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Gwyn's "Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience" - Book Review

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Douglas Gwyn, *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2000), pp. 420. Paperback. ISBN 0-87574-960-7. £12.00.

Douglas Gwyn's *Seekers Found* seeks to relate the fragmentation and desiccation of current spiritual practices to the withdrawal from formal worship advocated by a range of unorthodox religious thinkers he characterizes as Seekers. There are problems with such a comparison, and with such a classification, but Gwyn writes well and easily, with palpable empathy for the positions he outlines. In his Introduction, Gwyn implies that 'seeking' can never be over, as truth is not a fixed object which can be owned, but rather a living individual to be followed.

His analysis of twenty-first-century belief is based on sociologists Stephen Tipton, James Farrell and Wade Clark Roof, and involves discussion of the pervasive influence of the 1960s on North American (and by implication, world) culture. The bulk of the book is devoted to a lucid review of the fertile religious thinking occasioned by post-Lutheran speculation and social radicalism in Germany, and its later analogue in England during the 1640s and 1650s, the English Civil War and Commonwealth periods.

Gwyn's review covers the Germans Caspar Schwenckfeld, a proponent of 'Stillstand', (withdrawal from empty church ritual and religious observances), and Sebastian Franck, influential among Anabaptists. Moving from the 1530s to the England of more than a century later, Gwyn discusses John Saltmarsh and William Erbury, both radical preachers with the New Model Army, whose prophecies of a redeemed Nation were disappointed as early as 1649. While both these were professional clergymen who became radicalized over the course of the Civil Wars, the other writers covered are more disparate. William Walwyn, Leveller, brilliant polemical strategist and a writer of huge good sense, explicitly denied being a 'Seeker' at all. The mystical communalist Gerrard Winstanley, who helped found the Digger or True Leveller colony in Surrey was a very different writer with a very different frame of reference. As is habitual, Abiezer Coppe, Joseph Salmon and Laurence Clarkson are classed together as 'Ranters', whose 'nihilism' is interpreted as resulting from political and spiritual frustration. While Coppe and Salmon have something in common, Clarkson has little connection with either. Gwyn unfortunately perpetuates ancient rumours about Abiezer Coppe, a truly extraordinary writer, which have been effectively refuted by Robert Kenny ('In These Last Dayes', *The Seventeenth Century* 13/2 [Autumn

1998], pp. 156-84). In relying too heavily on Jerome Friedman, Gwyn does an unwitting disservice both to Abiezer Coppe and to recent scholarship. Also considered are two female prophets, Anna Trapnel and Sarah Jones, as are Isaac and Mary Penington, rather atypical Quaker converts in the late 1650s. The truly startling 1650 writings of Isaac Penington certainly deserve wider exposure. Apart from the uncertainty of classifying all these different writers as Seekers, Gwyn portrays seeking as leading inevitably to Quakerism, which is thereby figured as the goal.

Gwyn then goes on to discuss early schisms within Quakerism which resulted in the introduction of increased central control over the nascent movement, based on the personal authority of George Fox and the centralizing influence of Margaret Fell. He rather skirts the issues raised by the persecution of James Nayler, but deals well with James Perrot, and with later and more serious breaches in Quaker unity. Gwyn is clearly a Fox loyalist, although he accepts some recent revisions of his reputation. The transformation of Quakerism from what he states was a more serious revolutionary challenge than that of Levellers or Ranters to a quietist and disciplined religious movement was probably necessary in view of increasing State hostility after the re-imposition of the monarchy, but inevitably required the suppression of the individualist cast of the early movement.

Gwyn's attempt to point a way forward through a comparison of the 1640s with the 1960s seems problematic: religion was the primary discourse in seventeenth-century England, and has become severely weakened. Gwyn advocates honest dialogue, but the seventeenth century was characterized by highly polemical and vituperative disputes over religious forms, resulting in widespread bloodshed. I cannot personally imagine directing such questions as 'How does the present dilemma pose a dissonance for your sense of truth?' to a member of any faith community.

Gwyn's book is both enjoyable and thought-provoking, and contains much information which may be unfamiliar to a wider audience. While I can certainly recommend it as a lively and interesting contribution to the study of radical religious thought I do not find it entirely reliable on matters of fact or interpretation, towards both of which, of course, all manner of attitudes are both possible and defensible.

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