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## RESPONSE TO REVIEWS OF *A NEAR SYMPATHY*

MICHAEL BIRKEL

First of all, I would like to express my thanks to these two reviewers for their generosity in their remarks. No book is perfect, no matter how inspiring its subject, but Canby Jones and Max Carter chose to focus on my aspirations in writing the book. It was my hope that this book, grown out of a long and attentive listening to John Woolman, might open a door to understanding his spirituality for newcomers to his writings. My intent was to be a finger pointing to a finger pointing to the moon. Thank you, Canby and Max, for perceiving and honoring that hope.

Often, in settings like this, an author's response is a reply to criticism offered by reviewers, but in this case the reviewers were so kind that they have made it impossible to respond in such a manner. So my words will move in other directions.

Some appreciative readers of *A Near Sympathy* have asked me if I have further interests in John Woolman. While I have some research interests that move me in other directions, I anticipate that I will be a lifelong disciple of the gentle, radical tailor from Mount Holly. There are many gems yet to be mined in the study of John Woolman, and if *A Near Sympathy* inspires others to study the inward life with him as their guide, and if that in turn leads to new insights on John Woolman that they share with others, that would bring me great pleasure.

One area worthy of further examination is discernment, an essential practice for a group like Friends who hold that we can receive leadings from the Holy Spirit. Not long ago, I led a workshop comparing discernment in John Woolman's experience and in the Ignatian spiritual tradition. The portion dealing with John Woolman found its way into the chapter on discernment in *Silence and Witness*, a recent work that introduces Quaker spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

We might call another avenue of study "John Woolman's Bookshelf." Here I remember Quaker historian Hugh Barbour's wonderful work with William Penn, in which he reconstructs some of the collection that must have been in Isaac Penington's library, in

which his son-in-law William Penn studied, before the books were confiscated by the authorities as a punishment for Isaac Pennington's refusal to pay tithes.<sup>2</sup> My particular interest is not in rebuilding John Woolman's personal library. Fortunately, some decades ago Quaker historian Frederick Tolles already did that in part. He wrote an essay describing the contents of a "list of books lent" in a ledger owned by John Woolman.<sup>3</sup> This list included various non-Quaker writers on the spiritual life, such as John Everard, William Law, and Jakob Boehme (or "Jacob Behmen," as he was often known in English-speaking lands). Some might be interested in the possible influence of such readers on John Woolman and his contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> My interest is in how John Woolman and his contemporaries might have read these writings in a Quaker way. What would eighteenth-century Friends have been drawn to and nourished by?

A brief excursus: in graduate school the focus of my work in church history was in ancient Christianity. Naturally, then, I am drawn to John Woolman's understanding of the early Christian centuries. His writings mention Origen and Eusebius, though he seems generally to have been dependent on secondary sources, such as William Cave's *Primitive Christianity*<sup>5</sup> and John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perillous Day*,<sup>6</sup> commonly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. My dissertation focused on early Christian monasticism, especially Greek-writing monastics of the late fourth and early fifth centuries. There are not, to my knowledge, many contemporary Quaker scholars of ancient monastic spirituality. Then I read Henry Cadbury's essay on the books in the library of colonial Quaker Anthony Benezet, who was John Woolman's friend and fellow mystic and social reformer.<sup>7</sup> You can imagine my thrill when I found that Anthony Benezet owned a copy of an English translation of the *Macarian Homilies*, an early monastic spiritual text that my Anatolian monks had known.<sup>8</sup> It felt very affirming to learn that other Quakers, or at least one in the distant past, had felt drawn to, and perhaps also felt a connection with, the rich spiritual tradition of early monastic texts. For myself, I share good books with my friends. I wondered: might Anthony Benezet have lent his copy of the *Macarian Homilies* to his friend John Woolman? We will probably never know the answer to this, but yes or no, it may be worthwhile to explore how Friends in the eighteenth century might have interpreted the legacy of early Christianity.

There are some fascinating echoes in the Macarian corpus for readers who, like John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, have an acquaintance with the writings of George Fox and Robert Barclay. Like some early Quakers writers, the *Macarian Homilies* speak of the possibility of perfection and of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human soul. Other parallels are worth exploring. Imagining the interior conversation with an early Christian monk that might have taken place in the mind of an eighteenth-century Friend is exciting—though admittedly an acquired taste for some. At this moment, however, I find myself even more drawn to another writer, one who was definitely on John Woolman’s bookshelf: Jakob Boehme.

The writings of Jakob Boehme have appealed to many Friends throughout our history. We know that early Friends read his works. Giles Calvert, who published some of John Sparrow’s translations of “Jacob Behmen,” also published numerous early Quaker writings. (Not all early Friends, however, held Jakob Boehme in such high esteem. See, for example, the remarks of Rebecca Travers, in *A Testimony for God’s Everlasting Truth*, where she accuses her opponents of being followers of “Beamond,” “Beamon,” and “J. B.”) Friends in the eighteenth century read Jakob Boehme, as some did in the nineteenth as well. Rufus Jones and Howard Brinton wrote on Jakob Boehme in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Why, I want to know, have Friends found such a perennial attraction to the writings of Jakob Boehme? His works, in the original German or in translation, are dense, complex, and fairly impenetrable at many points. Yet John Woolman and many others found nourishment in Jakob Boehme’s words, so I want to spend time with this influential mystic.

My reason for this is that I hope that this will open the door to a fuller understanding of the kataphatic dimension of Quaker spirituality. It is often assumed that earlier Friends were chiefly apophatic in their inward life, preferring the way of imagelessness. Exploring John Woolman as a reader of Scripture, however, has convinced me that the kataphatic way, the way of imagination, also played a significant role.<sup>11</sup> Entering the cosmos of Jakob Boehme, which is as rich in image and symbol as the Jewish Kabbala that influenced him, may shed further life on the kataphatic side of the spiritual life of earlier Friends.

This is a direction that I hope to explore in the Quaker spirituality of John Woolman. To all others who find John Woolman inspiring and pursue their own directions of study, I wish much insight.

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## NOTES

1. Michael L. Birkel, *Silence and Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press and London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2004), pp. 58-67.
2. Hugh Barbour, *William Penn on Religion and Ethics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).
3. Frederick B. Tolles, "John Woolman's List of 'Books Lent,'" *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Society* 31 (1942): 72-81.
4. For an example of this approach, see the unpublished dissertation of W. Forrest Altman, "John Woolman's Reading" (Florida State University, 1957).
5. William Cave, *Primitive Christianity, or, The Religion of the Ancient Christians in the First Ages of the Gospel* (London, 1673), with many later editions.
6. First printed in London in 1653, with many later editions.
7. Henry J. Cadbury, "Anthony Benezet's Library," *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association* 23 (1934): 63-75.
8. For a more recent translation of these homilies, see George A. Maloney, *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).
9. In *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker Women's Writings 1650-1700*, edited by Mary Garman, Judith Applegate, Margaret Benefiel, and Dortha Meredith (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1996), pp. 320, 322.
10. Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1914), pp. 151-234; Howard H. Brinton, *The Mystic Will: Based on a Study of the Philosophy of Jacob Boehme* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1930).
11. I discuss this in *A Near Sympathy*. I look at meditative reading among seventeenth-century Friends in the forthcoming study, *Engaging Scripture: Encountering the Bible with Early Friends* (Friends United Press, planned to be released in 2005).