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Reviews

T Vail Palmer, Jr.

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Reviews

QUAKER UNDERSTANDING OF CHRIST AND OF AUTHORITY, edited by T. Canby Jones. Friends World Committee, American Section, Philadelphia, Pa., and Plainfield, Ind., 1974. 68 pp., \$1.00, paper.

On first sight, there seems to be something very strange about reviewing this study booklet in *Quaker Religious Thought*. Its editor is a former editor of *QRT* and present chairman of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. The writers of the papers in this booklet have all either written for *QRT* or read papers at QTGD conferences. The subject matter and level of discussion are familiar to readers of *QRT*. Indeed, one of the papers — by Dean Freiday — has already appeared in fuller form in *QRT* (Vol. 15, No. 1). Wilmer Cooper's "Introduction" to the booklet is in essence an expanded version of his guest editorial in that same issue.

In fact, there is only one reason why this booklet could not have itself appeared as a double issue of *QRT*: The Discussion Group is a collection of individuals; any interested person who sees an announcement of its conferences can attend and can participate fully in its discussions; authors of *QRT* articles and comments write as individuals and as such are responsible only to themselves and (in most cases, at least) to the Lord for what they say. The authors of the papers in this booklet write as members of the Faith and Life Panel, which is ultimately a creature of the 1970 St. Louis conference — a delegated conference of yearly meeting representatives. The authors have therefore written these papers as representatives of the various institutions that constitute the Religious Society of Friends in North America.

In other words, the Society of Friends has looked at what the Discussion Group has been doing for the past fifteen years, pronounced it to be good, promoted these dialogues from the individual to the institutional level, and then assigned persons, most of whom have gained their expertise in the unofficial discussions of the QTGD, to do the same thing now officially on behalf of the whole Society. Should not our response be

"Hallelujah! We've got it made!"? Should we not perhaps even discontinue the Discussion Group, since we can now continue to "do our thing" in a much larger arena, with an official stamp of approval and no longer as lonely individuals?

These questions are posed all the more sharply, as we look at the strengths of the individual papers in *Quaker Understanding of Christ and of Authority*. Wilmer Cooper's "Introduction" traces the history of the Faith and Life dialogues clearly and in much fuller detail than was possible in the two pages of his *QRT* guest editorial; he also brings to a sharp point the issues which Friends are facing in these discussions. Ferner Nuhn, in "A Quaker Approach to Christ," proposes a "trans-Christian" approach to religious truth, as a way of incorporating the values of both the specifically historical revelation in Christianity and the appeal to a wider, more universal apprehension of God. He intends to hold these contrasting views in a clear dialectical tension, instead of deliberately fuzzing over the differences, as many would-be bridge-builders among Friends have tended to do. Verlin Hinshaw, in "An Evangelical Friend Looks at Christology," is particularly to be praised for the judicious care with which he relates early Christian statements about Christ to their historical contexts.

In "Christian Quakerism and Universal Quakerism," Francis Hall, speaking himself from within the Christian viewpoint, is admirably sensitive to the point that the reasons why many — Friends and others — reject Christianity today are sufficiently valid that they do not in themselves constitute evidence of unfaithfulness to the claims of God or even Christ. "Quakers and Religious Authority," by Arthur Roberts, is a model of *practical* theology; he is strong in his suggestions about how to go about focusing and responding to the authority of the Bible and of the Holy Spirit and about how we can in practice begin to exercise the authority of the church. Even Dean Freiday's "The Early Quakers and 'Authority'" is not simply the abridgement and summary of his *QRT* article which he claims it to be. Perhaps one-fourth of his paper develops points and explores issues that were barely mentioned, if at all, in the earlier version of his article; thus it, too, contains fresh material for readers of *QRT*.

Friends who read *Quaker Understanding of Christ and of Authority* may also wish to purchase a set of mimeographed papers from the Indianapolis Faith and Life Conference, which

was held October 13-14, 1974. These papers include "Quaker Understanding of Christ," by John H. McCandless, "Some Thoughts on Authority," by Milo C. Ross, and reports on the discussions at this conference. They can be purchased for \$1.00 from the Plainfield, Indiana, office of the Friends World Committee. These papers carry forward and react to the arguments in the papers in the study booklet. John McCandless's paper is particularly incisive, as he tries to bring the issues down from the level of abstract discussion to that of lived personal history. Some of his comments are only too relevant: "A Christian is a person who believes that Christian truth is universal truth" (p. 13). "To fall into the contemporary habit of removing all objective content from our faith and practice and then asserting that what remains is Quakerism seems to me the theological equivalent of making a desert and calling it peace" (p. 14). "I can't imagine a Friend who really knows about the center of history withholding that information from anybody" (p. 15).

We can fruitfully look on the discussions, which were initiated in the 1970 St. Louis conference and which are continued in *Quaker Understanding of Christ and of Authority* and in the Indianapolis conference papers, as a belated response to the call which that great-souled Friend, Albert Fowler, made in his 1961 Pendle Hill pamphlet, *Two Trends in Modern Quaker Thought*. In that pamphlet, Albert Fowler portrayed two varieties of Quaker belief. One is the "universal," which accepts all religions as valid expressions of the search for God and decries the exclusive claims of many Christians as a source of division and conflict. The other is the "particular," which sees the fullest and final revelation of God's character and will in one particular historic individual, Jesus Christ. A better title for Albert Fowler's pamphlet might have been "Three Trends in Modern Quaker Thought," for he went on to describe a third group of Friends, including most of the leaders in the Society, who attempt to draw together the other two groups and to reconcile them by blurring their differences and discouraging sharp confrontations between them. Albert Fowler rejected this strategy, as paying too great a price for the maintenance of unity among Friends and as being finally subversive to the search for Truth. He called instead for a frank and fearless dialogue between Friends of opposing camps, in which each group expresses its views as fully, clearly, and persuasively as possible. And he insisted that this dialogue should take place

not merely between individual Friends but more particularly in the corporate gatherings of the Society itself. The question of the nature of religious truth, he insisted, is the ultimate business of the Religious Society of Friends!

Albert Fowler's concern has, to a certain extent, borne its first visible fruit in *Quaker Understanding of Christ and of Authority*. But not completely. For one thing, Francis Hall in his paper calls on Christian and non-Christian Friends to stop trying to convert each other to their own views. In the name of toleration he thus urges the very strategy which Albert Fowler rejected. More crucially, however, the "universal" variety of Quakerism is not directly represented in the new booklet. Ferner Nuhn's religious views, as expressed in his paper, are essentially those of Albert Fowler's third group; he is trying to discover and develop a bridge that transcends and includes both Christian particularism and religious universalism. The difference is that he here rejects the strategy of smooth-over and cover-up; he wants to hold the opposing positions in dynamic tension, and this can be done only as each is fully and openly expressed. The other writers in this booklet espouse several varieties of "particular," Christian Quakerism.

The dialogue is thus incomplete; it is primarily a conversation among various types of Christians and of "third-groupers." The true representatives of "universal" Quakerism are not yet deeply and widely involved. One can hardly accuse yearly meetings of deliberately refusing or failing to appoint their "universalist" members to these conferences. The actual situation is probably that few "universalist" Friends are now interested in theological dialogue with Evangelical Friends. They are more concerned with sharing spiritual insights and experiences with Hindus, Zen Buddhists, or agnostics. To a great degree, they are still in revolt against the "particularist" Christian background, out of which many of them originally came.

One possible consequence of this situation is that, if the Faith and Life discussions do move toward a consensus on a "normative Quaker stance" — which Wilmer Cooper suggests as the goal of these discussions — then the "universalist" Quakers may well find themselves left out in the cold; or this new move toward unity-through-dialogue may threaten a new division between those Friends who reject the Christian position and the "bridge builders." Albert Fowler recognized the risk of new division as one that must be run, in the quest for

honesty and truth. The irony would be if such schism came, not through dialogue itself but through the failure of those Friends who are the most overtly committed to tolerance and religious openness to enter into dialogue!

But we have not yet reached the heart of the problem of contemporary Quaker theological dialogue. What if the lively alternative to Christ-centered Quakerism is no longer the universalist ideal of Ramakrishna, who looked on the many great religions as different pathways to the one God?! A couple of years ago, the author of an obscure article in a learned journal suggested that the real religious issue today is — *polytheism*. Since then, the noted psychotherapist Rollo May has proclaimed, in his widely-read reminiscences of Paul Tillich, that we are moving toward a “new polytheism.” Certainly a quick survey of the smorgasbord of religious and psychological fads and gimmicks available in the programs of recent sessions of Friends General Conference would suggest that this movement toward a frank polytheism is already well advanced within the Society of Friends. Rollo May acclaimed the advent of this polytheism, for the old monotheisms (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) have bankrupted themselves by their alliances with national ideals, by their proclamation of holy war against Communism or any other national enemy — all of which have reached a climax in the obscenities of Christian America’s rape of Vietnam.

Our tragedy as Friends is that we once had a vital Christian alternative to this monstrous alliance of Christianity with nationalism, war, and naked political power — and we let it slip from our grasp. Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and Friends in the seventeenth century proclaimed and lived a devotion to Christ that was divorced from war-making and from active allegiance to the existing government. Can this vision and life be recaptured today, as a living alternative to the encroaching polytheism — and to the idolatry that can hardly lag far behind it? Wilmer Cooper, in his “Introduction,” affirms an astonishing faith that the survival of the Society of Friends for three hundred years is not mere historical accident but the work of the invisible Spirit of God, directed to ends which we may not fully understand. But, surely, what greater responsibility can God be laying on us, as heirs to the great discovery of George Fox and his co-workers, than the attempt to rediscover what it was that made this Anabaptist-

Quaker understanding of Christianity tick and to seek out the ways in which this type of Christian faith can most appropriately be put to work in our own day?

Francis Hall does note, in his paper, that the church’s involvement in war and persecution and the hypocrisy of many Christians are among the reasons why many people today reject Christianity. But he suggests that these facts are so well known that there is little need to spell them out in his paper. What he fails to discuss is the fact that George Fox and Edward Burrough had already suggested an answer to this problem. Their answer was that these amalgams of Christianity with war, nationalism, and loose living were not really “Christianity” at all, but — *apostasy*! We are so addicted to tolerance today that we find the word “apostasy” distasteful. Ferner Nuhn expresses the feelings of most of us, when he scolds George Fox for his dismissal of nearly the whole history of Christendom as apostasy. But we need to think again. Rollo May and Francis Hall are surely not far wrong, when they say that this mis-marriage of Christianity to war and nationalism makes Christian faith unavailable to many people today and could, if it prevailed, lead to the disappearance of Christianity as a movement in history. But any circumstance that threatens to bring about an end to the Christian mission is by definition an enemy of Christian faith; and if it claims the name of Christ, it *must* be apostate. Therefore the whole tradition of Christian warriorism — from Constantine to Augustine to Bernard of Clairvaux to Cromwell to Billy Graham — is necessarily apostate! We need to go back again, Friends, and wrestle more agonizingly with Fox and Burrough’s doctrine of the apostasy.

The goal of our thinking and our dialogues should not, then, simply be what Wilmer Cooper suggests — to find a common ground around which all Friends can unite. Our goal should be to rediscover a vital Christianity which is not bound to the values and power-structures of the society in which we live — that is, to recover the basic point of early Quakerism. We should do this, whether or not we can bring all other Friends, as individuals or as corporate bodies, along with us. As we begin to make discoveries along the way, we should seek as vigorously as possible to persuade others of the truth of these discoveries. Of course, such attempts at persuasion will have to take the form of open dialogue, in which we are equally

open to the possibility that others may have discovered some truths which we should adopt.

For this reason, we should not dismiss the work of the Faith and Life Panel. Friends meetings will find it a useful exercise to study these papers and to ask themselves the questions which are posed in the booklet, *Quaker Understanding of Christ and of Authority*, and in the Indianapolis conference papers. But let us not stop there. I am convinced that the really important discussions will center around questions such as those posed in the issue of *QRT* which you are now reading: Is Fox's "prophet Christology" a central point of early Quaker theology, without which the whole Quaker message dissolves — as Lewis Benson insists? Or can radical Christian obedience, in the Anabaptist-Quaker style, be derived equally well from other sources, such as Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God — as Keith Esch suggests? Is a prophet Christology still possible today, or — as Howard Macy implies — is it to some extent incompatible with the findings of careful biblical studies? What about the "prophet like Moses" in Deuteronomy 18:15? Was this really a messianic figure, as George Fox and some early Christians insisted, or are scholars like G. E. Wright correct in suggesting that this verse was simply intended as a justification of the authority of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah? If the latter, what happens then to a prophet Christology?

These are not merely academic questions. The whole future of Quakerism, and perhaps of the Christian faith itself, may well depend on the effectiveness of our wrestling with them and with other questions like them. At least for this reason, the Quaker Theological Discussion Group still has a task to perform.

T. Vail Palmer, Jr.

Contributors

Howard R. Macy is pastor of Smith Neck Friends Meeting, South Dartmouth, Mass. A graduate of George Fox College, he received his M. A. from Earlham School of Religion and is now a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, where he is preparing for a career of teaching in Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern studies. A member of Northwest Yearly Meeting, he has served Friends in Northwest, Indiana, and New England Yearly Meetings.

Lewis Benson is the author of *Catholic Quakerism* and of a number of articles in *QRT*. He was Fellow at Woodbrooke in 1954-55 and has been a guest lecturer at Woodbrooke and Pendle Hill. Many — Friends and others — consider him to be the preeminent contemporary George Fox scholar; he would doubtless prefer to have his abiding concern recognized, that the mission and message of Fox must be powerfully rediscovered and recreated in our time. He and his wife, Sarah R. Benson, reside in Brielle, New Jersey.

John H. Curtis retired in July, 1974, after 22 years as Comptroller of the American Friends Service Committee. He has a deep interest in prophetic, Christ-centered Quakerism. He and his wife, Barbara Curtis, are members of Germantown Meeting, Philadelphia, Pa. They have three grown children.

Keith Esch received his academic training from Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, Va., and from Earlham School of Religion, Richmond, Ind. He has worked as a high-school teacher, as a pastoral minister, and as Associate Director of the Laurelville Mennonite Church Center, in western Pennsylvania. He joined the staff of Earlham School of Religion in 1969 as Director of Admissions and continues to serve there as Associate Dean for Business Affairs. He and his wife, Virginia Esch, are members of West Richmond Friends Meeting. They are the