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Glenn Hinson's "Love at the Heart of Things" - Book Review

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HINSON, Glenn E., *Love at the Heart of Things* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications; Nashville, TN: The Upper Room Books, 1998), pp. 392. \$16.50. ISBN 0-87574-929-1 (Pendle Hill), 0-8358-0860-2 (Upper Room Books).

The wide range of Douglas Steere's interests and activities presents his biographer with a daunting task: Quaker global minister, ecumenical pioneer, contemplative scholar, midwife of saints, existential realist (philosopher), to quote some of E. Glenn Hinson's chapter headings. Hinson has succeeded in giving an impression, both of the scope and scale of Steere's influence, and of the character and abiding concerns of the man himself.

Steere (1901–95) was for most of his working life a professor of philosophy at Haverford College, but his work there receives what at first seems surprisingly little attention in Hinson's biography. For Douglas Steere, Hinson writes, 'philosophy served as a handmaiden in his quest to know God' (p. 321) and it is with that quest that the biography is primarily concerned. Knowing God is inseparably linked, however, for Steere and for his biographer, with the vocation of service. The co-inherence of Steere's intellectual development, his spiritual development, and his work for Friends, together with the profound reliance of all of these on his prayer life and on his relationship with his wife Dorothy, is one of the strongest impressions the biography leaves with the reader. From 1932, when he became a member, the Society of Friends was an important context for all these aspects of his life.

The influences on Steere's thought are both documented explicitly, in the chapters dealing with his academic work, and allowed to emerge in the narrative. Early research on von Hügel and close association with Rufus Jones were of enduring importance, as was work on Kierkegaard and Pascal; Steere's existential realism combines these in an account of the mystical experience that neither absolutizes nor annihilates the experiencing subject. Among important Quaker influences were John Woolman, whose life is frequently referred to as a particular inspiration for Steere, and Isaac Pennington. Steere's contribution to the understanding of spirituality, in both academic and faith communities, is perhaps his most significant intellectual legacy. His study of prayer as the paradigmatic form of religious practice was significant not only for his academic teaching, but also for his work as retreat leader and spiritual guide. It is clear that, while Steere's roots in the Christian tradition were very deep,

the particular foci of his research made it especially easy for him to enter into dialogue with thinkers from different religious traditions. Even clearer is his concern, as a Protestant thinker and teacher, to rehabilitate for Protestantism concepts and practices that have often been regarded with suspicion: sainthood, spiritual exercises, contemplative prayer.

The biography reveals the extent of Steere's personal involvement in numerous projects and programmes of central importance for twentieth-century Quakerism. His role in the foundation and continuing life of Pendle Hill is described in some detail, as is his establishment and leadership of the American Friends Service Committee's Finnish Relief programme after the Second World War. His extensive international ministry of visitation among Quakers, in his sabbaticals and in retirement, is shown in its significance both for the world community of Quakers and for international understanding more generally. Steere was instrumental in the formation of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, contributing both practical knowledge of international Quakerism and a theological articulation of the unity of Quaker experience.

Reflection on unity and diversity, and a commitment to dialogue across boundaries of all kinds, is a consistent theme. Steere appears as an advocate, both of the ecumenical movement among Quakers and of Quakers' distinctive concerns and witness within the ecumenical movement through the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality, his participation as an observer in the Second Vatican Council, and numerous lectures and publications. Hinson identifies the (perhaps less felicitous nowadays) phrase 'mutual irradiation' and its practical exemplification as Steere's key contribution to the ecumenical movement; it describes close encounters between individuals and communities, in which the integrity of each is preserved but there is the mutual possibility of transformation through the encounter. The connection with his understanding of mystical experience—being irradiated in the encounter with God—is clear.

As might be expected, the biography sometimes reads as what Steere's life must have been, a whirlwind of meetings with very different people in different contexts. Personalism in philosophy, knowing God in one's spiritual life, and working for peace through personal contacts and the development of friendships, were all of central significance to Steere. Some of the people, particularly Steere's family, emerge as well-drawn characters; at other times one feels that the lists of names could have been omitted or shortened, although for those au fait with the various

circles in which Steere moved their mere mention might be sufficient. At the same time, every reader of the biography will probably find references to meetings about which she would have liked to know more: what did Steere talk about with Martin Heidegger? What did he think of the young Nelson Mandela? The lists of names—inevitably, mostly names of men—make one sympathize with Steere's daughter who was uncomfortable with her father's tendency to refer to certain leaders as the 'key people' and became 'an active feminist, perceiving many unsung women to be the ones who held life together' (p. 75). This biography, by making explicit Dorothy Steere's role in many of the projects discussed, helps to ensure that one such woman does not remain unsung. Hinton deserves credit for his sensitive handling of the difficult as well as the positive aspects of Steere's relationship with his family. Both daughters obviously felt burdened at times by the high ideals implied by Steere's work and life. (An indication, perhaps, of the dangers of an unthinking adoption of Steere's emphasis on sainthood without the theological counterbalances he was able to supply?) The final years of Steere's life, during which he suffered from Alzheimer's disease, are not ignored as might have been the temptation but are described in moving terms from the perspective of those who cared for him.

Hinton has, as the headings listed above suggest, chosen to portray Steere's life and work in chapters devoted to themes, rather than chronologically. While it is easy to see why this approach was chosen for a many-stranded life such as Steere's, it does cause problems for the reader. One easily loses track of Steere's life as a whole, the author is often forced to repeat information in different contexts, and at times important events are passed over with what appears to be unjustified haste, pending full discussion in a subsequent chapter. (For example, in the third chapter, which deals with Steere's education, we read: "[He] prepared to take the comprehensive examinations for admission to the PhD. Doubts assailed him but a mystical experience the night before he took the exams enabled him to proceed. He slept well and passed." Readers who would like to know more about that mystical experience find a full description in the chapter on spiritual growth, but meanwhile are left puzzled).

The biography draws extensively on Steere's unpublished journal—especially for accounts of his early life—on the recollections of his family, and particularly on his vast correspondence. The result is a book that speaks very much in Steere's own voice, with occasional divergent

tones, as noted above, coming mainly from family members. Hinton's work is not, then, primarily a critical assessment, but a sympathetic, accessible and often engaging presentation of a man whose contribution to Quaker—and to Christian—life and thought is undeniably great. It will be particularly useful for those with a knowledge of Steere's writings, who wish to place them in the context of his life, or, conversely, for those who want to learn something about the theology that arose from and inspired his international activities.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Rachel Muers is working on a PhD in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University, studying treatments of the theme of silence in recent Christian theology. Her MPhil thesis (1998) was on Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology of the Holy Spirit in relation to Quaker belief and practice. She is a member of the Quaker Theology Seminar.

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