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Letter to the Editor–Quaker Religious Thought, no. 76

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

R. W. HARRINGTON

Whatever sentiments or attitudes one may have about Quaker religious thought, it can hardly be denied that a joining together of Larry Ingle, Douglas Gwyn, and Hugh Barbour on such matters [QRT #75] provides much reason for celebration. Among the things with which we are left for reflection from their offering are three—not of a substantive nature—but nevertheless seemingly worthy of continued attention. One of these is the distinction drawn between “academic” and “nonacademic” contributors to theological discussion. A second is the degree of influence that a surrounding context of social and political events plays on what an individual religious figure contributes. A third arises from the emphasis placed by George Fox and other Quakers on a distinct requirement for understanding Scripture.

Lewis Benson has been referred to as a “nonacademic.” George Fox, of course, would be the same. Robert Barclay probably would be accepted as “academic,” but it is doubtful that William Penn or even Isaac Penington would be granted that classification. Could Jesus be considered for this designation, or does his uniqueness require exclusion from such categorization? What should be done with James, “brother of the Lord”? Which designation should we give to Paul? Thomas Aquinas would certainly qualify as an “academic,” but what of Martin Luther? What are the distinguishing qualifications for an “academic,” and, possibly of greater importance, what are the implications of such a designation?

“At another time, as I was walking in a field on First-day morning, the Lord opened to me that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ; and I stranged at it, because it was the common belief of the people.” (George Fox, *Journal*, Nickalls ed., p. 7)

Larry Ingle offers us an unequivocal introduction to his thought with the statement “the thesis of this paper is that for any who want to understand Quakerism, past or present, the only way to do so is to explore its rise in the context of its time. To rip it out of its time, to tear it from its social, political, and economic context so that, for example, theological ideas can be emphasized amounts to chasing the

the holy grail—and discarding the only information that can furnish the genuine picture” (p. 17)

We should, perhaps, note that Hugh Barbour displays some concurrence with this outlook in his work, *The Quakers in Puritan England*, but in a somewhat less rigorous fashion than Ingle. The claim deserves close examination. To what degree is a minister’s message determined by “the social, political and economic context of his time,” and to what degree may it be the product of his own creative response to his experiences of life *and* the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Larry Ingle asserts that “to rip it out of its time . . .” discards “the only information that can furnish a genuine picture.” Must we conclude that the claim that George Fox makes, that we can transcend the circumstances of our time and can achieve *freedom* under the leading of God, must be rejected?

“Therefore ye, who know the love of God, and the law of his Spirit, and the freedom that is in Jesus Christ, stand fast in him, in that divine faith which he is the author of in you; and be not entangled with the yoke of bondage. For the ministry of Christ Jesus and his teaching bringeth into liberty and freedom; but the ministry that is of man, and stands in the will of man, bringeth into bondage, and under the shadow of death and darkness. And therefore, none can be a minister of Christ but in the eternal Spirit, which was before the Scriptures were given forth, for if they have not his spirit, they are none of his (*Journal*, p. 17).

An assessment of Larry Ingle’s claims seems to require that we go back to the question of how we may understand the message of another. There appears to be a need to examine the degree to which it is necessary for us to come “into the spirit” of those who give forth a message, and whether the essence of the message may be understood by critical analysis of language and the surrounding environment. The essential element in this question is of some considerable importance, in so far as it serves to distinguish the Quaker difference from Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Is it possible to appreciate a poet’s inspiration, or that of a painter or sculptor, from analysis of the empirical data that may be derived from close examination of their work? Or must we enter into the experience from which the work emerged? Can we accurately account for the experience of *love*, or the elevation of spirit that may occur from an encounter with marvels of nature, by critical analysis of material and psychological elements?

And this I was moved to declare, that the Scriptures were given forth by the Spirit of God and all people must come to the spirit of God in themselves by which they might know God and Christ, of whom the prophets and apostles learnt; and by the same spirit they might know the holy Scriptures and the spirit which was in them that gave them forth; so that the spirit of God must be in them that come to know them again, by which spirit they might have fellowship with the Son and the Father and with the Scriptures and one with another, and without it they cannot know neither God, nor Christ, nor the Scriptures, nor have fellowship with one another." (*Journal*, p. 136)

The "Doctrinals" (Vol. III, 1831 ed., p. 394) give indication of the sources on which Fox drew for this ministry. The insight is drawn [in free translation] from 1 Cor. 2:11-14 [q.v.]. Fox is quoted as saying:

"But the apostle saith, no man knows the things of God, but by the spirit of God, and the spirit of God doth reveal them; and the natural man perceiveth not the things of the spirit of God, they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Is Paul, in this [passage cited] providing light for us on the difference between the "academic" and the "nonacademic"?