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Review of The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies

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Our session proposal today promises a discussion that will be global and interdisciplinary. It focuses questions such as: What contributions does *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) make to the genre of denominational studies? What contributions does it make toward understanding Quaker origins and development?

As the panelist from the Two-Third’s world, the principal (or president) of Friends Theological College, Kaimosi, Kenya, my focus will be on the global dimensions of the volume. My examples are African, but I hope their implications extend to the wider world of Friends.

According to *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, 56% of Friends live in Africa (p. 550). But perhaps 5.6% of this book directly relates to African Friends. This is not a unique situation for either denominational studies or studies about denomination as an ecclesiological category. If I may cite my own recent work: in my review essay on “The Church Catholic, Global Christianity, and the Pentecostal Contribution to the Renewal of the Theological Agenda” I noted how erroneous and disconnected Pentecostal theologian Wolfgang Vondey’s understanding of the African roots of contemporary Pentecostalism seems from the vantage point of contemporary Africa.¹ In “Denomination beyond the North Atlantic Ecclesial World”, I reflected on how theological and social “agency” in regard to “being a denomination” fits within the pressures of African colonial and post-colonial historical and present Christian realities.²

What can we, together, do about this global gap of theological and scholarly participation and partnership capacity in Quaker studies and in the broader milieu of denominational studies? Although these are not discontinuous matters, I will divide my remarks into two clusters: theological and academic capacity and “agency” building in the Two-Thirds or majority world and developing better means to utilize, understand, and assess the theological and religious studies
information that is or could be readily available before Western, minority world, eyes now. My proposal might be usefully engaged by many other ecclesial or denominational groups but an extensive discussion of those possibilities is beyond our current scope.

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR THEOLOGICAL AGENCY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In closing the chapter on Quakers and science Geoffrey Cantor writes, “there has been recent and widespread recognition that science is not pursued in a social vacuum but possesses immense implications for society” (533). The same can be said, in a more modest way, of every form of scholarship and research. Scholars, researchers, and theologians are made who they are and carry out their activities within social matrices.

In 2011 the administration and faculty of Earlham School of Religion made a visit to Friends Theological College, as part of an ESR visit to eastern and central Africa. Preparations the visit to FTC had been carried out over many months. Some at ESR felt that they wanted to just “hang out” with the faculty. But the Africans were very uncomfortable with the prospect. “Hanging out together” isn’t really part of their culture. To them this visit was an important occasion. They live in a highly ritualized world, one not that far removed from traditional African culture. It was inconceivable to them that such an important event would not have a ritual dimension of formal greetings and exchanges. They didn’t want impromptu sharing and would not have known how to do it.

In some ways the visit seemingly went awry. The person given the opportunity to make the most substantial African presentation was incapable of acting like a scholar. I imagine he gave some offense by treating those assembled as if he were a speaker at a pastoral event engaged to preach for conversion to his viewpoint rather than to make an academic argument for their consideration. A non-faculty employee shared his excitement of the occasion with a comment expressing the essence of the colonial residue in Africa, “I feel like the elder brother has come and everything is going to be all right.” The ESR visitors did not come with an expectation of taking on a responsibility for making everything all right or being elder brother. But an African faculty member told me that the visit was the best thing I had done for them in the then two years I had been there.
I think I know what this last speaker meant. The maxim popularized by South Africans comes to mind: I am because we are. I am a scholar and theologian because on that day we were scholars and theologians together. By that visit the faculty members and scholars of Friends Theological College, despite their lower levels of academic opportunities and achievements, were made part of, were initiated into, such occasions as we carry out here today.

In her book *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America*, Margaret Hope Bacon claims that by women coming to be accustomed to hearing their own voices speaking in women’s Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, they came to think of themselves as people who have something to say. The same experiential change might be posited about the visit of Earlham School of Religion to Friends Theological College. Some, at least, of the African Friends experienced themselves and their colleagues as having something to say in a setting of scholarly exchange.

Such experience of gaining what is sometimes called “voice” is largely absent from *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*. While there are younger scholars included, there are not essays by African or Central or South American or Asian Quakers. This has social implications for the Religious Society of Friends and the wider community of scholars who might utilize the volume.

Yale University missiologist Lamin Sennah has called for a history of missions that is not about missionaries but about what those who received and responded to missionaries did with and because of the missions. In terms of the current moment in eastern African Quakerism, this means an account of the indigenous development of the faith life and activities of the Samburu people and Tanzania and Congo Yearly Meetings rather than an account of those from Western Kenya who have gone to serve in Samburu, Tanzania, or the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance. I have observed that it stirs the imagination of some in Western Kenya to see themselves as a “mission sending church” rather than a “mission receiving church.” It is significant that Jacalynn Stuckey Welling’s chapter on mission pointed to this activity (319). Yet it is hard to escape the impression that the anticipated audience of the chapter like the larger book as a whole is Western. “In the early years of Quaker foreign missions, smoking, drinking, and dancing were banned, and marriage practices and sexual mores were often contested. . . . Evangelically inclined Yearly Meetings maintained a traditional view on sexuality.” Presumably this
is a reference to what is traditional in the monogamous West rather than traditional Bukusu polygamy.

One way to talk about African or other non-Western Friends as scholars or readers of scholarship is to speak in terms of scholarly agency. In sociology and other social sciences the term “agency” is used to refer to capacity for free act available to individuals within a social context. Agency is contrasted with “structure(s)” which delimit the space of action individuals. When we speak of increasing access to participation in scholarship of non-Western Friends, we might say we are seeking to increase the scholarly agency of non-Western Friends, so that a volume such as The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies would be expected to be written by, about, and for non-Western writers and readers as much as by, about, and for Western writers and readers.

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR THEOLOGICAL AGENCY AMONG ALL SCHOLARS OF QUAKERISM

One irony of such a goal is the reality that Western Quakers also have somewhat limited scholarly “agency.” This event is an Exploratory Session of the American Academy of Religion. That fact points to a limitation placed upon scholars of Quakerism from outside this community. However, The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies displays voluntary limitations, to which we now turn.

The volume displays an overwhelming preference in scholarly method for historical-critical analysis of printed texts arranged in chronological order. In her chapter “Quakers in Theological Context,” Carole Spencer observes, “Quaker missionaries introduced a Western, Protestant, evangelical orthodoxy to Kenyans that continues to shape the Kenyan Quaker church at present. An indigenous post-colonial Kenyan Quaker theology is only beginning to emerge.” (156) Listening to students and faculty members at Friends Theological College preach and pray at chapel each morning suggests a different picture. To my ear most Kenyan Friends are very much a moderate old-line or main-line community rather than descendents of American evangelicalism. Among the less theologically educated, there is high degree of influence from African Traditional Religion, sometimes to be point of overwhelming the Christian intent of speaker. Might Spencer’s observation have been different if she had access to the several thousand Quaker messages preached on any Sunday morning in Kenya through recordings or hand-written scripts?
Margery Post Abbott is correct when she points to the focus on everyday life in Kenyan Quakerism (554). How can everyday life be studied effectively? Questionnaires and diaries on what you prayed for or about today? Perhaps. A faculty member at Friends Theological College, Rodgers Wekesi, completed his master’s degree study by interviewing Friends in Lugulu Yearly Meeting on their idea of being the people of God and compared that with Old Testament views of the topic. Perhaps methods from ritual studies and anthropology might assist in getting at the texture and meaning of a primarily oral religious culture. What about the music used in contemporary Quaker worship in eastern Africa? The visual culture of contemporary non-Western Friends? Who is studying these matters? How do we support those who are best able to do so? I have been encouraging Oscar Lugusa, currently the registrar and assistant academic dean at Friends Theological College to focus on liturgical studies: child dedication, weddings, and funerals are complex webs of activity woven from surviving cultural elements, the Quakerism brought by earlier missionaries, ambient Christian expressions, and the developing expressive needs of the meetings in which they are celebrated.

How does this activity become part of what is studied by anyone proposing to be a scholar of Quakerism and automatically included in such reference works as The Oxford Handbook of Quaker, rather than the esoteric knowledge of those few Western scholars who have lived and worked in Kenya?

Perhaps in a religious group that claims to be non-credal it might seem inevitable that narrative and development over time would be prominent modes of expression and inquiry. But it is striking that almost every chapter in The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies presents an historical narrative on the topic of discussion. Yet, there is no exploration of the theological or cultural or epistemic meaning of this understanding of either history or narrative. Is it because narrative is the dominant form in Scripture? Because human beings come to know over time, in historical phenomena and through change? Or? What does it mean that it did not seem necessary to explore that question?

How different is this approach from John Mbiti’s highly regarded presentations of African Traditional Religion. Mbiti’s African Religions and Philosophy and Introduction to African Religion are both arranged conceptually and a-historically. Roger Corless’s introduction to Buddhism The Vision of Buddhism: The Space under
the Tree is arranged around key moments in a religious, rather than historical, account of the life of the Shakyamuni Buddha, not key moments in the history of Buddhism. Sweeter than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth, by Peter Bouteneff, “begins with a deeply thoughtful reflection on the nature of truth in the face of relativism, absolutism, and fanaticism showing Jesus Christ as the logic and love that undergirds and unites the universe. Part 2 is a journey through the landscape of Orthodox teaching, with a solid explanation of how it comes down to us today. Sweeter than Honey provides indispensable insight into Orthodox Christian thinking” reads an advert. The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology, edited by Gerald R. McDermott, in the same series as the Quaker volume is organized theologically, not historically. Lloyd Lee Wilson’s book Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order frames Quakerism in terms of a certain outlook upon the world. In view of these other possibilities, the choice of a book that “charts Quaker history and the history of its expression as a religious community,” to quote Steve Angell and Pink Dandelion in their introduction to the volume, calls for theological, metaphysical, cultural, or epistemological explanation. Historical thinking is so dominant a form in Quaker scholarly self-understanding that I felt it necessary to give examples of how things might have been arranged otherwise. That may be a phenomenon worthy of investigation in itself.

A Proposal

In his The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race, Willie James Jennings encourages inter-racial understanding and reconciliation within the United States by a dialogue of understanding between local churches. In ecumenical and interreligious engagement in national and international settings we have engaged in similar forms of dialogue.

In Ancient Faith and American-Born Churches: Dialogues Between Christian Traditions, which I edited with United Methodist Ted A. Campbell and Gilbert W. Stafford, of the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, we tried to engage one another in ways that made the assumptions and presuppositions of our diverse Christian traditions explicit and transparent to ourselves and others. While some sharp exchanges occurred in the dialogues, the purpose was not theological argument and suasion but theological and human insight.
Kenneth Haase, of beingmeta, inc. and New England Yearly Meeting, and I have been looking to the creation of an e-reader-based dialogue process within the theological disciplines among faculty, students and alumni of Friends Theological College in western Kenya and US Friends. With a larger group of involved scholars such an enterprise could go far beyond this proposed initial partnering of Kenya and the US and, methodologically, reach beyond historical-critical method focused on printed texts: biblical interpretation, worship styles, investigation of everyday faith experiences, intergenerational conflicts over music, pedagogical methods in catechesis, visions of marriage presented in pre-marital counseling, theological ethics and accounting practices, what happened to “plaining” beyond North Atlantic culture? I don’t need to go on.

Such activity would increase the theological agency of Quakers in the majority world, with their current under-access to international theological engagement. For them, expectation of theological performance could lead to developed theological performance. But it would increase theological agency among the established scholars of the West as well.

ENDNOTES


13. Term used by Roger Homan in his chapter “Quakers and Visual Culture,” 492-506 at 496.