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## A REVIEW OF *SEEKERS FOUND*, #2

BY STEPHANIE A. FORD

Douglas Gwyn poses an important query at the beginning of his thorough overview of Protestant Seekers of another era, chiefly Seekers whose searching sparked the fires of early Quakerism, when he asks, “What can we learn from them?” Indeed, Gwyn notes, we, particularly North American Protestants,<sup>1</sup> are also in a period of spiritual seeking, sparked originally by the social and political upheavals of the 60s and one still underway; and we would do well to reflect on previous periods of religious ferment. As our history teachers are wont to remind us, we are never the first to be experiencing what we are experiencing; there is much we can learn from the past. Moreover, the stakes of our quest have been magnified in today’s global economy. In an increasingly interfaith context, mainline Protestants—including Quakers—are searching for effective spiritual responses to this fragmented cultural exigency. In the Christian spirituality classes I teach at a Quaker seminary, I am continually aware of a “seeker” identity among my students. Many of them have been on an “errand” or on a quest that has taken them through several denominations, as well as twelve-step groups and other faith traditions. Bringing Gwyn’s question home, I am stretched to ask: What, then, can we at the Earlham School of Religion learn from these early Seekers, authors of the Quaker tradition, to whom we have come for spiritual nourishment?

In *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience*, Gwyn offers the thesis that if we would engage in self-reflection and dialogue—applying the four “moments” of truth that emerged among early Friends, we might better recognize the connections of others to their faith traditions as well as be more faithful in our own quest for truth. Gwyn suggests that this four-part structure “could prove useful for dialogue as we struggle to reclaim civility in religious life and to work across our differences toward a more peaceful and just society.” (p. 15)

Using a modern philosophical lens, Gwyn identifies these four “moments” as they coalesced in the early Friends movement. First, there was the *correspondence* between their lived faith and espoused beliefs. Gwyn writes, “This insistence upon a lived experience of Christian beliefs (what Fox called ‘possession’ and not mere ‘profession’ of truth) was an important breakthrough [in] the English Reformation.” (p. 378)

Second was the *coherence*, or consistency, among Quakers with Christian orthodoxy, not the classic Puritan externally-based variety, but an epistemology founded upon the light within, understood as the “direct teaching of Christ.” An example can be seen in the case of women’s voice in the Quaker movement. By shifting their framework to a sense of coherence with the inner voice of the Spirit, early Friends legitimized women’s spiritual authority in a way that their Puritan cousins did not.

The third moment that Gwyn identifies is that of Quaker “process” (or *operational*), which is represented in “Spirit-led vocal ministry,” communal approaches to discernment, efforts towards egalitarian relationships, and non-violence. It is what Fox identified as “gospel order.” Finally, the fourth moment of truth is best identified as *pragmatism*, the idea that truth, if it is truth, leads to actions that have desirable results. In case of Friends, these “desirable results” are necessarily qualified ethically.

However, while Gwyn expresses the hope that readers will discover these same four predications towards truth that early Seekers merged in the Quaker vision, his overall argument is much more complex—bringing cultural, historical, and economic analyses to bear. Gwyn actually begins the book by exploring questions about the contemporary climate. Applying the research of Wade Clark Roof and others, Gwyn makes a convincing case for two trajectories of postmodern seeking. The one is typically mystical, personal, and syncretistic; the other tries to recover the religious foundations of a pre-sixties innocence. Yet, this second type of seeker, Gwyn notes, is very different from his or her parents; his or her quest is more “individualistic and experiential.” (p. 29)

Then, Gwyn turns to what I found most effective and relevant in his writing: a sequential recovery of compelling, well-written spiritual biographies paired around particular historical themes. These begin in Chapter 2 and comprise much of the book. Gwyn’s first subject is the continental Radical Reformer Caspar Schwenckfeld, whom he deems as the prototypical “Seeker.” The German Schwenckfeld “was the first to proclaim the bankruptcy of the entire Protestant project.” (p. 11) Gwyn moves next to the English Reformation—revealing the fascinating plot of the Seeker trajectory, which eventually synthesized in an inward apocalyptic “atonement” among early Friends. Gwyn sets the scene: the rise of Puritanism, civil war, and the radicalizing efforts of Separatists, Independents, and Baptists. Soon, he introduces the cast of characters: Seekers like the earnest and idealistic John Saltmarsh, the despairing Ranter Joseph Salmon, and the devout, quietistic Sarah Hones. Next,

Gwyn outlines the Quaker Apocalypse, focused on the scrupulous and charismatic George Fox, and follows with a careful study of the deeply-considered conversion of well-to-do Isaac and Mary Penington. Two remaining chapters explore the complexities of the Quaker vision as it settled into uneven maturity.

However, the question that first galvanizes Gwyn's thesis—what can we learn from these early Seekers—is never really explicitly addressed again until the conclusion. It is there that Gwyn reflects on the ways that the early Friends' dynamic conversation with these four “moments” of truth really set the early Quaker *atonement* drama apart. Friends saw atonement as reconciliation through Christ that “begins inwardly with radical surrender to God.” (p. 383) After reaching peace with God within, the Seeker would find external differences less threatening; thus, “[atonement] becomes interpersonal and social...extending divine love to those who would otherwise be excluded.” Yet, Gwyn does not mean to suggest that this idealistic path is easy, for it is path where the “cross is taken up within,” a deepening conversion that “often requires initiatives of personal risk and voluntary sacrifice.” (p. 383) Gwyn's insightful history of these dynamic, risk-taking early Friends is persuasive and meaning-filled. Nevertheless, I find that Gwyn's final move toward a dialogue between seekers today and early Friends to be less convincing.

Seventeen years ago, Gwyn would have convinced me. Indeed, Gwyn's thesis accurately diagnosed my baby-boomer spiritual quest. In 1985, having been an errant wanderer in the wilderness and letting go of constrictive elements of my childhood faith, I returned to the haven of a progressive Baptist seminary in order to consciously “reconstruct” my shaky, but deeply spiritual, Protestant faith. I had reached a crisis of *coherence*; the externals of my faith no longer cohered with my internal pilgrimage. Thankfully, my quest was furthered in seminary; a deeper intellectual, moral, and spiritual coherence evolved during my studies. I also discovered “spiritual directors” among the Quaker spiritual writers that I read (like John Woolman, Douglas Steere, and Thomas Kelly). Pragmatically, I was persuaded to embrace a Quaker vision of social justice that begins with attentive waiting upon the Spirit.

However, today at ESR, many of the students I serve look very different from the rather homogeneous brand of Baptists I studied with. Across my desk are representatives from generation X, as well as baby boomers. My students include Quakers of various stripes, Methodists, Baptists, and Unitarian Universalists—as well as a few Pentecostals. However, such Protestant labeling is actually mislead-

ing; in fact, the spiritual journeys of many of these students are usually much more complicated.

Here are a few examples. There is John, 52, a sixties war-resister who had been reading Catholic mystical writings when he happened upon an unprogrammed meeting one Sunday.<sup>2</sup> He found many answers to his deepening spiritual hunger there but also began attending Catholic mass regularly; moreover, once a week, he meditated at the Dharma Center. He decided to study at a Quaker seminary in order to work on peace and justice issues in a spiritually rich environment.

From the Midwest, there is Joanne, who, at 25, remembers attending church only at Christmas when she was growing up, but when she attended a small religious college, she experienced a cataclysmic conversion; she started to study the Bible earnestly and decided to answer a call to ministry. She had no denominational affiliation until a friend suggested a Quaker seminary, and she has begun discerning membership with the Friends as an ESR student.

Then, there is Eileen, 41, raised in a nominally Catholic home, who reached “bottom” abusing alcohol and was convinced to attend to an AA meeting; her meandering journey through contemporary spiritualities has led her to our door. Her ideas are incredibly insightful, but she comes to the study of faith with little religious foundation.

To place these students in a trajectory of seeking that resembles the emergence of early Friends is perhaps possible—but would be, I believe, a misplaced emphasis. Indeed, I would recommend *Seekers Found* to a contemporary seeker, not for its thesis of correspondence between generations of seekers, though I readily acknowledge the particular, important early Friends religious ‘achievement.’ Rather, I would recommend Gwyn’s book to my students for its treasure trove of spiritual biographies, which are carefully historically contextualized, but are never tedious. The application of the “moments” of truth, as Gwyn has applied them to contemporary “groups of different truth stances” (p. 462-3) certainly works in principle—but I am not convinced it will enable seekers today to dialogue effectively at the wide-ranging intersections of experience, belief, and praxis. What the fragmentation of postmodernity means—for many—is that they have never encountered a tradition “whole,” or frankly, even in depth. In fact, the trajectory of the contemporary seeker may actually begin with the fourth “moment” of truth in Gwyn’s schema, which is pragmatism; he or she might find a spiritual practice in order to

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keep the intention to be drug-free. Or, a college-age seeker with no religious background may decide to attend a local meeting after studying Lucretia Mott and the abolition movement in a history class—“hooked” by the Quaker process leading to social action (Gwyn’s third moment of truth).

The reality is that we can no longer readily apply trajectories based on the relative homogeneity of Puritan England to a multi-cultural world, nor do we need to. For example, while the class conflicts of 17th Century England are indeed prevalent in our world today; they are today complicated by religious intolerance and misunderstandings that cross borders, languages, and politically dissimilar landscapes. The tragic terrorist acts of September 11th underscore the complexity of a global village based on inequity, where a paucity of resources are monopolized by a few and religious fundamentalism may be used as a vehicle for cultural, as well as class, violence. While I believe Gwyn’s application of the four-part structure to questions would be useful if enough seekers of different traditions had delved deeply into their own complex religious identities, I think such seeking is quite rare in contemporary culture. As a teacher of Christian Spirituality in a Protestant seminary, I am usually trying to help students who often have fragmented, wide-ranging religious identities to experience the riches of a Protestant, as well as historically Catholic, spiritual heritage. Indeed, there are Seekers in every generation to study, converse with, criticize, and admire; St. Francis of Assisi, for example, is one of my favorites.

This fall, I took a different tack in one of my classes. I assigned Philip Yancey’s recent book, *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*, to students in a course on spiritual direction. The text is a collection of short spiritual biographies of persons, several of them writers—only a few being classically Christian, who enabled Yancey to integrate a childhood Christian faith (that was birthed in a fundamentalist environment) with his baby-boomer-come-of-age-in-the-sixties world. Students have had a rich experience reading Yancey’s depictions of Gandhi, Frederick Buechner, and Annie Dillard in a way that mirrors my own experience reading Douglas Gwyn’s *Seekers Found*. I was enthralled by the fire, passion, and depth of lived faith experience of John Saltmarsh, Anna Trapnel, and the Peningtons. While their quests certainly fit the well-crafted argument that Gwyn makes about the experience of early Seekers, that coherence is not what kept

me engaged. Rather, it was the very unique, often dramatic, and complicated the spiritual formation of these remarkable individuals.

In fact, I have been persuaded by theologian James McClendon and his vision of biography as theology. McClendon points out that “[i]n or near the community there appear from time to time singular or striking lives, the lives of person who embody the convictions of the community, but in a new way.” This is what *Seekers Found* exemplifies. While reading Gwyn’s book, I inwardly meditated upon the striking integrity of George Fox and considered the insightful courage of Caspar Schwenckfeld against very challenging cultural exigencies. Reading their narratives was a powerful experience for me. I felt the far reach of our tradition’s most significant biography, Jesus Christ, and I left with much hope for the Church of our generation. To me, this is what gives the book its apocalyptic fire for contemporary seekers.

## NOTES

1. Gwyn does not seem to delineate North American Protestants as the contemporary context that he appeals to, but the references to Wade Clark Roof and Robert Bellah, as well as to the Vietnam War and to 60s counterculture, imply this context for his argument.
2. None of these names correspond with actual students; any similarity is purely fictitious. However, all the elements in each of these stories are representative.
3. James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 22.