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THE ORIGIN AND VISION OF *QRT* AND QTDG

WILMER COOPER

Quaker Religious Thought and Quaker Theological Discussion Group were born at the Conference of Friends in the Americas at Wilmington College in the summer of 1957. I came to that conference with a concern to bring together several Friends to consider the starting of a Quaker theological group and a journal. I discussed this first with Tom Brown, who was a delegate from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. He encouraged me to call the group together, about a dozen of us—Tom Brown, Canby Jones and myself for sure, and perhaps Arthur Roberts, Hugh Barbour, Lewis Benson and two or three others.

Our first *QRT* issue was mimeographed (a copy of which I still have) with an article by Howard Brinton on “The Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.” Later, that issue was published in the format we use to this day—in its light blue cover. At this point we asked Calvin Keene to become the editor, and he accepted the assignment for a number of years.

In the early years we had a small but functional group of Friends called the “Planning Committee for the Quaker Theological Group.” I was appointed Chairman (today we would probably say “Clerk”), with Edward Manice as Treasurer. We have had a statement of purpose to this day, except for slight rewording:

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.

The origin and vision of QTDG and *QRT* sought intentionally to include the range of Quaker and theological views. Some of us were influenced by Lewis Benson who relied on George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends. Benson had thoroughly indexed Fox’s writings and probably was better acquainted with them than anyone else, though some Friends disagreed with his interpretation of Fox. Another Friend, Maurice Creasey from England had an influence on *QRT* and QTDG, and our discussions have included Friends from

8 • WILMER COOPER

different persuasions and sectors from day one until the present. In all, however, our hope has been to reach out and serve all Friends who take their Quakerism seriously, seeking to be faithful to its historic and theological roots. Such a quest honors the truth and its claims upon us in “both the content and application of our faith.”

Quaker Religious Thought and Quaker Theological Discussion Group are now 50 years old. It is therefore appropriate to recognize those who made these ventures possible. We begin with those who served as editors of *QRT*. J. Calvin Keene assumed this responsibility from 1957 to 1964. T. Canby Jones served as editor from 1964 to 1969. He was followed by Chris Downing from 1969 to 1974. Vail Palmer and Dean Freiday served as editors from 1974 to 1989 with a period of joint-editorship (1978-1982) between their individual terms. A significant change came in 1989, when the editorship was moved from the East Coast to the Northwest, as Arthur Roberts (1989-2000) and Paul Anderson (2000-present) at George Fox University assumed responsibility for the editorship. This shows the flexibility of the organization. It is not beholden to any location or branch of Quakerism.

In addition to the editors of *QRT* we commissioned persons to carry out the responsibility for the Quaker Theological Discussion Group—when and where we should meet, and who would speak or present papers for our discussions. The name for this service changed from time to time; “Chairman” of the Steering Committee was used of A. Burns Chalmers in 1966, and in 1969 Canby Jones served both as editor of the journal and as chairman of the Steering Committee. When Chris Downing became editor in 1969, Canby Jones was made “Chairman of the Planning Committee” (with a name change), and in 1985 Douglas Gwyn became “Clerk,” or “Chairman,” of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. In 1990 Doug Gwyn appears again as “Clerk of the Steering Committee.”

There have been many Friends who helped with the development of QTDCG and *QRT*, especially those who wrote for *QRT*, as well as others who supported it in many different ways. Calvin Keene and I both lived as neighbors at Garrett Park, MD. He taught at Howard University, and I worked for the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) on Capitol Hill. We consulted with each other frequently. Then there was John McCandless from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, who was a good example of a person who volunteered his professional services with exceeding generosity. He ran Hemlock Press

and handled most of our publication needs. At the same time he wrote essays to engage us in dialogue at our QTDG meetings.

Although referred to before, Dean Freiday stands out as one of our most valued *QRT* editors. He also challenged us with his research and writing, and he engaged us in dialogue through QTDG. He was from Manasquan, New Jersey and a member of New York Yearly Meeting. Then there was Ted Perkins from North Carolina Yearly Meeting who served as Business Manager—keeping *QRT* in stock and handling our mailings, as well as reminding us of our membership dues. Phil Smith followed Ted Perkins in 1998 as Business Manager, and his help in keeping our memberships current and fulfilling orders for back orders of *QRT* is greatly appreciated!

Earlier I wrote “we were a small but functional group of Friends.” Perhaps the reader will wonder whether that was accurate after reading these pages. We were all volunteers and “operated on a shoestring” because we believed our cause was essential to the Religious Society of Friends. So as our 50th anniversary comes up, we can be thankful that we followed our leadings.¹ That in itself says a lot about the origin and vision of *QRT* and QTDG.

ENDNOTES:

1. Anyone wishing to do research on QTDG or *QRT* will find the best sources at the Archives of Earlham College c/o Tom Hamm, Historian & Archivist. There are similar holdings at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon c/o Paul Anderson.