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Reflections on the George Fox Commemorative Conference

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Reflections on Fox

Paul Anderson

The George Fox commemorative conference held at Lancaster university from 25 to 28 March celebrated, three hundred years after his death, the contribution of George Fox. With over 130 scholars and aficionados attending from ten countries, the conference was indeed a major international event. Nearly half the participants attended from outside the UK (over forty attended from North America alone), due primarily to the exceptional job of coordination performed over the last three years by Michael Mullett and other members of Lancaster university's department of history. By all accounts the gathering was a tremendous success.

Particularly intriguing was the interaction between historians and those more centrally interested in Fox's spiritual contribution. These differences were reflected in the titles of the fifty-six seminar papers, grouped under such thematic headings as 'George Fox: the background', 'George Fox's religious and social teachings', and 'Friends and women Friends in English history'. More importantly, however, they found expression in the informal discussions following a presentation or around a meal table. Indeed, both interests were furthered by the conference in that one cannot truly understand Fox's spiritual contribution without a healthy appreciation of the historical setting out of which his ministry emerged.

The interplay between historical interpretation and its implications also became evident in the dialogues between the plenary sessions. Especially salient was the tension between the papers presented by Christopher Hill (one of the foremost experts on seventeenth century England) and Richard Greaves (a noted American authority on the same period). Hill's presentation launched the conference to a lively start, as he argued

that Quakers had nothing like an unanimous peace platform until it became expedient to do so immediately after the failed Fifth Monarchist uprising of 1661. He also raised controversial questions about what the political programmes of Quakers might have been, and the degree to which Fox could accurately be considered the undisputed leader of Friends before 1661.

Needless to say, a vigorous debate ensued. Hill was asked how he could make such claims in the light of Fox's pacifist refusal to join Cromwell's army, early Quakers' nonviolent responses to beatings and imprisonment, and the fact that Fox left judgment to God rather than taking it into human hands. Hill's response hinged on the assumption that the historical Fox could not be considered identical to his portrayal in his extensively edited journal, and that original political motivations had eventually become spiritualised. While all were intrigued by his response not all were convinced.

The following day Richard Greaves posed an alternative view. He considered the Quaker view of government from 1660 to 1685 to be not a matter of reforming shattered revolutionary expectations, but a vision of the restoration of God's rule above and beyond human government. Greaves argued that while the 1661 affirmation of peace may have been the first 'official' Quaker declaration of peace, it broke no new ground. It followed directly from Margaret Fell's statement on peace in 1660 and was entirely consistent with Friends' attitudes toward magistrates, actions in court, commitment to the electoral system and even their defiance of penal laws. The Quaker 'peace programme' arose not out of the disillusionment of a failed rebellion, but out of the conviction that only God establishes kingdoms and governments. Thus, the

nonviolent restoration of the monarchy was viewed hopefully by Friends, who believed that the only way forward involved radical but peaceful engagement in facilitating the active reign of God. This can happen only when common people and magistrates live responsively to the loving and just leadings of God.

The third plenary address was given by Tatiana Pavlova, a political scientist and historian from the Soviet Union. Her topic was 'George Fox and *perestroika* in seventeenth century England'. Within her presentation she developed the thesis that three relationships are germane to authentic *perestroika*: the relationships between God and the individual, the individual and society, and society and God. Tatiana Pavlova argued that prevalent forms of government, including marxism, capitalism and institutional religion, had generally emphasised one or more of these relationships, but not all three. Conversely, George Fox and the early Quakers seemed to strike an impressive balance between all three relationships. This, according to Pavlova, provides a way forward for contemporary and future reformers.

In addition to these sessions, the conference planners balanced the schedule with events to uplift the soul as well as challenge the mind. Along with several meetings for worship, the participants were treated to various musical and dramatic presentations. Especially inspiring were The Leavers' performances of *The Fire and the Hammer* and the story of Anne Wynn Wilson and the Quaker Tapestry. Excursions to Swarthmoor Hall, Briggflatts and Cumbrian meeting houses also provided a treat, as visits to historical sites served to punctuate impressions of the early Quaker movement with fascinating illustrations and anecdotes.

The concluding sessions of the conference proved to be among the most stirring. Kenneth Carroll's presentation on George Fox's ministry in America gave a vivid portrayal of the pastoral and social concerns inherent to Quaker travelling ministry. His account,

richly seasoned with quotations from journals and original correspondence, provided many personal insights into the influential aspects of Fox's leadership. In doing so, the striking humanity of Fox's ministry came alive in the minds of many.

The climax of the gathering, however, had to be the moving and powerful presentation by Dorothy Nimmo entitled 'A testimony to the grace of God in the life of James Nayler'. By means of sensitive historical investigation, couched in poetic form, Dorothy Nimmo held the participants spellbound as she sketched the bittersweet relationship between Fox and Nayler. She portrayed the tragic pathos of Nayler's misguidance, torture, embarrassment of the Quaker movement, failure to recant, and unsuccessful attempts to be fully reinstated to Fox's graces; and, in doing so she wove together the implications of historical studies and spiritual interests.

Assuming the role of the schoolteacher and placing her audience in the role of the pupil, Nimmo asked what was remembered about James Nayler. It was now time for the final exam. Yes, of course, one may know the outward facts of his torture and death but is such distanced acquaintance really an adequate level of knowing? No. To learn truly from history is to forget one's own name, being subsumed into the identity of one's subject . . . and, with respect to James Nayler, and George Fox for that matter, the true student of history can do none other than to sign his or her name with . . . a cross.

While Michael Mullett plans to publish the proceedings of the conference later, a fitting conclusion to this report might be the impressions of a few of the participants. When asked what they thought was the most significant aspect of the conference responses were:

'The linking of the Quaker faith—the heart—with the academic discipline of the historian. The faith has nothing to fear about the truth and the historical discipline of seeking it. Historians have also found it useful to meet a living community of faith.' (Joan Allen, QPS)

I was deeply impressed by the quality of The Leavers' musical performance, followed by the readers' theatre story of Anne Wynn Wilson's influence on the beginning of the Quaker Tapestry project. I thought the life of George Fox, so skillfully presented in this medium, allowed for his vision to come through extremely well. Fox was humanised by the art form, which balanced the academic track with a spiritual one.' (Ed Higgins, George Fox College, Newberg, Oregon)

'The conference revealed an on-going problem between the positivism of Quaker historians and the spiritualism of the more theologically motivated contributors. Papers of both kinds could have been more clear about what the writers see at stake in the present for their study of the past.' (Doug Gwynn, Pendle Hill, Philadelphia)

For me the most significant aspects of the conference have been that there was such diversity of attitudes—the great and the good of historians of

the seventeenth century, and the enthusiastic amateur, and the Friend seeking insight and knowledge and "Truth". The fact is that this diversity has created some friction, but friction of a creative kind, as Friends face some uncomfortable truths, and historians have had to face the spiritual dimension of the material they are handling.' (Christine Trevett, University of Wales)

'Quakerism is too important to be left to the Quakers. In other words, because our discipline is one of inwardness we may neglect helpful influences that come to us from the outside, as well of being negligent in sharing what we've found with others. Conferences like this cause us to see the larger picture of Truth and how our movement fits into it.' (John Punshon, Woodbrooke)

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Briefly

Now. The spirit of God is present in the eternal now. It comes to some daily, to some infrequently. Most have to be satisfied with occasional glimpses as the clouds of unknowing part. We become aware of a power, a love that is eternal, permanent, always there. It seems not new but familiar, not strange but joyfully, lovingly known as a friend. A friend with us now, not a figure remembered from the past or one to come from the future but here and now, immediate, ready to change our lives.

A religion that looks only and talks only of the past is of no use to me, no help. I cannot be helped by words written in great books hundreds of years ago even though they were inspired by divine revelations. Of course truth is always the same and is indissoluble but the fullness of truth is not yet known to us; the mystery and wonder remains. God reveals more aspects of that truth only as we humans are able to understand more.

We should not be asked to be faithful to what is already known but rather to seek the

truth for ourselves. If you seek you will be rewarded with the joy of self-discovery because we find God within our own heart. Then we can go forward cheerfully understanding that the ideas and beliefs of the past can live as they are enlarged and moulded to the present. The new revelation, amplifying the past truths, guarantees the genuineness of what has gone before and marks humanity's progress towards a fuller understanding.

Peter Tatton-Brown

Facing senility

Senile dementia causes anguish and poses impossible dilemmas both for sufferers and their families. In BBC2's *Who cares now? Mrs Godfrey goes to Rawalpindi*, Jonathan Miller will be introducing the story of a 78-year-old Eastender, who suffers from increasing senile dementia but who wishes to remain in her own home. Her own and her families' points of view are explored. The programme will be at 5 pm on 14 May.