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THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF *QRT* AND QTDG

HUGH BARBOUR

When *Quaker Religious Thought* and the Quaker Theological Discussion Group were begun in 1957, I had been teaching Quakerism at Earlham for four years, with Tom Bassett and sometimes Elton Trueblood. I had also taken part, with President Tom Jones, in a conference of Quaker educators he had called at Germantown, Ohio, which reluctantly agreed that the FUM Yearly Meetings did not provide a broad enough base of support for a full-fledged independent School of Religion. We considered creating an adjunct to the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis to expand our previous pattern of granting individual M.A. degrees in Religion to a few pastors studying at Earlham.

But Wil Cooper, amid seven years as Administrative Secretary of FCNL, with his year-old doctorate from Vanderbilt, had the administrative and doctrinal skills, and the integrity and grace, to become the center of a much wider project: the Earlham School of Religion. Tom Jones and Elton Trueblood sent him around the western and southern Evangelical Yearly Meetings to garner support for the project, as well as the Eastern liberals with whom, though a Conservative Friend, he had already worked. His *Living Faith* is for me the most complete and balanced survey of the varieties of Quaker doctrines. At Earlham we welcomed the idea of making Friends out of Quaker pastors, but we did not foresee the important roles ESR graduates would play on the administrative staffs of East-Coast Yearly Meetings.

ESR opened in 1960, but Wil had already been part of the group that had founded the QTDG and *QRT* three years before. I always felt that part of Wil's sense and sensitivity had been his refusal to make these mere "house-organs" for ESR, leaving the editorship of *QRT* in the hands of Calvin Keene, and holding the QTDG's annual sessions in such neutral settings as Olney School in Barnesville. When I gave my first paper for them at the Barnesville Conference in 1961, hosted by Tom Brown, it was clear that Canby Jones, Lorton Heusel, Lewis Benson, and Arthur Roberts were already key members of the group,

which included Paul Lacey, Ted Benfey, and Charles Thomas from the Earlham faculties. By 1970, Wil Cooper could report concisely in *QRT* on the St. Louis Friends Conference, which originated among Evangelical Friends and led to the Faith and Life Movement among Friends. This also anticipated the key role of Northwest Friends in Quaker peace studies and the New Call to Peacemaking.

Since T. Canby Jones, Chris Downing, Dean Freiday, T. Vail (also called “Noah Vail”) Palmer, Arthur Roberts, and Paul Anderson, the successive and successful editors of *QRT* are making their own contributions to this issue, all I can add is gratitude that from the beginning, liberal and Christ-centered writers and editors have contributed extensively, making both *QRT* & *QTDG* more inclusive, and more deep-searching, than *Quaker Studies* or *Quaker Theology*.

Chris Downing was also a member, particularly after moving to Pendle Hill, of a group begun by Dan Wilson and Joe Havens, which called itself “The Working Party on the Future of Quakerism.” It met there three times a year for about three years in the late 1960s and included Joe Havens, John and June Yungblut, Jan DeHartog, Bob Blood, Scott Crom, and Maurice Friedman, (almost all of whom contributed to *QRT*), and briefly Bill Lotspeich and Paul Lacey. We knew each other too well to hope to conceal our spiritual investments and uncertainties, and our fascinating dialogues were recorded and transcribed (do only I still have transcripts?). Yet our central concern to develop a 20th Century phraseology for Quaker beliefs reached no conclusions. We shared our spiritual pilgrimages in depth and used each others’ personal sets of terms, drawn from Carl Jung, Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Buber, and Thomas Merton. We worked to clarify familiar phrases, like “the Light within,” but never came close to standardizing a new terminology. Like our group, *QRT* has also been wise not to impose a uniform theological structure or approach.

Apart from the challenges Friends face, from the national swing in religious thought towards conservatism and our deepening ethical cleavages over sexual ethics and biblical authority, I think Friends face a more serious crisis than any since 1827 and 1887. While personal religion has played important roles in America, religious experience cannot replace integrity, justice, and transparency. More specifically, the sanctification embraced by Wesley and Fox is not a result of the “new methods” taught by Finney and the revivalists, but of slow, disciplined sanctification. Claims of religious commitment and divine guidance—even by presidents—should not be confused with deeper holiness

characterized by following the way of Jesus. And, conservatives and liberals alike are in need of rigorous religious thought: conservatives find it all too easy to endorse the worst of evils in the name of God and country; liberals too readily succumb to fears of being labeled antisemitic if they oppose Israel's overuse of force. What we need is thoughtful and discerning awareness, not simply pat answers.

The world hungers for truthfulness and religious authenticity. Now more than ever the checks and balances the Quaker tradition has provided for self-searching and awareness of our personal self-deceptions are needed if the inner truthfulness that is the heart of authentic Christian faith is to be actualized. If *QRT* and *QTGD* might not be perfect expressions of the Spirit, they nonetheless have a vital role to play in pointing Friends, and America as a whole, back towards sober Christian maturity. Facing the urgent threat of a third world war, along with awareness of our prejudices and moral shortcomings, makes us realize how much we depend on divine grace to undergird our hope.

For my personal faith I find answers in the book *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), by the South African Quaker astronomer George Ellis, and the Brethren theologian Nancey Murphy. It returns to the problem lately faced by many thinkers, of the relation of Christianity to all the mysteries of the "Big Bang," "black holes," an accelerating expansion of the universe, and theories of the smallest units or particles as "strings," out of which our world and our lives emerged. Its conclusion moves towards "intelligible creation."

Physics and cosmology present for us data implying that our traditional fixed frameworks of time and space, and our ideas of energy and matter tried to describe a real universe are outdated. The authors see God's role not as the impersonal mind or force behind reality, as Einstein would have liked to, but as the source of our morality, the kenotic self-restraint embodied by Jesus and summarized by Paul in Philippians 2:5-10 (I find it meaningful that Jesus is so seen *en morphē theou*, "in the very form of God"). This leads to a human ethic of love and non-violence, of which Gandhi and King were examples. Though Ellis points to examples such as Mandela and Tutu in South Africa, where this ethic "worked" triumphantly, Murphy is a disciple of John Howard Yoder, who taught that a true Christian must expect to suffer. Even the Resurrection was God's doing, not ours, nor even Jesus'. Avoiding reliance merely on "faith," Ellis and Murphy call us to action

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to transform ourselves and society, not simply to affirm ideas. Yet this totally Christ-centered theology says little about the Holy Spirit, the power of God that may be released when our attention to reality and mystery, and our submission to grace, break in upon our world in totally surprising ways. We dare not talk about the Spirit as a personal possession or part of our inner selves, but we may still see the Spirit's work *in* us, as well as around us.

As an appendix for Quakers' future thought, especially because Friends do not make dogmas final, I want us to face reality as fundamentally fluid and variable, as interactive networks mathematics based on probability, and Quantum mechanics, have supplanted substance-oriented and cause-and-effect understandings of physical reality. Plato's timeless ideas (embodied in the Fourth Gospel) and Aristotle's study of change and purpose (as in Aquinas and Teilhard) no longer define realms of physical reality. Sociology and psychology now break through the contrast of "inner and outer reality" that Fox and most Friends have lived by. Friends can affirm as "continuing revelation" the validity of new ways of understanding them, as we do for the Bible, Jesus, and moral and religious life, when they have passed the tests of experience, reverence, logical consistency and mutual discussion. I wish I could hope to live to see how Quaker theological discussion and *Quaker Religious Thought* can begin to help humans, and particularly Christians, respond to these challenges.