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## Front Matter – Quaker Religious Thought, no. 50

Vail Palmer

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QUAKER COLLECTION

# The Quietist Heritage

William P. Taber

Ruth M. Pitman

*Reviews*

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**autumn 1980 (vol. 18, no. 4)**

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# Quaker Religious Thought

Cumulative Number 50

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Autumn, 1980

*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.

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## Editor's Page

This is the first of two issues of *QRT* which will be devoted mainly to papers read at the 1978 conference of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. The theme of that conference, held at Olney Friends School, Barnesville, Ohio, was "A Theology of Evangelism and Outreach for Friends."

It has become something of a tradition at QTGDG conferences to include in the program one or more papers on early Quaker thought or practice as a resource for understanding the topic of the conference. Many issues of *QRT* have also been devoted, in whole or in part, to the thought of the earliest Friends. To have the scheduled "Quaker" paper devoted to a later period of Quakerism, as a resource for contemporary thought and practice, was thus more than a small innovation at the Barnesville conference. This break with tradition was furthered by the presentation of a volunteered paper by Ruth Pitman, in the free time later in the evening on which William Taber's paper had been read.

These papers combined to make a point which has often been overlooked or questioned — that there is much to be learned from the quietist period in Quakerism, if we wish to find resources for the renewal of the people of God today. There may well have been more to quietism than the mere repetition of earlier Quaker insights or the deadening hand of tradition in a period of decline. Quietist Friends knew something that has in another way been celebrated in the contemporary musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*: tradition at its finest can be the dynamic source of life and strength for a community. This is not the only occasion on which I have raised the question: do we not need to be working out a fresh Quaker understanding of the place and role of tradition as a vehicle of God's action and revelation in history?

### COMMUNITY AND THEOLOGY

The question of tradition, I believe, is part of a larger question. In an earlier editorial (*QRT* number 45) I suggested the importance of community, of regaining a living awareness of our being "members one of another" in the restoration of Quaker unity. In an essay on the theological

ethics of four Quaker thinkers, scheduled for eventual publication by *Catholic and Quaker Studies*, I found that individual religious experience was not the primary source for religious ethics in their thought. What I did discover was "a grounding of their religious thought in the *life of the religious community*. I use this phrase in its broadest sense to refer both to the contemporary life of the community, in the writer's own time, and to the previous life of the community, as reported both in Scripture and in the tradition of the church." This growing realization that theology can be meaningful and alive only as it grows out of the past and present life of the community of faith was a primary motive in my decision, a year ago, to move from southern Ohio, where I was isolated from any present-day Quaker community, to Portland, Oregon, even though that move meant giving up an academic career.

Having personally experienced many of the anti-community pressures of contemporary life, including the disruption of even the primary community of marriage, I needed all the more acutely to rediscover the roots of life in the faith of a people worshipping together. A further step in this direction finds me for the coming year sharing a house with four other Christians, three of whom are fellow-attenders of Reedwood Friends Church. Having learned some of the pitfalls of too drastic a break with the existing culture, we are consciously *not* an "intentional community" or commune, but simply a group of Christians living together, sharing meals, common tasks, and unprogrammed conversations on the meaning of Christian life.

The lesson I have been learning in recent years is that theology is not simply an exercise of the head. All of life — including also the emotions, the sharing of joy and grief, worship and even ritual, the disruptions and the healings in our relations with our fellow Christians and our fellow human beings — is the stuff of theology. Indeed, such relationships are the fabric out of which the life of the people of God will be re-created and renewed, if such re-creation and renewal are to come at all. Even though the QTDC has been asserting the importance of religious thought in Quaker life for over twenty years, we have always recognized that theology is an instrument for the rebuilding of the church of Christ. A theology that is severed from its roots in the life of the community of faith, and from its service to that community, is no theology at all.

V. P.