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RESPONSE TO REVIEWS OF *QUAKERING THEOLOGY*

DAVID L. JOHNS

I became Quaker by accident.

I was studying religion in college and looking for something to inspire me. College was doing what it was supposed to do, and I was asking questions about everything I thought I knew. Faith was deeply important to me; in one form or another, it was the landscape of my childhood and early adulthood. But, I struggled with how to fold this together with an awakening awareness of violence and injustice, as well as a growing interest in other religious traditions. I was looking for something to stand on, something in which to root my life; I wasn't satisfied with the answers I was hearing.

Looking back I realize at least two things: one, I was surrounded by more people of lively faith than I acknowledged then. At the time, I was zealous and looking for something that did not compromise on principles, something consistent—heart, soul, mind, and strength. I was looking for a kind of faith that spoke to my head, and one that opened space to care deeply about the world. I felt as though religious folks in my life talked a great line, but didn't follow through with lives of principled action—they knew the form of religious life, but didn't understand what faith *really* meant. Of course, I was overly critical, and downright judgmental; there was more going on than met my eye. However, like many, I certainly resonated with George Fox when I first encountered him.

And second, I realize that in desiring something stable upon which to root my life, I had not yet come to terms with slipperiness of reality, of the seductive, but elusive lure of certainty.

Like many folks who convert from one tradition to another, I poured myself into this newly adopted faith, learning as much as possible. That makes sense. But, since I had not learned how to hold many things together at once, to embrace Quakerism meant, for a time, rejecting much of what had formed me for years. In one sense, it's not surprising one would respond this way; it grew out of enthusiasm for this movement that was reshaping my life. I worked

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hard to be, what I believed at the time was, a ‘good Quaker.’ I was naïve, I realize, but it didn’t seem that way to me then. It was real.

But somewhere along the way, and I don’t recall just when it happened, I came to the conclusion I was missing the point.

The Friends who were inspiring me, I began to understand, had called for their contemporaries to set aside the forms of religion—the structures of certainty that were foundational—in order to break open these forms and come face-to-face with the Power that turns the world upside down.

On one level, I knew this. It doesn’t take long in one’s study of Quakers to learn this was a fundamental theme through the years. Let go of the forms that distract and lay hold of the living substance. The startling realization for me was that the ‘forms’ of religion were not only named: Presbyterian, Catholic, and Baptist, some of the favorites identified in early Quaker literature; the ‘form’ of religion was also named ‘Quaker.’

The point of Quakerism, it seemed to me at that moment of realization, was to break itself open too, and to point beyond itself to something else. A friend shared with me his practice of repetitive prayer in the Rosary. Particular words, he explained, were not essential at a certain point in the practice. At the beginning, the images and messages evident in the words shaped the imagination and provided grounding in a living tradition. However, the longer the prayer was uttered, the more the words slipped away and opened a space where Spirit touched spirit.

The point of being Quaker is not to be Quaker; the point is to be carried into the presence of the Living Christ, a place at once more certain than any foundation humankind could construct, and also less certain and less predictable than anything one could possibly imagine. Those things I believed were amiss in the tradition I abandoned when I first embraced Friends, were equally present in Friends as well; Quakerism could as easily become a distraction from the pulse of Spirit as anything that troubled Fox.

I mention this journey to illustrate (or perhaps confess) that the theological questions I raise regarding the Religious Society of Friends in *Quakering Theology* are, in fact, deeply personal. They grow from my effort to understand what I do not understand: the touch of Spirit that has enlivened my life and has been, in unequal portions, both comforting and disquieting.

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I am deeply grateful for the thoughtful reviews by Steve Angell, Margery Post Abbott, and Paul Anderson. I have high regard for each of them, and for their many contributions to the study of Quakerism. I would like to thank them for giving the book a close reading and for addressing the concerns I discuss in it. Any review that does not raise questions is not honest or attentive. For this reason, I am pleased each writer has asked important questions about some of my claims and assumptions and that each has invited me to think otherwise.

I will be brief and not address each point this trio raises. Thus, this conversation, like any one worth having, ends with an ellipsis—a promise of more to come.

Among the issues these writers discuss, there are two they share: one is met with appreciation, the other with some apprehension. The first is the emphasis throughout my work on incarnation—indeed, an incarnational faith. It is a feature of what Anderson calls a “dynamic christocentricity.” Not surprisingly, I think this is an inescapable dimension of any faith touched by Jesus. While Quakers have emphasized interiority in the spiritual life, it has rarely been without a serious engagement with flesh and blood; in one form or another, Quakers have cast their lot with creation.

What has raised some concern among these reviewers is my stance concerning the impossibility of unmediated revelation. I realize that precisely because the phrase “unmediated revelation” has been used so frequently within the Religious Society of Friends, to characterize the matter as being “impossible” seems pretentious, if not downright pugnacious.

As I regard this claim, it is the second side of a two-sided coin, the other side being “incarnation.” If faith is incarnational, played out somatically, and if humans are historically conditioned, created from earth-dust and God-breath, then what happens in faith is known and experienced in our historically conditioned existence. My overriding interest in remarks about revelation and experience is to stay close the power of creation and to the conviction that, of all the means at God’s disposal, God chose flesh and blood, the contingencies of incarnated existence, for the canvas of creation and for salvific grace.

Of course, Aslan is free to roar as Aslan chooses, but the human experience of just about everything is communicated through or mediated by something knowable in human experience; I don’t think anyone would deny this. In fact, mediated experience is a

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fundamentally Quaker conviction that grows out of the conviction that “Christ is come to teach his people himself.” However, my claim raises a legitimate concern that I may be jeopardizing a fundamental Quaker insight—namely, that the new covenant does not require the mediation of religious authorities, whether human or institutional.

The problem here is a confusion of language. When I speak of mediated or unmediated, I am not speaking about authority, that is, who speaks authoritatively about matters of faith and through what mechanisms; rather, I am speaking about epistemology, how it is we know what we know. Thus, to say “unmediated revelation is not possible,” means that what we know about faith and the living Christ, we know through language, symbols, images, ideas, and the like. Even “openings” in worship that are presumably not provided by someone apart from ourselves, are mediated through the structures of human knowing. We would not recognize them otherwise, and this is why I claim unmediated knowing is not possible. Recognizing this distinction (authority vs. epistemology) clarifies the disagreement.

Along this theme, because I emphasize incarnation (mediated reality) so often, I am grateful that Anderson calls attention to the cast of characters that appears in the book: Aslan, Lucy, the Edmunds, Mary Dyer, and so on. An incarnational faith pays attention to many things, and one thing I hope is true about my work is that it pays attention to human lives.

Implied in Anderson’s critique is an invitation to consider the implications of my own position on forms and revelation. If Quakerism calls us to break open all forms of religious life—including itself—this implies the same for those received forms of Christianity that sacramental practice entails. My remarks could be seen as a reversal of the breaking open that marked the experience of Friends. I do not intend this nor do I intend to perpetuate ecclesial practices that stand in the way of the immediate leadership of Christ. I do believe the reason often given for dismissing these practices is not valid. Anderson’s argument, however, is rich and goes well beyond the hasty dismissal I want to challenge. He writes convincingly of the spiritual reality that is evidenced in signifiers of grace such as the fruit of the Spirit, and that can be encountered in a community that loves one another.

There are, in fact, many ways to somatically participate in specifically religious communities, and some of these have a ritual quality to

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them. My primary concern is to remind us that the new covenant, which Friends enjoy, does not diminish the historical contingencies of our lives. Human communities (including Quaker!) are marked by patterns of behavior, and while Friends may wish to eschew the word, some of these patterns of behavior are, in fact, ritual. I remain convinced that ritual action is fundamentally human and functions at an anthropological level rather than a spiritual one. One is not changed in *essence* through a ritual, but one's *relation* to a community and one's understanding of role within it will, in fact, be impacted. In short, my contention is simply that ritual—especially the Eucharist—is a physical and incarnational way to demonstrate communion with *each other*, not with the Divine. Thus, the often used Quaker argument against the practice of sacraments misinterprets the ritual function of the practice itself.

I am grateful for Margery Post Abbott's invitation for me to clarify the role of *inner* in the expression of *outer*. The relation of the two is a perennial Quaker concern. Abbott refers to the chapter: "Sometimes You Just Gotta Dance," in which I discuss physical expressiveness in worship—the body in motion. To make a point, I swing the pendulum to one side and concentrate my attention there. There are reasons rhetorical and theological for doing this, of course, but by doing so I do not give sufficient consideration to the powerful inner movement that both precedes and follows any outer expression. As I discuss throughout the book, dualisms are obstacles, and language forms habits of mind. In trying to avoid what I often critique as over-spiritualization of reality among Friends, I need to take care to develop the interplay of all dimensions of the life of faith—interiority and exteriority. In fact, if I were to clarify this, I may untangle the confusion I may create with the issue of mediated and unmediated revelation.

Angell's critique of the kataphatic emphasis in my work to the underdevelopment of the apophatic underscores Abbott's remarks. What comes to mind is the space between words—silence gives birth to speech—and the contemplative, centering pause before a pianist touches the keys or a gymnast leaps.

Perhaps without realizing it, Steve Angell has helped me think in a larger than human way about faith and consciousness. At a gathering once upon a time, perhaps in response to a comment of mine, Angell spoke of a Friends meeting in which a service dog of one of the members participated regularly in a deep way in the meetings

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for worship. Now, Steve introduces two cats to illustrate beautifully the necessary balance of the mystical. He also raises a very good point that the metaphor of lion in reference to God, which I use in the one of the book's chapters, can be so gendered that it unbalances one's concept of the Divine.

Each writer, explicitly or implicitly, has challenged me to develop more fully what I mean by *Quakering* theology, to clarify "a way to go and do likewise" (Angell), to do so in a way that makes "theology more accessible for folk who are not embedded in the academic community" (Abbott), and to consider how a Quaker apology might speak to the spiritual longing of our time (Anderson). I deeply appreciate this challenge, and I think Steve Angell is right when he states that what I am trying to do in this work is emphasize an experiential theology over a "notional" one—a theology is born out of human experience, where human life is the stuff of theological reflection.

Of course, while I want to avoid the development of a theory or methodology, I realize something akin to this is a necessary next step. Whatever shape this takes, it will be grounded in the movements of worship. As I mention in the conclusion of *Quakering Theology*, worship in the Friends tradition forms a community of practice that listens. Taken at face value, this may not seem significant; however, theology's first act is to attend, to be attentive. "How is this done? By looking, by listening, by observing, by waiting—common practices of worship." (p. 152) A community that pays attention is able to hear the voice of the Divine, whether it roars, or whether it is still and small. But more than this, such a community can hear the joy and sorrow of the world God so loves.

What I want to do is assure that Quakerism itself not be the focus of our paying attention; rather, by quakering the larger story of faith, I hope that Quakerism will be broken open again and again, and point beyond itself to the source of power and life that inspired it in its first moments, and that continues to move throughout all creation.