

1-1-1985

Review--Quaker Religious Thought, no. 60

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Recommended Citation

Kolp, Alan (1985) "Review--Quaker Religious Thought, no. 60," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 60, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol60/iss1/8>

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Review

QUAKER SPIRITUALITY: SELECTED WRITINGS, edited and introduced by Douglas V. Steere, preface by Elizabeth Gray Vining. Paulist Press: Ramsey, NJ, 1984. 348 pp., \$9.95 ISBN: 0-8091-2510-2.

Douglas Steere has produced a fine and freshly written introduction to Quaker spirituality. Additionally, he has exercised care in choosing selections to accompany his introduction. Taking these features together, readers interested in Quaker spirituality will have an informed encounter with this particular way of experiencing the Spirit of God.

Overall, the *Classics of Western Spirituality* of which this volume by Paulist Press is a part has been an exceptional series. It has rendered significant historical works into readable English translation, sometimes for the first time, and accompanied these with some very good historical and theological introductions. It is out of this series context that Douglas Steere's book needs to be seen and reviewed.

Perhaps the hardest thing to do is not to review the book simply from a Quaker perspective! A Friend with any familiarity with his or her tradition will find little novel information in Steere's introduction, however freshly stated it may be. Thus there is an initial temptation to be disappointed. Yet, when a closer look is taken, one will realize that there is something which even Quakers can work with in the way that Steere develops and outlines the characteristics of Quaker spirituality. For the non-Quaker reader -- presumably the principal "audience" -- the book will be extremely useful and rewarding.

In undertaking his fine introduction and the elaboration of some of the key aspects of Quaker spirituality, Douglas Steere, not unexpectedly, begins with the doctrine of continuing revelation. Precisely what he means by "continuing" revelation, however, needs to be made more clear as to content if the non-Quaker reader is not to be left wondering whether and how continuing (new?) revelation might happen for her or him or someone else. In addition to continuing revelation Steere takes up the fact that Quaker spirituality is experiential. Inasmuch as experiential religion does seem to be the key to understanding who Quakers are, here Steere's efforts will be very illuminating for the non-Quaker.

As well as these two familiar themes, Steere introduces and highlights a number of other distinctive aspects of Quaker spirituality. For example, a very significant amount of attention is given to Quaker worship. He is able to be charmingly descriptive, as in labelling meetings for worship "laboratories of the Holy Spirit" (p. 15). And, under the rubric of worship, he carefully distinguishes between having a message and the call to share it. Worship also provides the opportunity to talk about the mystical, the interpretation of Quakerism as mystical, but he does not develop sufficiently what he means by mystical spirituality (or ethical mysticism) or what its interpretative limitations might be.

Beyond worship, Steere talks about equality of sexes, the queries, ministry, and meeting for business. These are treated in such a way that non-Quakers would have a good "feel" for the way Quakers are shaped and formed by their spiritual environment. Throughout, Steere also does a good job of describing the history of Quakerism. He has a nice sense of humor. Frequently he offers very compelling illustrations.

So far I have focused exclusively on the introductory section. There remains much that could be said about the selections which Steere has chosen. He focuses on six Quaker figures: George Fox, Isaac Penington, John Woolman, Caroline Stephen, Rufus Jones, and Thomas Kelly. Three are British and three are American. Caroline Stephen is undoubtedly the least familiar and is a welcome addition. Steere's selection is a balanced presentation of Quaker spirituality as far as the unprogrammed tradition is concerned, and that is his focus.

But, I would suggest as a final point that the exclusiveness of this focus is perhaps the most unfortunate part of the book. In final analysis it is a book which simply does not deal with the impact the previous one hundred years has had on midwestern and western and southern pastoral Quakerism. And it also misses those very significant areas around the world which have become part of Quakerism through pastoral missionary efforts.

Steere is quite explicit and clear about not dealing with this (and hence, it is unfair to belabor the point since he simply says, "I acknowledge this limitation"). However, the book does carry the title *Quaker Spirituality*, and in that sense is misleading by focusing too narrowly on what "Quaker" is in our present century. Having chosen to move this way means that we need a companion volume for