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THE QUAKER VISION AND THE DOING OF THEOLOGY

R. MELVIN KEISER

THE QUAKER VISION

The Quaker vision of the inaugural period of Quakerism was understood through and articulated in theological language. Yet many Friends today believe theology to be antithetic to that vision. They see theology as preoccupied with the letter while the Quaker vision is about the life—the life of spirituality lived in the presence of God and the life of social action seeking, in Penn’s phrase, “to mend...the world.” (Tolles 53) While the life of the mind can be actively engaged with rigor and precision in any other field—scientific, political, economic, social, historical, literary, even artistic (as witnessed to by this conference)—when it comes to what is most important to us, to what are the roots of all our intellectual and ethical undertakings, we become strangely silent. We avoid making sense of them to ourselves, to our children, and to non-Quakers, in the belief that our lives will speak and that this will suffice.

I agree that lives must and do bespeak what is of central importance to us, that fine words disengaged from our ethical behavior are empty, and that the ultimate realities of our existence are ineffable mysteries that can never be adequately caught in words. Nevertheless, I find in my own experience the need to make sense through words of the ultimate meaning of our lives: in order to achieve an integrated wholeness of being, doing, and thinking; to raise up the next generation; to make our most effective contributions to contemporary efforts to overcome social oppression; to engage non-Quakers in dialogue, both to help them and to learn from them; and finally, to deepen our spiritual lives of love.

This attitude that opposes “letter” and “life” roots in the origins of Quakerism, for this is precisely the distinction early Friends used to criticize their non-Quaker contemporaries’ writings and to evaluate their own Quaker writings. The “life” as experienced in worship and daily existence became the measure of truth and the principle of
coherence. Yet the “letter” for them did not mean all words, but only those words empty of the life. Many words were spoken and written by early Friends that they believed were engendered by and filled with the life. These words were indefatigably theological.

The Quaker Vision of early Friends was incarnate in theological language. That vision was rooted in the discovery of the divine within the self, experienced as: presence, sacred mystery, what is really real, transforming power, guiding illumination, and integrating agency (making us aware of and bringing us into a felt sense of unity with all other selves and with the entire creation). The foundation of this vision is beneath words in experience of the depths of self and world. The primary authority is not, therefore, in words but in what early Friends called “the Spirit,” which is known first through experience of being “in the Spirit.” For this reason Quakerism was from its beginnings a non-credal and non-dogmatic tradition within Christianity. From life in the Spirit actions issue, both nonverbal and verbal. The efforts to transform the political socioeconomic system of mid-seventeenth-century England emerged from these non-verbal depths but so also did words, theological words. Words and non-verbal actions were all parts of a whole that encompassed every aspect of life that were experienced as a unity in the divine depths within. For this reason Quakerism offers a model today, as it has throughout its history, of two things sought for passionately by many today in our larger society—an approach to justice and relief work grounded in spirituality, and a tradition of spirituality centering the whole of life in meditation, which as the focus of Quakerism from the start makes it unique among Christian denominations. The warp and woof of our distinctive pattern of life is language. And I believe we can provide another model, which will help our larger society and ourselves, of a way of doing theology based in this meditative spirituality. We already speak of a Meeting for Worship, a Meeting for Business, and a Meeting for Education. In our Quaker heritage, as we explore it from our present dwelling in “the life,” we possess today a remarkable as-yet-unrealized potential for a Meeting for Theology.

Theological Fatness and Quaker Muscle

But this is hidden both from ourselves and from the rest of the world. A mainstream Protestant biblical scholar and head of his church is reported to have once said to a Quaker colleague: “Quakerism lives
off the theological fat of other traditions.” While he is right that Quakerism’s theological output is modest compared with Lutheran and Calvinist writings, there is, nevertheless, a considerable amount of it. But among its bulk—he is again right—one does not find the kind of systematic treatises that mainstream Protestantism is known for. Yet it is a mistake to take either quantity or a certain kind of theological form as the measure of theological seriousness. Quakers have not lived off of the “fat” of mainstream Protestant thought. Such “fat” is the result of rational elaboration of objectified biblical ideas. Starting formally with some external principle lifted from the scripture—such as the Word of God, justification by faith, or election—mainstream Protestantism has developed its logical implications. The measure of its truth is, therefore, rational—whether the logical elaboration has been consistent, coherent, and comprehensive—and scriptural—whether the starting point conforms to what is central to their understanding of scripture and whether its development takes up the salient biblical texts in comprehensive and insightful ways.

Such an objective starting point located in scripture, in fact, has an experiential foundation. Martin Luther’s doctrinal principle of justification by faith is quite obviously based in his acute personal struggle with a sense of ineradicable sinfulness and discovery of God’s forgiving grace. John Calvin’s doctrinal structure of divine glory, original sin, justification, and sanctification is founded upon a personal experience of divine acceptance and transformation, which—while intentionally obscured—is discernible in his *Institutes*. While these experiences of God are there, the focus theologically is not, however, on them but on their objective doctrinal truth.

Early Quakers, on the other hand, begin beneath words with experience of divinity in their depths, which, to be sure, comes to be named in the words of Spirit, Light, eternal Christ, Inward Teacher. The focus is not on the clarity and certainty of the doctrinal concept focused in scripture but upon the reality experienced over and over again in worship and daily living. From such an experiential beginning the theological fat of logically elaborated long treatises does not accumulate. Rather, Friends have grown their own lean muscle feeding on the direct experience of the life, which has led them to put it to work to mend the world, to develop their own peculiar form of spirituality, and to give expression to meaning of this experience of the life—which has been through theological language.
THE VARIETY OF EARLY QUAKER THEOLOGY

While the amount of Quaker seventeenth-century theological writing does not approach the output of mainstream Protestant writings, it amounts, nevertheless, to a sizable bulk. The published writings of Fox were collected in eight volumes, Isaac Penington’s in four (although there is a considerable amount that has not yet seen the light of print), Barclay’s in three, Margaret Fell’s and James Nayler’s each in one long volume, Mary Penington’s in one short volume, and much more by numerous men and women in single volumes or multifarious short pieces. Contemporary Quakers are largely unaware of this since we have during much of this century only kept in print George Fox’s *Journal*, two pamphlet selections of Isaac Penington, an abridgment and translation of Robert Barclay’s *Apology*, and a few of the political and religious writings of William Penn. More recently, Margaret Fell’s *Woman’s Speaking Justified* has been published in several places and efforts are being made to publish or reissue other texts (see *Early Quaker Writings*, Penn’s *Papers*, Fox’s *Pastoral Letters*, *William Penn on Religion and Ethics*, Isaac Penington’s *Works*, and *Hidden in Plain Sight*, for example).

Not only is the amount somewhat staggering, but the variety of kinds of writing is astonishing: journals, letters, polemical writings (broadsides, debate tracts, trial records), essays, treatises, queries, frames of government, economic models, catechisms, maxims, minutes (of business meetings and memorials for the deceased), dreams, prophecies, apocalyptic visions, anecdotes, history. While some of this is written to and for Quakers, much is written for non-Quakers. The writings address a wide range of concerns: spirituality, doctrine, religious organization, evangelizing, politics, economics, social oppression, the problems of daily living, relief to the suffering, and visionary experience. All of it is expressed in theological language, because that was the coin of the realm in which people in mid-seventeenth-century England discussed politics, economics, social issues, and ethics as well as religion.

What is the meaning of such variety of written forms? Such an array is dramatic evidence that early Friends were not focused on formal boundaries; the truth did not lie in certain forms. Nor were they focused only on certain subject matters, such as God, belief, and religious practice. Amidst such multifariousness, in what did early
Friends find a principle of coherence and what was the measure of its truth?

COHERENCE AND THE MEASURE OF TRUTH

The principle of coherence is not an explicit boundary by which things are objectively demarcated as either included or excluded, but is the experience of life at the center of one’s being and world. From this center such variety springs as multiple expressions of the life. The unity in their writing, as in their living, was found, not at the periphery, but at the center. The primary authority, experienced at the center, is the divine Spirit. The measure of truth—which not only permitted but engendered such variety—is the presence of “life” in what is said or done. The life is known experientially by being, as Fox says, “in the life” or being “in the spirit.” (Fox, Journal 30 & 10) As William Penn puts it, the question is whether the various forms “are such Means as are used in the Life and Power of God, and not in and from Man’s meer Wit....” (“A Key” 503) As Sarah Jones says, the forms which are “manifestations, that proceed from the word” have the purpose “to lead it [the creature] to the substance”: “so let not your eyes nor minds be gathered into the manifestations, but sink down into that measure of life that ye have received, and go not out....” (“This is Light’s Appearance” 35) The measure is whether the life is manifest in the form and whether it is a means to lead us into that life.

But how do you know that either you or a set of words are “in the life”? You know it by its feeling, fullness, fruits, and fittingness. Fox says over and over again: “Live in the Life of God, and feel it.” (Fox, Power 78) For Fox, everyone is given their own “measure of the spirit of God” (Fox, Journal 143) with which to be responsible and by which to understand. Isaac Penington speaks of entering into that measure in order to feel its fullness of divine presence:

wait for, and daily follow, the sensible leadings of that measure of life which God hath placed in you, which is one with the fullness, and into which the fullness runs daily and fills it, that it may run into you and fill you. (“To Friends of Both the Chalfonts” 537-38)

Penn speaks of distinguishing the “Spirit of God” from the “Spirit of this World” in terms of their fruit:
the Tree is known and denominated from the Fruit, so Spirits (are) by their Motions and Inclinations. And the Spirit of God never did incline (any one) to evil;...[but] the Spirit of God condemns all Ungodliness, and moves and inclines to purity, mercy, righteousness, which are of God.... (“A Key” 501)

And the life, as Fox says, brings one into unity—with oneself, with one’s fellows, and with creation itself. It is thus fitting as it “speak[s] to thy condition” (Fox, Journal 11); as “you all have unity in the same feeling, life, and power” (282); and as it brings you into “unity with the creation.” (2)

What this means is that the measure of truth for Friends in writing, as in other actions, is not a concept, such as the doctrine of justification by faith, but is an intuitive sense, not simply an idea, but a felt reality. This reality in our experience gets verbalized as “the life” or “Spirit” and it can be articulated within a doctrinal framework as the creative and connecting agency of the trinity, but the truth of it is not in its conceptual manifestation but in its experiential substance.

THE PURITY OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

We can see more clearly now how the Protestant scholar’s accusation misses the mark. His norm is the purity of systematic theology. But as we have seen, the starting point is not some idea as an objective, systematic principle, but an experience of divinity. The form is not singular as a rational development of belief, but is multifarious in reflecting, in appropriate ways, on diverse aspects of our living. And, the truth is not the clarity and distinctness of idea but the experiential sense—the feeling, fullness, fruitfulness, and fittingness—of a reality. Because Quaker theology springs from the life and is measured in the life, it is intuitive and integrative. Yet precisely because it is working from a sense and integrating the different parts of our lives, it may seem less serious than the pure logical elaboration of ideas about God, sin, and salvation. The richness of systematic theology is its purity of rational clarity and comprehensiveness—that is its systematicness—whereas the richness of Quaker theology is its abundance of life.

Yet some Friends do speak of certain kinds of Quaker theology as systematic (see Margaret Benefiel’s discussion of Bathurst and Barclay’s systematic theologies in Hidden 309). It is right to regard
Barclay’s *Apology* as systematic theology in the sense that it attempts a comprehensive expression of Quaker belief and does so in an orderly manner. It is, of course, technically “apologetic” theology because it is written to present Quaker views to non-Quakers and to try to find common ground that will enable genuine understanding. As a comprehensive apologetic, it is a systematic theology. But it is not “systematic theology” in its other definitive meanings—of starting from an objective systematic principle and elaborating it logically.

Barclay, in fact, witnesses in his *Apology* to his own intimate experience of the divine life within corporate worship. He says he was convinced “not by strength of arguments…but by being reached by this life,” and then goes on:

> for when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed. (340)

On the basis of this experience of the divine life, he begins his book with the epistemological issue of the “true Foundation of Knowledge” (23) and the nature “Of Immediate Revelation” (26)—no doubt shaped by his audience, with whom he found common ground in their attention to this issue under the influence of Calvin and Descartes. While Barclay is erudite in the use of reason in the development of his apologetical theology, he does not use it to elaborate an objective systematic principle, but to explain Friends’ experiential knowing of the life of God in ways that non-Friends can understand.

Measured by an objective systematic norm Quaker theology is, then, not merely emaciated but nonexistent. Early Friends wrote, nevertheless, a great deal of theology but did so, as I have tried to show, in a different “way and method of his Spirit”—as Penn called it (“A Key” 501).

**MAKING THEOLOGY QUAKER**

But what then makes Quaker theology “Quaker”? Does starting from and in the Spirit? That is a *sine qua non*, but other kinds of thinking can start from a tacit indwelling of reality, which, however similar,
would not be Quaker. I would suggest that to be Quaker, theology must not only work from and with the principle of the life (the divine presence experienced in the present amidst our relatedness to the community of being), but must work from and with our Quaker heritage—its historical writings, practices, and actions. The greatest richness of our heritage—both in expression and in potential meaning—is in our beginnings in the middle of seventeenth-century England. To be “Quaker” theology, then, our thinking should start from the divine reality experienced in the present—from being in the life—and work consciously amidst the metaphors, methods, anecdotes, and principles of our historical origins. Finally as theology, it must not simply be a historical study of the past but must seek to make sense of the meaning—especially that which is deepest and most significant—of our contemporary existence through the use of the past and whatever means at hand in the present can be vehicles of the life—“to answer,” as Fox would say, “that of God in everyone.” (Journal 263)

The purpose is not to describe the characteristics of an object, whether God or self, but to bring the reader to an experience of the divine—as Sarah Jones says, to “sink down into that measure of life” (“This is Light’s Appearance” 35)—in the depths of the self’s being, situated in this moment and this place in the world.

**The Need for Quaker Theology**

But if that is how Quaker theology can be done in our day, why would anyone want to? The answers are different for liberal and evangelical Friends. For liberals, “theology” means systematic theology, which typically obstructs the mending of the world by its exclusivism, political conservatism, and rational abstraction from the real needs of people. Many convinced Friends are refugees from such dogmatic traditions of Christianity and want no truck with them. Others enter Quakerism from secularism. Lacking any theological heritage to react against, they do not expect to encounter theology in their search for spiritual nurture. Birthright Friends, on the other hand, in part define themselves as not engaging in things that other Christian groups do, such as the physical sacraments or theology. Hence, whenever they reflect on the meaning of existence, such thinking is by definition not “theology.” I remember a close birthright Friend who had a significant hand in founding the FAHE, who, whenever engaged in intellectual articulation of the religious life, would always resist calling
what she was doing “theology.” When confronted with this, she would always respond: “What I am thinking and writing about is not ‘theology,’ because I don’t like theology, but I do like what I am doing.” In a similar vein of serious playfulness, she was known to say of jazz she liked that “it was not jazz because she didn’t like jazz, but she did like this.”

The answer to liberals, why do theology, is, in Socrates’ words, that “the unexamined life is not worth living”; and in John’s words, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (8:32) Reflection on our commitments and making them explicit, can focus, develop, enrich, connect, and transform our lives. While theology was the coin of the realm in seventeenth-century England, the ethical was present in it. Today the liberal Quakers’ language is ethical, but within it the theological is implicit. To make it explicit—in a Quaker manner of doing theology—would enable us: to understand better who we are, to show the connection between our “doing good” and “being in the Spirit,” to create a common realm of dialogue for Quakers within which our disparate views can be shared and be made more responsive to the life, and to communicate with non-Quakers what we have to offer and to learn from them what they can contribute to us.

Evangelical Friends, on the other hand, are not afraid to articulate their beliefs and to do so in consciously theological language. The question for them is not whether to use theology but how. Do they begin from an abstract concept taken from scripture, or do they begin from experience of the divine life within? Do they move so as to conform to an outward doctrinal structure, or do they move in the creativity and novelty of the Spirit? Are they seeking certainty or the fullness of life? The answer to evangelicals, why do theology, is ever to think how to use that theological language so it can speak with freshness and depth to our condition in the modern world.

Evangelical Friends keep alive the importance of the Christian language of our Quaker heritage. From them the liberals can learn, since there is a wealth of spiritual wisdom inherent in that heritage that can nurture our souls. Liberal Friends keep alive the search for new ways in our culture of engendering and deepening the spiritual life, from which evangelicals can learn to find Christ in unanticipated ways in unexpected places. I would offer a query to both evangelical and liberal Friends in the form of a passage to meditate upon. For the evangelical I suggest Isaac Penington’s:
For Friends, there is no straitness in the Fountain. God is fullness: and it is his delight to empty himself into the hearts of his children: and he doth empty himself, according as he makes way in them, and as they are able to drink in of his living virtue. (“To Friends of Both the Chalfonts” 537)

For the liberal I suggest George Fox’s:

being renewed up into the image of God by Christ Jesus,…[g]reat things did the Lord lead me into, and wonderful depths were opened unto me, beyond what can by words be declared; but as people come into subjection to the spirit of God, and grow up in the image and power of the Almighty, they may receive the Word of wisdom, that opens all things, and come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being. (Journal 28)

Thinking about the meaning of such passages for our life so as to make sense of the ultimate meaning of our lives in ways that fit our condition—which includes, for example, the otherness of diverse peoples and systems of oppression, opening to the former so as not only to tolerate but to honor and learn from these differences, and transforming the latter—is the doing of theology.

**Theological Reflection on Faith and Practice**

This question of the need for theology is implicit in the discussion of faith and practice by Rupert Read and John Miller in a recent issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* (December 1995). In search for what is common among Friends, Read identifies practice alone—the practice of waiting in silence—apart from faith. Miller responds that faith is central for Friends both within and outside the practice. Implicit here are the opposite views that theology is not needed because practice is the only essential element and that theology is indispensable because we need to reflect upon and articulate our faith. While I agree with Miller on the indispensability of faith and therefore of theology, and appreciate his narrative theological perspective (being shaped myself by many of the same theological influences he mentions [see n. 1 & 3]), I want to engage him, as well as Read in dialogue. To Read I suggest that faith is implicit in practice, which a certain kind of theological reflection can uncover and usefully articulate. To Miller I suggest that this uncovered faith is deeper than—and indispensable to—his
meaning of faith. Hence Miller’s view of faith can be enriched by theological reflection on practice, even as Read’s view of practice is enriched by theological exploration of faith.

I value Read’s efforts to locate a commonality among Friends and have myself investigated practice in the search for commonality in Quaker education. As far as I know, all Quaker schools, colleges, theological schools, and study centers use Quaker business procedure. It is here, if nowhere else, that the students (both the many non-Quakers and the few Quakers) experience the Friends’ spiritual principles as faith in practice (see E.B. & R.M. Keiser). While I honor Read’s efforts, the silent meeting for worship cannot, of course, be this point of commonality since it is, as he acknowledges, only central to unprogrammed Friends. While some evangelical meetings use some silence amidst a prepared liturgy, most of them do not.

For Friends worshiping in this traditional way, I would not, however, define our commonality by saying that “what we do in Meeting” is simply “constitute meeting.” We both experience and expect much more than “demand[ing] nothing more nor less of each other than a sincere and non-hostile effort at so constituting Meeting, at being Friends.” (34) In the language of H. Richard Niebuhr—whom Miller acknowledges as important to him, as he is to me—this is an “external” rather than an “internal” account of waiting in silence (see The Meaning of Revelation ch. 2).

What happens in inwardness, in the silence? We in fact do not constitute the meeting, except in the sociological sense of getting ourselves there to sit together in the same room. Rather we are constituted into a meeting. While there is considerable diversity now among silent Friends on how this would be expressed, the traditional phrase is “gathered” by the Holy Spirit, Light, Life, or eternal Christ into a “meeting” with the divine and each other. To be so gathered is our constant hope and, from time to time, our experience. Yet Read says:

I have contended that there are no principles which are central to Quakerism any more, save for principle of practice. That is, socio-ethical-spiritual principles of action outside of Meeting, and the action, the practice, of sitting and waiting in silence, inside Meeting. (35)

But what I want to call his attention to are not the “principles of practice”; I want to uncover the principles in practice. One of these is
faith as the experience of the divine—whether we call it Christ, God, the Self, the Whole, the Way, or Gatheredness (not that these words are identical, but they are all expressing our experience of a More, a Beyond, in the midst of those sitting together in silence).

The practice for traditional Friends of sitting in silence is, as Read says, something like scientists practicing their craft; there is probably as much difference in how the silence is used as in the different ways in which scientists do their work. But one can reflect on what commitments they hold in their diverse, yet scientific work, as one can reflect on what these are in the practice of silence. These take the scientist, as it does the worshiper, beyond the mere demand to constitute a group. They both are passionate about the realities they are encountering, even if some scientists speak not of realities but only of observations, and even if some worshipers do not speak of Christ and God. Within the common practices scientists do argue, though not just at the point of shift from one paradigm to another—witness Einstein’s ongoing debate with quantum mechanics. But I would agree that their arguments go on within an accepted general way of doing things. Perhaps, rather than jettisoning ideas of faith, there is a model here of dialogue—“that makes Friends keep talking to and being with and doing what we call worshiping with Friends” (Read 33)—that could be useful to us all as we seek commonality by reflecting on what is going on in practice—which is faith, in the sense of experiencing a More we are inherently related to in the silence.

Miller articulates in a fruitful way this principle of faith within practice. He expands the meaning of “faith,” used by Read, as belief (i.e. explicit conceptual affirmation), to include “trust.” When he reflects (theologically) on the principle in practice both of worship and life, he locates faith in experience, “in the intersection between my Encounter with God and my Story.” He goes on:

I seek to understand the Encounter in the light of my Story, and this understanding produces one dimension of faith; we often call it religious belief. I seek to live out my Story in the light of the Encounter, and this provides the other dimension of faith; we often call it trust in God. (39)

Telling one’s own story can be a powerful expression of the meaning of one’s life and of the realities one is connected with—as I find it to be in Miller’s own account. Here is an internal account for which I was asking. In our practice there is a story that we are living and that
we can, through reflection, make explicit. To see one’s own story within a larger Story is to grasp its greater symbolic import, since all meaning is contextual, and to understand, our larger context illuminates the parts and partialities of our individual story.

What I find limiting, however, in Miller’s narrative theology is the location and definition of faith. I would not locate faith as trust only in the living out of my story; is it not as well central to my understanding of God as it underlies faith as belief? Moreover, I would not locate faith only “in the intersection between my Encounter with God and my Story.” Is not faith as trust directly involved in that divine encounter on the basis of which I tell my/our story, which in the telling expresses that trust? Finally, I would suggest that the faith as trust involved in “my Encounter with God” is underlain by a deeper faith of trusting commitment within an ongoing relatedness to God. Encounters are episodic, as Miller recognizes; but they are momentary occurrences within ongoing relatedness to God dwelling at the roots of our being. Such encounters can be pivotal, life-transforming experiences that function as the interpretive moment by which all relatedness and other moments are understood in our life. But the moments of faith in encounter rest upon the deeper faith within our constitutive relatedness to God and all of creation, which they bring to focus. To distinguish this kind of trust from the trust involved in a momentary encounter, we might call it “tacit commitment.” (Polany) We all, I am suggesting, exist in a largely unconscious reliance upon the divine in our inward depths. Many ignore or deny this; many seek to control others to defend against this uncontrollable dimension at our foundations; some erect beliefs as protection against it; some have life-transforming encounters that reveal it.

Practice can be enriching to Miller’s definition of faith, as belief and trust between encounter and story, for in theological reflection on practice we find not only moments of encounter, but our ongoing experiential reliance on God. The waiting in silence is practicing the presence of God, that is, becoming aware of (listening to, being challenged and guided by, celebrating) indwelling divinity. Quaker spirituality is the calling not only to constitute a meeting, nor only to tell our story of the divine encounter, but to live in constant awareness of divine presence, which underlies such moments of encounter. In our ongoing experience of the divine life in this inherent relatedness—in its feeling, fullness, fruits, and fittingness—is our measure of truth. The danger in narrative theology is that the larger story will become
abstract and hegemonic, absorbing our own story, so that we measure our lives by an objective standard—narrative though, not dogmatic—rather than by our sense of the spirit in our present life, out of which the narrative of encounter has come and on the basis of which it is sustained.

We, in fact, are living several stories at once; the particulars of our life can be ordered in various patterns. The big Story takes elements of our story and puts them into a certain pattern. If this pattern becomes hegemonic, we lose sight of the various elements in our life that do not fit and thus obscure the transformative efforts of the whole-making as well as holy-making spirit—who is bigger and deeper than any story, who “searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10; RSV)—who seeks ever to expand and deepen our being to include these alien particulars. We may also be living the same story by telling it differently. What then constitutes it as the same? Is it the same telling, the same words recounting the same events, or the same spirit in relation to whom we render it in different words illuminated by different moments of experience?

Our need for theology is evident in the telling of our stories—which Miller embraces—and in making us aware of the dangers in that story-telling. It is evident as well in thinking about the meaning and realities encountered in the practice of waiting in silence—which Miller and I are suggesting Read consider. And, it is evident in the effort to find a commonality among Friends, for to think about the meaning of our meeting together is to ask after the ultimate significance of human being with each other, as part of our being in the world, which is what Quaker theology reflects on—through the language of our Quaker, biblical, and secular heritage.

If the search for commonality is a theological undertaking, how can theological reflection help us along? It can investigate both our practice and our faith. We can describe our different practices—whether as waiting in silence or praising Christ—and look for the common spirit at work within it. We can tell our own stories and the bigger Story we see it as part of, and listen to the different contents and styles of others’ stories, and through these seek for the common holy spirit. I do not think we can find our unity on the explicit level. I agree with Read that we do not find it in belief; but Miller would agree. I do not think we can find it in looking for a uniformity of plot or of narration. Our unity, I believe, is rather in God and in relatedness to creation beneath all explicitness in our tacit commitments and
connectedness. We do approach these within the Quaker context, present and past. However little or much is known, and however differently it is understood, we have chosen to join or to continue as part of this particular conversation on faith and practice rather than some other Christian or non-Christian one.

What I am suggesting is that our unity is ultimately found through the “spirit of God” in “the hidden unity in the Eternal Being,” which “opens all things” to us, within us, whose “wonderful depths” are, however, “beyond what can by words be declared.” (Fox, *Journal* 28) Penultimately, our unity is in dialogue amidst our Quaker context. The theological question then becomes what will facilitate such dialogue? Then need for theology becomes evident in finding a way to speak and to listen to our stories, beliefs, practices, and understandings of our Quaker, biblical, and secular contexts, that sustain, enrich, illuminate, and make problematic this dialogue. Such dialogue can be life-giving, edifying, and community-building if we approach one another knowing that our meeting is in this hidden unity beneath words, which enables us to accept, and even to learn from, our differences. Drawing upon the more inclusive, caring elements in our diverse practice, faith, and stories—as the spirit opens us—we can be graced by otherness. Then we can live in the “love and unity” of which Isaac Penington speaks:

For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him, and that he walks in his rank, in his order, in his proper way and place of subjection to that; and this is far more pleasing to me than if we walked just in that track where-in I walk….The great error of the ages of the apostacy hath been to set up an outward order and uniformity, and to make men’s conscience bend thereto, either by arguments of wisdom, or by force; but the property of the true church government is, to leave the conscience to its full liberty in the Lord, to preserve it single and entire for the Lord to exercise, and to seek unity in the light and in the Spirit, walking sweetly and harmoniously together in the midst of different practices. (Renfer 213)
THE QUAKER VISION’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD OF THEOLOGY

What can we say, then, in conclusion, to the question of the conference, in what ways has the Quaker vision contributed to the discipline of theology? The answer is “Not a wit,” judging by the Protestant scholar’s remark. There was a vigorous theological exchange between Quakers and other Protestants in the seventeenth century. Samuel Fisher, in his eight-hundred-page *Rusticus Ad Academicos*, answers point by point the written attacks on Quakers by such leading Puritan theologians as John Owen and Richard Baxter, and contributes to the beginnings of higher biblical criticism through extensive arguments about the sources and formation of the biblical canon, with the purpose of refuting their identification of scripture with the Word of God. But his efforts are forgotten in biblical scholarly history with the passage of time. Significant writings of Penn and Barclay also exhibit this Puritan-Quaker dispute, but Penn is remembered for his contributions to the making of modern government rather than to outcomes but without the unnecessary baggage of theological thinking. Yet such effects in the world were incubated within the minds and hearts of Quakers seeking, as they understood it, to sink down into the measure of the life and to manifest that life as led into both word and deed. To the degree that liberal Friends do not reflect on their commitments in doing good, and to the degree that evangelical Friends do reflect on their commitments but do so not in the life but adhering to objective forms, the scope of action is curtailed and the depths of spirituality are restricted in energizing, sustaining, and imagining such ways of being in the world.

If our theology has in fact been so potent in its impact on social life, even though having no noticeable effect on others’ theology, perhaps there is further socially transformative potential in Quaker theology. In any case, there are contemporary theologies that, like Quaker theology, are focused on doing theology so as to overcome social oppression. From these Quakers can learn—such as how to do systemic analysis of social oppression—but can also contribute insofar as our theology is grounded in a spirituality of divine presence—in a sinking down into the measure of life from which comes both action and words, and their integration.
NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


