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In Person and In Print: Engaging in Theological Discussion as Friends

Celebrating 50 Years of *Quaker Religious Thought*

By Paul Anderson

The vision of the founding organizers of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group (QTDG) and the journal, *Quaker Religious Thought (QRT)*, was to create a venue where serious theological dialogue could happen among Friends about important subjects of the day. Over the course of 111 issues of the journal and some two dozen gatherings for focused theological discussion, that vision has indeed been realized and deserves to be celebrated.

The first meeting of QTDG was in 1957, but the first issue of its journal, *QRT*, was published in 1959. And so it is this year that we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the journal with a special celebration June 22-24 at Olney Friends School in Barnesville, Ohio. Barnesville offers a historic setting that is dear to the memory of early participants in QTDG, as several of its meetings during its first two decades were held there.

In its recognizable blue cover, *QRT* is subscribed to by leading theological libraries around the world. It is prized by individual subscribers and many meeting libraries among Friends of all persuasions.

Ironically, one of the pressing questions discussed during the early years of QTDG was whether Quakers *should engage at all* in theological discussion. Given that Fox and the early

Friends are thought of as being “non-creedal,” might Friends be abandoning their Testimony to the dynamic character of God’s Truth and transformative spiritual experience if they got involved in theology? I suppose that’s always a danger; then again, that particular Testimony, as well as all the others, is itself a theological conviction. The question is *how* to think about our Testimonies and their implications, not *whether* to reflect on them. So, as long as we’re *doing* theology, I suppose we should try to do it well, rather than poorly.

There is also a special need to engage in theological discussion *as* Friends, rather than simply responding to the propositions of others. When you look at the topics covered over the years, it becomes clear that thoughtful engagement of important religious issues provides a resource for all Friends, as well as those outside the movement, and that the treasures of *QRT* issues over the years still deserve to be mined and put into service by later readers.

In looking over the back issues of *QRT*, the early years sought to establish Quaker positions on leading theological subjects (the Holy Spirit, Christ, God, humanity, the church, peace, the Bible, authority, sacraments, the world, ministry, worship), followed by focusing on the explosive vitality of early Friends. The middle years saw the addressing of contemporary theological subjects from a Quaker perspective and such topics as the place of Friends within the ecumenical movement. Recent treatments have reflected the diversity of perspective among Friends, continuing to address leading subjects of the day.

A delightful part of the latest issue features the editors highlighting their favorite essays during their years of editorship. I would also point readers to issue number 105, where the back issues are listed and reviewed by Susan Jeffers and Shane Kirkpatrick. In reflecting upon the rise and progress of *QRT* and QTDG, we see the development of Quaker thought over the last half century and, most importantly, the providing of a solid reflective foundation for the next.

Perhaps the best antidote to creedalism is experiential and dynamic theological engagement. That being the case, *QRT* and QTDG not only provide a source of spiritual vitality for Friends, they do so for the world beyond, as well.

Paul Anderson is Professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies at George Fox University. Author of over 160 published essays and several books, he has served as editor of *QRT* since 2000. For back issues of *QRT* and registration information for the anniversary celebration, visit: <http://theo-discuss.quaker.org/>.



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