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# QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT— THE FIRST 50 ISSUES

SHANE KIRKPATRICK

As I recall it, the genesis of this project came about as the result of one of the classic blunders of any organizational participation; namely, I mentioned to *QRT* editor, Paul Anderson, that I had an idea. My idea was, now that the journal had reached 100 issues, “somebody” ought to read through all 100 issues and do a review of them. The idea was received warmly, and as surely as night follows day, the “somebody” who ought to carry out this great idea was quickly identified as *me*. I do wish to commend Anderson’s wisdom, however, in inviting Susan Jeffers to share in the undertaking of this task. It has turned out to be every bit as intriguing and exciting as I had hoped when I formulated the idea, but it has also proven to be a much larger endeavor than I imagined. For all its scope and complexity—indeed, *because* of that—the project has proven to be all the more engaging, and I am pleased to be able to share in these pages some of my discoveries and reflections.

Let me begin with some disclaimers. This journal, and the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, which supports it, has been in existence several years longer than I have. The beginning of its life predates the beginning of my own; so I speak to you not as an eyewitness, but like the author of the Gospel of Luke, as one who has investigated things carefully, wishing to write an account of that which has been handed on to us in the pages of this journal. Secondly, as my allusion to Scripture may indicate, I am a biblical scholar by training. Neither theology, nor history, nor ethics, nor Quaker studies is my discipline; they are at best avocational for me. In other words, I am something of a dilettante in this regard (and this demonstrates the educational value of reading through these issues—I have learned a new vocabulary word!). And yet, the interest these areas hold for me is substantial, both as they intersect and complement my own discipline of biblical studies, as well as engage me personally on their own terms.

I mention these things in order to situate myself in relation to the authors and ideas of the journal. What I have written here is, of

course, one person's view—and from an *outsider* at that. I mean “outsider” in the sense that I do not personally know many of the authors whose works I have read, nor do I share a common experience from the times during which they were written, nor do I have expertise in the theological and other currents from which they were drawing. Thus, there are allusions I miss, subtleties that escape me, silent conversation partners I am unaware of, associations left implicit that I am not able to draw out, and so on. And yet, this one person's view is also very much that of an *insider*. I mean “insider” in the sense that I am a Quaker, and that I am one who is actively seeking to engage with the continuing religious thought of my own tradition, not always as a scholar but certainly as a member of the Society. I am grateful to *Quaker Religious Thought* for giving a voice to the tradition in which I stand, these things that have been handed on to us and about which we have been instructed.

And now, to turn to the texts, I begin with some words penned by Dean Freiday, one-time editor of *QRT*. He writes about the journal's first editor, J. Calvin Keene, on the occasion of Keene's death in 2002. Freiday notes that

...the authors that wrote for *QRT* during [Keene's editorship, 1959-1963], Howard H. Brinton, Maurice A. Creasy, Lewis Benson, Wilmer A. Cooper, Arthur O. Roberts, Chris Downing, Hugh S. Barbour, T. Canby Jones, D. Elton Trueblood, and Douglas V. Steere, provided a quality of input rarely available to a new journal. [Furthermore,] the range of topics they covered, pneumatology, Christology, ecclesiology, religious anthropology, religious experience, historical religion, Scripture, ministry, sacramentality, experience of God, and Christ as motivation to Quaker service, quite appropriately cut a wide swath through the total field of Quaker thought. They also mirrored Calvin Keene's extensive background in philosophy, religion, and theology. (*QRT* #101 [2003]:46)

When Keene began his work editing that first issue of *QRT*, Dwight Eisenhower (1890-1969) was nearing the end of his second term as President (1952-56; 1956-1960), and no American military personnel had yet been killed in Vietnam (some 58,000 would eventually die over a period reckoned from 1955 to 1975). Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was finishing the third volume of his *Systematic Theology* while serving posts at both Harvard and Chicago. Martin Buber (1878-1965) had been on lecture tours in the U.S. and Europe at various

times during most of the decade. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was finishing his teaching career at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The World Council of Churches had just reached its tenth anniversary (founded in 1948); FCNL was only fifteen years old (founded in 1943); Philadelphia, New York, and Canadian yearly meetings had reunited less than five years earlier (1955); Friends United Meeting was still called Five Years Meeting (changed in 1966); the Evangelical Friends Alliance, now Evangelical Friends International (since 1989), had not yet been formed (planned in 1962, approved in 1965, though the Association of Evangelical Friends then existed from 1947 to 1970); and the Earlham School of Religion was still a year away from its opening.

I mention these names, places, and organizations not only to set the context but also because some of them are ones, along with many others, of course, that find mention in the pages of the first 50 issues. The list of contributors that Dean Freiday cites includes some impressive names within Quaker circles and beyond, and I am interested to note what names and whose work *they* in turn draw upon. I am struck, as I read through articles from 1959 and from the '60s, that some of these Quaker names that are now associated, in my mind, with significant figures in Quaker thought and life, were at the time of their work in *QRT* young men in early or mid-career. And note that I am intentional about saying “men.” Not only did this journal begin before the days of gender-inclusive language—see, for example, issue #4, whose lead article addresses “Quaker Perspectives on the Nature of Man”—but early on the contributors were almost exclusively male, as well—see, again, issue #4, where a woman’s voice, that of Edna M. Hall, appears for the first time, as a respondent.

Women are listed on the editorial committee from the very beginning; that first list includes Ruth Durr and Elsa F. Keene. Attention is called to “the first woman to write a major article” for the journal in issue #6. That woman is Chris Downing, and that issue is a collection of papers from the Barnesville Conference of 1961, so her paper is not accompanied by written responses in the journal. It is again Chris Downing who first has a focal essay that is accompanied by written responses (the format that was typical for the journal in this early period), in issue #12. I count only 15 different women who contributed to the journal across its first 50 issues, and I include among those contributions book reviews and letters to the editor. I am not implying a negative evaluative judgment with these observations, and I wish to note in addition that Chris Downing served as the third editor of *QRT*, moving

the journal to an ambitious quarterly publication schedule and producing 17 issues across the five years from 1969 to 1974.

The early issues are marked by a format of dialogue—typically, a focal essay followed by three respondents whose comments are in turn followed by a response from the author of the focal essay. If I thought there was some ambivalence about the notion of “systematic theology” among Friends, I find only further ambiguous clues in the work of *Quaker Religious Thought*. For example, the journal’s title avoids the term “theology” in favor of “religious thought”—no doubt an intentional decision. And I find relatively little use of the traditional terminology of theology’s subject areas: pneumatology, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc. Note, however, that Dean Freiday uses precisely this terminology when he describes the earliest issues, as quoted above. He recognizes, rightly, that the articles were clearly addressing these standard categories of theological thought, whether those technical terms appeared in them or not. Modified by the adjective “Quaker” or “early Quaker,” there are a number of different *nouns* used in that first handful of issues: “perspectives,” “vision,” “interpretation,” and even, in issue #1, “doctrine”—“Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.” Chris Downing finally asks, “What is Theology?” in her focal essay for issue #12, and it is issue #20 before “theology” takes its place among that list of nouns, when Thomas S. Brown writes of “A Theology of Quaker Education.”

Many of the articles, whether their titles make it clear or not, deal rather extensively with Quaker history, and these early theological articles are no exception. If I were to think of the first fifty issues of *Quaker Religious Thought* as a kind of stew or a casserole, and if I were then to try to list for you the flavors that seem most to characterize the mixture, I would list *history* as one of the strongest. This is not a journal of Quaker history—we have other very fine journals for that purpose—but the theological reflection that occurs in these pages is grounded very thoroughly, it seems to me, in a sense of Quakerism’s history and the richness of the writings of our forebears in the faith and practice of the Society. Another theme that flavors the mix is a strong ecumenical concern, or sensitivity. There are hints of a great deal of ecumenical activity, and there is explicit attention paid to it not only as the main topic of certain articles and issues (for example, the collection of essays on Quakers and Ecumenism in issue #19) but also in others, like those dealing with the sacraments (see esp. #s 9 and 34), wherein the main topic bears significantly upon ecumenical issues and relationships.

Something else I was particularly interested in watching for was the way in which the diversity within the Society of Friends was addressed. I seem to sense, across these pages—and I think the format of dialogue enhances this—that there is a kind of wrestling with coming to know ourselves. What labels shall we use? Fundamentalist, evangelical, Pentecostal, Christocentric, service-minded, mystical, liberal—all these descriptions and more show up in these pages, often with various kinds of modifiers attached to them, and often followed up by someone else’s questioning of what we even mean by our use of the labels. I wonder if these various themes are not mutually related. Our effort to come to understand ourselves better drives us to our history as we struggle to understand what has divided us, where these divisions have come from, and how we each appropriate our common roots. The reflections on our division are often accompanied by a plea for some recognition of at least complementarity, if not a stronger sense that we all *need* each other, that there is some lack on one side without the other side. I wonder if there is a certain disappointment about our own divisions within the Society on the one hand while we work to make a contribution to the larger cause of ecumenicity and human solidarity on the other hand.

There is, of course, much here that is of great value not simply as historical record but as resource for our continuing reflection on the issues that occupy our attention today. There are, as I expected, places along the way that engage with the larger theological currents of the day. Included in *QRT* is recognition of the significant work undertaken in the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) (e.g., issue #25), the theological impact of “the death of God” (issue #15), and the rise of feminist and liberation theologies (e.g., issue #48, which unfortunately also represents something of a low point in terms of the tone of the engagement between the contributors to that issue), as well as the charismatic movement (issue #41). I was a bit surprised to note that the Peace Testimony was treated relatively rarely across these first fifty issues, especially given the high visibility and highly-charged atmosphere surrounding the conflict in Vietnam during those years; I find only three issues, #s 11, 18, and 29-30 (a double issue), dealing significantly with it. However, issue #18 was reprinted once, revised once, and reprinted a second time with an indication that it was, to date, “by far the most popular” issue yet produced (McCandless, “Guest Editorial” *QRT* #27 [1971]:1), and there are several other issues that address ethics (especially social ethics) in a broader sense (see #s 26, 28, 29-30, 37, and 44).

Work on the sacraments appears in issue #s 9 and 34 (with subsequent letters to the editor in issues #s 35 and 37). This work represents a good example of the way in which the journal serves as a valuable resource for matters that are of continuing significance. For example, my home yearly meeting is currently struggling with questions about the form of our practice of the sacraments, and the critical work collected in *QRT* may yet play an invaluable role in enriching that conversation. Indeed, this is one reason that this project has become such a large task for me—I find myself unable to skim through this work; instead, I am constantly drawn in for a closer reading and more careful reflection and deeper engagement.

My study of these early issues has helped me come to a better appreciation of the way in which discourse is sustained and moves across generations. As a teacher, I find that students sometimes wonder at this notion of a “perennial question.” How can something sustain our attention across significant time without somehow being *resolved* or *settled*? One way to think about it is to suggest that while the question may persist and even some standard answers may endure, the people who do the asking and the situations out of which they operate are always changing, and thus the questions are ever-pressing for each new generation. I have begun to think that there is more to it than that, however. I have been coming to a better appreciation of the way in which our thinking is shaped by the models and constructs available to us, and I have begun to think that the ability of these questions to sustain our inquiry across generations has partly to do with the fact that new models and new constructs of thought provide us with new perspectives on the old questions. To take but one example, there is the appearance, in the earliest issues, of the notion that Hebraic thought was radically distinctive from Greek thought. This notion provided a way to examine Quaker origins and development against a grid that divided religious thought between these two very different approaches. As with most binary oppositions, there is an implied preference for one over the other, and I find authors appealing to the Hebraic as preferable to the Greek and thus calling for a return to Quakerism according to the Hebraic model rather than its distorted Greek form. This model was enlisted as a resource for wrestling with some of the perennial questions of Quaker history and contemporary development and practice. The model has since fallen out of use—in this particular case, following the critique by James Barr in 1961 (*The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford University Press).

I do not look back upon those articles now and say, “Ha, how silly those authors were to think in those terms!” Instead, my reflections

lead me to think about my own work and that of my colleagues and contemporaries today and to wonder what constructs that we find so valuable will be overturned and pronounced quaint by future generations. I find it instructive for my own work to observe how those models and constructs were employed to work anew on old questions. And I am reminded of an image of truth that Parker Palmer offers us (in both *To Know as We Are Known* [Harper San Francisco 1983, 1993] and *The Courage to Teach* [Jossey-Bass, 1998]). Palmer writes,

I do not understand truth to be lodged in the conclusions we reach about objects of knowledge. How could it be, since the conclusions keep changing? I understand truth as the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones. (*Courage to Teach*, 1998:104)

So, for example, the determination that Greek forms of religious thought have helped deteriorate the strength and purity of the early Quaker witness is a conclusion that was reached about the Society's situation in the late '50s and early '60s (e.g., Benson in #s 1, 3), but Palmer reminds me that I need not simply accept that conclusion as truth or reject it as false. The truth does not lie in the conclusion—nor, I would add, in the model upon which the conclusion is dependent. Indeed, the conclusions, the models, and the constructs by which we reach them “keep changing,” as Palmer says. Therefore, he continues,

...it is not our knowledge of conclusions that keeps us in the truth. It is our commitment to the conversation itself, our willingness to put forward our observations and interpretations for testing by the community and to return the favor to others. To be in the truth, we must know how to observe and reflect and speak and listen, with passion and with discipline, in the circle gathered around a given subject. (*Courage to Teach*, 1998:104)

It is here that I find the most fitting description of the contribution of *QRT*. Especially as exemplified by its format of dialogue, with responses and comments and critique built in to the format of the journal, we find here a vehicle for our own participation in the truth. We find here a circle gathered, and a conversation engaged, wherein we are invited to “observe and reflect and speak and listen” and thereby to be “in the truth.” It makes me want to say “Thank you” to the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, and to look forward to 100 more issues of *Quaker Religious Thought*!