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## RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS OF *SEEKERS FOUND*

BY DOUG GWYN

I am grateful to *QRT* for dedicating an issue to reviewing *Seekers Found*, and to Stephanie Ford and Vail Palmer for their careful readings and insightful reflections. The work for this book began in 1994, with a concern to explore more fully the religious and political developments that led up to the Quaker movement in the 1650s. In particular, I was interested to explore the Seeker phenomenon of that period. In this work, I was reworking ground already covered by Christopher Hill, Barry Reay, J. F. McGregor, A. L. Morton and other historians of 17th-century English radicalism. Their work has presented these radical groups in a *taxonomical* manner, examining their ideas and experiments rather anecdotally.

My approach was to present key individuals and groups in a more *narrative* manner, as actors in the larger story of the Civil War era, in a manner showing how spirituality and politics interacted intimately and powerfully in the breathless pace of events during the 1640s and '50s. I also wanted to explore the deeper roots of these religious currents, going back to the Continental reformations of the 1520s and '30s. This led me to rework some of the ground covered nearly a century ago by Rufus Jones, but with the help of more recent scholarship. Particularly, the work of George Huntston Williams on the radical reformation has been a great help.

As with my previous work in early Quakerism, I undertook this project consciously in light of my own experience growing up in the conflicted American culture of the 1960s. In both cases, a period of intense cultural conflict remapped religious experience and political life in profound ways. I found Wade Clark Roof's work on contemporary patterns of religious seeking very helpful to showing how the conflicts of the 1960s placed everyone—from traditionalist to liberal-progressive—on some kind of seeker quest.

It seemed that telling the stories of Seekers and other radicals in the English Civil War period, relating them to the larger narrative of historical events, was the most appropriate way to write the research. I am glad to know that both Vail and Stephanie were strongly engaged by these

stories; they certainly engaged me powerfully during the process of research and writing. Perhaps at this point, it would be best for me to respond to the points raised by the reviewers.

I am grateful for Vail's putting the book in context, of both other scholarship on early Friends and my own previous work. He also provides a good summary of the book's narrative of groups and events leading up to early Friends. Vail is right in showing more explicitly than I did that there are two inter-related metaphors in early Quaker language of the seed within: genealogical and botanical. It is true that Fox's seed language is most often centered in the genealogical sense conveyed by its biblical-theological sources, while Pennington's language is most often devoted to the botanical sense, using growth language to describe the interior registers of Quaker spirituality. But Pennington is not the originator of this second sense. Fox can be found using this more experiential, botanical sense at an early stage, as in Epistle #24 (1653).<sup>1</sup>

Vail expresses disappointment with the opening and closing portions of the book. These sections, which attempt to relate the 17th-century story to our present-day experience, are bound to be more experimental and questionable. Some theoretical and theological constructs seem to have been more helpful than others. Brian Drayton, in his review in *Friends Journal*, complained of too many ideas woven into the book. In defense of this tendency in my work, I would only say that in attempting to speak to our present bewildered state, some casting about is in order. The Oakeshott typology of forms of association seems to have raised more questions than it answered for Vail. But I want to clarify that in applying that typology to Schwenckfeld and Franck, I was attempting to show two tendencies that appear in the Spiritualist Reformation and continue to run through English Seekerism (A and B), and which still manifest themselves in the seeking scene of American culture today.

Both Stephanie and Vail engage strongly with the 'moments of truth' model that I propose in the last chapter and conclusion of the book. I am grateful for this, as no other reviewers have done so as yet. Perhaps this model should have been an entirely separate piece of writing—probably a whole book. However, it developed as I was searching for a hermeneutical model that could describe the way the Quaker movement forged such a strong unity among a diverse group of Seekers, Baptists and others. Why didn't they simply carom off each other, as seekers usually do today? Some very powerful dialectical process worked the disparate ideas and experiments of these radical groups into a movement of compelling, prophetic power and abiding witness. In devising

this model of that process, I utilized four philosophical theories of truth, none of which has proven adequate on its own, and adapted them as dialectical moments of a larger process in time. The model and its four phases do not encompass the truth itself, of course, but they suggest the manner in which a people of God attempts to think and act faithfully regarding the mysterious, living truth of God in its midst.

Vail has a more extensive philosophical background than I do. He clearly knows a lot more about correspondence theories of truth, but it seems abundantly clear to me that the conviction narratives of early Friends describe *some* kind of moment of correspondence between received Christian doctrine and experienced reality. We can hear it in many of their accounts. Thomas Story (convinced in the latter 17th century) writes of his own conviction: “The Divine essential Truth was now self-evident; there wanted nothing else to prove it. I needed not reason about Him; all reasoning was superseded and immersed, by an intuition of that Divine and truly wonderful evidence of that light which proceeded from Himself alone, leaving no place for doubt or any question at all.”<sup>2</sup> Fox describes this correspondence in another way: “I saw the state of those, both priests and people, who in reading the Scriptures, cry out much against Cain, Esau, and Judas and the other wicked men of former times, mentioned in the Holy Scriptures; but do not see the nature of Cain, of Esau, of Judas and those others, in themselves. ... [B]ut when some of these came, with the light and spirit of Truth, to see into themselves, then they came to say, ‘I, I, I, it is I myself that have been the Ishmael, and the Esau.’”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps further refinement of this “moment of truth” is needed, but I still believe that something along the lines of “correspondence” is an accurate description.

Vail summarizes that the model is not a symmetrical network, “but two theories of truth, a theory of meaning, and an amalgam of a theory of truth with a theory of knowledge.” This may be an accurate description of the model, but it should not be surprising that a hermeneutic aiming to include not only belief but action might be comprised of criteria of different kinds.

Further, Vail finds inconsistency between my application of the model to the development of early Quakerism and my summary of the portrayal of truth in the Gospel and Letters of John. Evidently, it is the sequence of moments that is problematic. But this dialectical model works with different sequences of moments. In the Gospel of John, it begins with the coherence moment of divine creation. In the case of early Friends, it begins with the moment of correspondence between

doctrine and experience. In the conclusion to the book, I suggest that the model could be utilized in facilitating interfaith dialogue. Here, the initiating moment might be pragmatic, the shared sense of a social problem that brings different religious groups together. From the different starting points, different sequences of moments play out. However, it is the same hermeneutic of truth that emerges in time.

This is a difficult model to absorb, I admit. I have presented it twice, in different manners, to the Quaker Theology Seminar (QTS) in Britain. The first time, I used it as a description of early Quaker development, as in the last chapter and conclusion of *Seekers Found*. The second time, I utilized the model to analyze the process of discernment among American Friends in the 1980s around issues of war tax resistance, as documented in two publications on that subject. The QTS group began to engage with the model successfully only the second time around.

I appreciated Stephanie's attention to the atonement theme of the book. This is another key to understanding how early Friends coalesced so strongly, reversing the fragmentation of radical religion and politics. The deep personality spirituality of surrender, the powerful solidarity of the Quaker community, and its sacrificial witness to the world are the energizing force that powered the Quaker movement through each "moment of truth." Rather than appropriating Christ's cross for their own personal salvation, early Friends took it up in their own lives and enacted a drama of atonement that was personal, communal, and historic.

Stephanie rightly expresses doubt that the model would be useful in her work with today's seekers, who often operate in a flux of various spiritual traditions. In proposing it as a model for facilitating interfaith dialogue, I am assuming that participants would engage in conversation from well developed positions. I conceived the model in terms of a communal process, rather than one based upon individual discernment. I would need to consider further how the model could be useful in counseling today's seekers. Stephanie is probably right that the starting point might be the pragmatic moment.

It is worth noting that I also wrote two chapters on seeking in the Bible. These ultimately were dropped because they would have made the book even longer and more complicated than it already is. The first chapter was an extended meditation on the saga of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar in second-millennium BCE context. The second chapter was a look at the seeking culture of Hellenism from which the early Christian

movement emerged. Particularly because of my own personal biblical frame of reference, I still regret the loss of those two chapters.

Stephanie finds the question “what can we learn from the early Seekers?” left unanswered by the book. I cannot disagree, but I hope that the story of early Seekers and Quakers will offer an important historic example that can inform our movement through *this* present darkness.

Perhaps we are, like the Seekers of the 1640s, still in a time of preparation.

## NOTES

1. George Fox, *Works* (Philadelphia: Gould, 1832), 7:32.
2. Thomas Story, *The Life of Thomas Story*, abr. John Kendall and ed. William Alexander (York: Alexander, 1832), p. 35.
3. George Fox, *Journal*, Nickalls ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1952), p. 30.