

1-1-1959

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Recommended Citation

Brinton, Howard H. (1959) "Response to Comments," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol1/iss1/4>

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Response to Comments

HOWARD H. BRINTON

Lewis Benson has well stated the contrast between the Hebraic-prophetic-personal and the Hellenic-philosophical-impersonal tendencies in modern Quaker thought. He feels that it is not a case of both-and but a case of either-or, since in his opinion it is impossible to combine the two. In basing his religion on a personal relationship with God and Christ, he places himself in line with much of recent theological opinion.

I agree that, under the influence of a liberal theology which is over-influenced by scientific methods, modern Quakerism has often swung too far toward the impersonal. But, perhaps because of my philosophical and scientific training, I cannot abandon entirely the more general and universal approach. Both the impersonal Greek and the personal Hebrew points of view were present in Quakerism, as indeed they were in Christianity, almost from the beginning. I say "almost" for in both cases it is probable that the personal came first, as it should, for that is the more powerful and moving of the two ways.

I shall not dispute *Lewis Benson's* interpretation of *George Fox*. But soon after *Fox* came *Barclay* and *Penn* who added a more universal and generalized element which was not renounced by *Fox*. In a similar way, perhaps, soon after the very personal description of Christ in the Synoptic gospels, came *John* who added an emphasis on the Eternal Light, Life, Logos, Truth, without depreciating the historical events.

In my religion I find a need for both the eternal and temporal, the universal and particular. But such terms as "abstract" or "impersonal" or "it" as contrasted with the personal term "Thou," are inadequate in describing the non-temporal and universal quality of Divinity. We need some such word as "super-personal," though that is not fully satisfactory either.

Lewis Benson's quotations from *Fox* seem to make the Divine-human relationship too complicated. According to these

statements, God's Spirit draws us to Christ, the mediator between man and God. But *Fox* is often more direct. A common type of expression in his Epistles is "submit to that which is of God in you to guide you to God" (Ep. 79). *Fox* is sometimes Christocentric and sometimes theocentric.

Thomas Brown points out the danger inherent in a religion based only on the Spirit within. I agree that this danger exists. In my essay I pointed out some ways which Friends have used to avoid it. But in spite of these ways, Quakerism has sometimes degenerated into Ranterism in modern, as well as earlier, times. It is true that what we consider to be the Spirit of God or Christ is sometimes a projection of ourselves and that our doctrine of divine guidance may generate spiritual pride. But this, I believe, is not inevitable. It only occurs when in our religion the inward becomes everything and the outward nothing. I think that the Friends Journals show that a religion based on the primacy of the Spirit (but not *only* on the Spirit) can be appropriately embodied in a life. The Quaker Journalists depended greatly upon the Scriptures. Their sermons often consisted mainly of scriptural quotations. But they believed in the primacy of the Inward Light. The Scriptures, for the very reason that they were produced by the same Light, were an indispensable help.

The doctrine of infallibility, sometimes evident in early Quakerism, has seldom appeared since. But is not the confidence which can say "Thus saith the Lord" an assurance of which we have need today?

In reference to what *Thomas Brown* says about the importance of the symbol of the Trinity, I agree with his quotation from *Paul Tillich* that the doctrine of the Trinity keeps "the unity between the ultimacy and the concreteness in the living God," but these are two, not three. Friends also seem sometimes to reduce the three to two in identifying the Holy Spirit with the Christ Within. Though the Trinity is a time-honored and suggestive symbol, I do not wish to limit God to two, three or any other number of ways of presenting Himself to man.

Charles Thomas points out clearly the importance of a doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a "unifying force within the Society," a doctrine which "would give us God in his creative initiative

and Self-disclosure as the heart of spiritual experience.” With this I fully agree, especially as such words do not require us to be specific regarding the exact relation between God, Christ, the Spirit and man. The Spirit is not an object to be classified, but a Power to which (or to Whom) we may, or may not, respond.

Charles Thomas’ paper is concerned more with practice than with doctrine. I agree that, as an individual should check the validity of his own inspiration with that of the meeting, the meeting should also check its revelation with that of a larger body. In the Five Years Meeting the larger body has sometimes used its authority to enforce creedal conformity in ministers, a procedure which might have unfortunate results.

On the subject of vocal ministry some misunderstanding may exist. I believe that the Society of Friends needs a teaching ministry at stated times and prepared in advance. As a teacher of religious subjects for thirty years I cannot object to this, though the “weighty Friends” of the meeting which I attended in my boyhood would have condemned this instruction as “creaturely activity” in an area in which only Divine inspiration should operate. Paul listed teaching among the gifts of the Spirit (I Cor. 12:28). In my opinion, prepared addresses are most suitably given at a time other than a meeting for worship, perhaps at a forum before or after a meeting. It is my belief that the period of collective worship should be devoted to cultivating sensitivity to the “inward intimations” of the Spirit by, and through, which divine guidance may be experienced. What is presented vocally may have had its origin at an earlier time, but in worship it should arise with a fresh sense of fitness and timeliness.

A Quaker meeting is a group search for Truth and a seed-bed in which former individual insights may mature and develop. Such a group exercise of worship is a peculiar and difficult undertaking which may fail more often than it succeeds, but three centuries of Quaker practice have proved its power and worth.