Hoell quite properly, in my opinion, declared that "the entire modern revivalistic piety is a pronounced Jesus-cult."²⁹

Scriptural passages such as Hebrews 13:8—"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever"—have both in hymnals and regular preaching been exclusively applied to his beneficial deeds towards the believer and not to his person. So-called lay preaching has always had the ideal of being applicable, and that pragmatic bent has shown little patience for theological hair-splitting. Although conclusive documentation is difficult to find, I would suggest that the Friends have misunderstood Keswickian Christology and therefore have uncritically applied the latter tradition's anthropology and holiness teaching to Christology precisely *because* they basically have been preoccupied with praxis, the pragmatic element within Christology: e.g., that the believer is called to follow Christ's example. It is not a matter of debating Christ's unique standing *vis-à-vis* the believer, but rather that the emphases of one's reflections have been anchored in practical rather than theoretical systematic theology. As long as the believer—according to Keswick teachings—had an ongoing struggle against his or her indwelling sin nature, the *Friends* have had few if any difficulties with Jesus' voluntary participation in the very same corrupted sin nature.

4. Influence via Jeanne Marie Bouvière de la Motte Guyón?

A seeming weakness with my thesis concerning the Friends' doctrinal dependency on the Keswick tradition is the movement's affinity

²⁷ Bloch-Hoell, *Pinsebevegelsen*, p. 315.

²⁸ Bloch-Hoell, *Pinsebevegelsen*, p. 316.

²⁹ Bloch-Hoell, *Pinsebevegelsen*, p. 315.

to the Catholic mystic Madame Guyón. Her book with the Norwegian title *Bønner* was published by Skjulte Skatters forlag in 1912 as the Friends' first book-length publication. Johan Smith wrote to his brother Aksel in 1909 that he was reading a Swedish translation of Madame Guyón's autobiography to his wife Pauline: "Granted, some of her ideas are strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, but God has given us light so we are able to separate the wheat from the chaff."³⁰ Probably, it was because of the Catholic distinctives, not in order to prevent a view into the movement's confessional roots that Johan admonished his brother "not constantly [to] quote...Madame Guyon."³¹

Bloch-Hoell found the frequent quotations from Guyón in the movement's official journal to be perplexing, especially since the *Friends* differed from the Quietists in so many respects. For example, Bloch-Hoell noted that "ecstasy among the Friends primarily is exaltive and not, as in Quietism, contemplative (apathetic)."³² Despite these differences, however, Bloch-Hoell observed important similarities, such as "analogies to the very same *mortificatio carnis*-reasonings in Madame Guyón as those having been noted among Smith's Friends."³³

Steinar Moe is correct, then, when he on one occasion claims:

Catholic thought processes concerning salvation [primarily that Christ delivers us, then one allows oneself to be delivered, and then, finally, with Christ in his/her life, the believer continues the battle. So then, salvation is not something that is done and over with, but rather a process that is moving forward toward a goal] and thoughts and ideas from old pietistic theology from the 1700's can be fitted into Smith's Friends' understanding of the gospel in the twentieth century.³⁴

At the same time we should not forget the fact that Madame Guyón was very controversial within her own Roman Catholic tradition, and that she has been greatly admired within the Holiness movement. The

³⁰ Johan Oscar Smith, letter to Aksel Smith, Oct 23, 1909 in *Letters of Johan O. Smith*, 2nd English edition (Tananger, Norway: Skjulte Skatters Forlag, 1999), p. 171.

³¹ Smith, letter to Aksel Smith, Oct 23, 1909.

³² Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths venner," p. 174.

³³ Bloch-Hoell, "Smiths venner," p. 174.

³⁴ Moe, "Fokus på Smiths Venner," translated into English by Lowell D. Streiker in Streiker, *Smith's Friends*, p. 107.

American Holiness leader Thomas Cogswell Upham published her autobiography, *Madame Guyón*, which came out in 37 editions.³⁵ Penn-Lewis also cherished the French mystic³⁶ and once admitted, “I owe a great deal to the books of Madame Guyon.”³⁷ An abbreviated edition of one of Guyón’s books, *Spiritual Torrents*, was published by Penn-Lewis under the title *Life out of death*. Penn-Lewis explained in the preface that the original edition was “too analytical, too involved in expression, too overdrawn, too mystical” for the average reader.³⁸

Just as was the case with many in the Holiness movement, the Friends primarily benefited from Madame Guyón’s books as inspirational writings. In 1909, Johan Smith wrote, “I firmly believe that it is very healthy and edifying to read about god-fearing souls and the battles and hardships they had to endure in order to gain light.” As an example, he explicitly mentioned the life of Guyón. “Madame Guyón’s book,” he continued, “has truly been a blessing to me, because I detect a zeal in her which blesses my heart. Not many people in each century give themselves over so unreservedly to God.”³⁹

Nonetheless, heritage from Guyón is by all appearances an indirect one, mediated through the Holiness movement in general and through Penn-Lewis in particular. I cannot see that the appreciation of Madame Guyón weakens my thesis that the Friends’ holiness teachings are influenced by the Keswick tradition, and that their Christology has been formulated, at least in part, through the adaptation or appropriation of Keswick anthropology and holiness teachings.

³⁵ Dale Hawthorne Simmons, *E.W. Kenyon and the Postbellum Pursuit of Peace, Power, and Plenty* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1996), p. 89.

³⁶ Brynmor Pierce Jones, *The Trials and Triumphs of Jessie Penn-Lewis* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1997), p. 16.

³⁷ Quoted from Mary N. Garrard, *Mrs. Penn-Lewis: A Memoir* (London: Overcomer Book Room, 1930), p. 34.

³⁸ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Life out of Death* (Poole, Dorset: Overcomer Literature Trust, n.d.), p. 5.

³⁹ Smith, letter to Aksel Smith, Oct 23, 1909.