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# OF CATS AND MUSLIMS: REFLECTIONS ON DAVID JOHNS' *QUAKERING THEOLOGY*

STEPHEN W. ANGELL

It is a delight to review David Johns' elegant book. David was my colleague for twelve years at the Earlham School of Religion, and he is a terrific colleague, a friend, a stimulating conversation partner, and a diligent and inspiring teacher and scholar. Here he has collected wide-ranging *Essays on Worship, Tradition and Christian Faith*, commenting on Shakespeare and C. S. Lewis; the martyrdom of Mary Dyer, and the sufferings of Americans after the collapse of the twin towers; from "sometimes you just gotta dance," to the knowledge of virtues to be gained from the practices of Christian parenting, and more. He does all of this with grace, creativity, writerly craft, fair-mindedness, depth of insight, verve, playfulness, erudition, and groundedness in Christian and Quaker traditions. This is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature of Quakerism.

These were written over many years, and some were previously published. I commented on some, when they were first written. Gathered together in one volume, they are fresh and important, as he has convincingly highlighted overarching and interweaving themes in his work.

In an important concluding chapter, Johns questions whether Quaker theologians should attempt to produce any new apology for Quakerism, as Robert Barclay's *Apology* is now 338 years old. He suggests that an apology is unnecessary. Quakerism is diverse enough, and, considering all of its various branches, fragmented enough, so that it would be difficult to come up with a defense of all varieties of it in a single work. Also, there is no one to write an apology to, no one to whom Quakers need to defend themselves. Barclay wrote with his former Presbyterian co-religionists in mind, but challenges to modern Quakerism are quite diverse, so that it is difficult to conceive to whom Quaker theologians would direct their defense.

He argues that Quaker theologians still have important tasks left. Quaker theologians must realize that they are part of a renewal

movement for the universal Christian church. Johns wants to boost the global Quaker and Christian churches. He would reconceive Quaker theology to make it less dualistic, and he would promote a Quaker contribution to the Christian doctrine of creation, including the arts.

Quaker theology should stake out a position that reorients itself toward present-day issues. Seventeenth century Quakers were neither ecumenical in their focus, nor were they favorable to the arts, but these are vital concerns for Friends now. Then Kenya, indeed all of Africa south of Ethiopia, was unknown to Quakers, but now most Quakers in the world live in Kenya, so concerns of Quakers in Kenya should carry weight in formulating Quaker theologies for the twenty-first century.

He calls his method “quakering theology,” the word “quaker” here used as a verb. He envisages his work as an “invitation to the denominations [i.e., not just Quakers] to think *through* their particular identities and *into* a more expansive and ecumenical space, one with sufficient room for the movement of the Spirit.”

That’s his larger project. How does Johns do at it? While he gives us a generous selection of his best work in this volume, what is presented is enough to demonstrate that he can make some very interesting explorations within his own parameters. But it is not necessarily enough to persuade the reader that she or he can “go and do likewise” when it comes to quakering theology.

One thing that would be helpful are guidelines as to how to quaker theology. One guideline that I would propose is an emphasis on the experiential, inspired by George Fox’s statement in his *Journal*, “When God doth work who shall let [prevent] it? And this I knew experimentally.”<sup>1</sup> The experiential dimension of faith is not unique to Quakerism — and it could serve to build ecumenical connections point — but it is characteristic enough of the Quaker approach to theology so that it could be stated as an expectation within the process of quakering theology.

It would also be true that if Quaker theologians set about quakering theology, they could be expected to arrive at different conclusions, even if working with the same texts, or the same theological questions. Many of my reactions to Johns’ work were at this “micro” level. While this is an unorthodox way of reviewing a book, I will take two problems that he presents in his book, and then show how I might

quaker theology, as a means of addressing those issues. In other words, I will to try to “re-quaker” some of Johns’ fine work.

## CAT-APHATIC THEOLOGY

In regard to Johns’ fascinating essay, “He’s Not a Tame Lion: Doing Theology with Lucy and Lewis,” he reflects on an important moment in cat-aphatic theology (pun intended), as presented in C. S. Lewis’ “Narnia Chronicles.” There it is implied that God is not a tame lion, but, instead, a wild lion who is good but not safe, who roars rather than meows, although he cannot roar when his mane is shorn.<sup>2</sup> I have spent little time in the vicinity of wild lions, and I have yet to hear one lion’s roar. But I know experimentally that God does roar sometimes, especially when God’s still, small voice is ignored.

I wonder what is the purpose of this portrayal of God as a lion, a wild lion. I suppose that the male lion’s impressive mane is a symbol of God’s glory, and that both the mane and the roar are meant to suggest God’s power. I am uneasy with kingly glory ascribed to God through such symbols as the male lion’s mane (although theologies of empire help to elucidate that God’s is an alternate monarchy, standing in stark contrast to the Roman and other empires). Also, we worship a God who condescended to be born into a poor family of Nazarenes, possibly in a stable during a temporary residence in Judea. God may be great and glorious, but God also takes on our lowliness.

God is often portrayed as a “mild mannered and clumsy God who has less complexity than a family cat.” (59) Some may protest that family cats are, in fact, rather complex creatures. I have shared my home with cats that might be described as “feral.” I could respond enthusiastically to the metaphor that God is a feral cat. Of course, by thus sacrificing size in my metaphor, I have chosen an animal that cannot unpredictably turn on me, kill me, and eat me up! A feral cat may be too safe for some theologians. But a feral cat is not safe at all for small creatures that are its natural prey.

One animal housemate had been found frozen to a windowsill on a frigid morning in Washington, D.C. After being pried off the windowsill and given the suitable name of Lazarus, he came to live in my home. An affectionate cat, he was glad to have a warm home, but he thought that canned cat food was unpalatable. So he sat motionless in the backyard, springing out to kill unwary squirrels to eat, then

hauling their carcasses into the kitchen for more leisurely dining, if I was not watchful. This I know observationally. I know how Lazarus ate, and that is something that the quasi-docetic Lewis did not inform us about Aslan.<sup>3</sup>

Johns is certainly correct that if God is like a feral cat, and presumably like a wild lion, God does not necessarily follow well-meaning human rules. Feral cats, and God, plot their own paths and set their own rules.

One might also object that cataphatic theology runs shallow, and a deeper apprehension of theology may be had through apophatic means. The demanding logic of apophatic theology suggests that God resembles nothing we can experience in this world, thus neither a tame nor a wild animal. John Greenleaf Whittier drew on apophatic theology for “The Meeting”: “And so I find it well to come/ For deeper rest to this still room,/ For here the habit of the soul/ Feels less the outer world’s control;/ The strength of mutual purpose pleads/ More earnestly our common needs;/ And from the silence multiplied/ By these still forms on either side,/ The world that time and sense have known/ Falls off and leaves us God alone.” In our covered worship, we are left without benefit of images garnered from a “world of time and sense.” We are left with God alone. Is this also what we know experimentally?

## ADDRESSING THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS: CAN A CHRISTIAN CENTER HOLD?

In “Whatever happened to *Primitive Christianity Revived?*” David Johns takes on a vexing issue for our time, how to address the startling range of theological diversity within the Religious Society of Friends. Johns stakes out a middle position, rejecting both relativism and absolute creedalism. He urges that Quakers see ourselves as a vital segment of the Church catholic, with our own charism (spiritual gifts) that should be placed at the service of the larger Christian community in the world.

Absolute creedalists often choose just one document from the seventeenth century — the very creedal-sounding Letter to the Governor of Barbados — and insist that the Letter, or some carefully excerpted portion of it, constitute the standard for sound Quaker doctrine in the 21st century (often alongside the late 19th century

Richmond Declaration of Faith). Johns' strategy to deal with this is to expand the documentary evidence under consideration. He focuses on William Penn's 1696 work, *Primitive Christianity Revived*, and George Fox's 1682 work, *Something in answer to all such who falsely say the Quakers are no Christians*.

This is a welcome move on his part, since both works have more theological substance than the thin Letter to the Governor of Barbados. Both are more representative of the tenor of seventeenth-century Quaker theology than the Barbados letter. Johns' conclusion that Quaker theology represents "convictional non-creedalism" is drawn with real strength.

On the liberal side, Johns opposes the "Fox as a conceptual/linguistic opportunist theory". In that regard, he cites Janet Scott's 1980 Swarthmore Lecture.<sup>4</sup> She dismissed the significance of Quakerism's Christian origins, because "Christian assumptions were unchallenged" in seventeenth-century English culture, and thus Quakers had "no alternative" to being Christians. Johns counterposes the simpler theory that Fox really was Christian.

What I find in the developing scholarship on seventeenth-century Quakers is more nuanced than the positions of either Johns or Scott. Seventeenth-century English Christianity came in many flavors. Many English then were convinced that Quakers were no Christians. As I have previously shown,<sup>5</sup> movement of Quakers toward more orthodox expressions of Christianity later in that century was occasioned in large part by peer pressure from non-Quaker contemporaries to become more orthodox.

Scott is wrong in certain details: there *were* alternatives to being Christian in the seventeenth-century world (at least one Muslim became Quaker, for instance<sup>6</sup>) and Christian assumptions of all sorts were highly contested, often by rival Christians, and sometimes by non-Christians such as Muslims. Johns' alternative, that Fox was simply a good Christian, does not provide a good picture of the situation either. All three of us favor Christian ecumenical and interfaith dialogues that renounce the hostility evinced by seventeenth-century Quakers toward their English Christian neighbors. But that does not render Quaker Christianity (labeled by John Punshon an "alternative" Christianity)<sup>7</sup> a comfortable fit, solely under the Christian umbrella.

Justin Meggitt, in his 2013 book, *Early Quakers and Islam*, and I, in a recent essay on Mary Fisher's involvement in interreligious

dialogue,<sup>8</sup> develop the position that early Quakers' apocalyptic theology ironically made them regard their Muslim and Jewish contemporaries more favorably than the apostate Christians in England. Meggitt writes:

In many ways the “Turks” [i.e., Muslims] were doing no more than demonstrating in their actions the veracity of the fundamental apocalyptic belief central to early Quaker faith. Early Friends were predisposed to potentially positive assessments of Muslim morality as their eschatology removed any particular preferential place for Christians, moving the locus of faith from a response to propositional knowledge of the Christian gospel to response to an experiential dispensation that they believed was available to all people.<sup>9</sup>

Meggitt concludes that seventeenth-century Quakers positioned themselves “as the ultimate cultural effrontery, in which apostate Christendom, and Islam, and indeed all outward religions, were in the same category, with none privileged in the face of the Quaker's apocalyptic gospel, nor any excluded. Indeed the parallels between Islam and Quakerism in this respect were not lost on contemporaries in this period.”<sup>10</sup> Are we now at a different place that obliges us, as Quakers, to place our ecumenical and interfaith work on different footings, or can we still see all religions equally as sister and brother religions to Quakerism?

I hold, along with Johns, that the present Christ is “guiding and directing our lives, and we can know and obey God's will.” I also hold that the openness and radical content of a Quaker theology centered on following Christ's Light does not always differentiate Quakers strongly from Jews and Muslims. Quakers have often felt challenged to relate our emphasis on Christ's Light as an eternal presence, with our conviction in a fully incarnational presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>11</sup> the latter conviction historically being a sticking point in Christian discussions with Jews and Muslims. But the very nature of Quaker theology, from our origins forward, has pointed toward ways to resolve this tension, through a radical openness that should be seen as distinct from present-day forms of religious relativism.

#### ENDNOTES

1 John L. Nickalls, ed., *Journal of George Fox* (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975), 11.

- 2 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1950), 74-76, 180, quoted in Johns, *Quakering Theology*, 59.
- 3 In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Aslan talks and fights, and the children eat, but I believe that nothing is said about what Aslan eats. I am suggesting, therefore, that Aslan cannot be considered fully incarnational (as compared to the children in the narrative), and hence Lewis' theology is quasi-docetic.
- 4 Janet Scott, *What Canst Thou Say? Towards a Quaker Theology* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1980).
- 5 Stephen W. Angell, "The Catechisms of George Fox," *Quaker Theology* 5:2 (Fall-Winter 2003): 90-107. <http://www.quaker.org/quest/issue-9-angell-01.htm>
- 6 Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21-49.
- 7 John Punshon, *Alternative Christianity* Pendle Hill Pamphlet 245 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1982).
- 8 Stephen W. Angell, "Preaching Truth and Listening for Truth: Early Quaker Mary Fisher and Prospects for Interreligious Dialogue," *Learning and Leading*, November 13, 2013. <http://esrquaker.blogspot.com/2013/11/preaching-truth-and-listening-for-truth.html>
- 9 Justin J. Meggitt, *Early Quakers and Islam: Slavery, Apocalyptic and Christian-Muslim Encounters in the Seventeenth Century* (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2013), 57.
- 10 Meggitt, 75.
- 11 See Rosemary Moore, *The Light in their Consciences: The early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2000), 108-109, 221-222.