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A REVIEW OF *A NEAR SYMPATHY*, #2

T. CANBY JONES

Michael Birkel's study and interpretation of the life, convictions, and unquenchable concerns of eighteenth century Friend, John Woolman of Mount Holly, New Jersey is an inspiration and delight.

In six perceptive chapters Birkel examines Woolman's life of integrity and love, his experiences of worship, his interiorization of Scripture, his grasp of suffering and redemption, his living out a "nurturing empathy," and his engagement with slave-holders and the world.

Woolman could never separate his inward life of love and devotion to God from his fervent activities to remove oppression and to create a society of peace and justice in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina and Britain.

George Fox was widely known for his knowledge and use of Scripture. Woolman was equally steeped in the Bible. The prophet Jeremiah was a close and present friend to Woolman, just as he is to this present writer. Worship and bearing the cross were inescapable and life giving necessities to Woolman. His cultivating a "near sympathy" for all oppressed persons and for their oppressors was key to his remarkable life and mission to the world.

I propose to share some quotations from Woolman and from Michael Birkel to convey something of the powerful message and witness of John Woolman.

Woolman says: "For God's love is universal, so where the mind is sufficiently influenced by it, it begets a likeness of itself and the heart is enlarged towards all." Birkel comments: "For John Woolman, this love that God begets in the heart is none other than the love of Christ, which produces a willingness to suffer redemptively for the sake of others." (6)

Woolman continues: "It is with Reverence that I acknowledge the Mercies of our Heavenly Father, who, in Infinite Love...wrought a Belief in me, that through Obedience a State of inward Purity may be known in this Life; in which we may love Mankind in the same Love with which our Redeemer loveth us, and therein learn Resignation to endure Hardships, for the real good of others." (ibid.)

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In his providence and pure wisdom “God has fixed the boundaries of labor so that people [do] not work too much or make others work too much on their behalf...Wisdom sets boundaries to all our wants.” (12)

Since, “The Creator of the earth is the owner of it,” and because God “is kind and merciful, ...while we live answerable to the design of our creation, [we] are so far entitled to a convenient subsistence that no [one] may justly deprive us of it.” Such responsible behavior will result in social harmony. (13)

Birkel enjoys pointing to the fact that Woolman’s unusual “notion of moderate labor” is contrary to the “Protestant work ethic” which believes that labor and work are drudgery to be avoided or neglected if possible. For Woolman labor was a beneficent part of the design of creation to be rejoiced in. (13)

Woolman, according to Birkel, defines oppression as the “weight of missapplied power.” “And here oppression carried on with worldly policy and order, clothes itself in the name of justice and becomes like seed of discord in the soil; and...so the seeds of war swell and sprout and grow and become strong, till much fruits are ripened.” (16)

The desire for wealth and “reputation” is corrupt and the fruit of greed. But an exercise of charitable imagination “opens the way to perceiving how those who bear the burden of injustice feel.” Woolman calls this use of the perceptive imagination “the pure witness.” (20)

In Birkel’s second chapter, “Worship,” Woolman says that in the silence “the soul feeds on that which is Divine.” The worshipper “partakes of the table of the Lord,” and experiences “the real presence of Christ, the living bread.” (30) Also, in such worship the participant experiences “pure inward prayer” which “ariseth up before the throne of God and the Lamb.” (31) Of baptism Woolman testifies that baptism into Christ Jesus means baptism into his death. It also means being gathered into one body and one Spirit. (33) Through it we also enter into Christ’s sufferings: “Sorrow and heaviness is often experienced, & thus in some measure is filled up that which remains of the afflictions of Christ.” (35)

Chapter three deals with Woolman’s dependence on and use of Scripture. Birkel says of him, “He spoke Bible as his mother tongue, with fluency and subtlety.” (39) “His spiritual experiences shaped his reading of the Bible, and the Bible shaped his understanding of his experiences. He did not simply read the scriptures; he lived them.” “He

found a particular closeness to the prophets....They served as models of inward purity....They called out for justice and righteousness and championed the cause of the poor and oppressed.” (43)

Woolman felt a special affinity for the prophet Jeremiah, who throughout his life cried out against Judah’s betrayal of God’s covenant, and who suffered much as a result. When it came to slavery, the haughtiness of the rich, and the oppression of the poor, Woolman emulated his “friend” Jeremiah (47) in “gently” condemning them. Woolman applied one of my favorite scriptures from Jeremiah to his own situation. “Is not my word,” Jeremiah 23:29 says, “like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” Woolman applies this passage to his own condition: “I was humbled before him, and at length the Word which is as a fire and hammer broke and dissolved my rebellious heart.”

“Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other biblical prophets were often called by God to ‘go as signs’ of God’s judgment to come. Isaiah went “naked” in the streets; Jeremiah wore an ox yoke. In like manner because they were the products of slave labor, Woolman refused to wear dyed clothing, drink from silver vessels, eat sugar, or imbibe rum because they were all the fruits of slave labor. As a young man Woolman loved to ride a spirited horse, but he spent his last years in ministry traveling by foot and sailed to England in the steerage of the ship in order to experience in his own person the oppression of slaves and the hardships of sailors.” (52-53)

Birkel makes this very perceptive comment: “Reading the biblical prophets in the company of John Woolman opens a new way to understand the prophets. We can read them in *his* spirit. They can become our friends and can offer us comfort and challenge,” just as they did to John Woolman. (55-56)

One of the key passages in all of John Woolman’s *Journal* tells of an attack of pleurisy he suffered in about 1769 or 1770. He says:

I was brought so near to the gates of death that I forgot my name. Being then desirous to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy colour, between the south and the east, and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be and live, and that I was mixed in with them and henceforth might not consider myself as distinct or separate being. In this state I remained several hours. I then heard a soft melodious voice, more pure and harmonious than any voice I had

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heard with my ears before, and I believed it was the voice of an angel who spake to other angels. The words were, 'John Woolman is dead.' I soon remembered that I once was John Woolman, and being assured that I was alive in the body, I greatly wondered what the heavenly voice could mean. I believed beyond doubting that it was the voice of an holy angel, but yet it was a mystery to me....In the morning my dear wife and some others coming to my bedside, I asked them if they knew who I was, and they telling me I was John Woolman, thought I was only light-headed....My tongue was often so dry that I could not speak till I had moved it about and gathered some moisture...at length I felt divine power prepare my mouth that I could speak, and then I said 'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ liveth in me, and the Life I know live in the flesh is by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' [Gal. 2:20]. Then the mystery was opened, and I perceived here was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented and that the language *John Woolman is dead* meant no more than the death of my own will. (58-59)

For this interpreter this is the greatest vision and passage in John Woolman's *Journal*. In 1942, just after graduating from Haverford College, I had been appointed by the Five Years Meeting of Friends to travel in ministry among Young Friends. At one of their gatherings at William Penn College in Oskaloosa, Iowa, I became suddenly ill. I was put to bed in isolation but improved in a few days. I was then permitted to travel by train to Media, Pennsylvania near Philadelphia where my parents were then living. Put to bed to recover my strength, I began to read both Janet Whitney's biography, *John Woolman*, and *The Journal of John Woolman* itself.

When I read the passage just quoted about John Woolman's bout with pleurisy, in which the words "John Woolman is dead" meant not that he was dead in his body but that he was "crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life I live is by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me," I was transfixed, transported and transformed! In a matter of hours my illness and my depression about being ill were lifted, and I was well enough to proceed to New Market, Ontario and to visit the Canadian Young Friends gathering there. In my rejoicing over my recovery I am inclined to exaggerate and describe the experience by saying, "John Woolman got me out of a sick bed!"

Michael Birkel sees three results in these experiences of the cross in Woolman's life. The first result is obvious from what we have just been discussing—*the death of his own will*. This means the replacement of John Woolman's will by that of our beloved Lord. A second result of suffering the cross in Woolman's experience was "suffering with the Seed of Christ that was suppressed in slaveholders." "Finally, the cross meant to enter freely into the suffering of oppressing human beings." (59)

Woolman calls us "to dwell deep [to] understand the spirits of people," for "there is a 'witness' in others (the Seed) that one can reach. Manifesting a 'spirit of true charity' is more likely to reach this witness when confronting an oppressor. John Woolman therefore wrote that Friends must be 'kindly affectioned' toward slave-keeping Friends." (62)

As a further experience of the cross, Woolman went on to make sure that he knew experientially the sufferings of slaves, forced laborers, Indians and anyone else who was downtrodden in society. He expresses it: "Desires were now renewed in me to embrace every opportunity of being inwardly acquainted with the hardships and difficulties of my fellow creatures and to labor in love for the spreading of pure universal righteousness in the earth." (65)

Birkel continues: "When he journeyed on the dusty colonial roads during the Maryland summer heat and humidity to visit slaveholders, he traveled on foot so that he 'might have a more lively feeling of the condition of the oppressed slaves.'" Woolman saw his labors as "efforts to fill up that which is behind the afflictions of Christ." (65)

Such vicarious bearing of the cross on behalf of others, says Birkel, means we "partake of something holy, something with cosmic dimensions. To bear the cross in this way is at once painful and joyful. The suffering is intense, but we do not bear it alone. We are suffered through. The power of Christ within us bears us up." (66)

Michael Birkel presents his main insight into John Woolman in his Chapter Five, "Nurturing Empathy." He discusses again what Woolman means by "death of the will." This does not mean "spiritual suicide," but "a letting go of compulsive behavior that results from living our lives centered on fear rather than love. He means a release from the illusion that an incessant drive for power, prestige and wealth affords us any final control over our destinies. For him, the death of the will is followed by resurrection into new and abundant life." (72)

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Woolman expresses it: “No man can see God and live [Exodus 35:20]. This was spoken by the Almighty to Moses the prophet and opened by our blessed Redeemer. As death comes to our own wills and a new life is formed in us, the heart is purified and prepared to understand clearly. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.’ [Matt. 5:8] In purity of heart the mind is divinely opened to behold the nature of universal righteousness, or the righteousness of the Father.” [John 6:46]

Woolman continues, “And as long as this natural will remains unsubjected, so long there remains an obstruction against the clearness of divine light operating in us; but when we love God with all our heart and all our strength [Luke 10:27], then in this we love our neighbor as ourselves, and a tenderness of heart is felt toward all people....‘Who is my neighbor?’ See this question answered by our Saviour [Luke 10:29-37]. In this love we can say that Jesus is the Lord [Philippians 2:11].” (78-9)

Woolman expressed his “near sympathy” toward the prophets of the Bible, the martyrs of Christian history, the Indians he visited at Wyalusing, and “with the Negroes in all their afflictions and miseries.” He identified “the slaves of African descent as members of his [own] family.” (81-84)

In chapter six, “Engaging the World,” Michael Birkel reminds us that Woolman counsels us to keep our eyes on the prize, namely on divine love and divine Wisdom. Woolman expresses it: “Wisdom leads people into Lowliness of Mind, in which they learn Resignation to the Divine Will, and contentment in suffering for his Cause...” (86-87)

Again Woolman elders the wealthy: “Did such who have the care of great estates attend with singleness of heart to this Heavenly Instructor, which so opens and enlarges the mind that men love their neighbors as themselves, they would have wisdom given them to manage without finding occasion... to make it necessary for others to labour too hard.” (89)

Birkel gives us helpful advice in the spirit of John Woolman on dealing with our own conflicts. He suggests: “1) Do not pretend that the conflict is not there.” “2) Value Real Community.” “3) Keep your eye single to universal righteousness.” “4) Move beyond merely blaming others.” “5) Strive to reach the pure witness in others.” (95-105)

A final quotation from John Woolman: “O how precious is the Spirit of peace! How desirable that state in which people feel their

hearts humbly resigned to the Lord, and live under labour of mind to do his will on Earth as it is done in heaven. Where...true love so seasons their proceedings that the pure witness is reached....” (104)

A final word from Michael Birkel: “In the experience of John Woolman, righteousness and love are inseparable. Justice and righteousness are what love of God and neighbor look like. They are the shape that love takes when it is lived out.” (105)

A final word from this reviewer: a favorite sentence of mine from Psalm 23 was incarnate in dear John Woolman: “Lead me in the Paths of righteousness for thy name’s sake!”

