

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Roberts, Arthur O. (2010) "A Response to David Johns and Paul Anderson," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 114, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol114/iss1/4>

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A RESPONSE TO DAVID JOHNS AND PAUL ANDERSON

ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

Thank you, **David Johns**, for an evocative paper! You may be right that Friends are in too great a disarray to present a deliberated, conciliar apologetic. Perhaps *aspiring* to write one has merit, nonetheless: to feed intellectually hungry members or inquirers, to establish Quaker credibility among other Christians, to defend against “pugnacious challenges by atheists.” Like other rational systems, clear theology enhances freedom. Maurice Creasey’s call of four decades ago for a common vision rings with prophetic urgency today. Truth and love go hand in hand. Clear proclamation is an essential part of the Christian witness, along with fellowship and service. Let’s face it squarely; our cluttered Quaker house could use some intellectual tidying up! Especially if done within a context of penitence and prayer. (Hope nudges me to look for the Holy Spirit to choose the tools and oversee the project.) Ecumenical and global perspectives *are* important preparatory stances. At the same time, seriously interacting with the truth content of Barclay’s *Apology*, not just as prideful custodians of a classic theological statement, might be helpful to a generation acculturated widely, but not deeply.

Yes, Barclay can be, and in certain eras of our history has been, read through dualistic lens, but one can also read him through the lens of a holistic understanding of human nature. As noted more specifically in my response to Anderson, early Friends interpreted and acted upon scriptural teachings as consonant with the full range of epistemic modalities: sense, reason, and intuition. The “truncated doctrine of creation” is being replaced in our times by a more coherent blend of creation and redemption theology, yielding a fuller, more biblical, understanding of salvation—both earthly and heavenly.

I like David’s emphases that offer alternatives to a full-blown apologetic, at least for now. The first is a call to conscientious *ecumenicity*, acknowledging common Christian bonds, spurning elitism in respect to divine revelation, transcending a sectarian stance of “contrast and critique,” willing to receive as well as to give insights,

open to accept correction. A die-hard separatist might surmise Friend Johns has been contaminated by fraternization with the “world’s” people! A case can be made, however, that Friends demonstrate their ecumenicity at the *most mutually beneficial levels* when they are clearest about their doctrines and their testimonies, and are faithful to them.

The second alternative is a call to *global* collaborative theological dialogue. David states:

“An interesting project would be an internationally collaborative one, where Friends thinkers not only state their respective visions but, where they actually work together on a constructive statement—a consensus response to a specific theological or social question.”

Friends, could we accept this as a prophetic call to action? The Quaker Theological Discussion Group may well be one group that, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, could give impetus to and direction for a *world-wide and representative* gathering of theologically and spiritually prepared Friends. Perhaps the Friends World Committee for Consultation would consent to provide logistic support, as it did for North American Friends several decades ago in the “Faith and Life” conferences. The “Global South” has much to offer the rest of us. Let us ask the Living Christ to renew us, so that with clear and impassioned words we may communicate more ably a normative Quaker understanding of the Christian faith.

I conclude my response to Johns’ essay with excerpts from a prayer by Robert Barclay, concluding a sermon “From Death to Sin to Life in Christ” (May 16, 1688):

O blessed powerful Lord God! that those that are not convinced and persuaded of thy way and blessed truth, that are not come into it to partake of the life of it, that are not yet come to live to thee, and to live in obedience to thy blessed Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who are not come under the power of his cross, may be crucified to the world, and have the world crucified to them: Lord awaken them, utter thy voice that shakes the mountains, rend the veil, and draw in their hearts, and minds, and affections, from earthly and fading objects; that they may come to breathe after thee, and feel the Spirit in them. (Quaker Homiletics Online Anthology)

I commend **Paul Anderson** for preserving an apologetic form—a rational ordering of belief—and for expanding Biblical textual support while building upon Barclay’s propositional outline. Whether

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“authentic spirituality” is a “fitting parallel” term to “Christian divinity” might be debated, given its person-centered rather than God-centered orientation, but at least it conveys meaning credibly within our 21st-century culture.

My responses to certain propositions reflect a concern for greater faithfulness in our Friends’ witness. I appreciate also those propositions to which I have not responded, and hope that they, too, will elicit thoughtful discussion. My greetings to all of you!

“The Immediacy of Revelation.” (#1) Barclay challenged a *religious* priestly monopoly doling out salvation and its blessings. We face and must challenge *secular* dispensers of the good life, skilled in sensory manipulation and rational dogmatics. In this context Friends’ emphasis upon Christ as present teacher should extend beyond appeal to in-group guidance, to encompass leadings in respect to *all* significant decisions, personal and corporate, recovering our testimony for intuitive discernment of truth for every-day choices as well as for occasional prophetic leadings. And, to keep normatively authentic, let us re-emphasize our testimony that it is the Risen Christ who is the present and inward Teacher, not some mythic inner concept illustrated by an exemplary Galilean long ago.

“Scripture as the Inspired Word of God.” (#2) Paul aptly summarizes historic Quaker understandings of the Bible’s place within God’s revelatory work: “an objective referent by which to check subjective leadings.” He rightly stresses a need to read Scripture with Spirit-guided discernment. If “all truth is God’s truth,” then we ought also to look carefully to the book of nature, not only for its bounty and beauty, but for what God can show us about his creation and our stewardship. Thankfully scientists such as Francis Collins, *The Language of God*, are helping renew a unified concept of revelation, so badly broken in past decades. Friends have a heritage that accepts revelation at all levels of life. Let’s be faithful to it.

“The Human Condition.” (#3) Historically, religious renewals are preceded by a wave of penitence. Perhaps penitence for sins of arrogance will presage a renewal elsewhere among the world’s Quakers, as it has amongst many of our African brothers and sisters.

“The Universal Light of Christ.” (#4) This formulation is a major contribution to theology. Paul, please restore the omitted modifier: “*and saving*”! Barclay successfully challenged exclusivist doctrines that touted God’s light sufficient to condemn everyone but

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salvific only for the elect. Barclay's conjoining of the Incarnate and Inward Christ guards against Gnostic heresies—new as well as old. It is a biblically authentic and culturally timely universalism that joins the particular and the universal in acknowledging God's full revelatory power. May Friends regain clarity on this doctrine and articulate it effectively.

“Sanctification and Perseverance.” (#6) In the past century this was a powerful testimony that, unfortunately, degenerated into legalism. Now it suffers from neglect or outright antinomianism. Our culture extends tolerance beyond limits of virtue, and in response the church stretches the meaning of grace to let it cloak sin. As a result the “empowering Spirit” is blocked. In his introduction to the *Journal* of George Fox, Penn lamented such abuse, calling it “sinning more easily” at Christ's cost. I pray the Quaker Theological Discussion Group will help Friends renew a doctrine of holiness. Let it be an *inclusive* doctrine, embracing conversion experience, spiritual discipline, artistic insight and expression, and conduct. Yes, and let it embrace ecstasy—mystical, physical, and intellectual. The Spirit blows where it will! I commend for your reading Carole Spencer's *Holiness, the Soul of Quakerism* (Paternoster, 2007).

“Inclusive Ministry” (#7) I'd like to see more emphasis upon *ordinary* vocations, including “blue collar” jobs, as ministry. I think both Martin Luther and George Fox would say *amen!*

Thanks for listening and discussing thoughtfully!