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A REVIEW OF *A NEAR SYMPATHY*, #1

MAX L. CARTER

John Woolman is underutilized. Among many programmed Friends, he is forgotten in a history largely replaced by contemporary Christian models. In unprogrammed circles, Woolman has taken on iconic status, a few passages from his *Journal* defining his image. Two new books on the 18th century Quaker from New Jersey offer both “camps” opportunity to make Woolman a greater resource in personal spiritual growth and in addressing pressing needs in the world.

Michael Birkel, a professor of religion at Earlham College, puts his extensive academic training in Christian history and a rich interior life influenced by Woolman to excellent use in this deep yet very readable book. By the author’s own description, *A Near Sympathy* is an invitation to a conversation with Woolman on the inner life.

Using Woolman as a model for integrating the inward and outward life, Birkel invites the reader into an intimate relationship with the Quaker “saint” in reading scripture, experiencing worship, entering into the suffering and redemption of the world, nurturing empathy for others, and engaging the world out of the humility of “pure wisdom.” Birkel hopes others will find in Woolman a faithful companion in finding hope for chaotic times; and he succeeds.

With Woolman by our side, love for the world becomes a real possibility; scripture becomes a “mother tongue,” giving richness and authority to our observation of spiritual realities; Christ’s passion and cross become a way to enter into the world of the oppressed.

Each chapter of the book has its own treasures. Chapter 1, “Integrity and Love,” draws the reader into Woolman’s world of exercising imagination. Chapter 2, “Worship,” opens his understanding of the biblical basis for silence and offers keen insights into the positive nature of Quaker sacramental understanding. Chapter 3, “Scripture,” describes Woolman’s affinity with the prophet Jeremiah. Chapter 4, “Suffering and Redemption,” makes the central mystery of Christianity — the cross — accessible. Chapter 5, “Nurturing Empathy,” gives an illuminating dissection of the fascinating last sea voyage of Woolman. Chapter 6, “Engaging the World: Practical

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Considerations,” outlines practicalities for social change and conflict resolution. The book ends with a ringing endorsement of Woolman’s currency and a helpful group discussion guide.

Of these, I found the work on worship and scripture to be especially helpful. Working with college-age Friends as I do, I often encounter stiff resistance to corporate worship and the Bible. Many young Friends exited the doors of their meetinghouses at the beginning of adolescent rebellion and have not looked back. Many have never taken up the Bible to abandon it!

Birkel’s description of the sacramental nature of Quaker worship and the importance of corporate empathy and discernment resonates with the interests of young Quakers, for whom one of the valued Quaker distinctives is the non-use of outward forms of baptism and communion and one of the cherished testimonies is that of community.

His articulation that, “To read scriptures is to look in a mirror and find one’s own inner life reflected in the lives of spiritual forebears” can resonate with young people’s intense introspection. The focus on Woolman’s “companionship” with Jeremiah and identity with much of the prophetic imagination will also speak to a generation enamored of the social prophets of bygone days, holding up a vision of the possibility of appropriating prophetic companions ourselves.

Birkel has a singular gift for weaving together excellent scholarship, crisp writing, good humor, and spiritual authenticity in making the sometimes-inaccessible Woolman an inviting and welcome companion.

NOTES

1. Michael Birkel, *A Near Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Wisdom of John Woolman*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2003. 123 pages. \$15.00