

1-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Whitbeck, Caroline (2009) "A Quaker Theology of Education -- A Response," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 112, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol112/iss1/4>

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A QUAKER THEOLOGY OF EDUCATION: A RESPONSE

CAROLINE WHITBECK

It has been my pleasure to spend much of the week with these papers and I have found them good company. By way of introduction to QTGD, perhaps I should say that on the one hand, every Meeting of which I have been a member has been affiliated with FGC, so I suppose that makes me a Liberal Friend. On the other hand, I owe a great intellectual debt to Stanley Hauerwas for showing me what is wrong with Liberal Thought. Finally, although some find 17th century Friends difficult to understand, they make perfect sense to me, and they pose a truer path than the assumptions of modern culture.

Jamie Johnson seeks to use the categories developed by George Denis O'Brien in his book, *All the Essential Half-Truths About Higher Education*, viz., concentration, cohorting, continuity, connection, commitment, and conversation which Johnson seeks to view through the lens of Quaker testimonies. Unfortunately I have not read O'Brien's book and was not entirely sure what he meant by his key terms. From his language and his emphasis on virtue and character, I suspect he is influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre's ethics, however.

I do recognize the terms that Jamie Johnson uses to characterize major Friends testimonies, and although one might quarrel with any one-word summary of a Friends testimony, contemporary Friends commonly do use these words to name Friends testimonies. I must object, however, to one of them. I regard "equality" a dangerous term because it is widely used to deny difference and the diversity of gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-11) as a hedge against the competitive individualist ideology that passes for common sense in the United States today. That "common sense" views all in terms of winning and losing, according to competitive ideology; different gifts means a differential in the ability to compete. For fear that any difference will mean that we are "losers," many prefer to deny all difference by maintaining we are all "equal." By contrast, 1 Cor. 12:25-31 views diversity of giftedness as serving the blessed community. In Jamie Johnson's paper, I take "equality" to mean having the same political and social rights, a meaning derived from its use in the *Declaration of Independence*. Despite some dilligence

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searching, I have found little use of the terms “equal” or “equality” among 17th century Friends, and none in connection with any of what we would regard as testimonies. In particular, Margaret Fell does not include in her argument for women speaking in church a claim of political and social equality for women.¹

What I believe to have been the first formulation of the claim of equal political and social rights for both women of all races and conditions, and of men of color, including those who had been enslaved, is to be found in Angelina Grimké’s 1836 *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*.² Although in 1831, Angelina Grimké had followed her sister, Sarah Grimké into Quakerism and Angelina was still a Friend—oddly enough an Orthodox Quaker—in 1836 when she wrote this groundbreaking abolitionist tract, Angelina was disowned by Friends in 1838 for marrying the abolitionist, Theodore Weld (a non-Friend). Thus her time with Friends was short and, as Angelina herself noted,³ Friends had confined themselves to regarding all people as having the same *spiritual* endowment but had made no claim to *political and social equality* for women or for men of color. (Historian Gerda Lerner in her book, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina*, argues for the influence on the sisters of their father and their brother, Thomas, both lawyers.)

Certainly abolitionists after Grimke use the concept and often cite the assertion in the *U.S. Declaration of Independence*, that “all men are created equal endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights....” Famously, Abraham Lincoln referred to that Enlightenment ideal in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. That ideal comes to us from Thomas Jeffersonian and Enlightenment thought rather than from Friends. I, like many other Friends, am a U.S. citizen and accept the ideals set forth in the country’s founding documents as valid foundations for the democracy in which we live. Thus, I am glad that U.S. law recognizes all people to be equal before the law and do not desire a Christian state (any more than Hauerwas does).

Enlightenment ideology has given rise to an individualism that I find quite destructive to Friends values, however. Thus it is very dangerous to confuse Friends testimonies with Enlightenment assumptions, even if we accept some of those assumptions as valid. Enlightenment thought contains many elements that are not merely different from those of Friends, but which contradict those of Friends. The Enlightenment had, for example, an exaggerated view of the place of reason in governing human affairs. It also rather naively assumed

that people from every culture would agree on what reason shows. This is a thesis that Alasdair disputes in a work nicely titled⁴ *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

Today, individualism and the competitive social expectations that accompany it have made any difference in skills or gifts an occasion for resentment and envy. The ideal of equality has expanded beyond spiritual and even political equality to create the demand that we see everyone as equal in all (important) respects. Many Meetings have abandoned the discernment of spiritual gifts for fear of occasioning such envy, and thus are more concerned with giving everyone a turn at serving in significant positions within the Meeting based incidental characteristics, such as length of time as a member of the Meeting, with predictably disastrous results. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if the only diversity with which contemporary Friends are comfortable is theological diversity.

Even if we eschew the individualist ideology that has emerged from Enlightenment assumptions, there is a danger in confusing the Friends testimony that the Spirit of God abides in every person with the democratic ideal of political equality. The danger is nicely illustrated in an instance in which the confusion arose in my own Meeting, where a Friend proposed a minute in support of same-sex marriage citing a supposed long-standing testimony of equality. Such a testimony was argued to make it *obvious* that same-sex couples have the same right to marry as heterosexual couples. That is an argument based on the assumption of the political and legal rights of all. That argument may be appropriate to make about the legality of same-sex marriage in a democracy like ours. It is not an argument as to why Friends should hold weddings of, or recognize, the marriages of same-sex couples. For that one must claim new revelation, a very weighty matter. As it happens, I am ready to witness that I have seen Quaker marriages between two people of the same sex, and my husband and I have reflected this witness by being married under care of the Meeting (after some years of consideration) without legal registration of the marriage until such time as same-sex couples can legally register their marriages. The question of whether Friends, as a religious body, ought to celebrate same-sex marriages is a different question from what follows from the same laws applying to everyone. It is a question of accepting new revelation. No one should be surprised if some Friends are slow to accept same-sex marriages. There are no shortcuts.

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Paul Anderson, in his essay on “The Mission of the Christ-Centered Quaker College,” seeks to address the mission of a Christ-Centered Quaker College. He spends about half of his time laying out “Friendly Thoughts on Higher Education.” He picks up on the late Elton Trueblood’s four point plan for redeeming a Christian college and then examines contributions on Quaker education by T. Canby Jones, Ward Harrington, Ron Johnson, Arthur Roberts, Hal Cope, and Paul Lacey, from whom Paul Anderson quotes six means by which an educator might facilitate welcome openness and responsiveness to Christ, who teaches us inwardly through the Holy Spirit.

Paul Anderson then goes on to lay out the elements of a Christ-centered Quaker Education and identifies twelve common traits of a Friendly Education, most of which center on the understanding of what Truth is. He continues to discuss the Christ-centered Quaker college as a welcome alternative and the formation of lives as a spiritual challenge.

Here I will share my question of whether what I take to be the alternative Christianity of Quakerism—and which, I agree, would be a welcome alternative—is fully conveyed in this paper. My concern is that the references to Christ in this paper seem much like that of other Christian bodies and seem to assume some sort of well-defined doctrine of the Trinity, which, thanks be to God, Quakers, at least 17th century Friends, do not have. This shows itself most clearly in the view attributed to Lacey, “Lacey lays out six elements of how the educator might facilitate welcome openness and responsiveness to Christ, who teaches us inwardly through the Holy Spirit,” which certainly suggests that Christ and the Holy Spirit are distinct and relate in a well defined way. I do not say that early Friends never talked this way, but rather that any who talked this way, also talked many other ways about that of God in us. They used terms like “seed”, “the Light” (which only occasionally is expanded to “the Light of Christ”), “the Holy Spirit” (which is sometimes rendered “the Holy Spirit of God”), and Fox even sometimes calls it “the grace of God.” In this, Friends follow the apostle, Paul, who, especially in *Romans*, frequently shifts from “Christ” to “Holy Spirit” and back again with little concern about a distinction.

Perhaps for the original disciples the distinctions between Christ and the Holy Spirit had an experiential base. They experienced Christ in Jesus, the Holy Spirit (before the Pentecost) as having spoken

through the prophets and perhaps through John the Baptist. For the Apostle Paul, as for us, living after the time of Jesus, there is no *experiential basis* for a hard and fast distinction.

Early Friends were clear that they did not need more theological distinctions than are in the Bible. The wisdom of this is shown in all the controversies they did not get into. Notice that if one does not have a clear distinction between Christ and the Holy Spirit, the question of whether the difference between Jesus and, say, Jeremiah, was one of kind or one of degree is not a sensible question. I am *not* making a back-handed denial of a difference, but rejecting the *doctrinal* question of difference or sameness.

Just as Quakerism is in danger of drifting into secular individualism, it is also in danger of wandering over into other forms of Christianity. Ours is an experiential religion. I find Paul Anderson's paper most compelling when he illuminates how our Quaker colleges can answer that of God in people and let them find the center of their lives in God/Christ/the Holy Spirit/the Light.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Today, I have found the term "equality" most often used to designate the testimony that Christ/the Christ Spirit/the Holy Spirit/the Seed/the Light/the Light of Christ/that of God (or even, in Fox's *Journal*, "the grace of God") exists in everyone and each person can heed it. One set of Friends First Day School curricular materials suggests, however, that it designates Fox's leading and practice (followed by other 17th century Friends) to refrain from paying "hat honor" or using titles. Although tipping hats has fallen out of favor in the larger society, and Friends may even be less likely than others to use titles, it is not clear that signs of "being no respecter of persons" is a testimony in current Friends practice. I have sought to refrain from using titles; I believe the effect has been simply to appear rude.
- 2 Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), especially chapters 8 through 12. As Gerda Lerner points out, Sarah Grimké in her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, who preached women's rights "most nobly and fearlessly" (192) saying among other things that "woman must feel that she is the equal, and is designed to be the fellow laborer of her brother" (193), but these sentiments were written a year after Angelina's tract.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 201.
- 4 MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1988).