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Shannon Craigo-Snell

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RESPONSE TO DAVID BOULTON AND JEFFREY DUDIAK

SHANNON CRAIGO-SNELL

I am grateful for the opportunity to be in conversation with two excellent essays, both of which exemplify some of the honest diversity-in-engagement that is one of the greatest strengths of Quaker community. I'm going to speak briefly to each of them, in turn.

David Boulton offers a learned historical perspective on non-theism within Quaker communities, as well as an argument that non-theistic Friends be acknowledged and engaged as a vital part of the mainstream of Quaker thought, rather than seen as a marginal few. The primary line of his argument goes like this: pushing the boundaries of traditional religious thought is an important part of the history and tradition of the Religious Society of Friends. Since questioning tradition is part of Quaker tradition, then the questioning that is happening now among non-theistic Friends is actually quite traditional! This questioning should not be feared as a break with Friendly traditions, but rather, welcomed as their continuation. As easy as it is to get tongue-tied in the explanation, this is a logical and reasonable argument, which Boulton states clearly and well. He urges an appreciation for the “free thinking and adventurous questioning” of earlier Friends, which leads to ongoing and mutual dialogue with freethinkers and questioners today.

Boulton also clearly states why he prefers the term non-theism to the term atheism, as atheist carries connotations of being “without God” and “without morality.” What is less clear, however, is exactly what is meant by the terms non-theism and theism. There are two quite different descriptions of non-theism in the essay.

First, as part of his historical account of non-theism among Friends, Boulton states that “the underlying sense of a fading or abandoned belief in a personal, interventionist, metaphysical God, a disembodied Intelligence, is... a thread woven ...throughout Quaker history.” Here non-theism appears as the rejection of a particular view of God.

Second, later in the essay, Boulton draws on Don Cupitt's work and says this of non-realism and non-theism: “God was re-envisioned

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as a wholly human construct, a projection of the human mind and imagination.” Here non-theism is connected to the assertion that God is a human construct, with the apparent implication that there is no God that is not a human construct.

These two descriptions of theism and non-theism are quite different. Regarding the first: there are many, many forms of Christian faithfulness and Christian theology that do not envision God as a personal, interventionist, metaphysical, disembodied intelligence. This is not what many of the greatest theologians mean by the word “God.” This is not the God of Augustine, Aquinas, or Bonaventure; not the God of Julian, or Hildegard, or Teresa; not the God of Pascal, Barth, or Rahner. For all of these theologians, and many more, rejecting this particular view of God does not entail rejecting God altogether. It does not mean that God is only a human construct.

The elision of these two views is understandable given some of the history of non-theism to which Boulton refers. Paul Tillich, for example, is named as a father of non-theism, a name which I suspect Tillich would be quite proud to bear. Tillich refers to views of God as a personal, interventionist, supreme Intelligence as “theism,” and furthermore declares the God of theism to be a human construct. However, for Tillich this does not mean that God does not exist, that there is no Divine beyond what we as humans create for ourselves. Rather, there is a depth dimension to all existence, a source of being, a holiness bubbling up around us. For Tillich, rejecting a simplistic, theistic vision of God as mere human construct is an important step on the path towards recognizing truth far greater. There is God beyond the God of theism, or, more fully, the ongoing process of recognizing and rejecting the limitations of our human conceptions of Divinity is a vital spiritual discipline that helps us to be in intentional relation with holiness that is of more than human making. Eckhart’s call to take leave of God for the sake of God can be interpreted in a similar vein. The denial of a particular view of God, and recognition of the limitations of all views of God, is often part and parcel of a deeply faithful affirmation that God exists and exceeds human conceptuality. Theology is not an either/or situation with only two options on the table: God looks like this, or is merely a human construct. It is, and always has been, a much more diverse and multiple discourse.

As I said earlier, I find Boulton’s primary argument persuasive. Quaker theological inquiry is richly diverse, including historical strands that nourish contemporary Friendly non-theism. Because of

this, non-theism should not be relegated to the margins of Quaker discourse, but rather embraced within the mainstream. I concur. I also urge acknowledging the rich diversity of the broader field of Christian theological inquiry. Placed within this larger context, the rejection of the particular view of God as a personal, interventionist, Supreme Intelligence is extremely mainstream. It has been done, again and again, by those who walk away from faith in God as well as by those who continue to have faith in God understood differently, often as defying understanding.

Jeffrey Dudiak offers a different historical assessment of non-theism in his essay. Instead of tracing the roots of non-theistic Quaker thought and movement, Dudiak places the opposition between theism and non-theism within the broader historical emergence of the modern worldview in the West. It is only within the mindset of modernity, Dudiak asserts, that these two possibilities emerge, and do so in a way that they are always intertwined. Within modernity, the elevation of human subjectivity and reason creates a shift from faith grounded in a response to our human situation in God's creation, to belief as intellectual assent to the proposition that God exists. There is a massive foreground/background shift: Instead of seeing everything (including ourselves) through the overarching lens of God's providence, modernity sees everything (including God's providence) through the lens of our own reason. This is linked with a shift from Christian faith as a lived, whole-personed response to God, to Christian belief as form of (possibly inferior) knowledge. For Dudiak, non-theism and theism are both predicated on the same modern assumption, namely that it makes sense for a person to stand back and consider the pros and cons of believing in God, relying on her own reason to pronounce subjective judgment on God's existence. Theism and non-theism are thus two sides of the same coin, a coin which holds no currency outside the relatively small terrain of Modernity.

Thus far the analysis follows the insights of multiple postmodern scholars in recent years, many of which have been recently addressed in Charles Taylor's tome, *The Secular Age*. Dudiak, however, states all of this with shocking and welcome lucidity, such that I will quote this essay often in my teaching.

He then takes the discussion further into the field of theology, arguing that the subject/object dualism inherent to modern epistemology constrains those who would relate to God into a

question of either/or belief: “either God is an object...that exists out there in some manner like other objects of our knowledge, or [God is] merely the projection of our subjective desires or wishes.”

Here Dudiak is speaking directly to the kind of view Boulton asserts, and indeed, pointing out some of the same concerns that I raise. There is an unnecessary dichotomy between intellectual assent to one particular view of God (theism) and declaring God a human construct (non-theism). Dudiak rejects this dichotomy as a “blunt instrument” crafted by modernity and inadequate to the broader traditions of Biblical faith.

My response to this essay takes the form of a word of encouragement and a question. First, the encouragement. In much the same way that I urge Boulton to embrace the rich diversity of Christian theology, I remind Dudiak that the best theologians of the modern era did not fall for the dichotomous options presented. Barth, Rahner, Tillich, and others all fought against this, in different ways. Whether modernity was always more complicated than our necessary analysis can capture, or these thinkers were the beginning of the end for Modernity, or they were part of the maturation process that mellows the angry young man—whatever the reason, the work of struggling against this dichotomy is well underway and we have admirable comrades beside us. Non-foundationalist theology is the norm in many current conversations, and many contemporary theologians (including Wendy Farley, Catherine Keller, and John Thatamanil) are developing and articulating non-dualistic theologies that are not premised on the modern subject/object split.

Second, the question. Within Dudiak’s essay there is both acknowledgement of the gifts of modernity and articulation of a need to approach the legacy of modernity with a critical eye. This is, I believe, a particular interesting task for Friends. The historical emergence of Modernity in Europe is the context in which Quakerism itself emerged, the soil that nourished the Society of Friends. Many aspects of Quaker principles and commitments, embraced in the early modern period as Quakerism began and dearly held today, are the ideals of Modernity. Indeed, in many ways, Quakers were distinctive not so much for embracing ideas that were gaining traction in the intellectual and religious communities of the time as for taking them more seriously than others did. Quakers were the most modern people around!

Some of these modern and Quaker commitments include:

- Experience and reasoning are better instructors than tradition or authority. This principle of early modern thought is vividly reflected in unprogrammed Quaker worship.
- All persons are equal. Equality is a deeply modern ideal. Quakers were persecuted because they said it early and, more so, because they acted upon the principle.
- Following upon this, egalitarian forms of government are another decidedly modern ideal that Quakers take to extremes.
- The best forms of worship are not rituals, but rather spiritual worship and moral life. Articulated often in the texts of early modern authors, this was embraced by Quakers. A New England Presbyterian church seems ornate next to many meeting houses.
- Even the notion of the inner Light is found in multiple early modern texts of theology, philosophy, and theory. Of course, the image of light has been used in many ages, but the idea of each individual having within themselves a light to guide knowledge and action was a dominant early modern metaphor.
- Also, more than many other religious traditions that developed at the same time, Friends tend to look to the founders of the Society as the grounding history of the tradition. Presbyterians really love Calvin, but they also all look back farther, to Augustine and Paul and Jesus. Given the diversity of Friends, it is easier (and more common) to look to Fox, Fell, and Barclay as figures upon whom Quakerism relies. In this sense, too, Quakerism is a profoundly modern reality.
- At the same time, there are a few dualisms rather critical to modernity that early Quakers rejected with lasting legacy. One finds in Quakerism
- A reluctance to separate private from public (business and politics should be consonant with religion)
- A hesitance to confine religion to one sphere of life, separate from secular dealings

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- An interesting theological anthropology, in which a high degree of individualism and a high degree of emphasis on community are not seen as dualistic opposites, but rather held together as mutually supporting.

What I am suggesting here is that Quakerism has a very particular, rather quirky, relationship with Modernity. While we have companions in the effort to think critically about modernity in theology and philosophy, there is work to be done on how this plays out specifically for Friends. Why did early Friends so fully embrace some aspects of modernity while resisting others? Was there a larger criterion applied, or was this an ad hoc and organic development? How can the deeply modern Religious Society of Friends apply the tools of postmodernism self-critically?

My suspicion is that these questions, requiring both the textual history Boulton applies and the broader historical perspective Dudiak employs, can point to some distinctive Quaker contributions to contemporary understandings of religious faith and practice that reach beyond easy dismissals of either theism or non-theism.