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Review of Quakering Theology by David L. Johns

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REVIEW: *QUAKERING THEOLOGY* BY DAVID L. JOHNS

PAUL ANDERSON

It is a delight and a privilege to be included in the review of *Quakering Theology* by David Johns. David and I have worked together in organizing Quaker Theological Discussion Group meetings for the last twenty years or so, and several of the essays in this volume were first published in *Quaker Religious Thought* under my editorship. In a few cases, David and I both contributed essays on important themes in the same *QRT* issue, and I am pleased to continue the dialogue into the next phase of David's contribution—a book of gathered essays outlining his own distinctive approaches to doing theology from a Quaker perspective. While this book includes essays prepared for and delivered in a variety of disparate venues, they nonetheless cohere in an impressive whole; the reader is thereby well served in the publishing of this handsome volume by Ashgate Press. Quakers do indeed do theology, and this volume speaks meaningfully and well on that score.

As I reflect on the essays, I appreciate two things about the volume, and I have two questions. The first thing I appreciate is David Johns' approaching the subject of Quaker theology not as an outlining of Quaker convictions, although those are certainly present, but as an attempt to do theology in a Quaker way—hence, the “Quakering” of theology. Given that early Friends were skeptical of creedal approaches to belief, this approach goes some distance toward not only addressing a concern about the way theology has sometimes been used in religious settings, but also showing alternative ways forward. Interestingly, the opening content of George Fox's 1671 *Letter to the Governor of Barbados* follows very closely that of *The Apostles' Creed*, building further on biblical content and practical concerns. Thus, Friends have long-affirmed the essential elements of Christian theology, and Johns affirms such by citing two other classic passages from Penn and Fox.¹ What early Friends challenged was the confining of biblical truth to propositional tenets, divorced from reasoned reflection and human experience. They also opposed the leveraging of creedal markers of faithfulness, creating religious and

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societal groups of insiders and outsiders. The blessed fellowship of Christ might overlap with such designations, but it is never confined to, or fulfilled within, such measures. Such is the Quaker objection to credalism, not the holding of beliefs credally.

In sketching the Quakering of theology, David Johns does some interesting things. As an incarnational approach to theology, the first half of the book features several examples of experiential narratives. Mary Dyer is remembered as a Quaker saint, whose example becomes iconic and formative for the faithful.² The Edmunds of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Lewis's Narnia Series pose one set of examples to consider existentially, while Narnia's Lucy and Aslan pose a more redemptive set. Indeed, the parenting virtues of hope, humility, and hospitality are to be modeled—not just asserted—and the Christotextured life says more about Christian values than lists of beliefs can attest. After all, Aslan is not safe, but he is good; he challenges our self-centered ways, which ever presents an existential and potentially transformative crisis.

As well as being impressive—creating space to encounter the divine in the silent meeting for worship, Quakers should also embrace expressive worship—sometimes “ya just gotta dance!” Not only would East African Friends concur, but so would preschool children in our churches and meetings—enthralled by the contagion of inspiring music. I recall an instance of my two-year-old daughter Olivia slipping away from my reach and dancing in the aisle of Reedwood Friends Church, as Shirley Brendlinger played an amazing piece on the piano. She said, “Daddy, I wanna dance.” As I escorted her to the foyer, it occurred to me that the problem was not the child's spontaneity; it was the incapacity of her father to embrace the joy of expressive worship, as inspired by the Spirit. I think early Friends would also have agreed with the child here, rather than the parent. Worship is both impressive and expressive, and programmed and unprogrammed traditions should be open to the movement of the Spirit, however that may manifest itself.

A second thing I appreciate is the way David Johns emphasizes the real thing in Christian faith and practice: the *Real Presence* of Christ in the midst of the fellowship of believers. Johns rightly acknowledges the many ways in which this sacramental reality is experienced individually and corporately, and he calls us to encounter the risen Lord rather than seeking the living among the dead. This leads to a renewed emphasis upon the original Quaker vision: *Primitive Christianity Revived*,

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as announced by William Penn and exemplified in the ministries of George Fox and early Friends. Steering a middle ground between relativistic pluralism and absolutist credalism, Friends have affirmed what I might call “a dynamic Christocentricity” at the heart of faith and practice.³ Extending this balance, seeing the Quaker movement as a committed “order” within the church catholic goes some distance toward being a Society of Jesus’ “friends.” (Jn. 15:14-15)

As a result of these important points being made, two questions follow. First, I’m not sure that the critique of Friends by von Hügel is as adequate as Johns suggests. The point of “unmediated revelation” is not to claim that no mediation happens; of course it does. Rather, Christ is the sole effective mediator of revelation, grace, redemption, and empowerment, and this mediation happens directly through the workings of the Holy Spirit. Johns helpfully points out the fact that Barclay’s original language in the title of his *Apology*’s second proposition was “Immediate Revelation,” not “Inward and Unmediated Revelation,” as paraphrased by Freiday, but he problematically sides with von Hügel on this issue in his earlier critique of Friends. To argue that the Christian Testimony on the Sacraments as furthered by Friends is naïve and traditionally ungrateful misses the mark on both accounts. Because Friends believe that because Christ’s mediatory work is all-sufficient, to add anything to Christ diminishes Christ. Friends do indeed appreciate the Christian heritage we have received, but apostolic Christianity is not a factor of imitating the externals of ecclesial traditions devised in the memory of the apostles as means of perpetuating institutions; it involves encountering the spiritual reality in which the apostles lived, moved, and had their being. That transformative encounter is availed alone by faith through the time-changing work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one, true priest; the priestly ministry of believers is only as effective as it points to his intermediary work.

If God’s power and presence are mediated directly and efficaciously through the workings of the Risen Lord via the Holy Spirit, nothing else is required. If one does not have Christ, nothing else will suffice. Of course revelation, redemption, transformation, and empowerment are mediated; but, they are not mediated through inanimate objects, rites, signs, codes, creeds, sights, smells, sounds, bells, or whistles. They are conveyed directly by the power and presence of the Risen Lord by means of the Holy Spirit. Yes, we are also flesh-and-blood humans who relish the beauty and graces of the sensory world, and

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spiritual inspiration is indeed furthered through aesthetic and sensory experience. That fact, however, differs from the belief that one has no access to the divine except through particular, official, religious means. Instrumental means of attaining ritual purity were opposed by Jesus in the name of God; he came to abolish restrictive access to God's saving-revealing grace, not to set up supersessionist "Christian" alternatives to Jewish religious forms. On that misunderstanding many a theological inference has foundered.⁴ And, in contrast to von Hügel, the Johannine stance on baptism and eucharist was seen by Rudolf Bultmann as antisacramental.⁵ Therefore, seeing Quakers as departing from the faith and practice of Jesus and the apostles—let alone ungrateful to traditional Christianity—is a flawed inference from the start. With Johns elsewhere, Quakers sought to embody "primitive Christianity revived."

On this point, Quakers not only opposed "dead formalism," they also opposed "lively formalism." Indeed, many members of 17th-century British society had participated in liturgically correct baptism and Eucharist without demonstrating the spiritual transformation characteristic of being baptized in the Holy Spirit and with fire and authentically communing with the crucified and risen Lord. They needed "the real thing" versus its symbolizations. Conversely, Quakers opposed those who claimed that unless prescribed water rites and the ingesting of the "medicine of immortality" were carried out ritually, people were devoid of God's saving grace and deprived of eternal life. As a New Testament scholar, I would say that it is von Hügel who is not attentive enough to the faith and practice of the New Testament and the tradition of the Apostles. Circumcision, Jewish food laws and cleansings, animal sacrifices, legal prescriptions on keeping Sabbath—these cultic and legal forms of religiosity were abolished by God's New Covenant with humanity; as the writer of Hebrews would say, they are the shadow of the human-divine relationship, not the substance. Indeed, early Christians evolved ways of expressing religious values and understandings, but to see these forms as instituted by God—determining access to the Kingdom by their employment—ultimately means Christ died for nothing.

Two points follow. First, if one is to ask how the spiritual reality of God's saving-revealing grace and presence are conveyed physically, Friends would affirm the New Testament answer: it happens incarnationally (John 1:14). When God extended the New Covenant to humanity, he did so not by sending another form, rite, or object; God sent a *person*—his Son Jesus Christ, as the express image of the

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deity. Therefore, if we were to ask how God's grace and presence are encountered physically and outwardly in the world, the incarnational answer would likewise point to persons filled with the Spirit of Christ.⁶ Where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, he is present in the midst (Matt. 18:18-20). And, the true sign of being Jesus' followers is that people have love for one another (John 13:34-35). The fruit of the Spirit may be a more adequate signifier of Christian transformation than the gifts of the Spirit—as their practice is also to be in love (Gal. 5:22-24; 1 Cor. 12-14). These outward signs of sacramental reality are all incarnational, and Johns would agree that the sacramental reality of the gathered meeting deserves recovery among Friends and others, as well. Second, Wittgenstein might also be wrong; while words, signs, and symbols do affect realities, they are also *not* those realities, and Quakers should focus on the realities instead of giving undue weight to significations, as though such were determinative. Again, substance transcends shadows, and that biblical testimony is as needed today as it was in the day of early Friends.

A second question is whether an apology by Friends is still needed or not. Indeed, an apology representing all friends is difficult—perhaps impossible, given Quaker diversity in America alone—but is it really *not* needed? On some levels, it is not. After all, Quaker testimonies have made major impacts in the world, and, truth has been befriended on many levels.⁷ In that sense, Quaker witness has won the day on the sounding of concerns for integrity of character, authenticity in worship, equality in ministry, simplicity of lifestyle, nonviolence and peacemaking, vocational living, and the stewardship of life—to name a few. Then again, there still is more work to be done; so while the conscience of the world has been piqued by Friends, the gospel of the Kingdom still needs to be sounded and embodied. Of course, Johns' point here on anachronism is also well taken; devoting energy to fighting 17th-century battles is less than life producing. And yet, the revival of primitive Christianity—calling for the conversion of Christianity to its best self and extending God's love to the world beyond—still involves work to be done. As one of many members in the larger body of Christ, we need the other parts, and we also must remain connected to the Head. However, we also must do our part effectively and well, lest our candle be removed from its lampstand. (Rev. 2-3)

This is precisely where Johns, I believe, points the way forward effectively. In calling for the restoration of primitive Christianity—the

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authentic faith, faithful practice, and transformative experience of the apostles—Friends have an incisive perspective that the church and the world still need.⁸ On this score I also would somewhat disagree with the presentation of Johannine Christianity put forward by Raymond Brown. Whereas Brown changed his view about the apostolic origin of the Johannine tradition because of the juxtaposition of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, its low and informal sacramentology, and its distinctive presentation of Jesus and his ministry, I see these differences as bolstering John's apostolic claims rather than diminishing them. Was the Fourth Evangelist a Quaker? Of course not, but one can understand how Christian readers influenced by the Fourth Gospel have become convinced that following Jesus is the heart of faith and practice. The Gospel of John's presentation of women in leadership, Jesus as a spirit-based prophetic figure, and egalitarian Christian fellowship reflects, in my view, a primitive apostolic view set in tension against institutionalizing developments within the late first-century church.⁹ That being the case, Peter's confession in John 6:68-69 that Christ alone has the words of eternal life (when contrasted with his confession and Jesus' response in Matthew 16:16-19) shows him to be *returning the keys of the kingdom back to Jesus*, where they belonged all along.¹⁰ It is no accident that Martin Luther developed his doctrine of the Priesthood of Believers on the basis of John 20:21-23. John's ecclesiology challenged hierarchical delimitations of Christian ministry in the Reformation era, and I believe it also did so originally as a primitive corrective in the late first-century Christian situation.

That being the case, I would disagree with Johns on his view that no apology is necessary. Rather than arguing for the character of *the true Christian divinity* rooted in transformative relationship with Christ, what the world needs today is *an apology for authentic spirituality*, rooted in the same biblical texts employed by Barclay.¹¹ The world is hungry, I believe, for meaningful spiritual experience and the transformative reality of a relationship with God availed through Jesus Christ. If Christ is indeed come to teach his people himself, we are all called to be humble learners in the school of Christ; for his yoke is easy, and his burden is light—producing rest and renewal for all who will be receptive and responsive to his leadership (Matt. 11:28-30). And on this matter, David Johns offers the best counsel I have heard in a long time—punctuating the way theology might be “Quakered” by any desiring to do meaningful thinking about God (*theos + logos* = theology). If Quakers have anything to contribute to Christian theology, perhaps it is the emphasis upon *attentiveness*. As

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we learn to attend the divine—the Inward Light of Christ, or “that of God”—within, seeking to discern and mind the divine will, that’s where theology becomes a living and life-producing engagement rather than an archaeological dig.

So thanks, David, for helping us reflect on how to do theology better; I do believe that Quakers still have a lot to contribute to Christian theology. And, as Quakers challenged notional approaches to faith from the beginning, your work has helped us not only consider what Friends might yet have to offer the larger world of theological endeavors, but also how we are also drawn into the transformative reality of that engagement personally and corporately as a result. In that sense, attending, discerning, and minding the will of the Present Christ is indeed the true *liturgia* (the people’s work) of Christianity—not as a formal rite, but as transformative reality. May it ever be so.

ENDNOTES

- 1 David L. Johns, *Quakering Theology: Essays on Worship, Tradition and Christian Faith* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 126-127.
- 2 I recall also with fondness Dean Freiday’s response to the issue on “Quaker Hagiography” in the next issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* #96 (2001), as well as his response to Johns’ essay on silence and ritual management in *Quaker Religious Thought* #90 (1998), “In Defense of Folly.”
- 3 Paul N. Anderson, “A Dynamic Christocentricity—The Center of Faithful Praxis,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 105 (2005): 20-36.
- 4 See, for instance, the insightful treatment of Jesus as a challenger of Jewish purity laws in John K. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Longman, Darton & Todd, 1980), building on the religious anthropological work of Mary Douglas.
- 5 In John it is asserted that Jesus himself did not baptize (Jn. 4:2); there is no institution of a meal of remembrance at the last supper in John 13, and Jesus’ true followers are called to the way of the cross in John 6:51-58, not to a cultic rite. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. By G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches, 1970; foreword by Paul N. Anderson, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014). See also my extended treatment of what is meant by “sacrament” in John in Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, WUNT 2 #78 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1996; third edition, Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010). John, however, is not antisacramental (versus Bultmann); it is incarnational in its opposition to limiting sacramentality to ritual forms, and in doing so, it is closer to the ministry of the historical Jesus than the cultic developments of emerging Christianity.
- 6 This thesis is argued powerfully in Alan Kolp’s *QRT* #57 (1984) essay, “Friends, Sacraments, and Sacramental Living.” I consider this one of the most important essays on Quakers and the sacraments ever written, and I’d like to see this contribution drawn into Johns’ analysis of the issue.
- 7 See the excellent collection of essays Jeff Dudiak has gathered on the subject, Volume 2 within the FAHE Quakers and the Disciplines series: *Befriending Truth: Quaker Perspectives*, Longmeadow, MA: Full Media Services, 2015.

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- 8 A central argument of Paul Anderson, *Following Jesus: The Heart of Faith and Practice*, Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2013.
- 9 I argued this view in my first *QRT* contribution, “Was the Fourth Evangelist a Quaker?” *Quaker Religious Thought* #76 (1991): 27-43. I also dedicated the third printing of *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel* to Raymond Brown (Cascade Books, 2010), as he and I had discussed many of these issues prior to his untimely passing. He encouraged me to bolster my reference to John as “disciple” as “John the apostle” in Appendix VIII, where I presented overlooked first-century evidence of John’s apostolic authorship, seeing Acts 4:19-20 as such a clue.
- 10 The implications of the Juxtaposition of Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John have been discussed for over a century, going back to Adolf von Harnack, C.K. Barrett, and others (including Brown), and I developed the implications of this apostolic stance for global Christian unity in my response to the Vatican, which I delivered personally to Pope Benedict XVI in 2006: “Petrine Ministry and Christocracy: A Response to *Ut Unum Sint*.” *One in Christ* 40:1 (2005): 3-39.
- 11 Paul Anderson, “An Apology for Authentic Spirituality,” *Quaker Religious Thought* #114 (2010): 20-37.