Searl's "The Meanings of Silence in Quaker Worship" - Book Review

Peter Collins
Durham University, England

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies

Part of the Christian Denominations and Sects Commons, and the History of Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies/vol13/iss2/14
In several ways this is an interesting book but as John Punshon warns us in his Preface, 'It is not an easy read' (p. vi). The problem is not so much the content or the structure of the book, though there are problems with both, but the writing style of the author. In places, the writing is poor and the entire text should have been proof-read and corrected for poor grammar, typographical errors, and repetition—what is the point of duplicating references at the end of each chapter and at the end
Ireland from a background in English

Tim Harris's introductory essay and

useful in coming to understand the

There are essays in the book on land

Irish Restoration drama, and Irish

interest, however, to readers of this

Heir Path: Quaker Adaptations to the

interest in the history of Quakerism

alongside Richard Allen's Quaker

's The Meeting Houses of Ireland (2004),

I Burton's A Social History of Quakers in

118-20). It is also likely to be a useful

ework in which to read and understand

from the Lancashire Women's Meet-

known copies of this epistle outside

phila. Hynes has also drawn on the

's Historical Library, Dublin, and the

d, to explore the ways in which Irish

de in the epistles, particularly around

behaviour. She

[men's Half-yearly Meeting in 1677 and

son's Yearly Meeting in 1679.

Betty Hagglund

mte for Postgraduate Quaker Studies

University of Birmingham

England

Worship (Ceredigion: Edwin Mellen

Tardback, £69.95, $109.95.

It as John Punshon warns us in his

blem is not so much the content or

lems with both, but the writing style

and the entire text should have been

ographical errors, and repetition—

end of each chapter and at the end

of the book, for example? Having said that, Searl has some original and provocative

things to say about Quaker worship and his book is worth the effort.

Why? In the first instance, what he has to say is, for the most part, grounded in

the words of Quakers themselves and that is refreshing. Searl carried out 47 semi-

structured interviews with members of the Society, living either in the United States

or United Kingdom, and in all but two cases members of non-programmed

Meetings—that is, primarily silent Meetings not led by a pastor. Secondly, he engages

seriously (in one chapter at least) with feminist discourse, a novel and bold strategy

for a man. Finally, he has uncovered a number of useful theses which this reader at

least had not encountered previously.

After a brief introduction there are five chapters and a Conclusion. In the

Introduction we read that Searl carried out his research under the 'official Research

Oversight Committee' of his local Monthly Meeting—an intriguing strategy both in

terms of ethics and methodology which he could have described in greater detail.

Indeed, the underdevelopment of ideas is a signal feature of the book which makes it,
at times, a frustrating read. After introducing a good idea or a scholar whose work is

not usually associated with Quaker Studies, Searl tends to rush on all too soon to the

next good idea—typified in the Introduction by his brief dallying with Lakoff and

Johnson on metaphor. Despite the emphasis on the word 'meaning' in the title, in

Chapter 1 Searl surprisingly foregrounds the experience of Friends. This is a novel

perspective and as such very promising and I was disappointed, once again, that it

was not developed further. Chapter 2 ('The Worship Silence and its Meanings') is

sprawling and would have been easier to follow had the author introduced subheadings

(there is one, 44 pages in). The chapter itself is a miscellany of information,
some original, some gleaned from other works. Searl goes on to consider 'Worship

and Issues of Community'. Given the centrality of 'community' to Friends in the

UK at least, I was surprised that the chapter failed to tackle definitional problems in this

case. 'Community' is one of those 'feel good' terms that needs unwrapping in each

instance—it is not helpful simply to assume that readers will read the word in the

same way.

In Chapter 3, Searl turns his attention to Feminist accounts of religious faith and

practice. He draws on established scholars such as Phyllis Mack and Liz Stanley and

(this is particularly useful) the theses of less well-known scholars—who among you

have read Gwendolyn Alker's work Silent Subjectivities: Performance, Religiosity and the

Phenomenon of Silence (2003)? It would be unfair to say that the chapter reads a little

like a short literature review, but the authors considered do tend to come and go

with alarming regularity. The ploy is to take a couple of male authors (Taber, Kelly,

Gorman) and subject them to a feminist critique with fairly unsurprising results.

Typically, male Quaker authors tend to reflect the ambient sexism of the culture in

which they wrote (and write?). For me, the final chapter 'Unresolved Dilemmas in

Quakerism' is the most coherently written and by far the most engaging. The reason

for this is quite simple—it is in this chapter that Searl foregrounds the talk of his

Quaker interviewees. The one thing which comes across most strongly is the

wonderful individuality (not individualism) of Searl's research participants. They are
thoughtful, good humoured, and always inciteful—and Searl is to be congratulated on his sound interviewing technique. Searl concludes, sensibly, with a brief overview of the book’s strengths, also pointing to areas of research that he would like to see developed, including comparative research on programmed and unprogrammed worship.

The author is himself a Quaker and occasionally slips awkwardly and probably unintentionally into an ‘insider’ mode of expression. I am not quite sure which audience this book is aimed at. Lay readers (Quaker or not) will probably find the prose daunting. Perhaps it would sit most comfortably in Religious Studies. The price of the book ensures that it will only be purchased by libraries. This is an interdisciplinary and somewhat quirky account of (unprogrammed) Quaker worship that, despite its several flaws, is worthy of the attention of Quaker Studies scholars.

Peter Collins
Durham University
England