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Introduction to Quakers, Politics, and Economics (Volume 5 of Quakers and the Disciplines)

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Introduction

By Tom Head

This fifth volume in the *Quakers and the Disciplines* series brings together a collection of essays by Quaker scholars and practitioners in the fields of Economics and Politics. To some degree *Quakers, Politics, and Economics* constitutes a second or companion volume on the topic of Quakers in business, following directly after last year's *Volume 4—Quakers, Business, and Industry*. However, this new collection widens considerably the scope of inquiry with topics ranging all the way from personal devotion to global governance. The thought and practice of Quakers in the realms of both politics and economics is explored philosophically, organizationally, historically, and biographically.

Woven throughout the chapters of this book are many themes of interest with respect to the integration of faith, politics and economics. These include:

- Religion as not just a private commitment but also a public witness.
- Explorations of the moral dimensions of economic and political life.
- Exemplary thought and practice in the lives of individual Quakers.
- The blend of service, advocacy, and activism experienced by Friends.
- The role of faith in defining and building a just social order.
- The efforts of Quaker organizations and movements to bring about political and economic reforms.
- Visions of constructive and compassionate ways to address global challenges and crises.

This volume begins with Steven Dale Davison's comprehensive economic history of Friends from the 1650s through the 20th Century. Davison details the ways in which Quakers over the centuries have related to the economic sphere,

to wealth and poverty, and to markets, government, and social programs. Over time the private and public manifestations of the Quaker faith have changed considerably, and this first chapter offers a sketch of the history, ideas, and personalities characterizing each era in the evolution of Friends engagement with politics and economics. Following this history, Ron Rembert's chapter examines our varieties of Quaker thought with respect to both public and private life by drawing upon the works of Thomas Kelly to explore philosophically the interplay of contemplation and activism. Rembert draws particularly on Kelly's essay, "The Eternal Now and Social Concern," and in so doing, offers a chapter that is both informative and inspirational. How are we to be open to empowerment by the "Eternal Now" as we grapple with the demands and challenges of politics and economics?

The second part of the book explores perspectives on contemporary economic issues. Drawing upon his research in the book *Viking Economics*, scholar and activist George Lakey analyzes how the economic experiences in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland both affirm and challenge Friends. He finds these societies in alignment with the Society of Friends in the sense that the Nordics have been value-driven, have produced outcomes consistent with Quaker testimonies, and have challenged dominant paradigms. Lakey argues that the *ethical* and the *practical* are not opposed realities. Nor must there be a trade-off between *equality* and *individual freedom*. Lakey builds the case that it is quite possible to move in the direction of both more equality and more freedom, a conclusion with significant appeal to Quakers and all others who proceed with the outlook that faith can constructively and abundantly shape our lives and our communities for the better.

Drawing upon Quaker and Gandhian traditions, philosopher and peace scholar Gray Cox proposes an ambitious research agenda to be carried on in a spirit-led manner. Through a multicultural lens, he outlines four global and inter-related threats we face today: the economic/ecological, the military/governance, the technological, and the moral/spiritual. In his search for a response to these threats, Cox draws upon the work and methodology of the Quaker Institute for the Future and its practice of holding a "meeting for worship for the conduct of research." In this context, truth can and does prosper; a living Presence is here to teach, to heal, and to transform the way we go about governing, communicating, and managing.

Focusing specifically on the commercial experience of Friends, management scholars Nicholas Burton and Alex Hope write about what we can learn from the Society of Friends with respect to responsibility in business. Burton and Hope review the scholarly work on the role of Quakers in business and the

distinctives of Quaker business practice. They conclude with a significant discussion of lessons for contemporary business practice in which they treat corporate governance, networks and movements, and business models in both faith-based and secular contexts. This chapter is likely to be of particular interest to management scholars, business schools, and those working in corporate settings.

Following the chapters on contemporary economic issues, the third section of the book gives direct attention to reviewing the work of various Quaker organizations engaged in economic and political affairs. Paul Moke begins this section with a history of the American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC's) engagements in the coalfields of Appalachia, stretching across nearly a century beginning with the period of severe recession in the late 1920s and continuing into the present day. In doing so, Moke's history of the AFSC in this region offers a case study of Quaker engagement with issues of economic justice, political reform, as well as relief, reconstruction, and social service. The story is not a simple one, in part because the liberalism of those offering help and service was not always fully in tune with those being served and with other stakeholders, such as government officials.

In the next chapter, Ruth Flower offers a history of the work of the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) with respect to poverty policy in the United States spanning from the 1940s and 50s to the present day. Flower served on the FCNL staff from 1981 to 1996 and again from 2006 until her retirement in 2016, and she continues to work with FCNL as a consultant on Native American policy. Thus, she is drawing upon a great deal of personal experience and engagement as she writes about the evolution of poverty policy in the work of FCNL, offering an insider's view of this Quaker work. Importantly, the chapter gives significant attention to the labyrinth of issues to which poverty is linked and intertwined, particularly civil rights, discrimination, racism, exploitation, health care, and education and budget priorities.

Moving to the international arena, Lori Heninger and David Atwood chronicle the work of Friends at the United Nations. The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) was one of the first NGOs to be credentialed in the UN system; it was in 1948 that the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) was granted consultative status at the United Nations. While one 'office' in name and purpose, QUNO has two physical locations, one in New York where the headquarters and general assembly are located and another in Geneva, Switzerland the UN Headquarters and UN General Assembly are located.

Heninger and Atwood are writing as those whose have had considerable experience working within QUNO; Lori Heninger served as Co-Director of

QUNO-New York from 1998 to 2004, and David Atwood joined the QUNO-Geneva staff starting in 1995, serving as Director from 2004-2011. Both Heninger and Atwood have also had significant experience with other NGOs. After a general introduction to the origins, history, and methodology of the Quaker United Nations Office, the bulk of the chapter reviews two case studies of the work of Friends at the international policy level: disarmament with respect to small arms and light weapons and the UN work on financing for development. Both topics involve a form of peacemaking, the first addressing weaponry and the second addressing the structural violence of extreme poverty and inequality.

In his second contribution to this volume, Steven Davison brings this section on Quaker NGOs to a close with a history of Right Sharing of World Resources (RSWR), a Quaker effort addressing economic justice, particularly in the developing world where extremes of economic suffering are so prevalent. Davison details the origins of RSWR within the context of the Friends World Committee for Consultation and the eventual spinning off of RSWR as an independent organization. As has been the case with other Quaker efforts focused on political and economic testimonies, the work emerges as both service and advocacy.

While all of the preceding chapters on Quaker service and advocacy bodies—AFSC, FCNL, QUNO, and RSWR—of necessity involve a measure of historical narrative, the next section on historical engagement of Friends offers two essays which focus in detail on specific historical episodes in which Quakers, in one way or another (*and* for better or worse) have engaged with political and economic issues.

Historian Thomas Hamm examines Quaker responses to economic liberalism, capitalism, and laissez faire economics at the time of and immediately following the Hicksite Separation of 1827-1828. While some Friends were clearly skeptical about capitalism and deeply concerned with the potential for injustice in unrestricted free markets, others clearly embraced free-market ideologies. On the socio-economic tenets, Friends in 1827-1833, even those who were unified with respect to theological liberalism, were not of one mind with respect to the emerging capitalist market economy of their day. While I do not observe configurations among 21st Century Friends that are as extreme as those Hamm portrays among 19th Century Friends, his case study does offer insight into the varieties of thought existing today. While Quakers broadly embrace economic justice, equity, and fairness, we still find, even within unified branches of Friends, a broad array of ideas about how things might best unfold in social and economic spheres. Friends are not always of one mind with regard to economic and political affairs.

Similarly, although in a very different time and place, the late 20th Century period of South African apartheid, we find Friends once again not being of one mind. Historian Robynne Rogers Healey writes about conflict between South African Quakers and the efforts of the American Friends Service Committee staff and volunteers. It is not always a comfortable story, and it may very well be the case that various participants have seen it through a variety of lenses and have accordingly come to somewhat different conclusions. It is likely that most or all of those involved shared the same ultimate goals, but disharmony, tension, and conflict still emerged and complicated the effort. A devotion to peace, justice, and building good order does not necessarily guarantee unity about priorities and strategies, and an examination of an uncomfortable case study such as this one offers us opportunity for reflection and the development of insight with respect to how spiritual beliefs shape political and economic strategies *and* how we handle our own internal conflicts.

The fifth and concluding section richly documents the contributions of five prominent Friends—John Bellers, John Woolman, Lucretia Mott, Elise Boulding, and Kenneth Boulding—to a Quaker understanding of economics, politics, and the larger human story. It seems fitting that references to Quaker economist Kenneth Boulding bookend this entire section. As you will read, in the first chapter of this section Keith Helmuth begins his writing on John Bellers by referencing the thought and work of Kenneth Boulding, and then at the very end of the section, the final chapter is devoted to an exploration the lives and contributions of both Elise and Kenneth Boulding.

On a personal note, I would observe that to have my mentor Kenneth Boulding show up in this prominent way is neither a surprise nor a coincidence. He was a remarkable scholar. While he was nominated for both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Nobel Prize in Economics, he received neither. For many of us in the economics profession, it is disappointing that he did not at least receive the prize in Economics; his contributions as an economist certainly merited such an honor. My own hypothesis as to why he did not receive the Economics prize is that he never promoted himself or his ideas. He approached scholarship in the same way as he approached rising to minister in a meeting for worship. He quietly and humbly drew upon the Source of Truth, never building his own academic empire but instead consistently seeking the Light and freely sharing his *ministry of scholarship* with all. This quality was, of course, not Kenneth's alone; it can be seen in significant measure in each of the Friends presented in this section. They *all* deserve a Nobel prize, and I would speculate that not a single one of them would have ultimately considered such an accolade to be the important outcome of their life and work.

Keith Helmuth begins this last section with a piece that I would characterize as one exploring nothing less than *truth seeking*. What does it mean to search for truth? Helmuth uses as his point of departure the posture that Kenneth Boulding took, but he then carries us back three centuries to exemplar John Bellers, a person who foreshadows much of what unfolds in subsequent centuries with respect to understanding human betterment and the common good. Bellers' vision is holistic and reaches beyond the confines of any one religion, culture or moment in time. At one point, Helmuth suggests that many figures beyond Friends—Confucius, Bodidharma, Thich Nhat Han, and modern poet Mary Oliver—would salute Bellers' witness. While this suggestion is perhaps a stretch for some readers, it does take us to the Source in a way that appeals to many Friends. Should not the best, clearest, and deepest understanding of right relationship ring true for all those truly seeking the Light, in whatever time and place that may occur? Ultimately, best practices with respect to human wellbeing and the commonwealth of life on this Earth are not culture bound. Helmuth's essay brings to our attention an early Friend who can and will connect with political and economic wisdom across the centuries and the oceans.

In this collection of Quaker biographies we find not one, but two essays on John Woolman. In the first of these chapters, Mike Heller brings us a portrait, as he says, of "one of the most fascinating Quakers to have written about economic issues, poverty, and wealth." Heller draws particularly on Woolman's essay "A Plea for the Poor," a classic piece of the literature of Quaker economics. He also, fittingly, circles around to Kenneth Boulding's *The Organizational Revolution: A Study in the Ethics of Economic Organization* in which Boulding explores how wrongs are righted: in brief, scientists show us where we are, and saints point to where we ought to go. And not surprisingly, Boulding's quintessential example of a saint is John Woolman, a prophetic, truth-seeking voice, discerning with clarity what the economy can and should be doing *for all*.

In the second chapter on John Woolman, Geoffrey Plank plows new ground with respect to Woolman scholarship, focusing very specifically on Woolman's relationship to the land, to ownership, and to the authority and responsibilities of estate holders. In Plank's portrait, Woolman does not come across quite as modern and universal as we might wish him to do so. Woolman is, at least in some respects, a man of his times, and his attitudes toward ownership and the gender-related aspects of ownership are at least in part a product of those times. Nonetheless, we still see in Woolman a faithful Friend seeking and affirming moral clarity. The emerging portrait is a human one, a person of his times but also a person paying attention to economic morality and striving to avoid bad and damaging practices. In this sense, Woolman appears perhaps a bit less saintly

but also human, approachable, and real and thus an example that we ordinary human beings can identify with even more closely. Perhaps a lesson here is that he was one of us, and we *can* do what he did.

Next in this series of biographies is Jean Mulhern and Cathy Pitzer's chapter on Lucretia Coffin Mott. Significantly, Mulhern and Pitzer note how Mott's acceptance of those from other faiths put her at odds with her Quaker community. Just as Bellers' perspectives transcended culture, gender, geography, race, religion, and politics, so did Mott's. In Lucretia Mott's case, the emphasis was on confronting injustice and pursuing human rights through nonviolent change, a mission originating in her life as a Friend but certainly in tune with the witness that emerges from truth seekers of many faiths. As Mulhern and Pitzer note, "Her objective was always to align the moral compass of the country against injustice, a long-term project." And the work continues, much accomplished and much yet to be achieved.

Fittingly, this section, and the book as a whole, concludes with a piece on the spiritual foundations of Kenneth & Elise Boulding's contributions as social scientists. The chapter is a collaboration between economist Robert Scott and J. Russell Boulding, a son of Elise and Kenneth with a particular interest in carrying on the work of his parents. The combined efforts of Robert Scott and Russell Boulding result in a delightful portrait of these two remarkable Friends. Their story is a rich and special one. They did not always agree. They certainly had different personal histories, as well as different impulses and perspectives about some social issues and even about their own values and beliefs. But their mutual respect was deep and real, and they together—sometimes close, sometimes distant—accomplished much. Their devotion to values that Quakers hold dear was apparent in their individual lives, their life as a couple, their scholarship, and their work for peace and justice in the wider world. Theirs were lives that flowed out of spiritual centeredness, and perhaps therein lies the most important lesson that this essay, and this volume as a whole, has to offer.

Throughout this collection of essays, the stories we encounter invite us to center down and to discern what *speaking truth* to both wealth and power has meant and will mean. In whatever ways we might frame our terminology—Truth-seeking, Mindfulness, Christ-likeness, the Eternal Now, the Light—spiritual centeredness is the fount from which our politics and economics must flow if we are to shape our lives and our communities for the betterment of all.