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Articles by Ronald Allen, Alan Kolp, Ruth Pitman, William Taber.

Rufus Jones and Mysticism

Daniel E. Bassuk

Comments by:
John Yungblut
J. Floyd Moore
Lewis Benson

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Cumulative Number 46
Volume 17, Number 4 Summer, 1978

Sponsored by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group

The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and the application of our faith.

Edited by T. Vail Palmer, Jr.

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Contributors

Francis B. Hall retired recently as director of the Quaker Hill Conference Center in Richmond, Ind., and is now a part-time member of the ministry team at West Richmond Friends Meeting, as well as leading retreats and intensive journal workshops. He and his wife Pearl Hall were formerly directors of Powell House. A Union Seminary graduate and long-time student of the works of Robert Barclay, he was the author of the major article in our issue on Barclay (Vol. 7, no. 1).

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Daniel E. Bassuk is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of South Florida. He also teaches at St. Leo College. His doctoral dissertation was an analysis and critique of the mystical in Rufus Jones and Martin Buber. His major areas of specialization are archetypal psychology, Eastern religions, and sectarian religions. He is a member of Louisville, Ky., Meeting and attends Southeastern Yearly Meeting.

John Yungblut, a graduate of Harvard College, has studied theology at Harvard Divinity School and the Episcopal Divinity School. As an undergraduate at Harvard, he came under the influence of Rufus Jones, who encouraged him in what has become a lifelong study of the mystics. After four years as teachers at Pendle Hill, he and his wife June embarked last summer on self-employment as counselors, teachers, and leaders of Quiet Days. They have taken up residence at Lincoln, Va. John Yungblut is the author of two books: Rediscovering Prayer and Rediscovering the Christ.

J. Floyd Moore has been on the faculty of Guilford College since 1944. His present position there is Professor of Biblical Literature and Religious Studies. He has major teaching responsibilities in the areas of Quakerism, Christian ethics, and non-Western studies. He has served the Society of Friends at Ramallah, Palestine; on an AFSC team in Koblenz, West Germany; and at the Friends Center in Lynn, Mass. Floyd Moore has been very active in the work of the Friends World Committee for Consultation.

Lewis Benson is the author of Prophetic Quakerism and Catholic Quakerism. He is a member and recorded minister of Manasquan, N.J., Monthly Meeting. His concern for the reestablishment of prophetic Christianity, as George Fox understood, preached, and practiced it, has led to the formation of a “New Foundation” movement among Friends in North America and Great Britain. In 1977 Lewis Benson delivered the Nitobe Lecture at Japan Yearly Meeting.

Editor's Page

In this issue QRT returns to a theme which has been a favorite point of discussion within the Quaker Theological Discussion Group from its beginning. I can still remember Douglas Steere, at the first QTDG conference I ever attended, nearly twenty years ago, as he pleaded with the rest of us not to give Rufus Jones too hard a time. He had a point, for most of the founders of QTDG were the Quaker “young Turks” of the day, who had just thrown out Rufus Jones’s magisterial interpretation of Quakerism as a mystical movement and were seeking, through mutual support and criticism, to build up a new and alternative understanding of what Quakerism had been all about in its origins and to rekindle a fresh vision of what Quakerism might again become in the second half of the twentieth century.

This controversy with Rufus Jones and his mystical understanding of early Quakerism has cropped up in many articles and comments in QRT through the two decades of its life. Until now, perhaps the fullest development of this theme has taken place in the Autumn 1965 issue (QRT, Volume 7, number 2), which was devoted to the subject, “Historic Quakerism and Mysticism.” Not surprisingly, the authors of two comments on Calvin Keene’s lead article, in that issue, turn up again today with comments on Daniel Bassuk’s article on Rufus Jones. Nor is it any surprise that they remain on opposite sides of the question.

Furthermore, the ongoing discussion in QRT of Rufus Jones’s interpretation of Quakerism is one in which the present editor has been most “egregiously” involved. Daniel Bassuk has insured that this involvement would not be forgotten, by his choice of a quotation with which to open his article, and John Yungblut has risen to take the bait. Indeed, I wondered, as I read his comment, whom he was really arguing with. But then, as he noted in an earlier go-round (QRT, Volume 12, number 3, Summer 1970), I had there seemed “bent on total destruction” of his views (honest — all I was trying to do was to impale him on the needle-sharp horns of a dilemma), and so I guess he deserves the opportunity to set matters straight.
With most long-standing arguments that refuse to die, there remains something new to be said. This is certainly the case here. In QRT the argument has usually focused on the early Quakers and on ways to understand and interpret them. What Daniel Bassuk has done is to move the center of attention to the twentieth century and to look squarely at Rufus Jones's interpretation itself. As often happens with such changes in perspective, the outcome is that both critics and defenders of Rufus Jones have thrown fresh light on an old and continuing controversy. As the erstwhile "young Turks" of Quaker theology grow inexorably older, we welcome these fresh contributions from younger scholars such as Daniel Bassuk.

QUAKER THEOLOGICAL NEWS NOTES

This issue of QRT will reach subscribers too late to beat the deadline for registration for this summer's QTDG conference. Perhaps most interested persons will have received the conference flyer or read conference publicity in other Quaker periodicals. For the record, the 1978 conference is being held at Olney Friends School, Barnesville, Ohio, June 26 to 29. Theme of the conference is "A Theology of Evangelism and Outreach for Friends." Alan Kolp, Professor of New Testament and Church History at Earlham School of Religion, is giving a paper on the biblical basis of evangelism and outreach. The traveling ministry in the middle period of Quaker history is the subject of a paper by William Taber, Friend in Residence at Pendle Hill and teacher at Olney Friends School. Ronald Allen, pastoral minister of the Friendswood, Texas, Friends Church, is to address the question of a theology of effective contemporary outreach.

Recently QTDG has been attempting to get itself recognized by the U.S. government as a non-profit agency. Benefits include the ability to cut down on rising postage costs by qualifying for the non-profit organization mailing rates. As part of the effort to meet Internal Revenue Service (sic) guidelines, the QTDG Executive Committee adopted a set of by-laws at its November 1977 meeting; a copy will be sent on request. IRS's response to our application has been to classify the Quaker Theological Discussion Group as a business! An appeal is now under consideration; despite reduced rates from our Quaker attorney this is an expensive proceeding, and contributions toward this extra expense will be most welcome. They can be sent to QRT at the Alburytis address.

Francis B. Hall
Throughout the whole of the study Donald Nesti is clear and strong and correct in underlining the fundamentality and centrality of experience to the early Quakers. The primary concern of those Friends was a genuine experience of the living Christ and all that they did and thought stemmed from their own experience and their desire to bring others to that experience.

From this central point Donald Nesti develops the theology of the Friends, and his detailed presentation of Christology is one of the most important contributions of the study. He is right in showing how the concern for experience led to a Christology that emphasized the eternal Christ and de-emphasized the historical Jesus. He speaks of the near-docetism of early Friends, but shows that they drew back from too extreme a position in this matter. They did affirm the historical life of Jesus and the value of his death and resurrection, but these affirmations were not their main concern. That concern was to show the work of the eternal Christ at all times, in all places, and in all persons — the work of the universal, saving grace-light. From this concern, Donald Nesti rightly concludes, early Friends opened a door to the separation between the eternal Christ and the earthly Jesus, and between the eternal Christ and the inward Light. This separation took place later and was one of the fundamental causes of the schism of the nineteenth century and the continuing separation of Quakerism into two strands — the Christian and the Universal. I feel sure that we who are Friends today will come to understand better the dynamics of the divisions among us by studying closely and carrying further the work of Donald Nesti on Christology.

A separate note on Christology needs adding. Donald Nesti does point out the office of Christ as Prophet, but he does not appreciate sufficiently the importance of this role given by the early Friends, especially Fox. It is one of the major contributions made by early Quakers to the Christian understanding of Christ.

Another area that Donald Nesti explores with great care is that of ecclesiology. Here again he gives major prominence to the desire the Quakers had for personal experience. They believed that a person is a member of the church when he is "in possession of the Spirit within." The true church is made up of these living members, and there is no church where there are not these persons filled with the Spirit of Christ. Thus far Donald Nesti is correct. However, again and again he empha-