

1-1-2006

## Author's Response

"Ben" Pink Dandelion

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### Recommended Citation

Dandelion, "Ben" Pink (2006) "Author's Response," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 106 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol106/iss1/11>

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## AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

“BEN” PINK DANDELION

First, I would like to thank the Quaker Theological Discussion Group for reviewing these books and for inviting me to respond. I have wanted to make a meeting of the Group for many years and am glad that it is finally possible. We have now 34 M.Phil/PhD students at the Centre for Postgraduate Quaker Studies: as the field of scholarship grows, it is vital to sustain the wider colleagueship. Second, I would like to thank Hugh and Ruth for such a careful and generous reading of these two books. Regarding my name, I apologize for the confusion. To paraphrase the earliest Friends, I am known by the world as Pink Dandelion but known as Ben Pink Dandelion amongst Friends. As academic books, worldly tomes, the author is just “Pink Dandelion.”

*Towards Tragedy/ Reclaiming Hope* began life as a conversation between Timothy Peat Ashworth, Douglas Gwyn, and myself on the loss of hope following the loss of empire within establishment England. Tim was not available to work on a collaborative project, but Doug's good friend Richard Sturm joined in a later conversation on the same theme, adding the theoretical lens of classical tragedy. It was no longer a story just of loss, but of lost possibility and the potential to regain “uplift” through a renewed sense of providence. It was no longer a story of twentieth-century England, but of centuries of the reinterpretation of tragedy to mean suffering alone. So, we read in the newspapers of “tragic accidents” simply meaning terrible ones. Brian Phillips and Rachel Muers joined the team to give an example of Quaker hubris and theological possibility respectively, and we presented our joint work in a course at Woodbrooke. It was a dry run of the book, and it convinced us of the coherence of our work. It took two drafts and a year's postponement of the delivery of the text to tie it fully together, but I am gratified by Ruth's response that “the book hangs together much more closely than might be expected.”

On page 32, Richard Sturm defines tragedy as all the authors then use it:

Tragedy . . . is an event, expression or experience of suffering that arouses sympathy or fear, evokes reflection on humanity's

deepest values and concerns, and ultimately affirms providence in the discovery of hope, justice, truth or wisdom gleaned in and through that suffering.

As I've said, popular usage of the term “tragedy” focuses solely on the event or experience of distress. The idea of tragedy as a process has been lost, and with it, the paradox of finding hope, in and through suffering. Society ends up with either suffering without hope or hope without reflection on suffering, pessimism, or triumphalism. Both these themes are taken up in the book.

We choose tragedy not because it is the only way to hope, but because it is one we see as especially helpful given the inherent suffering of the human condition. It does not depend on character flaws but rests on the distress and suffering we find in everyday life, from wherever it has come. As Hugh points out, tragedy is atemporal. We emphasize it as a collective process and I will return to this point. We also emphasize it out of its theatrical origins as a lens through which to view and participate in the human drama. Finally, we emphasize providence as underpinning the reflection and the consequent hope. The loss of providence in an increasingly secular society and even within church life itself, as God is levelled down as a means to circumvent the problems of theodicy, results in the loss of hope and the loss of means to hope. To correct Hugh, it is not that I want us to regain a sense of providence from Islam, but that this is at least one place where we can still find theism and providence stated explicitly, and which therefore might provide a means for other believers to regain a sense of God acting in the world. Of course, our understanding of how God acts, and to what end, will vary with Islam.

We use the Quakers as a case study. Doug finds the tragic processes in the convincement narratives of the earliest Friends, and the loss of this tragic lens, in the second generation systematisation of the Quaker enterprise. As society loses its understanding of tragedy, so do Friends. Thus, in Brian Phillips' work, we find turn-of-the-20th-century British Quakers in an unreflectively triumphalistic mode. When they are shocked out of this position by conscription in the First World War, they have no means to link suffering to hope and are left with only pessimism. World suffering in the shape of continual war, the Holocaust, and the dropping of atomic bombs confirms the pessimism and helps precipitate the reconstruction of God into a non-providential deity, which ultimately only compounds the problem. As Liberal Friends increasingly turn away from a God out there and beyond, they also turn away from the transcendent means to hope.

Ruth suggests this is a book just about England, this is not entirely so. It does focus on England, but again, only as a case study. The trajectories both of providence and of the loss of hope are easy to see there, but they apply to other settings, as well. The Establishment in England, which lost so many sons to the First World War, then faced crippling death duties and disinvested itself of huge amounts of land after the war. As the century wore on, Empire would go too, and a meritocracy would replace the old order. By the 1960s, the Beatles' "invasion of America" and victory in the soccer World Cup represented the remainder of imperial capital and would be continually celebrated in the following decades in the absence of further authentic success. The USA has, according to Ruth, run on a meritocracy for centuries, but the processes of facing loss are not confined to crumbling imperial powers. As Richard Fenn has pointed out in his *Return of the Primitive* (2001), meritocracies are increasingly unstable. All those upon whose labour and oppression such societies have been built are now finding a voice and are now coming into power. Those previously marginalized are unsettling the unreflective hope of the transitional new order. How stable is the US society? How ultimately hopeful? How fearful? This is not just a book about England.

It is this transition, whilst feared by those in power, which gives us cause for hope. Old orders will be replaced by new, and new by newer ones. Marginalized voices find power, and with it new possibilities can be imagined and realized. In Britain this may mean a fully multi-faith society and a less patriarchal one: one in which the previously powerful can find new and hope-filled ways to live. Providence and tragic process may ultimately be restored. As authors we might not necessarily share a theology, but we do share a belief in the importance of the conversation we are trying to initiate. It is not about individualism, but totally about society: the drama in which we are all both viewers and actors.

*The Liturgies of Quakerism* came out of a similar sense for me of frustration at the lack of theological understanding and knowledge amongst British Friends. Unprogrammed worship is increasingly presented as absence rather than as a means to presence, and original understandings about its inward (rather than absent) sacramentality have been lost. I wanted to chart this shift and tie it in with my work on how the loss amongst Friends of the sense of imminent Second Coming resulted in alternative but equally valid "meantime" strate-

gies for waiting faithfully. In this sense, I wanted to argue that programming—with its explicit reminders of what the people of God are about—may be a safer option than absence, which *can* engage with presence but also might not. Barclay’s claim that the devil cannot counterfeit silence is surely wrong; or, if true, refers to a particular and eschatological understanding of divinely *gathered* silence. The aim of the book, then, was to chart the changing theology of Quaker worship, mainly in the Liberal tradition, to educate Friends and scholars and to raise questions as to the future efficacy of the unspoken pluralism of theology we find in Liberal Quakerism.

I use Rahner’s definition of “liturgy” as the worship conferred on God by the church. Thus, Quakers who worship have a liturgy and a liturgical form, even if it is different from some of the more elaborate or creedal outward rites we usually associate with the term. I call the unprogrammed form, or open worship, a “liturgy of silence,” but it is not empty of intention or meaning or experience. Fox justified the use of silence by reference to Revelation 8:1 and the half an hour of silence we find in heaven after the breaking of the seventh seal; he claimed that Friends were involved in the inward communion of Revelation 3:20, not the outward rite described in 1 Corinthians 11:26. These Friends found themselves at the end of biblical history and no longer waiting for the second coming of Christ. Christ indeed *had* come.

Only as that experience wanes or is reinterpreted, as Barclay did, for example, do Friends need to use worship in the same way as other churches: as a meantime strategy. One of the founding arguments of the book is that Christianity is founded upon waiting and that the church is a temporary and pragmatic institution set up to help the faithful wait in the meantime. This understanding is explicit in official church documents. I argue that Quietist Friends adopted the peculiarities as a meantime practice rather than revise their liturgical form as the direct encounter with God was still central. So it is for those Friends, now the vast majority at some 85%, who have taken on a programmed or semi-programmed form, but they have felt the need for different strategies to help them wait faithfully. Only Liberal Friends have taken the bold step of claiming to need nothing outward (neither peculiarities nor programming); bold or naïve when their theology is so varied and so unspoken?

As Ruth suggests, most of the book is based on the work of other trusted scholars (and apologies for Hugh for not including his insights explicitly). It does however try to bring that scholarship together in a fresh way and to present an overview to raise questions about the kind

of liturgy Liberal Friends in particular practice. Examples of Friends United Meeting and Friends General Conference are indeed missing but I would suggest, as Ruth and Hugh do, that they do not hold particularly distinct liturgical understandings outside the rest of Evangelical and Liberal Quakerism which is represented. I do admit however that my view of Evangelical Quakerism is limited and I may have been over-generous in my ascription of historic Quakerism to all of their present understandings. At the same time the 1994 Statement on Elements from Friends Church South West reveals a great awareness of historic Quaker understanding in the face of congregational innovation.

I think the adoption of silent worship *was* conscious, according to Bauman too, and given Fox's statements, but I am grateful to Ruth for her insights on intoning and handshaking in North America. I apologize if I gave the impression that all those who married out were disowned. Marietta (*The Reformation of American Quakerism*, 1984) has a figure of 45.9% being disowned of those who committed marriage delinquency, either marrying out or marrying another Quaker before a priest. As for ethics and its absence, I have argued elsewhere that this is the place where many Liberal Friends end up. Ethics become shared rather than theology, but, because of that, without a shared theological understanding, as the work of Jackie Leach Scully shows (*Quaker Approaches to Moral Issues in Genetics*, 2002).

Ruth may be right to see the heightening of rules about form as belief becomes more diffuse. Sociologically this makes sense, as something needs to hold the group together, generate unity, and create identity. At the same time, fear may become dominant and lead to an over-legalism about modes of worship and ministry. Why is someone not encouraged to minister more than once? The answer is not purely theological but lies in the need to protect the silence, and possibly the familiar.

I like Ruth's comparison between the state of Liberal Friends and tragedy. Indeed, this may apply for those currently in distress, and it may also relate to crises yet to come, as Quaker groups dwindle in size. And, as Hugh asks, is it only Christ that comes? Or even Christ? For some Liberal Friends, they have no sense of a *first* coming, let alone a *second* coming. As an old-fashioned modernist, I still believe in "rational clarity," but I also find it alive and well in the modernist and differentiated Liberal tradition. Here theology is defined within a rubric of the "absolute perhaps"—a rational and absolute certainty gathered from outside the religious enterprise that within the irrational religious world, theology or truth can only ever be deemed as true...perhaps.

Why am I not outraged, as Ruth suggests I might be? While I certainly embody the predilection of the sociologist (as shown my diagrams), I have been schooled not to explicitly express my personal opinions alongside my academic analysis. I remember, writing this in Portland and meeting Paul Anderson one day, telling him I needed to rewrite the last chapter, as it sounded like a rant. I wanted the book to be primarily academic—a book to help understand a situation, rather than a manifesto to change it. The change is a collective choice, but one that is now out in the open. Let us take note of Hugh’s possibility of surprise: faith *can* transform everything, especially when it involves believing in One who is greater than ourselves and still active in the world.