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A REVIEW OF *SEEKERS FOUND*,¹ #1

BY T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

As part of the monumental Rowntree series of books on Quaker history, Rufus Jones wrote two introductory volumes: *Studies in Mystical Religion*² and *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th & 17th Centuries*.³ In these volumes, he backed up his argument that Quakerism was a mystical movement by describing the careers of a series of mystics through Christian history, whom he saw as forerunners of the early Quakers.

Eventually, other Quaker historians and theologians questioned Rufus Jones' interpretation of Quakerism. Some of them have followed Jones's strategy of tracing the ancestry of the Quakers through a series of forerunners who exemplified their own understandings of the essence of Quakerism. Hugh Barbour has emphasized that "historically and theologically, Friends are Protestants."⁴ To buttress this view, he began his book, *The Quakers in Puritan England*, with a chapter on "The Puritan Setting of Quakerism."⁵ Maurice Creasey argued that Quakers were powerful exemplars of "radical Christianity and Christian radicalism": that early Quakerism was "a bold, powerful and creative embodiment of that same vision: which had emerged in the 'Radical Reformation' in 16th-century Europe," in "three major divisions", the Anabaptist, the Spiritualist and the Rationalist."⁶

In *Seekers Found*, Douglas Gwyn supports his alternative interpretation of Quakerism, which he had spelled out powerfully in *Apocalypse of the Word* and *The Covenant Crucified*,⁸ by picturing early Quakerism as the culmination and transformation of the multifaceted Seeker movement that had spread through England in the 1640s and early 1650s. In chapters 2 through 7 of *Seekers Found* he traces the path of those whom he believes were the genuine forerunners of Quakerism. From Sebastian Franck and Caspar Schwenckfeld (representatives of the Spiritualist wing of the 16th-century Radical Reformation), this path winds its way through such persons and groups as Seekers John Saltmarsh and William Erbury, William Walwyn and the Levellers, Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, and pioneering women Seekers (Anna Trapnel and Sarah Jones), with an intriguing side path to the Ranters.

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I find these chapters to be the strongest, most captivating part of the book. I am impressed by the number of concrete examples of key Quaker ideas and practices which Douglas Gwyn turns up in the writings of these persons. In the writings of Saltmarsh, “a clear principle of Christian withdrawal from warfare was emerging.” (p. 107) Seeker Robert Westfield wrote in 1647 that “the manifestation of Christ is ‘that light which lighteneth every man.’” (p. 113) In the writings of Saltmarsh, R. Wilkinson, and other army Spiritualists, “We can hear many key points of future Quaker preaching and practice already in place in 1648: Christ as a heavenly prophet...; the universal light of Christ within;... ‘gospel order’ as Christ’s direct government among the faithful.” (p. 115) William Erbury “thrived on silent prayer among earnest believers” (p. 120) and advocated “worshipping in penitent silence.” (p. 121) Sarah Jones emphasized “that truly gathered congregations exercise the power of Christ in their midst.” (p. 205)

Doug Gwyn’s listing of proto-Quaker ideas in the writings of Gerrard Winstanley is remarkable: “children of light” (p. 140); rejection of violence in the struggle for justice (pp. 140-141); a “great Battell” and “Lamb’s War” language of the Book of Revelation. (pp. 143, 144, 146) Interestingly, Gwyn has uncovered an addition to the teasing bits of evidence that Winstanley may have eventually become a Quaker: a 1654 letter to Margaret Fell in which Edward Burrough wrote from London: “Winstandley...hath been with us.” (pp. 150, 247)

Doug Gwyn offers a striking reinterpretation of the significance of the Ranters. He notes that the mid- to late-1640s were in England a time of “queasiness,...spiritual vertigo,...disorientation” (p. 158), “a period when an entire nation was drunkenly lurching.” (p. 159) Ranterism was the most overt expression of this mood. “The real significance of Ranterism” was that it was “the key dialectical...eclipse, between the failed hopes of Seekers, Levellers, and Diggers in the 1640s and the tougher Quaker resurgence of the 1650s.” (p. 185)

In chapter 9, on the careers of Isaac and Mary Penington, Douglas Gwyn brilliantly fleshes out the way in which Quakerism marked the culmination and transformation of the Seeker movement. He examines the rich storehouse of Isaac Penington’s writings from various stages of his career as a Seeker, taking themes from these and showing how they reappeared in his later Quaker writings. One of these themes is the biblical metaphor of the seed. In discussing a 1650 theological writing by Isaac Penington, Gwyn notes: “Penington had used the metaphor of the seed all along. But now this

figure begins to assume a special importance. He writes of ‘the two Principles, Seeds, or Creations’...The second...grows steadily to perfection. We recognize here Paul’s imagery in 1 Corinthians 15:35-50 of...differing seeds....[This] will become one of the great themes of Penington’s Quaker writings.” (p. 278) Indeed, Gwyn does spell out several instances of Isaac Penington’s use of the metaphor of the seed in his Quaker writings.

But Douglas Gwyn runs into one difficulty here, which he might have avoided if he had noted a distinction which I made several years ago, when I examined the use of biblical metaphors in the writings of early Friends. The distinction is between the Seed as a *botanical* metaphor, as in Jesus’ parables of the mustard seed and the seed growing silently, and in 1 Corinthians 15—and the Seed “as a *genealogical* metaphor: Christ is the ‘seed of the woman’ (compare Gen. 3:15 *KJV*) or the ‘seed of Abraham’ (Heb. 2:16 *KJV*).”

Gwyn notes that Isaac Penington’s final conversion to Quakerism took place at a meeting in the home of John Crook in 1658: “It was apparently [George] Fox’s preaching that thrust Isaac over the precipice....In his *Journal*, Fox summarizes the main points of his sermon at that meeting. The seed, the promise of God sown in all souls, was a major theme. Something in Fox’s evocative language...spoke to Penington’s condition.” (p. 286 and footnote 55, p. 297) Gwyn implies here that Fox was using the word “seed” as a botanical metaphor. In the summary of Fox’s sermon, cited by Gwyn, Fox wrote: “The promise of God...was made to the Seed, not to seeds, as many, but to one, which Seed was Christ.”¹⁰ Fox was clearly citing Galatians 3:16 (*KJV*): “To Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” He was obviously here using “seed” as a genealogical metaphor.

I suspect that it was Isaac Penington who first introduced “seed” as a botanical metaphor into Quaker language; he certainly developed this theme powerfully in his own Quaker writings. As Gwyn notes, Penington was already using the word in this sense at least as early as 1650. Even though he did also use the term as a genealogical metaphor, I wonder whether Fox’s use of the term in that sense would have been as pivotal for him as Douglas Gwyn suggests.

I was disappointed by the opening and closing portions of *Seekers Found*. In the Introduction and first two chapters, Gwyn used a typol-

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ogy developed by political scientist Michael Oakeshott, in an effort to relate present-day movements of religious seeking to Seeker movements of the 16th (and 17th?) centuries. In chapter 11 and the conclusion, Gwyn develops a structure of interpretation as a way of interrelating early Quakerism, early Christianity (in particular, the Gospel and Letters of John), and potential ways forward for dialog among Friends today.

According to Gwyn, Oakeshott's typology posits "two fundamental modes of human association, *civil* association and *enterprise* association." (p. 4) Gwyn suggests that an example today of "associations strongly in the enterprise mode" is "the neo-evangelical movement." (p. 36) In contrast, "seeking that moves strongly in the civil mode of association" is exemplified by "religiously 'liberal' associations...motivated by concerns for ecumenical, interfaith, or multicultural dialogue." In the context of the chapter I presume this would include those movements often described as "New Age." Turning to the 16th century, Gwyn argues that Caspar "Schwenckfeld's *Stillstand* exhibits the enterprise mode of seeking" and that "in [Sebastian] Franck's invisible church we find the civil mode to be primary." (p. 61)

To argue that Schwenckfeld has more in common with modern neo-evangelicalism and that Franck has more in common with religious liberalism and presumably the New Age movement, than Schwenckfeld and Franck have in common with each other, seems to me to offer little insight into the dynamics of these two leaders and their movements. In short, this typology does not appear to me to be a very fruitful or powerful tool for analyzing these movements.

The fact that I do not find any further reference to civil and enterprise modes of association, as Gwyn moves on to his account of 17th-century Seeker movements in England, leaves me wondering what was significantly gained by introducing this typology in the first place.

In chapter 11 and the conclusion, Douglas Gwyn proposes "that the emerging Quaker truth-stance was constituted by four distinct aspects, or 'moments,' and that these can be related to four standard philosophical accounts of truth." (p. 377) He goes on to argue that the same four "moments of truth" can be found in the Gospel and Letters of John, and that this same structure of interpretation for truth-seeking in these two periods of history can be used to outline an appropriate pathway for seeking the truth today.

The four theories of truth are: (1) “the *correspondence theory* [of truth]. One embraces only those beliefs that can be verified by the corresponding facts of experience.” (p. 336); (2) “the *coherence theory* of truth. That is, all truths attain their validity within a holistic framework. A belief is verified by being consistent or harmonious with a larger system of beliefs.” (p. 337); (3) “the...*operationalist* theory of truth....Here the *methods* of verification are emphasized: there is an appropriate set of procedures to verify any given truth-claim.” (p. 337); and (4) the *pragmatist* theory of truth, according to which “true statements are those which lead to desirable results.” (p. 338)

Gwyn has aptly summarized the coherence and pragmatist theories of truth, but not the correspondence theory. The correspondence theory actually affirms that “a belief (statement...) is true provided there exists a fact corresponding to it.”¹¹ There are three main theories of *knowledge* that account for the primary way in which this correspondence between a statement and fact can be discovered: (1) Empiricism: knowledge is verified through sense experience; (2) the Rationalism of Plato or Descartes: knowledge is ascertained through the exercise of reason; and (3) Intuitionism: knowledge is gained through intuitive insight. What Gwyn calls the correspondence theory is actually a combination of the correspondence theory of truth and the empiricist theory of knowledge; in applying this view to early Quakerism, he emphasizes the “experience” aspect of this combination.

Since I was not familiar with the “operationalist theory of truth,” I checked out the two primary sources cited by Gwyn for his philosophical accounts of truth (p. 407, footnote 1). Neither of these reference works mentioned “operationalist theory of truth;” the closest I could find was “Operationalism...the view that the meaning of a term is simply the set of operations that must be performed in order to apply the term in a given instance.”¹² Operationalism is not a theory of truth but “a program in philosophy of science”¹³ or, at best, a theory of *meaning*, i.e., what does a term or a statement *mean*?

What we have, then, is not a symmetrical network of four competing philosophies of truth, rendered complementary as four “moments of truth;” but two theories of truth, a theory of meaning, and an amalgam of a theory of truth with a theory of knowledge.

Nor is Douglas Gwyn consistent in his attempts to apply this four-part structure. In early Quakerism, “the first and founding moment was the powerful catharsis in which seeking individuals were ‘con-

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vinced of the truth'....This first moment of truth...was one of *correspondence* between propositional belief and lived experience." (pp. 377-78) In the second moment of truth, Quakers posed a "counter-orthodoxy" against Puritan orthodoxy: "Early Quaker preaching thus began establishing its *coherence* from the start." (p. 378) "The third 'moment' of truth was constituted by the novel methods of the movement" in worship, church government, and codes of behavior: "This strong 'process' aspect of Quaker truth has affinity with *operationalist* philosophical theories." (p. 379) In the fourth moment of truth, "Friends had to deal with concrete problems to be solved, questions to be answered, and strategies to be devised....Truth's fourth moment is...rightly called *pragmatic*." (p. 380)

In the Johannine literature, in contrast, in John 1:1-18, "creation, God's formation of a *coherent* universe, constitutes the first moment of truth." (p. 385) "This...leads to the second moment of truth, the incarnation of the Word/light in the person of Jesus.... This second moment of truth is *operational*: that is, the incarnation of the Word is aimed to communicate God's love to the world through the words, actions, and miraculous signs of Jesus, the Christ." (p. 386) The third moment is expressed in John 5:37-38: "Here the witness of inner certainty, which should correspond to the witnesses already cited, is evoked." (p. 389) "The letters of John...elucidate the community of faith as the fourth moment of truth.... John states the pragmatic orientation of faith succinctly" in 1 John 2:3-5: "Note the equation here between truth, love, and obedience to Christ's commandments." (p. 394)

Douglas Gwyn proposes that "the four 'moments of truth' we have found in the Gospel of John and the formation of the early Quaker movement offer an appropriate structure for...renewed dialogue" (p. 399); but I believe that I have demonstrated that these four moments play quite divergent roles in his accounts of the Quaker and the Johannine movements. In short, I do not believe that Douglas Gwyn has developed a consistent or coherently formed structure of interpretation to enable us to relate those time periods to our own. He related early Quakerism to the issues of our day far better in his incisive prophetic tract for the times: *Unmasking the Idols*.

NOTES

1. Douglas Gwyn, *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2000. Preface + 410 pp. + 10 pp. of index. ISBN 0-87574-960-7. \$20.00.

2. Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1909).
3. Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th & 17th Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1914).
4. Hugh S. Barbour, "Protestant Quakerism," *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. XI, no. 2 (Autumn 1969), p. 2.
5. Hugh S. Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), pp 1-32.
6. Maurice A. Creasey, "Radical Christianity and Christian Radicalism: A Quaker Comment" (paper read at the London Society for the Study of Religion, 13 November 1973), pp. 10, 7.
7. Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986).
8. Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995).
9. T. Vail Palmer, Jr., "Early Friends and the Bible: Some Observations," *Quaker Religious Thought*, No. 80 (March 1993), p. 53.
10. *The Journal of George Fox*, a Revised Edition by John L. Nickalls (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1952), p. 339.
11. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), p. 930.
12. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Vol. 5, p. 240.
13. *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.