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QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

A Quaker Theology of Education

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**Cumulative No. 112
June 2009**

QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Cumulative Number 112

June 2009

Sponsored by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group

(<http://theo-discuss.quaker.org/>)

The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and application of our faith.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

In 2007 an important collection of essays on Quaker higher education was published, outlining the histories of fifteen American colleges and universities that were founded by Friends.¹ While the work is more historical than theological, it still raises important issues of interest to the readers of *Quaker Religious Thought*. What were the original visions and missions of these fifteen institutions founded by Friends, and how have they developed? To what degree have these institutions maintained their distinctively Quaker and religious identities, and what has been their impact upon the formation of spiritual leadership among Friends? In what ways has the world been impacted through these Friends-founded institutions of higher learning, and how might leaders within these colleges and universities articulate, recover, or maintain a sense of mission that preserves the vision of the founders as embodied within later settings and situations? These *are* theological questions, and for this reason we devoted a special session of Quaker Theological Discussion Group to “A Quaker Theology of Education,” at which the essays in this issue were presented in Boston last November (2008).

Jamie Johnson’s essay analyzes the tendency of Quaker colleges and universities to diminish not only their Quaker ethos but also their Christian identity over the last century and more. Likewise, the tendency of evangelical Quaker colleges and universities is to emphasize their Christian heritage while diminishing their Quaker convictions—also risking forfeiture of an earlier mission. Johnson here poses a way forward within which a recovery of Friends testimonies might yet appeal to non-religious populations, while at the same time offering a distinctive opportunity for advance among intentionally Christian Quaker institutions. In doing so, Johnson issues a call for Quaker educators to once more impart the cutting edge of the field in being true to a Quaker theology of education rather than forfeiting a historic birthright.

The focus of my essay is narrower; it seeks to sketch the mission of the Christ-centered Quaker educational institution in ways that may yet be relevant to some Quaker institutions of higher learning. While the degree to which any of the fifteen colleges and universities founded by Friends aspires to embrace either the Christ-centered or the Quaker mantle will vary, I believe there is value in articulating a vision at least for consideration. After *Founded by Friends* was

published, I was invited to speak at the 90th anniversary of the founding of Barclay College in Haviland, Kansas—an institution that was founded by my grandfather, Scott T. Clark. I delivered the outline of this essay in September 2007 at Barclay College, Friends University, Malone College (now University), and later at George Fox University as a means of extending the impact of the collection further. In doing so, I articulate my own approach to a Quaker theology of education.

I appreciate Caroline Whitbeck's response to the papers by Jamie Johnson and myself. Her analyses as first-rate philosopher are incisive and well worth considering; Jamie and I both modified our essays a bit following her critique. At the November QTGD meetings in Boston, Andy Grannell also delivered an excellent paper on the vision of Moses Brown for the Quaker prep school in Rhode Island bearing his namesake; I hope that a similar volume will be gathered of essays developing the histories and missions of Quaker academies and secondary schools in America in the not-too-distant future. The same could be done featuring Quaker schools in Britain and Ireland, and even more extensive lists of Quaker schools in Africa and Latin America also merit book-length treatments.

The book review for this year focuses on *Sacred Compass; The Spiritual Way of Discernment*, written by Brent Bill.² I am delighted that the publication of Brent's book coincides with a variety of other efforts in the works just now to make Quaker wisdom on discernment accessible to the larger Christian world.³ In doing so, Brent Bill introduces wider audiences to discernment-related wisdom emerging from his experience as a Quaker leader and writer, and Galen McNemar Hamann and Betsy Cazden provide engaging reviews to which the author responds. While the path to discernment is fraught with tendencies to objectify and subjectivize the venture, Friends have asserted that God continues to speak, and that humans can be led effectively in the world today. Of course, this is a humbling endeavor, as we see through a glass darkly, and we are ever mindful of the "earthen vessels" with which we seek to apprehend the present leading. Brent's book helps us get there, though, and the reviews by Galen and Betsy provide a serviceable engagement that deepens our appreciation for the territory covered.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of *Quaker Religious Thought*, and in celebration of that fact, a residential Quaker Theological Discussion Group conference is being held at Olney Friends School

in Barnesville, Ohio June 22-24. Our goal was to make it accessible to those attending the Friends Association for Higher Education Meetings at Guilford College June 18-21, and returning to Barnesville, the historic site of several of the earlier QTDG meetings, is something of a homecoming. Availing far more sustained discussions than our sessions held at different sites around the nation over the last decade or more, this promises to be an excellent opportunity for theological engagement among Friends. Registration and a more detailed schedule are available on the website (<http://theo-discuss.quaker.org>), and our sessions will address the following subjects:

- A Quaker Apology for the 21st Century
- Celebrating the Rise and Progress of *QRT* and QTDG
- The Future of Quakerism (from twelve regional and organizational perspectives)
- Quakers and Levinas
- Early Friends and the Kingdom of God.

All are welcome, and the essays will be included in future issues of *Quaker Religious Thought*.

— Paul Anderson

ENDNOTES

- 1 John W. Oliver Jr., Charles L. Cherry, and Caroline L. Cherry, eds., *Founded by Friends; The Quaker Heritage of Fifteen American Colleges and Universities* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007).
- 2 Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008.
- 3 See in particular the essays in *QRT* #106-107 and the website for the George Fox University Congregational Discernment Project: www.georgefox.edu/discernment.