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Paul Anderson

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QUAKER THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION GROUP 1990-2008

PAUL ANDERSON

As the editorship of *Quaker Religious Thought* passed to Arthur Roberts, Arthur continued to gather essays of theological interest for its issues during the early 1990s. Between the Quaker Theological Discussion Group meetings at George Fox College/University in 1990 and 1996, Arthur did an exceptional job of drawing together essays on important topics from a wide diversity of Quaker sectors, while also extending diversity to include geography. Primarily for convenience and stewardship reasons, these two QTDG meetings were organized in tandem with the Friends Association of Higher Education meetings that were held in Oregon; the same was done in 2004. If folks were going to be traveling to the Pacific Northwest, so the thinking went, we ought to make an occasion for having some theological discussions while they were here. That being the case, three June QTDG meetings were held in Newberg in 1990, 1996, and 2004. The papers presented at these meetings were published in several issues, especially *QRT* #s 74, 88, 89, 104 and 105. In addition, a brief QTDG meeting was held in conjunction with the Friends United Triennial meetings held in Williamsburg, VA the summer of 1999. While no formal papers were presented or responded to at that session, discussion about what sorts of topics should be addressed within QTDG facilitated the planning of several topical sessions in the future.

Following the 1990 QTDG meetings organized by Doug Gwyn, as Quaker scholars met together at the national AAR/SBL meetings, it was felt that further venues for QTDG deserved to be explored. Between 1992 and 1994, David Johns, Howard Macy, Gayle Beebe and I met together to discuss what could be done, and we decided to organize an informal gathering in November 1995, when the AAR/SBL sessions met in Philadelphia. Gayle Beebe and I organized a reception for Quaker scholars and local Friends, held at the Quaker Information Center in Philadelphia. The turnout of two dozen or so showed us that here was a good deal of interest among those gathering for these meetings, and given their being held in different cities around the nation, it was decided to organize a QTDG meeting as an option within the Additional Meeting sessions at the AAR/SBL annual meetings.

Given that a residential QTDG meeting in Oregon was set for Oregon in 1996, we looked forward to the Orlando 1998 AAR/SBL sessions, where a topical session on a Quaker understanding of Christ, featuring Arthur Roberts' work, coincided with a major review of my book on John's Christology.¹ Gayle Beebe organized the first of our AAR/SBL Additional meetings QTDG events that year, and I helped with the program. For the next ten years, a topical session and a book-review session have been organized at each of the cities in which the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature met, allowing QTDG to distribute its meeting venues around the nation and even in Canada. We also sought to plan sessions appropriate to the city in which we were meeting, where appropriate.

In Boston (1999), papers on early Quaker women leaders (and Mary Dyer and Margaret Fell, in particular) were gathered, focusing also on the book on Nayler by Harvard scholar, Leo Damrosch. In addition, a review of Linda Selleck's book on Quaker women leaders in reconstruction after the civil war was also organized. In Nashville (2000), papers on early Quakers' uses of the Bible were solicited, and John Punshon's book on reasons for hope among evangelical Friends was reviewed pre-publication. In Denver (2001), we focused on Quakers and science and featured a review of Rosemary Moore's book on the first generation of Friends. In Toronto (2002), our topical session focused on peace work after 9-11, and our review session focused Doug Gwynn's new book on Seekers found. In Atlanta (2003), we devoted a special session to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Quakers, and our review session engaged two books by Arthur Roberts: one on heaven, and the other a collection of his prayers. In San Antonio (2004), we featured Quaker decision-making process and corporate/individual discernment, and our review session engaged the first 100 issues of *QRT*. In Philadelphia (2005), we focused on Quaker contributions to American democracy, and we reviewed two of Ben Pink Dandelion's books. In Washington DC (2006), we focused on truth and power and reviewed Ben Richmond's book on signs of salvation. In San Diego (2007), we devoted the topical session to Quakers and the sacraments, and our review session focused on Carole Spencer's book on Quakers and holiness. In Boston (2008), our topical session addressed a Quaker theology of education, and our review session engaged Brent Bill's book on discernment.

In celebration of 50 years of *Quaker Religious Thought* and Quaker Theological Discussion Group, a residential meeting of QTDG is

organized to be held at Barnesville, Ohio, the site of many of its earlier meetings, June 22-24, 2009. Topics include the following: the future of Quakerism, a Friendly Apology for the 21st Century, Quakers and Levinas, and an open session or two. This is the first residential meeting solely devoted to QTDG in over two decades, and it is hoped that the quality of fellowship and discussion will serve theological engagement well, and that good things will come from it. While the briefer meetings around the nation in conjunction with the Bible and religion meetings have allowed regular and accessible meetings to be held, the opportunity for fuller dialogue will be welcome.

Given that the AAR and the SBL have stopped meeting together between 2008 and 2010, the next opportunity for gathering at a joint AAR/SBL Additional Meetings QTDG session will be November of 2011, in San Francisco. Indeed, other venues may emerge for gathering Friends of diverse persuasion for theological discussion, but an amazing feature of QTDG, looking back at its five decades of existence, is its pliability and capacity to be adapted to meet the needs of Friends hither and yon. While other venues for Friends' discussing subjects theologically have grown, including venues in conjunction with the Friends Association of Higher Education, Quaker Hill thematic consultations, the Quaker Studies Research Association in England, and the Friends Historical Association, and while such Friends educational institutions such as the Earlham School of Religion, Guilford College, George Fox University, the Friends Center at Azusa Pacific University, the Houston Graduate School of Theology, Pendle Hill, and Woodbrooke have organized a host of theological discussions among Friends, there still is a place for sustained theological discussion among Friends. In particular, the ongoing challenges for theological discussion among Friends include the following questions:

- Can meetings be held that draw in both leading Quaker theologians and interested non-experts into theological dialogue?
- Can sessions be held that allow the drawing in of leading Quaker thinkers reflecting the diversity of North American Friends, both theologically and geographically?
- Can important, timely topics be engaged helpfully, in ways that serve the religious and theological needs of Friends?
- Can historic theological contributions of Friends be effectively explored in ways that contribute to the spiritual

vitality of the Religious Society of Friends in later contexts and generations?

- Can the transforming spiritual reality central to the discovery, faith, practice, and witness of earlier Friends be encountered so as to be a life-producing resource for a broad spectrum of Friends and the world beyond the Quaker movement?
- Finally, can all of the above be managed in serviceable and efficient ways, maximizing participation and minimizing expense?

At the risk of oversimplification, an overview of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group shows roughly three phases of its history. The first phase reflects its foundation and establishment as the leading venue of theological discussion among American Friends between 1957 and the early 1980s. During this period definitive treatments of classic theological Christian doctrines were addressed from a Quaker point of view, and reinterpretations of early Friends' treatments of important subjects reflect primary interests of investigation. The second phase shows the expansion of concerns to include contemporary issues needing to be addressed by Friends. Beginning in the early 1980's and continuing into the mid 1990's, this second phase of QTDDG shows an efficiency-oriented approach of scheduling meetings in tandem with the Friends Association of Higher Education (founded in 1980) and the Friends Historical Association. During the third phase of QTDDG, from 1998 to the present, joint meetings with FAHE and Quaker historians have been supplemented by annual sessions held around the country in conjunction with the AAR/SBL meetings. Topics have here expanded beyond interpretations of Quaker history and development to addressing contemporary issues of theological interest, aspiring also to impact larger discussions as well as engaging them.

As we celebrate a half century of QTDDG and *QRT*, the original vision of their founders to create a source of spiritual and intellectual renewal among Friends has indeed been realized, and that vision continues to develop as Friends address with theological rigor the emerging concerns of the day. Then again, the work also is merely just begun.

ENDNOTES

- 1 These reviews by Robert Kysar, Sandra Schneiders, Alan Culpepper, Graham Stanton, and Alan Padgett were published in the first issue of the *Review of Biblical Literature* (1999, pp. 42-72), including my response to the reviews.