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HIGHLIGHTS OF *QRT* #S 1-10 (1959-1963)

RUTH PITMAN

I must begin this review with a caveat. When Quaker Theological Discussion Group was formed in the late 1950's, I was young, busy, and not present. Now I am old, full of hindsight and the warps of age. What I say will be filled with memory colored by the views I have developed. Nonetheless, I welcome the privilege of commenting on the highlights of the first ten issues of *Quaker Religious Thought*, edited by J. Calvin Keene, who passed away in 2003.

The twentieth century was an age of ecumenical movements, propelled by the shame of a divided Christianity, the desire to be more effective in the world, and, after World War II, a great feeling of optimism. In Europe, things could get nothing but better; in America, there was a sense of accomplishment. The National Council of Churches of Christ in America was formed in 1950. The United Church of Christ was put together in 1957. There was a Presbyterian union in 1958. Lutherans had unions in the early 1960's, and the United Methodist Church was formed in 1968.

Even if Friends had not been influenced by the times, they would still have felt the weight of guilt, with their tiny denomination divided in multiple directions. Friends, of all people, they who needed no intermediary to come to God, they who made a special effort to live by the direction of the Holy Spirit, they whose business procedure depended on discerning the will of God rather than on finding the will of the majority! To be divided was to make mockery of some of their dearest beliefs, to say nothing of detracting from their witness and effectiveness. Under the leadership of Orthodox Friends, Five Years Meeting was formed in 1902. To the great disappointment of the leaders, some Friends did not join. Hicksite Friends were wary of the Orthodox and had their own fellowship in Friends General Conference, founded just two years earlier. Conservative Friends were wary of the world and the worldliness of Gurneyites. They had their own loose associations bolstered by their schools and close blood connections. Worst of all, even some Gurneyite yearly meetings did not join: Ohio, in particular.

The Orthodox yearly meeting in Philadelphia, which contained meetings that had sympathies on each side of the Gurneyite/Wilburite split, had maintained its unity by not writing to any other yearly meeting. Meanwhile, its young Friends had formed a social union with young Friends from the Hicksite yearly meeting, and together they worked for decades to bring about a union of their two yearly meetings. With the death of J. Henry Bartlett in 1954, the last effective opposition from the Orthodox side fell, and in 1955, the division of 1827, for which Philadelphia Friends bore special responsibility, was at last undone. The only acceptable frame of mind after that was at least cautious optimism. New England, New York, Baltimore and Canada, to name the most prominent eastern yearly meetings, can tell similar stories of uniting.

In mid-century, most of the Gurneyite yearly meetings that did not join FUM began to form the connections that resulted, in the 1960's, in the Evangelical Friends Alliance (renamed Evangelical Friends International in 1989 and Evangelical Friends Church International in 2008). As it was with the eastern united yearly meetings, the aim was effectiveness in witness, though the nature of the specifics differed. Evangelical Friends wanted to produce common materials for religious education and to improve their missionary outreach. They were also at a place where they needed to make a decision: should they seek closer cooperation with other kinds of Friends, or were their spiritual next of kin non-Quaker evangelical groups?

Growing out of a Faith and Life conference and at the initial instigation of Evangelical Friends, Quaker Theological Discussion Group drew together some of the best Quaker thinkers from all of these branches. These were people who cared about unity but wanted it to have a solid basis in theology and faith, not simply in social life, social action or practical management. Was a solid ground of unity to be found? The first issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* contains a brief history of the beginning and purpose of the group and of the periodical. The name “Quaker Theological Discussion Group” was deliberately chosen to be simple, a reflection of the desire for broad participation rather than a club of selected theologians or officials.

The first presentation was made by Howard Brinton, whose topic “The Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit” went right to the heart of the Quaker faith professed by all branches. This article is as fresh today as it was then, summarizing what we had all grown up with. Lewis Benson, a fine Fox scholar and Hicksite of the old school; Thomas S.

Brown, perceptive and theologically trained; and Charles F. Thomas, a sensitive Gurneyite pastor, responded as such people might well respond today. This work was crudely printed and stapled between two sheets of blue paper. The new journal was given the title *Quaker Religious Thought*, and J. Calvin Keene was appointed editor.

Organizational matters, the steering committee, the statement of purpose and the intention to publish semiannually are spelled out in the editorial of the next number. With this number, the present physical format was adopted. The academic format of presentation plus responses and a final word from the presenter was adopted as the standard one. For this issue the subject was “The Quaker Interpretation of the Significance of Christ.” This was a logical choice after a discussion of the Holy Spirit, and again it went to the heart of Quaker faith. The presenter was the eminently qualified British Friend Maurice Creasey, Director of Woodbrooke, who had written his Ph.D. thesis on Christ in early Quakerism. The responders were substantially in agreement with Creasey, as would not be the case today, but evidence of their Quaker denominational differences is also perceptible.

Lewis Benson wrote the paper that appeared in the third issue (Vol. 2:1, #3). His subject was “The Early Quaker Vision of the Church.” Up to this point, Lewis had not been able to gather an audience, even though his scholarship was immense. Friends in his home territory, the east coast, were driven by guilt and by the spirit of the times, and generally sought to avoid theology on the grounds that “it divides.” QTGD listened to Lewis, and from this the New Foundation Fellowship was born. The NFF is the most significant of several Quaker renewal efforts that emerged on the fringes of QTGD. With this issue, *QRT* assumed another dimension, too: book reviews began.

Wilmer Cooper, who longed all his life to see Friends united, wrote “Quaker Perspectives on the Nature of Man” in issue #4. This subject brings one directly to the problem all religions must face: sin, evil and the path to redemption. “Early Friends and the Work of Christ,” by Arthur Roberts, followed logically in the fifth issue of *QRT*. Much of this issue, however, is taken up with the Quaker advocacy of the supremacy of experience over Scripture and creeds. A long editorial by Calvin Keene pleads the importance of theology. Paul Lacey, one of the responders, speaks to the point; he is concerned about the watering down being done by liberal Friends. This is early in 1961.

Issue #6, for the first time, uses a different format: three papers dealing with the importance that history has to us, or should have. Perceptively, Wilmer Cooper expresses concern about religious fundamentalism and religious mysticism:

Both, in my judgment, are false representations of historic Quakerism with its emphasis upon man's personal encounter with the living Christ within and its accompanying Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Both of these approaches to Quakerism cultivate and nourish a religious experience of good feeling and escapism which either consciously denies the outward historical dimension of life or unconsciously creates a false dualism between the outer and inner aspects of the religious life. (p. 18)

Lewis Benson is less theoretical and more practical, speaking of Quakerism's relationship to his own history in the face of the contemporary world. One might dismiss his anxiety about totalitarianism, but he hits the mark when he sees American Quakers in the grip of contemporary culture. The remaining two papers from the same conference are printed in the next issue of *QRT* (Vol. 4:1, #7) Hugh Barbour discusses the Quaker place among other Christian denominations with regard to theology and history, and Canby Jones writes about the role of the Bible in Fox's thought.

Of the issues that divide Friends, none is so visible as the form of worship: the issue of paid ministers (and use of music). Vol. 4:2 (#8) featured a paper by D. Elton Trueblood, "The Paradox of the Quaker Ministry." Always lucid and always eloquent, Trueblood spoke from a centrist position, adding depth to the nature of the ministry in both forms of worship and showing the common ground between them. He made his case so well that none of his three critics could find much to quibble with, but realizing that all three were disposed to be sympathetic anyway, Trueblood invited letters from those whom he had not convinced. That there might be such was evident from a short article by John Curtis, "Quaker Belief and Experience," that appeared in the same number. Though not writing in response to Trueblood, Curtis advocated traditional Quaker forms and faith. He became part of the New Foundation Movement.

The letters Trueblood asked for came and were printed in the following issue. This was the first time *QRT* had printed letters to the editor. Arthur Roberts wrote from the Evangelical Friends' perspective. In appreciative agreement with Trueblood, Roberts nevertheless noted that Trueblood had pandered a bit to the unprogrammed

Friends' prejudices against all "hireling priests," and he defended the practices, ministerial style and organizational procedures in Oregon Yearly Meeting as still very much in keeping with traditional Friends faith and practice. From the other end of the spectrum and of the country came a letter from Wilberta Hardy of Lancaster, PA. She hotly defended unprogrammed worship as the only truly Quaker form of worship, the only form that properly represented the faith. She never mentioned Christ; form was primary.

The lead article in Vol. 5:1 (#9) was again by Maurice Creasey on a subject that has been a problem for Friends in their recruitment of converts and in their association with other Christians: their attitude with regard to the sacraments, especially the "Lord's supper." Pressed by the spirit of denominational cooperation and eager to uphold the Christian nature of Quakerism, Creasey makes room in his thinking for a change in Quaker practice. Though Floyd Moore was the most sympathetic with Creasey's position, David Stanfield and Lewis Benson were both very skeptical. Stanfield raised the question of the role of the clergy in administering sacraments and the old Quaker concern of ritual *vs.* genuine relationship. Lewis Benson is more pointed. "Maurice Creasey rejects the Quakers' claim that their testimony concerning the 'Sacraments' expresses the mind of Christ and the true meaning of the New Testament," he retorts. (p. 38) Creasey knew this was heavy criticism and devoted more than a page to answering it in brief. The argument must have weighed on Creasey's mind, because the editorial in the very next number of *QRT* quotes at length from a letter from Creasey. "If I were to write an article on this subject *now*, I would give the grounds on which the non-observance of Sacraments might rightly be based by Friends..." (p. 2.) Any Friend who studies this subject should not only read Creasey's paper in Vol. 1:2 (#2), but include the editorial in Vol. 2:1 (#3). There is more to say on this subject. It would include the degree to which authority derives from tradition, the consequence of being a prophetic sect in Christendom, and much more.

Keene's last issue as editor of *QRT* (#10) gives Douglas Steere a platform from which to set forth his most mature thinking: "Beyond Diversity to a Common Experience of God." Some Friends felt that this paper opened the way for a discussion of the role of service in the religious life. Canby Jones, who assumed the editorship after this, pleaded eloquently for the Friends who embrace service but not missions and those who embrace missions but not service to

find spiritual unity in Christ, the Servant. In reply, Arthur Roberts argued the service in evangelism and the priority of evangelism. “I want to establish a priority for evangelism; otherwise service becomes utopianism, which after a serious brush with the ugliness of man’s nature, compromises with evil and settles for some form of social manipulation and a kingdom of this world.” (p. 44) One need only look at the AFSC and the Friends Disaster Service to see why the discussion is significant.

When I joined this organization several years later, Calvin Keene was no longer active. He died in 2003 and was mourned by those who knew him. Under his editorship, the periodical took its present shape and brought before Friends many of the issues of vital importance to all branches. At the meetings I attended, I was always impressed by the seriousness of the thinking, though I was rarely fully satisfied with the results; however, because we met one another with our deepest concerns and everyone was listened to attentively, the quality of the worship periods was superb! The Quaker branches have gone separate ways. The middle of the road will not hold, and few care any more that it should, but all Friends face the same challenges from the world around us, from popular culture, from intellectual thought, from our history, and from Scripture. The answers that we give to the challenges of life will inevitably have theological implications and will take us in directions that not even the wisest minds can fully predict. We need to look at the experience of our other branches, see where it has led, and tremble lest we be led into similar follies of our own. To my mind, that is ecumenical relations of the right sort.