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Doug Gwyn

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# QUAKER THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION GROUP, 1985-1990

DOUG GWYN

I attended my first Quaker Theological Discussion Group conference in 1975. I was a new Friends pastor, just out of seminary, serving in Noblesville, Indiana (Western YM). QTDBG was a wonderful discovery for me: a warm fellowship of Quaker academics and other concerned Friends, working together to recover historic Quaker theology and renew it for changing times. Beginning with that conference, I was blessed to become acquainted with a number of individuals, some of whom became mentors to me in years to come. These included Canby Jones, Wilmer Cooper, Lewis Benson, Dean Freiday, Hugh Barbour, John McCandless, Arthur Roberts, and Vail Palmer (then Editor of *Quaker Religious Thought*).

I was so pleased to discover QTDBG/*QRT* that I volunteered to serve in promoting future conferences and journal issues. Canby Jones was Clerk at that time, and he served until Viola Purvis succeeded him in 1981 or 1982. I was asked at the 1984 conference in Wichita to succeed Viola as Clerk. I had become immersed in early Quaker studies by that time, but I also wished for QTDBG/*QRT* to grapple with more contemporary theological issues. For example, I was supportive of the proposal by Loida Fernandez (who later became coordinator for Friends World Committee for Consultation in Latin America) that we address Latin American liberation theologies. But there was resistance in the group. Some feared we might be taken over by theological fads. Others were repelled by the liberationist use of Marxist analysis and the associations often made between liberation theologies and violent revolutionary movements. When we could not find unity to hold a conference on the topic, Canby Jones suggested we at least devote an issue of *QRT* to it. Dean Freiday (by then editor) produced a very good double-issue of *QRT* (#66-67), which appeared in late 1986. Through my contacts in Berkeley (where I was again a pastor among Friends), I was able to find two contributors to that issue. I was grateful to Dean for his vision and excellent shaping of that and other issues; Dean had been very helpful to me as I began to study George Fox in the late 1970s. Our collaboration as Clerk and Editor was a further extension of our friendship.

Conferences in the latter 1980s balanced between classical and contemporary themes. Our gathering in 1985 (at Barnesville, Ohio) focused on atonement, which somehow had never been directly addressed by the group in nearly 30 years. The 1986 conference (at Malone College in Canton, Ohio) was devoted to themes of sin and evil. Our 1987 meeting addressed justice and peace, and we “piggy-backed” that year with the conflictive Friends United Meeting Triennial at Guilford College, Greensboro, North Carolina. Papers at that conference ranged from John Punshon’s treatment of the spirituality of the Quaker peace testimony, to Vail Palmer’s work on the biblical bases of peace witness, to Lon Fendall’s report on the contributions of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, to the nonviolent revolution in the Philippines. In 1988, we returned to Quaker Hill and focused on the Inward Light of Christ and Quaker universalism. Wil Cooper took a leading role in organizing that conference, which featured, among other speakers, Arthur Roberts and Dan Seeger (a leading writer among universalist Friends at that time). The 1989 gathering (again at Quaker Hill) sought to identify a Quaker theology of human sexuality (inevitably, perhaps, the conference narrowed its focus on the issue of homosexuality). The group approached these themes of universalism and sexuality with misgivings. I was sorry that the very good papers from the sexuality conference were never published in *QRT*, although they were published as a separate topical collection.

Besides editing and publishing papers from QTDG conferences, Dean Freiday also produced a special issue on Lewis Benson, a key early QTDG participant who died in 1986 (#65, Summer 1987). He produced another excellent issue on Martin Luther King Jr. (#67, January 1988). Dean’s ecumenical work (representing Friends at the National Council of Churches) and wide-ranging Roman Catholic connections worked to ameliorate the parochial tendencies of a Quaker group.

By 1989, after five years as Clerk, I felt ready to pass the role on to someone else. However, we had begun losing some key early leaders by that time. These included Lewis Benson and John McCandless (who had been the printer for *QRT* for a number of years). New leadership was not stepping forward. Wil Cooper and I raised the question whether QTDG had served its purpose and should be laid down. The group balked at taking that step, but no one volunteered to succeed me as Clerk either. Fortunately, Arthur Roberts and Paul Anderson were willing to relieve Dean Freiday, sharing the work on

the journal as Editor and Associate Editor. That development augured new life for QTGD/*QRT*.

My last conference as Clerk was held at George Fox College, Newberg, Oregon in 1990. We devoted the conference to the theme of creation. We “piggy-backed” with the annual gathering of the Friends Association for Higher Education that year and drew some Quaker academics who had not attended with us before. At the Newberg conference, we decided to reverse the roles of QTGD and *QRT*. Conferences would no longer necessarily be annual. Moreover, they would no longer provide most of the material for issues of *QRT*. Rather, journal issues might be used to generate the discussion material for future QTGD conferences. This appeared to be a new and viable way forward. The Group was in a generational and geographical transition, after 34 years of fruitful theological reflection. It was a good time for me to phase out as Clerk and let new leadership reshape QTGD.