

1-1-1987

Comments--Quaker Religious Thought, no. 66

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Recommended Citation

Selleck, Ron (1987) "Comments--Quaker Religious Thought, no. 66," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 66 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol66/iss1/7>

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Comments

RON SELLECK

How do Friends face sin and evil? "Not very well," the typical Quaker responds. The same could be said of our QTDG conference on the subject. Papers, responses, and discussions somehow objectify and detoxify sin so that we can deal with it as "out there" rather than "in here." Why?

Private conversations during that conference taught me that many attenders had faced great evils, and my faith was strengthened by their stories. But why did we fail to address the problem of sin and evil squarely and publicly?

Early Friends confronted "the mystery of iniquity." Evil's deceptive power surprised them less than it does us. They were much less naive than we are about the human capacity for self-deception.

I have known the type of Meeting, not greatly better nor worse than many, very active in peace and social concerns, whose vocal ministry referred only to the sins of governments and multinational corporations. Yet I could look out over the membership and see the child molester who had abused one of his charges while serving in the nursery and thought his little victim had kept his "game" a secret as he had wished. I could see the high-school freshman who had already had one abortion. I could see the bitter, depressed wife and somber children, their husband and father having deserted them for another woman. I could see another woman trying to recover her self-respect and care for her teenaged children, her husband having left her not for another woman but for a man.

I could see the Quaker elder's wife, who was so sour as to advise a young mother to stay home or place her infant on the porch, rather than endure the child's minor disturbances. I could see the robbery victim telling her story again and again and again trying to distance herself from the nightmare. I could see the alcoholic struggling to remain sober. Beyond these was the unseen troop of psychotherapists who, during the week, helped all to "adjust." God knows what else remained hidden.

None of these accepted the presence of sin in their lives. All considered this assertion an offense against their good nature. Self-deception becomes a corporate phenomenon by implicit mutual agreement -- "You don't point out my sinfulness and I won't point out yours, we'll both point to theirs," i.e. Reagan's or Nestle's. Those who break this informal contract may find themselves informally but ever so resolutely excluded.

The doctrine of perfection notwithstanding, sin and its tragic consequences are not absent from the Society of Friends. Brokenness lurks behind many a cheerful face.

There have been great Quakers but scarcely any saints. Too few have fathomed the heights and depths of human existence. Commonplace perfectionism spawns unrepentant mediocrity glazed with inordinate self-congratulation.

Samuel Scott (Sullen Samuel as I like to call him), an 18th-century Quaker diarist, illustrates what happened to the doctrine of Perfection once the 17th-century exuberance was gone. If justification was tied to sanctification, then Scott deduced that God is pleased or displeased with us hour by hour, and moment by moment, depending upon our obedience to his subjectively revealed will. Thus, our justification before God is on-again off-again based upon our subjectivity, as our fortunes oscillate between heaven and hell. No doctrine is more aptly suited to make the sensitive neurotic and the insensitive hypocritical.

Scott coped by adopting a superficial view of sin and its remedy. For him, the most notable sins were wearing improper clothing and uttering more than a couple of sentences during worship. When Scott visited his neighbor under religious concern it was to reprove his choice in clothing.¹ What happened to the Good News?

The Eucharist has sometimes been described as the "medicine of immortality." Without Christ, the great Physician, we understand neither ourselves nor our need. As Poor Richard said, "He who would be his own physician has a fool for a doctor and an idiot for a patient." George Fox used the most exalted eucharistic imagery to describe what is to occur during Quaker worship. There is nothing to do but receive in repentance and faith.

Fox's hearers understood his symbolism because they knew the ritual; many of us do not. We assume that our spiritualizing interpretation of the Sacraments surpasses the more formal interpretation of our fellow Christians. In fact, we have not rid ourselves of ritual, but have merely smuggled in alternatives with a far less rich symbolic content. The devout soul who receives the elements in repentance and faith stands ahead of the self-satisfied Quaker.²

Some of us have such loads of sin, and such shrunken capacities for receiving forgiveness that we must take ourselves to the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection again and again, from many different approaches -- not that God's forgiveness is too small, but our own ability to appropriate it is so limited.

How do Friends face sin and evil? Within and without; reluctantly; and only with help.