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"Do What You Do in the Wisdom of God": Theological Resources for Quaker Ecological Action in the Writings of George Fox (Chapter One of Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability)

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1 | “Do What You Do in the Wisdom of God”: Theological Resources for Quaker Ecological Action in the Writings of George Fox¹

By Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser and Cherice Bock

Abstract: *In a time when intentional action to care for our planet is of increasing importance, Friends drafted the Kabarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice (2012) to call Quakers to ecological action as an expression of faithfulness. The following work represents one starting point for drawing Friends’ awareness to the theology and practice of early Friends in relation to creation by exploring the writings of George Fox. In this essay, we examine Fox’s use of the motif of “wisdom,” his view of the connection between wisdom and creation, his understanding and experience of the Word of wisdom (that is, Christ), and the way the experience of the wisdom of God in Quaker worship can inspire ethical action in the world.*

I. Introduction: A Plea for Ecological Action Among Friends

At the Sixth World Conference of Friends held in Kenya in April 2012, Friends released the Kabarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice.² It declares,

We have heard of forests cut down, seasons disrupted, wildlife dying, of land hunger in Africa, of new diseases, droughts, floods, fires, famine and desperate migrations—this climatic chaos is now worsening. There are wars and rumors of war, job loss, inequality and violence.

¹ An earlier version of this essay—“Wisdom and Love: A Theological Basis for Quaker Ecological Action”—was presented to the Quaker Studies Group at the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, IL on November 19, 2012.

² “The Kabarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice” (Kenya: Friends World Committee for Consultation World Conference of Friends, 2012), <http://fwcc.world/call.pdf>. See Appendix F for full text.

The statement calls Quakers around the world to recognize earthcare as a justice issue and to become “careful stewards of all life,” “a light in the darkness of greed and destruction,” and “examples in a 21st century campaign for peace and ecojustice.” Statements such as these are important for mobilizing Friends to care for the earth and its creatures, as well as for affirming environmental efforts already underway. Moreover, they also reflect a growing recognition of the ecological problems pressing themselves into our line of sight and of the tight connection between human flourishing and the flourishing of the ecosystems humans inhabit.

Within the context of religious responses to the ecological crisis, Quaker approaches tend to focus on practical action discerned through attentive listening to the Holy Spirit, and they have historically worked for wider social change through focused responses to injustice. Such strategies contrast with the more common approach of formulating broad religious-ecological frameworks that then set the agenda for actions in the environment.³ Quakers, therefore, offer a unique and concrete example for those seeking more action-based responses to the ecological crisis. At the same time, we believe there is insufficient articulation among Quakers of a theological basis that can both inspire and resource such actions; this is particularly important for those within the tradition who need to see the connection between faith and ecological action more explicitly.

While early Friends did not place an unambiguous emphasis on ecological practices (and we do not intend to anachronistically assign such motives to George Fox or other early Quakers), we suggest that the tradition holds potent theological resources for Quaker ecological practice.⁴ In this essay, we call attention to the motif of wisdom⁵ and its connection to creation in the writings of George Fox, particularly in volume 7 and 8 of his *Works*. We aim to explore some of the features of this wisdom motif and show how it may prove fruitful for developing Quaker thought and action on the environment, and for enriching

³ This preference for constructing or retrieving religious-ecological cosmologies over more contextual approaches can be traced back to the agenda set by Lynn White, Jr. in his landmark essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–1207. For more on White’s impact, see Willis Jenkins, “After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (2009): 283–309.

⁴ Douglas Gwyn goes so far as to suggest that there is a “proto-environmental awareness and ethic” present in their writings. Douglas Gwyn, *A Sustainable Life: Quaker Faith and Practice in the Renewal of Creation* (Philadelphia, PA: QuakerPress of Friends General Conference, 2014), xv.

⁵ This motif also appears in the Kabarak statement’s use of biblical wisdom literature in Job 38:4 (“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?”) and reinforces the contemporary relevance of wisdom for the development of a Quaker approach to environmental action.

the wider discussions on wisdom in ecotheology and ethics. To achieve this, we will explore how Fox understands wisdom as the basis of creation, as it is revealed in Christ, and as it bears upon human action before briefly noting the “ethical mysticism”⁶ in Fox’s approach to discerning the wisdom of God in corporate worship as a basis for action in the world.

II. George Fox and the Motif of Wisdom

In a well-known narrative in his *Journal*, George Fox recounts an experience of being caught up “in the spirit...into the paradise of God.”⁷ In this vision, he witnessed a creation made new, a creation that was open to him so that he could see “how all things had their names given them, according to their nature and virtue.”⁸ He also saw that those who stood in the “power and light of Christ” could have knowledge of “the admirable works of creation, and the virtues thereof...through the openings of the divine Word of wisdom and power, by which they were made.”⁹ In another account, Fox tells of a meeting in which the wisdom of God powerfully settled upon those gathered. Through wisdom they “saw” that they were “heirs of the power of God, were to take their possession of the power of God, the gospel and its order.”¹⁰ This experience of God’s wisdom and power led them to the “practice of true religion”—visiting the sick and aiding the widow and orphan—acts through which they could have “the wisdom of the Lord, and of his creation, and to administer his creatures.”¹¹

What these narratives reveal is that for Fox right knowledge and right action are closely linked through the wisdom of God. It is in wisdom that one is given to see the true nature of things, and it is in wisdom that one can respond in accordance with this reality, both in the human and nonhuman spheres. In fact, the wisdom that prompts ethical action on behalf of the marginalized is in Fox understood to be the same wisdom by which all things were made. What are often depicted in the modern context as two opposing claims—one ecological, the other social—vying for our moral concern, are shown in Fox’s writings to be

⁶ Howard H. Brinton, *Ethical Mysticism in the Society of Friends*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 156 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1967), 5.

⁷ George Fox, *Journal of George Fox, Vol. I* (Glasgow: W. G. Blackie and Co., 1852), 66.

⁸ Fox, *Journal*, 1, 66.

⁹ Fox, *Journal*, 1, 66.

¹⁰ George Fox, *The Works of George Fox, Vol. VII* (Philadelphia: Marcus T. C. Gould, 1831), 15.

¹¹ Fox, *Works*, VII, 15.

connected by wisdom. Indeed, what emerges is a vision of interconnection between the nature of reality, the experience of God in worship, and human activity in society and creation. In connecting wisdom with creation, Fox draws upon an ancient tradition of wisdom found throughout the Scriptures, which he develops in a Quaker key.¹² Echoing this tradition, he points to wisdom as the basis of creation, affirming that it was by wisdom that “all things were made and created” by God.¹³

The nature of wisdom’s role in creation must be approached from one angle through the concept of “order,” a word that frequently appears in close proximity to “wisdom” in his *Works*. For Fox, the “God of truth is a God of order,”¹⁴ and thus God governs and orders the heavens and the earth in wisdom and power.¹⁵ It appears to be the nature of God’s wisdom to order creation¹⁶ according to “that wisdom which made them, and doth not change.”¹⁷ The image here is not of some arbitrary ordering or divine decree concerning what something will be; rather, God is shown to be ordering creation according to wisdom—in other words, according to what creation is recognized to be. Thus, for God to create the world in wisdom is to create a world that is ordered, a world in which creatures have names, natures, and virtues.¹⁸

In addition to ordering creation, he also sees wisdom preserving and directing creation toward its rightful end. Fox asserts, “the wisdom from above is gentle and pure, and preserves you, yea, and the whole creation, to the glory of God.”¹⁹ The wisdom that creates and orders creation is the same wisdom that upholds that order and ensures creation’s continued existence; moreover, wisdom directs creation towards its *telos* or fulfillment, which for Fox is conceived

¹² This is an area of increasing interest within ecotheology from a variety of Christian perspectives. For more on the connection between creation and wisdom, see Celia Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006); Celia Deane-Drummond, “Creation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190–205; Dianne Bergant, “The Bible’s Wisdom Tradition and Creation Theology,” in *God, Creation, and Climate Change: A Catholic Response to the Environmental Crisis*, ed. Richard W. Miller (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 35–48; Brandon Lee Morgan, “Reimagining Aesthetics: Sergius Bulgakov on Seeing the Wisdom of Creation,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2018): 149–163; Andrea L. Robinson, “The Ecosapiential Theology of Psalms,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 42, no. 1 (2018): 21–34.

¹³ Fox, *Works*, VII, 149.

¹⁴ George Fox, *The Works of George Fox, Vol. VIII* (Philadelphia: Marcus T.C. Gould, 1831), 163.

¹⁵ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 186.

¹⁶ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 34.

¹⁷ Fox, *Works*, VII, 149.

¹⁸ Fox, *Journal*, I, 66.

¹⁹ Fox, *Works*, VII, 343.

as the glory of God.²⁰ He writes, “By the wisdom of God were all things made, and by the wisdom of God must all things be ordered again to God’s glory.”²¹

Having briefly explored wisdom’s ordering and preserving role in creation, we now turn to what is perhaps for Fox the most important aspect of wisdom, namely, as it is known in Christ. For Fox, the possibility of knowing the world as it is only comes through Christ, who himself is understood to be the wisdom of God and the creator of all things.²² Fox writes that if a person wants to know the things of God, one “must come to the spirit of God and to Christ the wisdom of God.”²³ Christ is “the treasure of wisdom and knowledge,”²⁴ and by living and walking in Christ a person can have the “wisdom and knowledge that is heavenly from this treasure.”²⁵ Again, he writes, “And now, my friends, if you do want wisdom and knowledge to order you in the affairs and service of God, Christ is the treasure of your wisdom and knowledge; and so receive them from his treasury which is above.”²⁶ It is only in Christ, the wisdom of God and creator of all, that the nature of the created order becomes something to which humans have real access. Thus, when Fox exhorts his listeners to “wait for wisdom and in it walk”²⁷ and “Dwell in the wisdom and power of God,”²⁸ he is pointing to a new reality that Christ has made possible for the human person to live into.

Once this wisdom, which orders all creation, has been received from God through Christ, it becomes possible for human beings to take up the role that Fox sees has been given to them: that of ordering the creation with the wisdom by which it was made.²⁹ And so, we turn to the final aspect of Fox’s motif of wisdom, that of its bearing upon human action. First, Fox’s wisdom framework provides key parameters for this action. With the ordering of creation to “God’s glory” an important check has been placed on human activity, namely, creation is ordered to God and, thus, is not a meaningless entity awaiting the human creature’s determination of what its good will be. This is particularly important given the tendency in modernity to view creation as the raw material for human progress. Acting in wisdom, therefore, will entail upholding creation and

²⁰ Fox, *Works*, VII, 149.

²¹ Fox, *Works*, VII, 149.

²² Fox, *Works*, VIII, 283.

²³ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 283–84.

²⁴ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 63. It is important to note that what Fox terms “wisdom” connects with the Quaker term “Inward Light,” but is not congruent with it.

²⁵ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 201, 192.

²⁶ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 192.

²⁷ Fox, *Works*, VII, 150.

²⁸ Fox, *Works*, VII, 116.

²⁹ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 34.

enabling it to be ordered toward its fulfillment in God's glory. Second, as created beings, humans have also been ordered by the same wisdom of God that orders the rest of creation. Therefore, in order for human beings to be what they are, they too must act in accordance with the wisdom that made them. For Fox this means that humanity must take its place in creation by ordering, ruling, and governing "all things which are under [their] hands" in the wisdom of God, that is, in Christ.³⁰ Again, he writes that by living in Christ the wisdom of God "ye may order, rule, and govern all things which are under your hands (which God hath given you) to his glory. Govern and order with his wisdom all the creatures that ye have under you, and all exchanging, merchandising, husbandry. Do what you do in the wisdom of God."³¹

In order to fulfill this role, human beings must attend to the "counsel of the Lord" from which they receive wisdom from God—the same wisdom that orders creation—so that they may "come to know how to order in the creation with the wisdom by which all was made."³² Although for Fox this seems to entail refraining from harming other creatures,³³ it can also be drawn out further in terms of the ethical category of love. Fox writes, "And so let all things be done in peace and love, in the name and power of Jesus amongst you...being all ordered with the wisdom of God."³⁴ And, "Be at peace with one another, and in love and tenderness, and in the wisdom of God order and preserve, and nourish and cherish all things to his glory."³⁵

Passages such as these make an explicit connection between being in wisdom and acting in love, including in our actions in the natural world. The wisdom of God that orders, preserves, and directs the creation and is manifest in Christ is a critical component of what it might mean to act in the world in love. Of course, this wisdom, as the Hebrew Scriptures make plain, is not something easily grasped or attained, and so there is a necessary humility and openness to new understandings (and changes in course) that accompany the search for

³⁰ Fox, *Works*, VII, 15. While one might be tempted to view such statements as providing a Quaker theology of stewardship, Fox is arguing for a more complex human/creation interaction than is allowed for in stewardship models, which tend to depict the human person acting in creation in the absence of God's action. For an interpretation of George Fox's writings on wisdom through the lens of stewardship, see Virginia Schurman, "A Quaker Theology of the Stewardship of Creation," *Quaker Religious Thought* 24, no. 4 (1990): 27–41.

³¹ Fox, *Works*, VII, 191.

³² Fox, *Works*, VIII, 34.

³³ Fox writes, "suffer no creature to perish for want of the creatures, and that none be lost through slothfulness, laziness, and filthiness," and also: "With this wisdom...you do good unto all and hurt no one." Fox, *Works*, VII, 191.

³⁴ Fox, *Works*, VIII, 192.

³⁵ Fox, *Works*, VII, 85.

wisdom. Acts of love in the natural world that spring from wisdom, therefore, would need to be those that move humbly and patiently, seeking to understand and appreciate it in all its complexities and to “preserv[e] you, yea, and the whole creation, to the glory of God.”³⁶

II. Wisdom, Worship, and Loving Action

In linking the experience of God in worship and ethical action among Friends, George Fox offers a way to think about the connection between wisdom and responsive and loving action. In one meeting for worship, Fox describes how the wisdom of God settled on those gathered in such a way that they were enabled to practice “the pure religion” through caring for others.³⁷ For Quakers, a central theological principle³⁸ is that “Christ has come to teach his people himself.”³⁹ Thus, in traditional Quaker worship, individuals listen together to hear Christ speaking to them directly, and what is discerned in worship has often led to the mitigation of injustices. Friends heard calls to end slavery, to reform prisons and mental health institutions, to reject the use of violence to resolve conflicts, and to work for the rights of women.⁴⁰ Howard Brinton describes this movement from worship to action as “ethical mysticism,” which “first withdraws from the world revealed by the senses to the inward Divine Source of Light, Truth, and Power, and then returns to the world with strength renewed, insight cleared, and desire quickened to bind all life together in the bonds of love.”⁴¹

The mystical experience of the wisdom of God in worship was for Fox and early Quakers indispensable for the subsequent movement into action in particular contexts. Fox’s own experience warrants mention, though it can only be traced briefly here. In the accounts of his experiences, Fox draws inward and away from the world (even spending years wandering the countryside seeking deeper spiritual fulfillment); at particular times, he has a mystical encounter with

³⁶ Fox, *Works*, VII, 343.

³⁷ Fox, *Works*, VII, 15.

³⁸ Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2, 56.

³⁹ This was a catchphrase of Fox. He often used this phrase (or a variation) when he preached in new towns. George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John L. Nickalls (Philadelphia: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 304; c.f. 8, 48, 80, 90, 98, 104, 107, 112, 149, 236.

⁴⁰ For more on these themes, see *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, eds. Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴¹ Brinton borrows this term from Albert Schweitzer, who thinks of mysticism as an outlook on the world that “brings [people] into a spiritual relation with the Infinite.” Brinton, *Ethical Mysticism*, 5. See also Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1949), 235.

the divine, for example, by going up “in spirit through the flaming sword to the paradise of God”⁴² or witnessing visionary oceans of darkness and light.⁴³ These experiences in the spirit, it is important to note, do not yield a disembodied or merely rational comprehension of wisdom; rather, Fox experiences a heightening of his senses in which he becomes more conscious of all creation and its goodness or virtue.⁴⁴ As Brinton suggests, Fox became aware of the “inward Divine Source of Light, Truth, and Power”⁴⁵ and of himself connected to the rest of creation through “the Word of wisdom, that opens all things, and come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.”⁴⁶ His encounter with wisdom illuminated his sense-experience of creation and his place within it, and this same wisdom also drew him into loving action in the world. He resisted inequitable laws and famously lived in ways that got him into trouble, speaking the truth he heard from God in prophetic (though not always popular) ways; attending to the wisdom he encountered inwardly, he acted “in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.”⁴⁷

In times of worship, Quakers still wait in expectation for the wisdom of God, the same wisdom that orders all creation and works to preserve it to the glory of God. Seeking to behold and apprehend “the Gospel and its order”⁴⁸ in heavenly form, as in Fox’s vision of Eden, is not an escape from the material world, but arguably may be a more complete experience of it. In this way, Quakers seek wisdom by cycling through times of withdrawal into an inward awareness of God and God’s wisdom in creation before discerning outward possibilities for concrete environmental actions. By attending to wisdom made accessible through waiting worship and mystical encounters with God, Fox offers a way to participate in the wisdom of God at work in creation.

III. Conclusion

As human beings navigate the environmental challenges facing our planet (as a whole and in particular contexts), wisdom is essential for seeing into the pertinent issues and for discerning actions that reflect and respond to the realities of each

⁴² Fox, *Journal*, ed. Nickalls, 27.

⁴³ Fox, *Journal*, ed. Nickalls, 19.

⁴⁴ Fox, *Journal*, ed. Nickalls, 27.

⁴⁵ Brinton, *Ethical Mysticism*, 5.

⁴⁶ Fox, *Journal*, 28. Other historical examples of mystical oneness include Meister Eckhart, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich, to name a few. Contemporary ecotheologians discussing mystical oneness in relation to caring for the planet include Thomas Berry, Denis Edwards, Ivone Gebara, Aruna Gnanadason, Sallie McFague, and many others.

⁴⁷ Fox, *Journal*, ed. Nickalls, 65.

⁴⁸ Fox, *Works*, VII, 15.

context. Given the complexities of ecological systems and their entanglements with human culture, it will entail approaching environmental actions with humility; at the same time, too great an emphasis on humility can become an evasion of human responsibility and the call to move through the world in wisdom and responsive love. It will entail a commitment to drawing from a wide array of disciplinary and religious perspectives to gain purchase on the issues in play in any given context; from a Quaker perspective, this gathering of knowledge will also include that which is gleaned from the tradition and from corporate discernment. And so, the goal of this essay has been a modest one: to point to (and elevate) the motif of wisdom in the writings of George Fox as a potent resource for scholars seeking to develop a stronger theological basis for Quaker ecological action. Fox's understanding of wisdom and creation, connected as it is to mysticism and action, as well as to corporate discernment, is also a contribution to wider discussions on wisdom in environmental theology and ethics. More work is needed to uncover how this motif functions in Fox's understanding of creation, and how it may be reimagined and deployed to shape the kind of world envisioned by the World Conference of Friends in the Kabarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice.