

1-1-2009

## Author's Response

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### Recommended Citation

Bill, J. Brent (2009) "Author's Response," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 112 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol112/iss1/7>

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# SACRED COMPASS: THE WAY OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT— AUTHOR’S RESPONSE

J. BRENT BILL

First, I want to say how I appreciate being invited to this group and how delighted I am that *Sacred Compass* was chosen for review. I have my collection of *Quaker Religious Thought* safely ensconced on a shelf in my home office. I first ordered a set of *QRT* when I was in seminary at Earlham School of Religion and am always interested in reading the latest issue.

Second, I want to say that I do not consider myself a theologian of the rank of those assembled here. I am a congregational consultant and writer. While I did go to seminary and studied theology—and found myself profoundly impacted by the writings of Barth, the Niebuhrs, Bibfeldt, Küng and others—my life’s work has been more about congregational dynamics and personal spirituality than it has about the nuances of Process Theology, *heilsgeschichte*, the Atonement, and the like.

That is not to say I am wholly ignorant of the import of theology or theological discussion. As Tim Shapiro, the president of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations (and my boss) says in the Foreword to Anthony Robinson’s *What’s Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church*,<sup>1</sup> “All life is theological.”

In that sense, *all* my writing is theological. In fact, I would argue that all writing—not just mine—is in some very special way, theological. Even fiction. Maybe even especially fiction. One would, I think, be very hard pressed to say novels by Haven Kimmel or John Irving are not theological. But that’s another discussion. I say the above so that you understand that I stand before you to respond not as a theologian in a classic sense, but as a theologian defined by Webster’s *Dictionary* as one who is interested in the study of God and of God’s relation to the world.

I think it is important, as I address the reviews, to say whom I write for, as this, I think, addresses some of the criticisms in the reviews.

I wrote *Sacred Compass* primarily for a Christian audience, though I thought others, especially those readers interested in the concept of spiritual discernment, would find it helpful as well. I wrote it for the general reader—the person who might be browsing in their local bookstore. And, I saw it being used in congregations for adult study group or in retreat centers and in book clubs.

So whom wasn't I writing for? I was not writing primarily for Friends. I certainly had a Quaker in the back of mind reminding me that where two or three Friends are gathered in Fox's name there are four or five opinions, so I tried to be careful to state my views as those of one particular/peculiar Quaker. I did not have academic settings in mind while writing it, other than perhaps those institutions that have a strong campus ministry program funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc's Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. Those programs, I thought, might find this book helpful—though not necessarily in a classroom setting.

That said, let me begin addressing some of the criticisms I feel most worthy of a response. I'll begin with Galen's review.

The first criticism Galen posits is how "Christian" the book is. As Galen notes, "The challenge for educators in Friends Schools arises with the Christian language: can we use this text as a learning tool for our Jewish, Muslim, Hindi, Buddhist, and Atheist students? ... This book assumes that the reader will believe in God, and will have some understanding of and level of comfort with the Christian Bible; this leaves out students in Friends schools or elsewhere who will not assume or accept God's presence or Jesus as the Messiah/Christ." Indeed, *Sacred Compass* does make the assumptions she notes. Again, that was based on my primary readership—and my publisher's prime audience. There was an intent to leave some people "out." That intent was not because I wished to disenfranchise any individual or group, but because I felt, for this book to be true to my understanding of spiritual discernment and to be focused around any sort of authentic center, I had to make it explicitly Christian. Some other writer could certainly have taken a much broader approach.

Do I hope that those of other faiths, or no faith, might find parts of *Sacred Compass* helpful? Yes. When I've led workshops on this topic, for example, I always try to state that I am coming from my Christian perspective, that I understand and respect that others in the room may have a much different perspective than mine (Christian or

not) and that if there is anything helpful in what I have written or said, I hope they’ll take that and adapt it for their use, and if there isn’t, that they’ll please disregard it and be gracious unto me. I do think, as Galen suggests, that there are a variety of tools and exercises that can be adapted (“de-Christianized?”) for use in a religiously diverse classroom.

In Galen’s review, she also writes from a student’s perspective. I resonated with this, because I meant *Sacred Compass* to be no *Fodor’s Travel Guide to Discernment*, written by an expert in the field. Rather, it is written in a student’s voice. It is much more like Michael Palin’s *Pole To Pole*—an educated everyman’s journey. It is not that I don’t know anything about spiritual discernment, but rather that I wanted the voice to be one of a fellow traveller on the Jesus way. As I told *AARP: The Magazine*: “The older I get, the more I realize I don’t know everything.... There is so much more to learn about the mystery that is the divine, and I’ve got this thimbleful of knowledge, and I want more.” So *Sacred Compass* is, in some ways, the reflections of a student of the spiritual life, who is taking a break between classes and sharing with other students what he has learned.

Regarding Galen’s criticism that she “found the density overwhelming,” and that the “book needs some sort of directive in the beginning that would encourage readers to read it in small quantities with ample silence, and waiting through out,” she’s right. The organizing of this material was the most significant problem to be solved, and I’m not satisfied that I did it well. The original plan for the manuscript was to use a device similar to *Holy Silence’s* Quietude Queries and *Mind the Light’s* Illuminating Moments. Those exercises instruct the reader to put the book aside and think intentionally about the ideas that had just been presented. Perhaps I should have stuck with that format.

Finally, from a Friends’ perspective, I am certain that individual Friends (and, indeed, whole Meetings or Yearly Meetings) will find points to quibble about. I made points *I’d* probably quibble about too, depending on the day. I do not say that to discount the quibbling, but rather to remind you that I did not write this primarily as a book for Quaker readers. It was my attempt to take some of the best of Quaker thought about spiritual discernment and to make it available to the general Christian reader. Certainly our Religious Society is filled with theological diversity. The whole of society is filled with theological diversity, as well. And it is not diversity that I am insensitive to; my

best friend is, after all, a rabbi. But, just as I did not write this book for Aaron (though he's read it and says he likes it) I was not writing for our diverse Quaker population.

The criticism that bothers me the most, though, is at a personal level and is one that I had not perceived. And that is Galen's assertion (and one that Betsy somewhat shared) about the stories of me on the farm and Tom Fox's martyrdom. As she said, "But to suggest that this is an unexpected place and then comparing it to Bill's experience building and living on a farm in Indiana is too much of a stretch for me." Indeed. I would find it too much a stretch as well, and I actually did not intend it to be taken as a comparison.

The analogy I was striving for was that of a continuum. While the chapter began with the story of Fox—which is admittedly dramatic—and moves to the seemingly more mundane, I would propose that that which may seem mundane may be just as fraught with the momentous for those living in it as was Fox's martyrdom for him. This is not to downplay his martyrdom, but rather to address the fact that most of us have not been led to that particular place. Instead, we are led to places that seem quite ordinary and yet are laden with spiritual potentiality. At one level, Tom Fox's decisions and mine have no relation to each other. At another, if they are at the core of who we were each called to be, then they have everything in common: the whole of our lives changes in response to our following God into unexpected places. I would thus agree with Galen that "Tom Fox's compass led him to was not to 'a black plastic bag' but into the hearts and minds of Iraqi people and U.S. soldiers in Iraq." And, I would add, into the hearts and minds of many Friends in North America, who found renewed vigor for peace-making as a result of his faithfulness to a leading

Betsy notes that she found my "treatment of Tom Fox seems somehow too bland. I'm not quite sure why." I'm not sure why either, except to say that I was very carefully trying to not to horrify or titillate (as I well remember the voyeuristic thrill of reading about martyrs of old, as youngster). Rather, I wanted to use Fox's story wisely and well, and humbly as a reminder that some of us will find Bonheoffer's dictum that "when Christ calls a man he bids him come and die" literally true.

Of course, Betsy's concern is firmly rooted in her query, "where is God in the face of active evil?" This is a question that I feel is outside the scope of what I was hoping to address in *Sacred Compass*, but it

is a question worthy of consideration. Why, if God is loving and kind and all knowing and all powerful, is there pain and suffering in this world? Why are the ones we love taken from us? Why are innocent office workers slaughtered on bright September mornings?

As the novelist William Griffin wrote in response to 9/11,<sup>2</sup>

Where was the mercifulness of Yahweh, Allah, God in all this? Right where it’s always been—in the thick of it. Death was swift, yes, but not unkind, what with the Divinity sweeping up to its bosom all the chosen souls before the final blows fell.

“Cut down in their prime,” the headlines proclaimed. But were they? Divinity, or so it seemed to me, had harvested them in fullness of his own time. September 11 proved to be their perfect day, perfect moment, perfect circumstance.

For the rest of us, Death was unkind, unmerciful, unbecoming a Divinity whose Scriptures boast his omnipotence.

On the ground, mercy was everywhere. Instantly everyone was a beloved of everyone else. Accidentally, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad were scrambling all over the rubble. Was this what Atta and friends intended? My dear Atta, what could you have been thinking of? You wounded us, yes, you wounded us grievously, but with the very same stroke you healed us.

God, whose praise we sing, is mysterious. Hence comes faith.

Faith ask us, as the southern writer Flannery O’Connor once said,<sup>3</sup> to have “the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery”—that mystery, of course, being God.

You’ll notice, of course, that I did not quote theologians above. Instead, I used the words of writers—some of the most gifted among us spiritually I think, because they are willing to wrestle with mystery and allow it to be without answer. Why answer that which cannot be answered?

It was partly my intent with *Sacred Compass* to engage the readers own spiritual imagination and questions—to push back, to go deeper, to wrestle with the mystery.

Betsy’s second query is “How do you remind yourself of what you no longer believe, or perhaps never have believed?” That is a powerful query, indeed. And she quotes me as saying, “[W]e are safe with God. As we find ourselves moving into unforeseen difficult times or situations, we need to remind ourselves that God is right—

and trustworthy.” That probably does sound awfully simplistic and perhaps a bit smug. It is not meant to be. Indeed, that sentence was written for me as much as it was written for any other reader. I have been hounded by the black dog of depression. There was a period in my life when I was plagued by daily panic attacks and depression and could barely get out of bed. I do not forget those days, nor did I write the words above lightly. I meant them and believe that they are true even when I cannot feel their truth and must rely on others to act it out for me in the way that they care for me in those days.

And while it may seem to Betsy that I dismissed “the resulting anguish [of my best friend’s suicide] as ‘pure emotion,’ which one should work to overcome by hope and faith,” that was not the impression I meant to leave or give to anyone struggling with that sort of horror. Instead, I was warning of the danger of relying on emotion as a reliable yardstick by which to measure God’s care for us. No, I did “not engage with the intellectual task—the theological task—of grappling with evil, sin, or whatever word you want to use to describe actions that seem entirely contrary to God’s will,” as Betsy rightly notes. At least not in how I chose to tell this story in *Sacred Compass*. But again, that was not the point of this particular book.

As a slight defense that the book does not completely ignore despair, I point to the story of in the section, “Lostness Can Lead to Hope,” about my friend getting the medical and psychiatric help she needed after long fighting depression. In fact, this particular friend has been offering copies of the book to her friends who fight depression as a way to encourage them.

The third query Betsy offers is “How does the compass help when your problem isn’t lack of guidance, it’s too much guidance, pulling you in multiple conflicting directions?” Again, a fine question—and one I think that *Sacred Compass* addresses, though perhaps not with the specificity Betsy wishes. I will stand by my assertion that “Leadings never go against God’s teachings.” However, I will say that I am less comfortable with seeing God’s teachings as quite so specific as some others do. Instead, I think that God’s teachings are less about specific actions (abortion, gay marriage, etc.) than I do that they are in line with the fruit of the Spirit outlined in the Galatians 5:22-23. In *Sacred Compass* I ask,

Do our leadings demonstrate:

- love
- joy
- peace

- longsuffering
- gentleness
- goodness
- faith
- meekness
- temperance

...But if we sense love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance behind and within our leadings, we can trust that we should follow them. God’s precepts are pure—and they will speak to the pure in us.

The larger question that Betsy’s query raises for me is how do I test the leading? What means do I use? And I feel that the book offers a number of ways to do just that. The basic three, which I fear we fail to rely on enough, are the movings of the Spirit in our lives, looking at Scripture, and trusting the spiritual wisdom of the community of faith. I am concerned that we tend to lean too much on the first—the movements of the Spirit in our lives—and not enough on the last two, especially the spiritual wisdom of the community of faith. Particularly when their wisdom is contrary to our “leading.”

I appreciate the time and care Galen and Betsy put into reading *Sacred Compass* and composing such thoughtful reviews. Could the book be stronger? Yes. Am I pleased with how it turned out? Yes. I feel that it accomplishes what I meant it to do—to open a fresh way of looking at spiritual discernment drawing on the best of Friends faith and practices and introducing them to a readership that is largely unfamiliar with how we quirky Quakers take seriously the work of discernment.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2005.
- 2 William Griffin, “Symposium 9/11: Psalms and Lamentations,” *Image Journal* 32 (2001): 54.
- 3 *Mystery and Manners: Selected Prose by Flannery O’Connor*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Macmillan, 1969) 79.