

1-1-2003

A Response to Reviews on Reasons for Hope

John Punshon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Punshon, John (2003) "A Response to Reviews on Reasons for Hope," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 99 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol99/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

A RESPONSE TO REVIEWS OF *REASONS FOR HOPE*

JOHN PUNSHON

I would like to begin by thanking the three Friends who have provided such thoughtful and provoking comments on my book. One cannot take up every interesting point that has been raised, so I would like to respond in respect of four matters: inward and immediate revelation, the nature of the Richmond Declaration, the status of scripture, and Friends and the Holiness Revivals. Before engaging in discussion with them, I would like to say something about how the book came to be written, since this will cast light on my responses, and why it was I who wrote it.

Some time ago I was invited to have lunch with some of the then members of the FUM staff. I guessed that I was one of a number of folks whose opinions they were canvassing about the role and calling of FUM. All well-run institutions do this sort of thing fairly frequently, and I guess the process is in the nature of a reality-check. I rather think it was about the time of the last realignment controversy, and it may have been this that influenced what I had to say.

I remember suggesting that decision-making at FUM sometimes seemed to take the form of a trade-off between the interests of its liberal and evangelical constituencies.

What FUM needed was a sense of identity that grew out of its core convictions rather than one imposed upon it by the need to maintain its position as a centrist body in the US Quaker spectrum. This is a counsel of perfection, but what lay behind it was a sense that FUM was being carried along by the stream rather than steering a course. I may have been mistaken about that, but such was my impression. The book is my attempt to suggest to FUM what its identity is.

The second thing that made me write was the particular curricular need that I had at ESR at the time. Believing that liberal and evangelical Quakerism are intrinsically interesting, I decided to offer a course on each. But what texts could I use? The unprogrammed branch, the FGC tradition, however one might describe it, is prolific.

The question, “What does it mean to be a Quaker?” is asked over and over in all sorts of ways and in all sorts of places. There was no problem there. When I turned to evangelical Quakerism, however, I was obliged to borrow copies of the out-of-print reprint of Gurney’s *Observations* rejoicing in the exciting and dynamic title, “*A Peculiar People*.” There was no extended and up-to-date enquiry into the nature of evangelical Quakerism for me to use. If I *wanted* one, I *had to write* one.

Now I am not the right person to do this, for goodness sake! What do I know? I grew up in liberal Quaker circles, though many regarded me as unacceptably conservative in my outlook. (I was, and remain, an orthodox Christian of ecumenical rather than sectarian preferences—evangelical, even, when you see what the mainstream is doing to the faith.) I was, and shall remain, a member of Indiana Yearly Meeting, and so sound was my doctrine that they conspired to record me as a minister. So I can do some things right. But what I do not have is extended *experience*, and I had to produce a theoretical book that would have been much better if it had been written by someone who grew up in an evangelical yearly meeting instead of being adopted by one relatively late in life. Stand up all those of you who could have done it better and didn’t! Since you did not undertake the task, you have to have *my* account of evangelical Quakerism *faute de mieux*.

Before getting down to detail, I want to say something about my general approach to the subject. While I am not post-liberal in theology, I am convinced that in modern circumstances it is helpful and productive to talk theology in terms of traditions in the MacIntyrean sense: arguments extended over fairly long periods of time in which certain fundamental agreements are considered and reconsidered in terms of external criticism and internal critique. When writing the book I realized that this was the way I customarily thought, and this was the way I was going to have to approach my material.

The advantage of doing this is what I said in the early part of the book. To produce definitions of “Quakerism” and “Evangelicalism” would shift the focus from the subject matter I chose to write about, to maintaining and defending the perhaps arbitrary definitions I would have produced at the beginning. I deliberately chose *not* to do that in order to give myself freedom. There are gains and losses, of course, and I am willing to live with them. The biggest danger in this approach is that one might avoid making distinctions when they

ought to be made. Gayle Beebe has unerringly put his finger on one of those places, but more of that anon.

On the other hand, the advantage is that one can connect a recent or familiar phenomenon to a much broader context. Quakerism did not spring fully armed from the head of George Fox, but it represents what is to my mind a powerful contribution to the longer Christian tradition. In the same way that one cannot understand Protestantism without Catholicism, one cannot see early Quakerism in the round without Puritanism. From this viewpoint, seventeenth-century Quakerism and nineteenth-century American revivalism are *both* the children of Puritanism. They have points of agreement and disagreement, and that is the internal debate of the tradition. I resisted definitions because my primary interest is in the terms of this debate. Let us take, for example, the nature of our knowledge of God.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

It would be hard, in fact, to imagine a matter more fundamental to theology than the status of epistemology. I am grateful for Arthur's reinforcement, in plainer language, of what I was trying to say, in his section, "Scripture and Spirit." I would certainly grant that the covenant community—collectively sensitive to the voice of Christ, utilizing inward revelation, scripture and right reason—will be rightly guided. But I think Friends have had great difficulty in maintaining that position over time, as our history shows. This is my point about instability. If one asserts that inward immediate revelation possesses a certainty guaranteed by its immediacy, knowledge derived from other sources is less certain and less reliable. In circumstances of controversy, a claim of inward and immediate revelation, sometimes made by a number of people, as in Arthur's example, will necessarily trump claims by others, which rest on induction of some other sort. The problem is that the inductive knowledge may be true and the supposed revelation false.

If we step outside the Quaker frame of reference, we can raise a philosophical question here. Are the ideas generated by immediate revelation recognizable because of the innate structure of the mind? Is that what produces certainty? If they are, then we immediately run into the Kantian roadblock. Barclay's *Necessity and Immediacy* seems to me to imply that we think categorically, and this places Quakerism

in the post-Cartesian world, where certainty is the only real kind of knowledge. Now if Barclay believes that this point is irrelevant because God supplies the capacity to understand with the content of understanding, he is back with a *tabula rasa* and is then in the position of having to say why impressions from without should have less veracity than impressions from within.

And so on. I wish this were a conversation and not an essay taking shape in a word processor, because I would like to refine this argument a bit. When I said that Friends have been bequeathed an unstable metaphysics, I was indicating that Barclay's way of thinking leads to a deductive rather than an inductive method, which encourages resorting to divine guidance as a first, rather than a last, resort. There is thus no answer to all kinds of interpretations which see Quakerism as constituted by its method rather than its doctrines, which is what the idea of continuing revelation now comes down to in many places. As I also said somewhere in the book, undue concentration on the inward light can prevent us from seeing what the outward light is telling us.

THE RICHMOND DECLARATION

The Richmond Declaration, however, is generally criticized for being too open to the outer light (as some think, darkness) and not sensitive enough to the inner, because it ignores the traditional categories of Quaker thought and expression in favor of an evangelical mode of expression and underlying theology. It should be clear from what I say in the book that (a) I think the Quaker tradition needs to be developed and cannot simply return old answers to new questions, always assuming the new questions have substance; and (b) fresh responses, informed but not determined by what has previously been believed, are what provides the lifeblood of a tradition in the terms I postulated above. The life is *in* the controversy. If this is true about intellectual traditions in general, it will indeed be true about the Quaker tradition in particular.

So how then do we look at the Richmond Declaration, still capable of raising very strong feelings among Friends? Gayle remarks that I critique the Declaration as both a statement of faith and a response to political realities, implying that my critique is a criticism. I am sorry if I have given that impression. In fact, the document would be

quite sterile if it were not both of those things, and Gayle is quite right. Once more we see the definition of tradition at work in controversy.

Arthur, also, is certainly right that the Richmond Conference marks a conciliar stand. Since the Hicksites were not there, it cannot have been an ecumenical council of Friends, though it is unlikely, even at that stage of history, that common ground could have been found between the two wings. For the purposes of the evangelical tradition, therefore, we are entitled to consider it as authoritative because it represents a strong consensus of opinion, at any rate, among leading Friends.

If we look at this leadership group, then, what do we find? The Conference comes hot on the heels of the Ohio decision of 1886 not to discriminate against ministers who participated in the ordinances, which is, perhaps, the high water mark of the Ordinance Crisis. The Conference Declaration makes strong statements about a variety of matters but it appeals to scripture as an authority, not reason or tradition. If I interpret him correctly, Tom Hamm sees the gathering as a move by what he calls the “moderate” party against the adherents of the holiness revival among Friends. This is why I see the Declaration as a line drawn in the sand against further movement in the direction of Wesleyanism. It seems to me that modernism as a hot issue post-dates Richmond somewhat. That the Declaration had the effect Arthur claims, I would certainly accept, but I am not sure that this was a large part of what the framers of it had in mind when they wrote it.

Controversy over the Richmond Declaration has always centered on how “Quaker” it is. Naturally those who dislike it say that it does not reflect the tradition strongly enough, those who like it take the opposite view. Gayle takes me to task strongly over the place of “tradition” in my argument and senses that I think there is some sort of “real” Quakerism with which I compare evangelical Quakerism unfavorably. Again, if I have given this impression, I regret it. By looking at Quakerism as a tradition, I was trying to avoid this sort of conclusion.

I may have confused the issue by using the word “tradition” ambiguously. In places I have used the more technical sense of any formal controversy extended through time which has certain limits defined by both internal and external influences. At other times I

have written about the Quaker tradition, meaning the heritage in a vague sort of way, perhaps giving the impression that I espouse a set of doctrines or values classically stated at some time in the past to which we should defer.

It was no part of my purpose to give authority to the “tradition” in this second sense. I certainly do *not* believe that the early Friends are the “real” Friends and evangelical Friends are in some sense deviant. My frame of reference is that the early and second-generation Friends marked a clear point of departure from the Puritanism of their day. They were recognized as a separate church with a distinctive form of Christianity. They were criticized from without, and they had their own internal debates. Their ideas continue to have vitality and provide the intellectual groundwork that forms the basis of much of our faith and practice today. There is both agreement and disagreement among both us and them, and we should recognize this.

I do not defer to Fox because he was the first Friend; I defer to him because I think he was *right*. This does not mean that I agree with him completely, because I do not; nor because I think he has all the answers to my problems, which he doesn’t. But he does institute a tradition in the first of my two senses as well as the second. It is the first that makes him interesting. Personally, I do not have much interest in the tradition in the second sense.

So when I say that George Fox “stated the Quaker position classically,” and that “An evangelical Quakerism that denies this...has probably parted company with its Quaker component...” one should not rush to the conclusion that I have “capitulated” to Fox. I have just argued that evangelical Christianity is prone to emphasize the authority of scripture rather than the authority of the Holy Spirit, and that at Ulverston Fox reverses this order of priority. Pentecostalism aside, I do not think I am wrong about this. It is a matter of judgment about which we can disagree. I read evangelical commentators today who would not have chosen Fox’s words, but would substantially agree with him against many of their precursors in their own traditions. Hence, one kind of evangelical Quakerism will follow one order of priority, or another. It is precisely to cover this subtlety that I took the risk of not defining terms; note the *indefinite* article.

I can understand how I might seem to vacillate between being an advocate and an adversary of evangelical Quakerism. That comes from my background and experience, I guess, though my purpose is

entirely sympathetic. When I used the words “superficially resemble,” I was thinking of a liberal Friend who said to me that she had once been to a programmed meeting and concluded there was nothing Quaker about it. This was superficial. Both a liberal Friend and a Nazarene might attend a Friends meeting and draw very different, and erroneous, conclusions about the nature of this faith community in terms of their previous expectations, and this is where the superficiality arises. In the Introduction I suggested that evangelical Quakerism is a vigorous hybrid and that is why it is difficult to categorize. It inclines in part to evangelicalism and in part to its Quaker past, but neither is enough on its own to explain why the two elements have combined so successfully.

INERRANCY AND INFALLIBILITY

This leads me to my final comment about Gayle. I am grateful for his comments about changing attitudes to the doctrine of inerrancy. The purpose of this section of the chapter on scripture was to draw the distinction between infallibility and inerrancy as sharply as I could in order to provide encouragement and assistance for anybody for whom this is still a problem. I should perhaps have said that it is a “fundamentalist *shibboleth*” in this connection, rather than an evangelical one, for I am aware that many evangelicals do not in fact believe in inerrancy, and am glad to be reminded of it. I am also sure that large numbers do, though, on an official and unofficial basis. The Southern Baptist Convention with over 15 million members still states that the scriptures are “...without any mixture of error,” for example, as does the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, though that is much smaller in comparison. In feeling that infallibility is not to be taken as a synonym for inerrancy, I wished to spell out the difference.

Indeed, there are places where the issue is still alive. *Christianity Today* reports that at the November 2002 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, a resolution was passed questioning the memberships of Clark Pinnock and John Sanders on the grounds that they had violated the inerrancy clause of the ETS constitution. Underlying this is the issue of Open Theism, but the magazine reports that the two theologians were charged with “promoting proposals ‘incompatible with inerrancy.’” It also reported that “Others debated the validity of the inerrancy challenge, saying its function is to ensure that whatever conclusions are reached are grounded in

Scripture. Many affirmed that arguments on both sides of the open theism controversy are grounded in Scripture, which means this is a legitimate debate within the society.”

FRIENDS AND THE HOLINESS MOVEMENT

Finally, let us turn to the issue of holiness. Of all the chapters in the book this is the one that required the most work, and in the end, was the most interesting to write. The word “holiness” can be used in different senses. It can be taken to indicate a religious experience, while also standing for an identifiable historical movement. I use it in both senses and accept readily what Carole says about my comparative neglect of the first sense.

There is an issue here in the relationship between holiness and perfection. Early Quakerism possessed a doctrine of perfection which only gradually, it appears, ceased to be a significant item of faith. One suspects that without Wesleyan fervor, it lacked the emotional intensity necessary to sustain it. In the passages I cite in connection with conviction, that fervor is certainly there. However, a doctrine of perfection as the culmination of a long period of personal religious discipline, i.e. gradual sanctification, is very unlikely to produce this result. Hence, the theology best suited to sustain a doctrine of perfection is that of the second blessing. Hence also the claim that conviction, in the early sense, indicates exactly this experience.

At first sight this seems an extraordinary suggestion. But Carole suggests what might make it so, namely this. In recent decades it has been difficult to talk about mysticism because the word has become a code word for all sorts of liberal and humanistic trends among Friends. This development has prevented us from seeing the phenomenon in its proper light and from understanding it accordingly. Holiness, she suggests, is another such word ripe for rescue. She is, in my opinion, absolutely right about this. Mysticism in one definition is direct unmediated experience of God (That again!). If a conversion experience is not precisely that, I don’t know what is. A revived interest in the mystical tradition among evangelical Friends is long overdue. I remember how delighted I was when I opened Arthur Roberts’ festschrift, *Truth’s Bright Embrace*, *(ed. by Paul Anderson and Howard Macy, Newberg, Oregon: George Fox University Press,

1996) and saw that Gayle Beebe had contributed an essay on “The Nature of Mysticism.”

Carole also raises the question of how Quaker and Wesleyan understandings of holiness diverge. As an aside, let me say I used the word “avowedly” to refer to those yearly meetings who identified themselves by use of the word in their names. I included Central Yearly Meeting because its Discipline identifies itself as such (I believe). That other bodies include holiness principles I readily accept, but I think their histories would show a compromise with, rather than a wholesale adoption of, Wesleyan Holiness doctrines. That was really my point, but I am ready to be corrected if needed.

Now this is partly a matter of methodology. One is faced with a development a century and a half old. Both evangelical Quakerism and the Wesleyan Holiness movement have been through some major changes in the course of it. From the standpoint of my original definition, Friends have been engaged in an interpretative debate over a challenging idea arising outside the tradition. The challenge is to see whether it should be adopted or accepted and modified in view of already existing ideas and practices.

The necessity of the second work of grace is a Wesleyan doctrine, which, actually, I accept. I fail to see, as Wesley did, how a sinner can enter heaven. The question is how we are perfected by grace in anticipation of our translation to glory. The Holiness movement overlooked Wesley’s misgivings about doubtful claims to perfection among his followers in England and went for the full-blown crisis experience. Friends, I surmise, were very much in Wesley’s position, since they preached perfection but did not claim it. I guess that in each case perfection was an embarrassing consequence that flowed for the particular theological means used to circumvent the rigors of the doctrine of predestination.

So how can we assess this situation? In terms of subjective personal experience, I have suggested there is little or no difference between the conviction experience of the seventeenth century and the second work of grace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At a given point in time a certain subject goes through a certain experience which is characterized as a sense of losing their sinful nature through the operation of divine grace. The differences between conviction and the second work of grace emerge in the period fol-

lowing the experience and when theologically inclined persons try to reach an estimate of what has occurred.

Certain questions seem to arise. First, is perfection the end-point of the process of gradual sanctification or does the second blessing *interrupt* the process of gradual sanctification? Second, is it possible to prepare for the possibility of the second blessing, or does it always come apparently arbitrarily? Third, by what means can the community verify an individual claim—are there indicators by which the genuineness of a claim can be made? Carole asks how Quaker and Wesleyan understandings of holiness diverge. On this analysis we can make several conjectures.

In terms of the subjective experience, the accounts we have of conviction are so steeped in seventeenth-century language that it would probably be impossible to replicate them, so to understand them we will inevitably have to use a different terminology. In some ways they are conversion experiences; in other ways they look mystical. They may be a form of the “second work of grace,” or they may be unique. On the other hand, conviction and second blessing may *both* be examples of something we now have more adequate means to describe, and a revisit of Quakerism and mysticism might be very fruitful in this connection.

In terms of practicalities, Friends seem to have begun by preaching a crisis experience but later to have accommodated themselves to reality by plumping for gradual sanctification with the remote prospect of perfection as its crown. One suspects that many members (and ex-members) of holiness churches have in fact settled for that also. Strictly speaking, this is less than holiness in Wesleyan Revival terms. But in terms of the argument I make about sacrifice and the covenant, holiness is in part a condition conferred with justification, an awkward conclusion in view of Quakerism’s hostility to positional theology, but it seems to me an unavoidable one. The consequence is that holiness is not equivalent to perfection. That is why there has to be a second work.

In terms of outcomes there is a difference too. The most striking, to my mind, is that Quaker first principles include a dimension of social morality which goes beyond the personal. This was a response to the circumstances of the seventeenth century and codified in the testimonies, which also included (as tends to be forgotten), but went well beyond, the rigorous but narrow personal morality which the

Holiness movement produced. As I also point out in the book, English Methodism resembles Quakerism in this respect far more closely than it represents the Holiness movement in the United States. Within the Quaker tradition there is an engagement with society on a much wider range of issues.

So this is the outline of my reply to Carole's question. Perfection is the logical consequence of Quaker doctrine, but it can be accomplished in more than one way. It is certainly a work of grace, but needs to be prepared for. It is the fruit of discernment and obedience rather than faith. Interest in the second work of grace is therefore tangential to these concerns and does not arise naturally out of the Quaker tradition; hence the difficulty in harmonizing the two understandings of holiness neatly, in spite of their obvious similarities. Finally, the Quaker tradition goes rather further than the Holiness movement in terms of discipleship, adding a social morality to a personal morality which thereby produces a different scale of values.

Nevertheless, as Carole has reminded me more than once, love lies at the heart of holiness, and Wesley was fond of the phrase "perfect love" (1 John 4:18). This is the nub of the matter, I think. Holiness is a term we use in connection with (to draw an artificial distinction) spirituality and discipleship. We should not get carried away, as I often am, by the fascination and intellectual challenge these ideas present, so that we forget what they are for.

