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# QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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Cumulative No. 103

November 2004

# QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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November 2004

*Sponsored by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group*

(<http://theo-discuss.quaker.org/>)

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 application of our faith.

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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Christian faith holds together heaven and earth. On the one hand, this faith is earthy with its hands soiled from laboring among aching multitudes crying out for bread and longing for freedom. The first disciples of Jesus quickly learned that his teaching did not invite esoteric flights from the world with its many concerns, nor did it demand abstinence from the physical joy of celebrating, laughing, and giving birth. Many of the greatest social reformers have been motivated to serve humanity, to challenge systemic evil, even to the point of self-sacrifice, because of a conviction that the world is that which “God so loves.”

On the other hand, this faith sets its eyes upon a vision not presently realized, one that strives to reflect the will of God “on earth *as in heaven*.” Perhaps the most searching question we face is what happens to us when we are no more. The Christian’s hope, articulated in the scriptures, is expressed as the mystery that “the dead will be raised incorruptible,” “that we will all be changed,” and that we will receive “what has been promised”—eternal life. What exactly this is or what it will look like is something “no eye has seen, nor ear heard,” although this has not for a moment squelched the human imagination or quieted the longing for something called “heaven.”

The incarnation—God with us—expresses theologically the conviction that heaven and earth are wrapped up together when “God is *for us*” in Jesus Christ. To the extent the Christian community embodies the living Christ—*Emmanuel*—heaven and earth together dwell with us. “Heaven’s best gift, the presence of the risen Lord Jesus, is enjoyed already when as disciples we engage in the ‘word and worship, work and witness’ of the church.”<sup>1</sup> More than a special location and much more than a reward to condition us for good behavior, “heaven” expresses the hope of a real future with and in God. Thus, heaven is never very far from earth, and earth is never without its foretaste of heaven.

In this issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* we bring heaven and earth together, quite literally.

Arthur Roberts’ latest book, *Exploring Heaven* (HarperCollins, 2003), is here reviewed by Tom Johnson and Stephen Moroney. Both essays discuss the book in conversation with Roberts’ latest

collection of poetry, *Prayers at Twilight* (Barclay, 2003). Not only do these discussions honor the range of Arthur's creative engagement with his subject, they implicitly recognize that the language of prayer, dripping with poetic metaphor, is perhaps as close as our words can come to expressing heaven this side of the beatific vision.

Both essays are appreciative. However, Stephen Moroney raises some pointed questions that challenge us not to allow the Christian hope of heaven to become a doctrine that excuses privatized wishful thinking. Arthur Roberts replies to his reviewers and suggests a vision for faithful thinking about heaven that opens us into the vast and expansive cosmos over which God is sovereign.

No twentieth-century figure has had quite the "earthly impact" as Martin Luther King Jr. His work was a concrete example of what heeding the life of Jesus requires. "Jesus is eternally right," King once wrote. "History is replete with the bleached bones of nations that refused to listen to him."<sup>2</sup> The cross brings the best heaven has to offer into the fray of even the worst earth can give out. "Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ....But...as I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine, but also of the tang of the human. I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but of man at his worst."<sup>3</sup>

Howard Macy and Lonnie Valentine both contribute thoughtful essays illuminating again this pivotal thinker, activist, and preacher. Howard Macy explores a number of intersections between King and the Religious Society of Friends, most particularly through Howard Thurman, Bayard Rustin, and the American Friends Service Committee. He illustrates how the impact of these intersections not only affected King, but also how they left an indelible mark on the Quaker social conscience. Lonnie Valentine, likewise, discusses Friends' connection to King through Rustin. He demonstrates how, in a spirit not unlike early Friends, King was able to grasp a sober understanding of human sin without slipping into the socially pessimistic "realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr. Rather than succumb to the despair of seeing humanity at its worst, King saw the cross as a "nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil and only love conquer hate."<sup>4</sup>

Heaven and earth.

We hold them together in this issue of *QRT*, but they really are not so far apart.

With feet planted firmly in the soil of human existence and inspired by a vision of life with and in God, we strive to build a world where the justice and love of God is made real, here on earth even “as it is in heaven.”

—*David L. Johns*

Guest Editor

## A NOTE FROM PAUL ANDERSON

I appreciate very much the willingness of David Johns to serve as our guest editor for issue #103. David is associate professor of theology at the Earlham School of Religion, where he has taught since 2001. He has served on the Advisory Council of *Quaker Religious Thought* since 1997. I am on sabbatical this fall and am a visiting scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary. David’s contributions to this issue make it possible for me to devote my energies more fully to my sabbatical research. The papers in this issue were presented at our Atlanta QTDG meetings last year, and they will be of great interest to readers for their timeliness and relevance, as David Johns has already noted.

Concerning other matters: First, I am hosting an interdenominational conference on congregational discernment January 16-18, 2005, in Colorado Springs (see the website: [discernment.georgefox.edu](http://discernment.georgefox.edu)). This conference is designed to apply the wisdom of the Quaker decision-making process across denominational structures and polities; it is made possible through a generous grant from Lilly. All are welcome to attend and readers of *QRT* might be particularly interested in the event!

Second, I have written a response to a Vatican letter addressed to the churches, a letter from John Paul II on the Petrine ministry. My response is titled “Petrine Ministry and Christocracy.” It was requested by Ann Riggs, director of the National Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission, and sent on to Walter Cardinal Kasper in Rome. Responses thus far have been positive. The focus of our San Antonio QTDG meetings will be the Quaker decision-making

process; an update will follow in a future issue of *QRT*. Until then, thank you for reading and for your efforts in furthering the publishing of truth!

—*Paul Anderson*  
Editor

#### NOTES

1. James McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 88.
2. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 55.
3. *Ibid.*, 45-46.
4. *Ibid.*, 39.