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RESPONSE TO PAPERS ON THEISM (JUST A LITTLE) AND NON-THEISM (MUCH MORE)

PATRICK J. NUGENT

I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to respond to these two papers and regret that I cannot be present. I am going to trust that Jeffrey Dudiak's excellent and thought-provoking paper will inspire good conversation in San Francisco, and I wish take up the opportunity offered by David Boulton's. I share Jeff's position as a Christ-centered and theistic Friend, and I regret that he chose not to be more of an apologist for Quaker theism in his fine paper. My position remains that a thorough, contextual, and systematic reading of the Quaker authors of the first one hundred fifty years cannot sustain non-theism as authentically Quaker. Yet I would rather respond constructively to David's paper as a theological colleague responding to an emerging theology that raises fertile theological opportunities to attain the mature theological credibility non-theism does not yet have.

I begin with some inattentive mishaps in David's paper which are probably not integral to non-theism, but which must be noted and, one hopes, overcome. Next, I post some constructive systematic questions for the non-theist project that suggest research directions. The themes I identify are all raised by David's paper and I hope they are accepted in the spirit in which they are offered—as advice on building a strong theological foundation to ground what is, at the moment, a widely attractive but intellectually undisciplined trend. Finally, I raise some questions about global context.

I.

David Boulton is an important mover and shaker in the evolution of non-theism among white, liberal, affluent, “First-World” Quakers. The revised version of his paper removed its first-person passages, obscuring his seminal involvement and projecting an artificial distance, as though Churchill could write about Yalta and neglect to

mention himself. David's first-person recollections lent warmth and authenticity to the account and signaled that his is not a contextually rich academic article, but a kind of founder's memoir of the personal inspiration he derives from historical ideas and figures. A rigorous historical account of the rise and progress of the movement is highly desirable, for non-theism is potent force in the white, liberal, affluent, Anglophone corners of our religious Society.

David's paper highlights generally the need for contextually-informed historical and theological scholarship. Non-theism among non-pastoral Friends is a significant fruit of the development of liberal Quakerism that began in the late nineteenth-century and is usually associated with Rufus Jones on this side of the pond. We are in desperate need of a thorough and nonpartisan history of liberalism's emergence as an intellectual force in Quakerism between the American Civil War and the Second World War, and of the concomitant changes in Quaker worship, discipline, and demography in the same period.¹ Jones in particular (a Gurneyite!) was a massive intellectual force who, almost single-handedly, reshaped modern Quaker theology (as an intellectual enterprise) and belief (widely disseminated among ordinary white, liberal, First-World Friends). We need a similar history of liberal Quakerism *after* the Second World War, in which non-theist and universalist Quakerism will be a major theme. The closest we have to that is Tom Hamm's excellent survey, *The Quakers in America*, attention to which would have enriched David's paper with some historical context. Nonetheless, this important founder's account is valuable precisely because it helps us understand this evolution from a founder's perspective (hence my urging that he restore the first-person narratives).

II.

Because David's essay is not a research-intensive, contextually rich paper, it's a little unfair to critique it as though it were. There are, however, some important things which deserve mention as non-theists construct and narrate their own history. Like *all* Quakers, non-theists need to be acutely vigilant against projecting twentieth-century ideals backward onto earlier Friends. Two examples of this, which David derives from the milieu of Quaker liberalism, are the misunderstanding of "seeking" and the confounding of George Fox's view of God with that of, say, Rex Ambler. If non-theist friends are "reverent seekers,"

let them not be confused with the Seekers of seventeenth-century England about which Douglas Gwyn has written so compellingly. Modern liberal Quakerism validates “seeking” without an object—intransitive seeking, in grammatical terms. But in what other linguistic context does one “seek” without seeking *something*? A thorough reading of the early Quakers cannot validate objectless seeking as valuable to them. The key moment of conversion, without which one was not a Quaker, had to do with *finding*, a moment or season of definitive transformation, with a normative shape, related to a definitive intervention by Jesus Christ. How that definitive experience transformed into a shapeless seeking in the twentieth century is a piece of theological history that deserves attention.

Similarly, David remarks on “George Fox’s only slightly less radical understanding of God as more inner light than outer superman – a view which, we should remember, was denounced as ‘atheism’ by religious traditionalists.” A careful (or even casual) reading of Fox’s works simply cannot sustain the notion that his view of God was radical *in the way that David suggests*. Far more novel was his understanding of how Jesus Christ enters, judges, redeems, and transforms the human person, but as Hugh Barbour demonstrated so eloquently fifty years ago, this understanding was only radical in the sense of being radically *Puritan*. If Fox was accused of atheism, recall that this epithet meant something entirely different in Civil War England than today.

Two more inaccuracies cannot go unremarked. First, to insert Dietrich Bonhoeffer into a list of non-theist heroes on account of his “religionless Christianity” simply cannot be sustained by even the shallowest attention to his actual writing. What Bonhoeffer objected to was the state church’s capitulation to state power; he was interested, in pure Christian faith without an ecclesiastical structure tied to the state’s purse strings. Bonhoeffer is called “neo-orthodox” in company with Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, far more obstinately Christocentric than even many liberal Christians can comfortably accept. Second, Lucretia Mott was a key actor in a progressive movement among Hicksite Friends, and she is indeed a classical 19th-century liberal, but her remark about heresy cannot be responsibly adduced as evidence of non-theism. Her magnificent sermons certainly mark her as a “second founder” in the Hicksite branch but do not in any respect mark her as even a proto-non-theist. How she understood herself to be a heretic, and how others so understood her, would be an excellent paper; and we need her sermons to be rescued from their current obscure edition and published much more widely.

III.

Enough with critique of that sort. From here, I'd like to indicate how David's sketch of Quaker non-theism might point toward future research and scholarship necessary for non-theism to claim a place as a carefully constructed, contextually informed theological position in the Religious Society of Friends.

1. We need a book-length, rich, *theological* argument for non-theism as a compelling theological position, with Friends as its audience. It would need to draw from key thinkers like Cupitt and Robinson, but I would add the Americans Thomas J. J. Althizer (*The Death of God*) and, more importantly, Mark Taylor (*A-theology*), as well as the French (Catholic!) thinker Jean-Luc Marion (*God without Being*) and similar theologians. The feminist critique of God-language would surely play a key role.

2. Non-theism needs to account historically and systematically for its claim to be authentically Quaker, including: (A) a thoughtful, contextually astute interpretation of the last 150 years of *liberal* Quaker history, including the emergence of universalism; (B) a thorough, responsible grounding in the theology of *early* Quakers; and (C) careful defense of how non-theism can relate constructively the robust, delightful, and evolving *Christology* that was so indispensable to the first 150 years of Quakerism. That is, non-theism needs to articulate systematically how it understands the theological normativity of classical Quaker thought. (So does every other form of Quakerism.) Liberal Quakers assert that we are “creedless,” but today we mean “we hold no beliefs in common, and do not believe we ought to,” when the early Quaker rejection of creeds was something altogether different. By what principles do we judge non-theism—or anything else—authentically Quaker (or not)?

3. Likewise, non-theists need to articulate a systematic account of “personal experience.” Among liberal Friends, one's private experiences seem to be the highest theological source of authority. The early Quakers were not interested in the communal validation of private individual experiences, but in the divine judgment of all human experiences and drawing human beings into a common, shared, redeeming experience, with normative features, clear boundaries, and rejection of what fell outside those boundaries. What constitutes “experience” in an age when psychology, cognitive science, neurology, cultural anthropology, sociology, and history have deconstructed

both “experience” and the category “private”? If “God” is a human construct of mythic proportions, the notion of “personal” experience is exponentially more so. (Catholic theologians have found the work of Michael Polanyi philosophically fruitful here.) Further, if personal experience is indeed the crowned authority, a compelling non-theism requires a responsible, dialogical, and *theological* account of the *personal experience* of Friends who affirm the existence of God as something other than a “language” translatable into other languages, and their *personal experience* of salvation through Christ Jesus as something other than superstition about a superman.

4. How can a theologically paramount personal experience be the foundation for *common* action or common values? What are the sources, norms, warrants, and arguments for *ethics*, of any sort, in a nontheist theology? What compelling criteria are there for goodness, truth, beauty, justice? Philosophy, psychology, and cultural anthropology have dismantled any notion of natural law or universal value, and non-theism is by nature non-foundational. What are the non-theist arguments and authorities for the Quaker testimonies?

5. What is non-theist ecclesiology—the point, the purpose, and the mission of a gathered body of Friends? Is it anything more than a vessel for a diversity of disconnected private experiences and thought-systems? I can get that in my bowling league. Why church?

IV.

As a trend attractive to large numbers in the white, affluent, educated, Anglophone corners of Quakerism, non-theism is a wide-open field for theological reflection. There are many theological burdens it needs to assume if it is to claim its place as something more than a Quaker peculiarity. (The same may be said of most other forms of Quakerism.) I have sought here to articulate some major theological projects that non-theists might take up to further the cause.

The largest challenge for non-theist Quakers may be the global context of twenty-first century Quakerism.² Quaker non-theism is the intellectual product of white, affluent, educated, Anglophone, “First World” Friends, and often speaks as if there is little or no Quakerism outside that world. As David Jenkins has so powerfully demonstrated in books like *The Next Christendom*, the future of all Christianities is not in with Europeans and their colonial descendents. How does

non-theist Quakerism account for, and interact constructively with, the overwhelming majority of Friends around the world who are not white, not affluent, not primarily Anglophone, and who are very evangelical? In the United States, liberal and universalist Friends are slowly beginning to take account of the existence of the hundreds of thousands of Friends in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and even of the evangelical or pastoral Friends in North America, with a new spirit of encounter, engagement, and dialogue. American liberal Friends do still write books that act as though Philadelphia Quakerism is all there is (Robert Lawrence Smith's *Book of Quaker Wisdom* is my favorite example of this white ethnic parochialism), and universalist Quakers still often speak of southern-hemisphere evangelical Christianity in patronizing terms that border on overt racism, but many are branching out remarkably to encounter the rest of the Quaker world that has continued happily without them for a hundred years. British liberal Friends would do well to do the same. I would be fascinated to see how an expanded, global experience that included listening deeply and authentically, and non-judgmentally, to the "personal experiences" of Friends from Kenya to Bolivia to the Philippines, might shape nontheist Quaker theology.

Then again, there's a danger, because so many of us white liberal Friends have done this, and ended up Christians.