1997

Fager's "Without Apology: The Heroes, the Heritage and the Hope of Liberal Quakerism" - Book Review

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Sources and Acknowledgements
Josef Keith, The Library of the Society of Friends (where all FAU members' records are now kept)
The Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Library Staff, Imperial War Museum
Deryk Moore, Friends Ambulance Unit, 1939-45
Le Lt-Colonel de Gislain de Bontin, Service Historique de l'Armee de Terre, 77
Family recollections

Mailing Address: c/o Quaker Studies

Book Review


Chuck Fager is best known among American Friends for his several books of Quaker fiction and nonfiction, but especially for his Quaker newsletter, A Friendly Letter (AFL). Chuck had been a full-time journalist in the sixties and seventies, covering a variety of social issues, particularly the civil rights movement. He brought this background to bear upon current issues among American Friends - especially the controversial ones.

During the the life of AFL (134 issues from 1981 to 1993), Friends United Meeting (FUM) supplied a continuing "soap opera," an ecclesiastical melodrama, that Chuck covered with journalistic elan. The liberal-evangelical struggles that have come to be known as "culture wars" in the United States played out with intensity across FUM's far-flung constituencies and unresolved theological tensions. Reporting on a body where controversy tended to be managed and swept under the carpet, Fager's newsletters might better have been titled The Lancet. I sometimes winced at the "expose" journalistic style of some issues of AFL. These were denominational conflicts, not civil ones; and some of the people involved were personal friends of mine. Yet I simultaneously wondered, "if not for this newsletter, how would I ever know about these crucial developments?" Some liberal Friends in the left wing of FUM and beyond chortled at each new instalment of this Quaker "Dallas." To me, however, this was tragedy, no matter how farcical some of the action. Of course, some in FUM were chagrined by Fager's reportage and anathematised him for it.
When AFL was laid down in 1993, it was not for lack of readership or a
dearth of good material to report. The newsletter will be an important
source for future historians of American Quakerism, not only for its
information on certain key events, but as a significant phenomenon in its
own right.

Fager revisits some of the classic episodes of AFL in his new book,
Without Apology. But added to the painful revelations and incisive
analyses of the original reportage is a compelling personal theological
statement of American liberal Quakerism at the end of the twentieth
century. During the early nineties, Fager was engaged in graduate
studies in theology and the Bible. Those efforts have "seasoned" themes
from the newsletter into a rich set of insights and paradoxes. Fager is
still strongly exercised by the repressive tendencies and political
ascendancy of the religious right. But he balances his polemical moments
with sobering insights into the mirror-image distortions of Quakerism in
the liberal wing. He makes an impassioned case for the integrity and
vitality of liberal Quakerism while also challenging Friends to face up to
their phobias, enclave mentality and pallid spirituality.

Material revisited and expanded from the newsletter days includes: the
clash over homosexuality at the 1977 Friends in the Americas conference
in Wichita (Chapter 1); the 1991 "Realignment" initiative in FUM
(Chapter 9); and the 1990 "Wicca" controversy in New York Yearly
Meeting (Chapter 8). Chapter 7 profiles two American liberal Quaker
exemplars, Elizabeth Watson and Jim Corbett, who had figured
prominently from time to time in the newsletter.

Fager offers this definition of liberal Quakerism:

An ongoing effort to make visible a particular portion of the
ture Church, by means of the specific traditions and disciplines
of the Religious Society of Friends. This very idea of
manifesting the true Church is, we believe, rooted in the early
Quakers' unique and inclusive understanding of the Society's
Christian background and origins. The key Quaker disciplines
by which this part of the Church is constituted are: silence-

based, unprogrammed worship; a free ministry led by the
spirit; decision-making by the worshipful sense of the meeting;
church structures kept to a spartan decentralised minimum;
cultivation of the inward life of both individual and the group;
a preference for unfolding experience of truth, or "continuing
revelation," over creeds and doctrinal systems; and devotion to
the historic but evolving Quaker testimonies, especially peace,
simplicity and equality. (pp. xif.)

This is a refreshing formulation, particularly from an avowedly liberal
Quaker perspective. The emphasis on the visibility of a liberally Quaker
church, through fidelity to its idiomatic traditions and disciplines, is a
breath of fresh air. I find liberal Friends usually avoidant in discussions
of the church in any concrete, accountable sense. Instead of struggling
with who we are as a modern Religious Society, liberal Friends often
throw in diversionary questions, like "but what about Buddhists, Hindus,
or Native Americans?" Fager's definition maintains the sense of an
invisible, trans-Christian church, while doing some justice to the fact and
responsibilities of a particular, historic Quaker polity.

He makes good use of Barclay's Apology in maintaining the invisible and
inclusive sense of the church. Admittedly, he does not grapple with the
more Christian-specific parts of Barclay's development of the church.
Moreover, he adds a sprinkling of "sound-bytes" from George Fox,
William Penn, and John Woolman to bolster the universalist side of
Quaker tradition. I have seen these "proof texts" used too many times by
liberal Friends to paper over the intensely Christian vision of traditional
Quakerism. But these minor irritations are offset by the larger
framework of Fager's argument.

Chapter 4 makes a good liberal case for the ongoing Christian affinities
of Quakerism. Chapters 5-6 offer an engaging anecdotal history of the
liberal, inclusivist evolution of Friends on both sides of the Atlantic.
This is not a scholarly study as such, but shows a responsible use of
sources in glimpsing some defining moments in the liberal Quaker
trajectory.
The profiles of Corbett and Watson in Chapter 7 make me wonder if we have entered some kind of post-liberal phase among Friends since the sixties. Something has changed in liberalism over the past thirty years. We may need to embrace some theory of postmodernism in order to describe the turn liberal Friends have taken in the latter twentieth century. Like Fager, both Watson and Corbett have re-engaged with the Bible in a manner not seen in classic liberal Quakerism.

Chapter 10 is a strong summary, making good use of Jacques Ellul’s *incognito* interpretation of Christian identity in our time. It offers Fager a helpful resolution of the tension between Quakerism’s historic Christian identity and internal logic on the one hand, and its current universal outreach on the other.

The book ends with a ringing affirmation of liberal Quakerism and its future. But then a postscript counters with the suspicion that such conclusions are not “Quakerly.” What follows is a list of eight prescriptions for the “improvement” of liberal Quakerism: renewed adult religious education and spiritual formation; reclamation of Quaker and biblical roots; better outreach; better interconnections, countering widespread feelings of isolation; overcoming fears of anger and conflict; confronting antichristian prejudices; moving beyond the “NPR (British Friends, read BBC) syndrome”; and a renewal of Quaker volunteer service.

*Without Apology* admirably complements the spate of fresh scholarship among British Friends, reappraising the century of developments since the Manchester Conference of 1895. Ben Pink Dandelion has identified a tendency of “privatisation” within Britain Yearly Meeting. Jonathan Dale has challenged Friends to move “beyond the spirit of the age.” Chuck Fager’s call to liberal Quaker renewal stands alongside such challenging statements. It deserves the attention of not only concerned Friends but also scholars. I believe it will prove a significant expression of liberal Quaker revision at the end of this century.

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