

1-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Downing, Christine (2008) "Highlights of QRT #S 21-38 (1969-1974)," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 111 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol111/iss1/9>

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HIGHLIGHTS OF *QRT* #S 21-38 (1969-1974)

CHRISTINE DOWNING

To explain the vision that underlay my editorship of *Quaker Religious Thought* seems to require some autobiographical reflections.

I can remember so well my introduction to the Quaker Theological Discussion group in late summer of 1959. I was in my late twenties, the youngest of our five children had just turned one, I was about to begin doctoral studies in theology at Drew University, a school chosen primarily because it was in easy commuting distance of our home in northern New Jersey. I was very excited about this new undertaking and excited, too, to discover that there were other Quakers interested in theology.

Not that I was all that sure just how interested in theology I myself actually was. I had been a literature major at Swarthmore and knew that I didn't want to do graduate work primarily in literary criticism. I also knew that my real fascination was with all the ways in which we humans have tried to use our minds and our imaginations to understand our inner lives, our relations with one another and the natural world, and with the transcendent. During the years that had intervened since I had received my undergraduate degree, Carl Jung and Martin Buber served as my most important teachers. Drew's innovative interdisciplinary program in "theology and culture" seemed to promise a way of pursuing these somewhat "promiscuous" interests.

Being a Quaker was very important to me. I had come to America from Nazi Germany when I was four, and initially our family had just gone to the one church within walking distance of our home. When we got our first car, however, my mother announced that she wanted to visit a Quaker meeting, mostly because she remembered being fed by the Quakers after the First World War, and because she knew that Quakerism was Christian, but noncreedal, and that there were no priests—no intermediaries between the worshippers and God. Our whole family immediately felt at home that first Sunday, and soon I was very involved in New York Yearly Meeting's high-school-aged Young Friends group. I went to a Quaker college and was a delegate to

the 1952 Friends World gathering at Oxford. I married a young man I met through Quaker circles; together we became very active in our local meeting, in the Yearly Meeting, in Friends General Conference.

So going to that 1959 meeting of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group was, in a sense, a way of getting a Quaker blessing upon my entry into the world of theological scholarship. I felt very welcome, even though almost everyone else was a bit older than I, and almost everyone else was male. I remember so well how excited I was to take part in the conversations—to feel the energy, the commitment, the openness, the sense that we had something significant and new to contribute to the Society of Friends, which had so often been anti-intellectual, both in the experiential focus of the silent-meeting Friends General Conference Quakers and in the reliance on biblical revelation more characteristic of the Five Years Meeting types. So it was a natural to decide to launch a journal through which we might share our perspective with the wider Quaker community.

Thus I was there at the birth of *QRT* and, indeed, my own very first scholarly publications appeared in this journal just a few years later, while I was still in graduate school. In 1961 (in Issue #6 edited by Calvin Keene) the lead article was my “Quakerism and the Historical Interpretation of Religion,” and then again in 1964 (during my first year as an instructor in the Religion Department of Rutgers University) Issue #12 (edited by Canby Jones) had as its lead article my “What is Theology?” and in 1966 (while Canby was still editor) I contributed to Issue #15, the “Death of God” issue. In rereading that very first essay, I see how in it I was trying to bring what I knew of Quaker history and theology into dialogue with what and whom I had been studying at Drew—Barth, Bultmann, Buber, Tillich, both Niebuhrs, Heidegger, and Jaspers. I was also trying to honor both Rufus Jones’ mystical emphasis (even though I believed his trying to connect early Quakerism to German pietism to be historically inaccurate) and Lewis Benson’s eschatological prophetic vision. Perhaps most importantly, I was calling for a view of theology as the human attempt to speak of God, which means that it always speaks from a particular historical standpoint and needs always to be done anew.

Thus, by the time in 1969 that I was invited to take on the editorship of the journal, my colleagues in the Discussion Group had a good sense of my particular approach to Quaker religious thought. My “Toward a Common Vision: A Call for Theological Dialogue Among Friends,” a pamphlet published by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

in 1967, had presented a good summary, and the title of my 1968 “Quaker Lecture” at the Earlham School of Religion, “Abraham and Orpheus Be With Me Now,” made evident how Christian or biblical images and perspectives were never the only ones that spoke to me, or that I needed to turn to in order to be able say what I believed most needed saying. Although I was interested in exploring what could be said through the language of Christian theology, it was never for me *the* language.

By 1969 I was a tenured professor teaching religion at a state university, teaching courses on Old and New Testaments but also on world religions, on ethics, on religion and literature, religion and psychology, religion and society—*religion* not theology. I had also begun to be very active in the American Academy of Religion (in 1974 I became its first woman president) and was publishing in most of the major theological and religious studies periodicals. Unlike most of the others centrally involved in the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, I was also actively involved from 1966 onwards in the Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology (my mother had been one of its founding members): I was on its board, the keynote speaker at several of its annual meetings, and a fairly frequent contributor to its journal, *Inward Light*. I was also serving on the Pendle Hill Board of Managers and was chair of that board from 1971-74, that is, during a good part of the time I served as editor of *QRT*. During those years I was as well a member of a small group that met several times a year to explore together “The Future of the Quaker Movement;” this group included Joseph Havens, Maurice Friedman, Hugh Barbour, Paul Lacey, John Yungblut, Scott Crum—all of whom I later persuaded to write for *QRT*.

So now—at last—to the years that I served as editor: from 1969-1974. I decided almost immediately to start publishing four rather than two issues a year. I had a lot of energy, a deep conviction that Quakers needed to become more open *to* theology and *about* theology, that there was so much to say and think about and talk about, and so many important voices to include in the discussion. Of course, it was also true then—and I imagine ongoingly—that not all the issues grew out of the editor’s personal vision, that some were decided upon by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group or initially appeared as papers given at the group’s annual gatherings. But as I look back over the issues I edited (#s 21 through 38), I see how they testify to my interest in dialoguing with current theological perspectives outside

Quakerism—with the theology of hope, for instance, and with the theology of Teilhard de Chardin—and in moving outside theology as narrowly conceived by publishing issues devoted to religion and psychology and religion and the arts, and others that focused on prayer and the sacramental, and on Quaker testimonies concerning peace and simplicity. It was similarly important to me to invite contributors interested in such topics who were not themselves involved with QTGD. In retrospect, what most surprises me is how during my tenure we published *nothing* about women in Quaker history, nor about a feminist “take” on theology or religious experience.

When in 1974 my term as editor came to an end and I moved to California, I discovered that I was by now more interested in feminism, mythology, and in-depth psychology than in theology. I am still very much a Quaker but see myself as writing *from* that perspective rather than *about* it. I am thus far away from the Quaker Theological Discussion Group that was so much a part of my life thirty years ago, not only geographically, not only temporally, but also intellectually and spiritually—yet I am enormously grateful to have been given the opportunity to be part of *QRT*'s early years and hope that what I tried to do then still has some value.