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QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT— ISSUES 51–100

SUSAN JEFFERS

I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on the past 14 years of our “denominational” theology journal, *Quaker Religious Thought*, issues 51-100. Allow me to begin with a personal introduction. I am a relative newcomer to Friends and to this group. I first found Quakers in Houston, Texas, in late 1990; I probably first discovered *QRT* as a stack of little blue booklets in the Ann Arbor (Michigan) Meetinghouse in the mid-’90s. I attended my first meeting of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group in Boston in 1999, which was also my first time at the annual Society of Biblical Literature meetings. I’ve been to SBL and the November QTGDG every year since, but that’s not very many years, so I haven’t been at this for long!

I am a “middle of the country” Quaker. I have seldom even visited Friends meetings on either the east or the west coast; my ties are mostly to Friends in Michigan, Texas, and West Virginia. I spent two years in Richmond, Indiana, working on an MA in biblical studies and taking every Quaker course I could from John Punshon. I’ve also traveled on my own to see for myself Quaker places and Meetings in Britain, Ramallah, Sweden, Finland, and East Africa and for a while immersed myself in the writings of early Friends, reading with George Fox in one hand, and the Bible in the other. I’ve worked hard to serve my monthly and yearly meeting, but my ties to the Quaker “alphabet soup” organizations are few.

I think of myself as a Bible student and Bible teacher, with a particular interest in Quakers and the other so-called Peace Churches. I am an FGC (“liberal”) Friend who claims Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and I long for Friends to listen anew for what God would have of us in the world today.

I do not think of myself as a scholar. I have not read all issues of *QRT* from start to finish, and until this review had not even read all the issues that have come in the mail since I’ve been a subscriber. Primarily I excavate back issues when I have some burning question on my mind, looking for what some wise Friend may have written

about it. Most often, as when I pray, this process yields an answer, but not necessarily an answer to the question I'd asked.

I'm a big fan of *Quaker Religious Thought* and of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. I see a continuing need in the Society of Friends for just what this group and this publication set out to do. Where else in all our local and national and international organizations and events do Friends from across the theological spectrum exchange our most serious thoughts and prayers and reflections on our Quaker faith and practice? Where else are the fruits of these discussions published in a forum that lends itself to thoughtful reflection and considered response?

BACKGROUND—*QRT* AND QTGD

The relationship between the organization or gathering known as the Quaker Theological Discussion Group and the associated publication, *Quaker Religious Thought*, has shifted over the years. Sometimes the changes are minuted in the pages of *QRT* but, for the most part, those of us who weren't there can only guess at the nature of the face-to-face gatherings that relate to the printed blue booklets.

What has remained constant is the statement that *QRT* is "Sponsored by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group." And in all of the 50 issues I reviewed, the following statement appears in the inside cover:

The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and the application of our faith.

I suppose I came to both the discussion group and the journal a bit too soon in my own journey with Friends. I may still be too hungry for Quaker religious experience, both "content and application." Possibly I'm not mature enough yet to be ready for "exploring the meaning and implications," at least in as much depth as many *QRT* papers provide. I'm going to tell you about some of the articles that have meant the most to me, and some that I think commend themselves to study in Meetings and Quakerism classes, but, frankly, quite a few of them feel like they are just over my head!

At any rate, I seem most drawn to the places in *QRT* where the human beings come into focus. Some of my favorite pieces in these 50 *QRT* issues are tributes to one Quaker luminary or another. For example, I never met Lewis Benson face to face, but the 1987 *QRT* issue (#65) devoted to his life and work is invaluable to me in understanding some of what I found in the Quakerism of the 1990s and am still finding today, particularly in terms of Christian Quaker renewal among FGC Friends. As Dorlan Bales wrote in the Benson issue, “seekers who think there must be something more will find their hearts stirred by Lewis Benson’s writing”²—and, I add, by this issue of *QRT*. “Seekers who think there must be something more”—I love that phrase!

As another example, I’ve known Arthur Roberts primarily from his wise posts on the often contentious Quaker online discussion lists, and from some of his articles posted online by Bill Samuels: a sort of postmodern snapshot of Arthur Roberts’ thought. Fifty issues of *QRT* have given me a much broader and deeper appreciation of this Friend’s thoughtful and faithful presence among us, not only through his many articles but through the responses of his colleagues writing in the pages of *QRT*.

I also love the parts of *QRT* that describe a bit of the embodied reality of the conferences and gatherings that produced many of the papers—although as with the Bible, much is left to the imagination! Reading through back issues to prepare for this review, I often felt as if I had married into a large extended family, and sat sifting through scrapbooks, wondering about my new relatives.

Speaking of marriage and relatives, Issue #56 discusses a 1982 QTDG conference about marriage and the family that sounded extremely interesting; I especially wish I could have been present at that conference for the “Open Dialogue between Stanley Hauerwas and David Bourns” on marriage and family (pp. 4-24). Ruth Pitman wrote this in her “Guest Editorial” introduction to *QRT* #56:

Though widely regarded as a non-theological subject, there is probably no area of concern to Friends that causes more heartache, indignation, militancy, silent bitterness, and fear than the sexual issues, from divorce with remarriage through homosexuality. Closely related to sexual conduct are the issues of male/female power and abortion. At a farther remove are less inflammatory issues such as society’s place for old people, single people, and children. Is there some context that will help us

understand this whole range of concerns, which are far more interrelated than we usually think?³

I still wonder the same thing: “Is there some context that will help us understand this whole range of concerns” theologically and practically?

TRAJECTORIES

I tried to discern some trajectories, or cycles, or phases through which *QRT* could be seen to have passed during these latter 14 years of publication, but the only blip that appeared on my admittedly low-power radar screen was the increase in what I would call “political” theological articles in the latter part of the eighties. Liberation Theology was much on Friends’ minds at that time, and, as John Punshon tactfully wrote,⁴

Our traditional peace principles are also under challenge from the advocates of liberation violence as a remedy for oppression violence (sometimes referred to as “structural violence”). We have the greatest difficulty in preventing our instinctive sympathy with the oppressed from compromising our principles.

Two articles of lasting interest from this period are Lonnie Valentine’s “Power in Pacifism” and John Punshon’s argument for the Peace Testimony’s origins in the experience of the cross. Both were part of a special “Justice and Peace” 1988 double issue #s 68–69,⁵ which is certainly worth another look at this time of war.

In a brief phone conversation with my co-reviewer Shane Kirkpatrick recently, Shane pointed out that, in its earlier years, *QRT* was concerned to cover major doctrinal topics in a fairly systematic way. This practice had almost vanished by the time we get to the second 50 issues; a series of articles on the Atonement⁶ published in the mid-80’s was the only such topic I found. There were a few thematic issues, including one each devoted to Thomas Kelly and Martin Luther King, Jr., and more recently #95, titled “Legacies of Quaker Women,” and #97, “Uses of Scripture by Early Friends.”⁷ But for the most part each article seems to stand on its own, sometimes responding to something from a previous issue but more often exploring its subject independently.

SUBJECTS TO LOOK FOR IN *QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT*:

For those who may not know *QRT* intimately, I'd like now to give an idea of the sorts of articles one finds in these last 50 issues, and the use to which each type might be put. This list started as an attempt to list nominations for the "Top 10" or "Best of *QRT*" but I quickly abandoned that effort. There are simply too many very fine articles, and too wide a range of purpose, topic, and methodology. In fact, the reader is encouraged to identify his or her own list of favorites, but here are some of mine.

1. To hear how "mainstream" Christian theology and traditional Quaker theology relate:

#62 (1986) Robert C. Buswell, "The Atonement: A Biblical Study" (pp. 3-12), and Dean Freiday, "'Atonement' in Historical Perspective" (pp. 13-32; among the comments see especially those by Sandra Cronk, pp. 36-39).

#76 (1991) Larry Kuenning, "'Miserable Comforters': Their Effect on Early Quaker Thought and Experience" (pp. 45-59, which discusses the way that Puritan doctrine of "limited atonement").

2. For theological and biblical aspects of Quaker practices, testimonies, and other "denominational distinctives":

#57 (1984) Alan Kolp, "Friends, Sacraments, and Sacramental Living" (pp. 36-52).

#90 (1998) David Johns, "Ritual Management of Presence and Absence: The Liturgical Significance of Silence" (pp. 31-42).

3. For Friends and others wanting a thoughtful examination of theological aspects of the "issues of the day":

#54 (1982) Dale W. Brown, "Some Implications for Peacemaking in Apocalyptic Times" (pp. 26-35).

#59 (1985) Ben Richmond, "How We Share the Gospel of Hope" (pp. 19-34).

4. For newer Friends who want to experience a bit of recent Quaker history along with those who lived it:

#65 (1987) the Lewis Benson Issue, especially Wilmer Cooper's Guest Editorial: "Lewis Benson, Evaluating His Contribution" (pp. 1-9).

#78 (1992) the Everett Cattell Issue.

#85 (1995) the Thomas Kelly Issue.

5. FOR ME – what I feel drawn to at this point in my own “spiritual path”:

#68-69 (1988) Lonnie Valentine, “Power in Pacifism” (pp. 23-35); John Punshon, “The Peace Testimony; An Ethic Derived from a Metaphysic Via an Experience” (pp. 55-73).

#60 (1985) Ruth M. Pitman, “Structures of Accountability” (pp. 21-36); Comments by Larry Kuenning, (pp. 36-40); and Response by Ruth M. Pitman (pp. 41-43).

#61 (1985) Dorothy H. Craven, “Accountability: A Biblical Approach” (pp. 18-30); Comments by Perry Yoder (pp. 31-35).

6. For insights into how some Quakers of Jewish background think about their faith life:

#60 (1985) Arthur Berk, “Coming to the Messiah and Living in Christ” (pp. 3-8); Comments by George Rubin (pp. 9-12), Cheshire Fager (pp. 13-15), and Michael Wyschogrod (pp. 16-18); Response by Arthur Berk (pp. 19-20).

7. For environmental and ecological concerns:

#74 (1990) Arthur O. Roberts, “Introducing a Quaker Theology of Creation” (pp. 5-9); Gerald H. Wilson, “Restoring the Image: Perspectives on a Biblical View of Creation” (pp. 11-21); Response by Ruth M. Pitman, “Response” (pp. 23-24); and Wilson’s “Response to a Response” (p. 25); Virginia Schurman, “A Quaker Theology of the Stewardship of Creation” (pp. 27-41); Response by Dean Freiday (pp. 43-48).

8. For ways of thinking about gender and sexuality and family:

#53 (1982) Gardiner Stillwell, “Wives and Metaphors” (pp. 34-40).

#56 (1984) “Marriage and the Family: An Open Dialogue between Stanley Hauerwas and David Bourns” (pp. 4-24).

9. For those who wonder why there are different branches of Friends, and whether we might ever get back together:

#90 (1998) Wilmer Cooper, “The Search for Unity in Diversity among Friends” (pp. 5-17).

10. For persons interested in what Quaker history has to teach us Quakers today:

#90 (1998) Carole Spencer, “The American Holiness Movement: Why Did It Captivate Nineteenth-Century Quakers?” (pp. 19-30).

CONCLUSIONS

I have several hopes for *QRT* and QT DG at this juncture. First, I wish *QRT* were more accessible to more Friends. I'm hopeful that we may soon be able to put a complete listing of issues and articles online, with perhaps some articles scanned and available in full. Perhaps some work could also be done to develop "recommended reading" lists on various topics for individual Friends, newcomers, and meeting discussion groups.

Second, I wonder what's next for the Discussion Group. In a few years SBL and AAR will cease meeting jointly, which will certainly affect the number of Quaker scholars converging on one city each November. In my few years of attendance, I've consistently wished for more participation from Friends in the immediate geographical area of each annual QT DG meeting. Perhaps there will be some new meeting format or venue worthy of consideration.

Finally, I want to return to the "mission statement" for QT DG, which, as mentioned above, states the "search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and the application of our faith." It seems to me that QT DG and *QRT* have been quite faithful in fulfilling our stated purpose of using discussion and publication to "explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience." Perhaps we've been a bit more diligent on the "faith" side and could use a bit more reflection on our experience. However, the real gap I see, looking back, is that we've done a lot of discussion and publication about the content and very little about the application. For many theological topics we've had excellent articles on biblical foundations, what early Friends thought, and how the Quaker "take" differs from other Christians' views. It seems to me that this work could be a starting point for reflection on our experience and our practice of each topic in turn.

A *QRT* piece by Margaret Benefiel introduced me to a classification of "ways of thinking" based on the work of Bernard Lonergan. According to Margaret Benefiel:

First-order reflection uses the language of symbol, image, myth, and story. Its purpose is to draw the reader into an experience, to re-create the experience about which it speaks so that the reader can have that experience, too. Its language is rich and full of depth. It captures the reader and makes the experience come alive.

Second-order reflection uses the language of theory to ask the questions: “What does my experience mean? Can I make a statement about God or Christ based upon my experience?” As it attempts to answer these questions, it works out careful distinctions and structures to express its conclusions accurately. It relies on logic and reason to build its theory.

Third-order reflection, unlike first-order language – which draws a person into the experience – or second-order reflection – which seeks the kind of metaphysical truth statements that can be made out of the content of the experience – reflects upon what is going on interiorly during the experience.⁸

It seems to me that *QRT* by and large has operated in the range of second-order reflection, looking for truth statements, making distinctions, and striving to “express conclusions accurately.” But the places where I find myself lingering are those odd articles, paragraphs, even phrases, in which first-order reflection touches me and enlivens my spirit. I also find myself drawn to what I imagine Margaret Benefiel means by third-order reflection, typified by Ellen Pye’s 1984 “inner” biographical article, in which she writes in detail about her experience of spiritual connection with George Fox.⁹

Might there be a way for both the discussion group and the journal to attract participation by more “seekers who think there must be something more”?

NOTES

1. For example, *QRT* #74 (1990) tells us “At the June gathering QTDC took a new turn. After thirty-three years during which time annual conferences generated themes that were then incorporated into articles for *Quaker Religious Thought*, in the future the journal will assume the major role...” p. 3. (Editor’s note: QTDC meetings then resumed in 1995 at the Philadelphia AAR/SBL meetings, organized by Paul Anderson, Howard Macy, Gayle Beebe, David Johns, and others, and they have continued annually ever since, including two summer meetings in 1996 and 2004.)
2. Dorlan Bales, “The Prophetic Gospel of Lewis Benson,” *QRT* #65 (1987), p. 13.
3. Ruth Pitman, “Guest Editorial,” *QRT* #56 (1984), p. 1.
4. John Punshon, “The Peace Testimony: An Ethic Derived from a Metaphysic Via an Experience,” *QRT* #68-69 (1988), p. 56.
5. Lonnie Valentine, “Power in Pacifism: A Response to Reinhold Niebuhr,” pp. 23-35; John Punshon, “The Peace Testimony: An Ethic Derived from a Metaphysic Via an Experience,” pp. 55-73.

6. For *QRT* #62 (1986) see Robert C. Buswell, "The Atonement: A Biblical Study," pp. 3-12; and Dean Freiday, "'Atonement' in Historical Perspective," pp. 13-32; with comments by Hugh Barbour, Sondra Cronk, Mary George, Kenneth A. Mammel, and Ron Selleck. See also Margaret Benefiel, "The Doctrine of the Atonement: The Quaker Contribution—A Revisionist View," *QRT* #70 (1988-89), pp. 21-25, with comments by Dean Freiday.
7. See #85 (1995), #95 (2000), and #97 (2001).
8. Margaret Benefiel, *QRT* #70 p. 22
9. Ellen Pye, "Living in the Life and Sharing It," *QRT* #57 (1984), pp. 2-23.