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# MYSTICISM AND REVELATION IN JOHN WOOLMAN'S THEOLOGY

JON R. KERSHNER

## INTRODUCTION

In 1758, at a Philadelphia Yearly Meeting session where Quakers were considering what actions to take against slave-owning members, John Woolman famously declared in support of instituting disciplinary actions against slaveholders, that the Yearly Meeting must act consistently with God's teachings, or else risk God's judgment.<sup>1</sup> Woolman, like other Quakers, believed that God would reveal to each generation how to live consistently with divine intent.<sup>2</sup> What Woolman did not state was the authority on which he could claim to know what it was that God wanted him and others to do. These are the epistemological concerns that shape how one practices their faith, interprets the meaning of the world around them, and that identify the sources that are capable of determining ultimate things. This article explores Woolman's theology of revelation, or, how he came to believe what he did about God and God's will for the world.

Woolman's view of the world, divine Truth and social destiny were the result of an ongoing spiritual immediacy to a transcendent God who communicated with him and desired to communicate with others. This spiritual immediacy was characterized by two main factors that shaped his socio-spiritual expectations: firstly, Woolman exemplified a mystical Christo-presentism in which Christ reigned directly and immediately, but spiritually, through the faithful; and, secondly, this Christo-presentism was layered with a sense of eschatological prolepsis in which the Kingdom of God was realizing on earth, and the inward presence of Christ was the reigning presence of Christ in the kingdom of God. Woolman's mystical Christo-presentism and eschatological prolepsis functioned together, such that the spiritual convictions Woolman thought he discerned from God were always revelations of the new world God was already establishing on earth.

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REVELATION

Woolman's writings are filled with revelatory language. His *Journal* reads as a long succession of "drawings,"<sup>3</sup> "leadings"<sup>4</sup> and "openings."<sup>5</sup> When he left home on a ministry journey to rural areas of Pennsylvania and Virginia in 1746 he did so because God had prompted him through an "enlargement of gospel love in my mind."<sup>6</sup> Many of these revelations were non-linguistic urgings and impressions believed to have a divine origin and specific meanings, but not tied to written or spoken word. However, his *Journal* is also punctuated with occasions of linguistic, supernatural revelation in which a theophanic presence or angelic messenger<sup>7</sup> spoke to Woolman, thus revealing a truth that could not be known through natural means.<sup>8</sup>

Woolman did not equate an inward revelation with any sense of innate human-originated capacity for religious understanding. Rather, he believed that God's intention for human behavior was knowable because God had "placed a principle in the human mind" which disclosed God's will and, if obeyed, ushered individuals and society as a whole towards greater degrees of faithfulness. Elsewhere, Woolman expanded on the idea of the imparted revelatory presence of God's self within the individual: "There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God." Woolman did not clarify whether this "principle" was a synonym for the Holy Spirit, or the indwelling Christ, but it is clear that he felt there was a connection-point imparted to humanity which could guide human actions. Moreover, Woolman related this "principle" to living consistent with God's ultimate purposes for societal organization.<sup>9</sup> For Woolman, God's revelation was always the revelation of the world more fully aligned with God's purposes, and, so, this revelation encompassed every sphere of human existence, religious, social, political, personal, and corporate. This "principle" was not inherent to humanity, it was placed in humanity from beyond humanity.

What Woolman described as God's imparted "principle," he also described as God's "internal presence" that brought about changes in the lives of the faithful. This "principle" or "internal presence," what I am calling his sense of spiritual immediacy is helpfully understood as mystical, because it represents the ongoing, inward, spiritual presence of a transcendent God within the human being. And so it is to the mystical elements of Woolman's theology of revelation that I now turn.

## MYSTICISM

Woolman's mysticism cannot be reduced to the reductionist view of mysticism which Bernard McGinn has likened to a mere "special form of feeling and/or perception,"<sup>10</sup> and which is thought to be independent of the contexts in which Woolman lived and acted, and, where he wanted to challenge, rebuke, confront, and teach others concerning the tangible implications of his spiritual immediacy. By mystical, then, I mean that Woolman believed himself to be united to God's will and capable of knowing and doing what God prescribed moment by moment, what Woolman sometimes called having "the mind of Christ," a phrase borrowed from the Apostle Paul.<sup>11</sup> The immediacy of Christ was continual and ongoing, for Woolman this immediacy was not merely a perception, it was primarily a command of God and a new way of being within the world. Woolman was adamant that the effects of spiritual connection would be manifest in new ways of acting in the world, such as "looking into the wants of the poor..."<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere Woolman said this spiritual immediacy "mortified" the fallen, carnal nature so that the faithful could say with Paul, "it is no more I that live, but Christ that liveth in me."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Woolman believed the life of the faithful would, in some sense, parallel the life of Christ: the continual presence of God and the obedience of the faithful would lead to a this-worldly "mortification,"<sup>14</sup> or death, and a this-worldly resurrection as a new creation in the life of Christ.<sup>15</sup> Here, Woolman believed the old-self went through "judgment," and out of that process of this-worldly death and resurrection the faithful are transformed such that the human will was aligned with God's will, and the faithful enacted God's dictates on earth. Elsewhere, Woolman wrote "in this state we are dead, and our life is hid with Christ in God."<sup>16</sup> Thus, God's will would be done on earth because Christ was really present, and actively revealing God's will for human affairs.

For Woolman, the revelatory and mystical encounter was one in which actual content was disclosed by God to human agents. Woolman understood himself to be subjectively present in the revelatory encounter, and therefore never able to claim mastery over it. For this reason, Woolman sought to maintain a state of "resignation," in which he surrendered to God's will. This is not to say that Woolman was merely passive in his theology of revelation. Rather, his was a mysticism that entailed a human capability for understanding and

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implementing God's messages, but the human capability was only a possibility that depended on God's self-disclosing and teaching activity, and then combined with human obedience. Those who did not take the second step, and obey the revelation, Woolman said, would be "shut up" to God's presence.<sup>17</sup> Woolman's theology of revelation was contingent on Christ's mystical presence, which was actively and directly instructing the faithful how to respond to the issues of their day and live a faithful life. This ongoing mystical presence leads to the second element in Woolman's spiritual immediacy, the eschatological prolepsis in which Christ's presence revealed the contours of human destiny and God's ultimate ends.

### ESCHATOLOGICAL PROLEPSIS

Like the death and resurrection Woolman experienced in the mystical presence of Christ, the reenactment of eschatological scenarios within time and history also occurred in Woolman's dreams. In the eighteenth century, dreams, or "night journeys," were considered authoritative sources of revelation, as Woolman considered his.<sup>18</sup> In 1770, he had a vision in which he participated in the events of Revelation chapter 8, where the "seventh seal" was opened and the glorified saints and angels were in silence before God for half an hour. It is striking that in this vision Woolman becomes a participant in these eschatological events: "and a trumpet was given me that I might sound forth this language, that the children might hear it and be invited to gather to this precious habitation..." In the book of Revelation, the seven angels blow the trumpets of God's wrath; in Woolman's dream one of the angels gives him a trumpet with which to broadcast the "language" he witnessed in this heavenly scene, and to gather the earthly saints to the same position of prayer in God's direct presence that he witnessed of the glorified saints in this eschatological scene.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, Woolman is here commissioned to enact the spiritual and eschatological events in his temporal ministry.

This vision revealed new insights into the spiritual immediacy knowable to the earthly saints, the spiritual and eschatological reality already present in the physical world, and the eschatological urgency of the historical moment. For Woolman, spiritual immediacy was the pathway through which revelation occurred. However, while revelation always originated in the eternal and transcendent, at some point the faithful would enter into that eternity and transcendence

and become participants in the revelation itself. In other words, God's revelation did not always stay outside of the human subject, such that the human could only learn about it in abstraction. Rather, Woolman believed he was taken into the revelation itself, as he was taken into eschatological scenarios.

Thus, God's revelation was not abstract, for Woolman, it was something to be embodied and enacted. In another dream during a pleurisy attack when he nearly died, Woolman heard an angel say "John Woolman is dead." He felt himself to then be carried in spirit to mines where people were in great misery, and he felt that he was mixed in with them. "Then the mystery was opened," Woolman wrote, "and I perceived there was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented and that that language *John Woolman is dead* meant no more than the death of my own will."<sup>20</sup> In this vision, Woolman's death and resurrection on the spiritual plane crossed into the physical realm as upon the conclusion of this dream, he immediately began to recover from his pleurisy and was, also, convinced that he should not use silver table-ware any more on account of the condition of the miners.<sup>21</sup> The spiritual and eschatological experience was also a revelation for how to enact the eschaton within history.

In this state of correspondence between the inward spiritual immediacy and the revelation embodied physically, Woolman said "all things are new and all things are of God."<sup>22</sup> The "newness" experienced by the faithful was that of the new world God was bringing about, breaking into historical time, and restoring human relationships to God's compassionate intent.<sup>23</sup>

Woolman believed the kingdom of God revealed God's will, and those who were responsive to the inward presence of Christ were under the influence of that revelation. Woolman's view of revelation, then, was eschatologically focused, bringing the world as it was into alignment with God's ultimate and inevitable ends which were already realizing on earth: "Now to those, in the present age, who truly know Christ, and feel the nature of his peaceable government opened in their understandings, how loud is that call wherewith we are called to faithfulness."<sup>24</sup> For Woolman, God's "loud" call was audible to those in the spiritual and eschatological state of Christ's government, and this call was to enact the kingdom on earth. Not only did Woolman view revelation as inward, spiritual, and ongoing, but as the revelation of God's ultimate intent for human affairs and, so, knowledge of the

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unfolding of God's eschatological agenda was necessarily linked to the divine presence.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the way Woolman arrived at his convictions of God's will is central for understanding his theology and social vision. The inward, revelatory spiritual immediacy he experienced was knowable by others, and could direct the course of history. Thus Christ would dictate how people treated each other, what material objects were made and how they were used, and what purpose the world economy would serve. Receiving and identifying God's revelation was not a matter of rational, exegetical or theological methodology, it was the result of a new state in God, a state that crossed the borders of eternity, and provided Woolman with an "existential confidence"<sup>26</sup> that he was in God and his activity on earth was a participation in God's ultimate and inevitable designs for the created world. Woolman's view of revelation and spiritual immediacy, therefore, had a strong social trajectory.

Woolman provides a helpful case-study on eighteenth century Quaker view of revelation because his positions seemed extreme to many Quakers of his day, and he was accused of being out of sync with Quaker teaching due to the clothes he wore, the food he abstained from, and his method of travel.<sup>27</sup> Woolman's spiritual immediacy led him to often perfectionist views of social transformation, because he thought he could translate God's intent into human affairs.

Woolman's view of revelation also provides important insight into his view of God. For Woolman, God regularly intervened in history through the faithful to guide the world toward an impending transformation. The strong sense of eschatology in Woolman's revelation made immediate God's ultimate designs for the created order, and, so, was a rejection of rationalist theologies and futurism. Moreover, by maintaining an epistemic that was both mystical and eschatological, Woolman rejected spiritual dualisms of time and eternity, God in Heaven and God on earth, and thus heightened his expectations for social transformation on earth.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 John Woolman, "Journal," in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 93.
- 2 Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 17.
- 3 Woolman, "Journal," 47.
- 4 Woolman, "Journal," 149.
- 5 Woolman, "Journal," 38.
- 6 Woolman, "Journal," 36.
- 7 Woolman, "Journal," 186.
- 8 Woolman, "Journal," 58.
- 9 John Woolman, "Considerations on Keeping Negroes; Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination; Part Second," in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 236–237.
- 10 Robert Gimello, "Mysticism in Its Contexts," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 86.
- 11 John Woolman, "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How It Is to Be Maintained" in *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia M. Gummere (New York: Macmillan company, 1922), 447; Phl. 2:5 (KJV).
- 12 Woolman, "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind," 447.
- 13 John Woolman, "An Epistle to the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings of Friends," in *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia M. Gummere (New York: Macmillan company, 1922), 477; Gal. 2:20.
- 14 Patricia A. Ward, *Experimental Theology in America: Madame Guyon, Fénelon, and Their Readers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 74.
- 15 Woolman, "An Epistle to the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings of Friends," 477.
- 16 John Woolman, "Conversations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How It May Be Promoted," in *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia M. Gummere (New York: Macmillan company, 1922), 473.
- 17 Woolman, "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind," 452–453; Woolman, "Journal," 25; Woolman, "Considerations on Keeping Negroes; Part Second," 236–237.

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- 18 Mechal Sobel, *Teach Me Dreams: The Search for Self in the Revolutionary Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3–4; Carla Gerona, *Night Journeys: The Power of Dreams in Transatlantic Quaker Culture* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 19.
- 19 Woolman, “Journal,” 160.
- 20 Woolman, “Journal,” 186.
- 21 Woolman, “Journal,” 186.
- 22 Woolman, “Journal,” 177; 2 Cor. 5:17-18.
- 23 Woolman, “Journal,” 177-178.
- 24 Woolman, “Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind,” 455.
- 25 John Woolman, “On Loving Our Neighbours as Ourselves,” in *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia M. Gummere (New York: Macmillan company, 1922), 493.
- 26 Bruce Chilton, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Receptions of John's Revelation in Western Imagination* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 104.
- 27 Henry Cadbury, *John Woolman in England a Documentary Supplement* ([London]: Friends Historical Society, 1971), 52, 135.