

2015

## Response to Carole Spencer's and and Jon Kershner's Papers

Michael Birkel

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Birkel, Michael (2015) "Response to Carole Spencer's and and Jon Kershner's Papers," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 125 , Article 8.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol125/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

## RESPONSE TO CAROLE SPENCER'S AND JON KERSHNER'S PAPERS

MICHAEL BIRKEL

What I find most captivating about these papers is how they delightfully invite readers to reverse, or at least revise, their expectations. We have known for a long time that John Woolman owned, lent, and presumably read Jacob Boehme.<sup>1</sup> Likewise it is generally acknowledged that James Nayler wrote with apocalyptic urgency and imagery.<sup>2</sup> In this pair of papers, they exchange dance partners, and what is explored is James Nayler's possible connections to Jacob Boehme and the eschatological dimension of John Woolman's thought.

### RESPONSE TO CAROLE SPENCER

Carole Spencer's paper is an admirable combination of external history and internal experiences of James Nayler. She weaves together networks of Behemenists: the Calvert and Simmonds; the Barbados trio of Robert Rich, Ralph Fretwell, and Robert Bacon; and generations of the Erbery family.

In her exploration of how James Nayler might have read Boehme, she perceptively points to sign and suffering, and her reading of Bristol as Nayler's *Gelassenheit* is astute. As she notes *Gelassenheit* is a term with a long history of meaning among earlier German mystics such as Johannes Tauler: resignation, yieldedness, and letting go, but also serenity, tranquility, and equanimity. The term, probably drawn from Tauler, was also taken up by early Anabaptists, who were, like James Nayler, despised and acquainted with grief. Of course, other Friends have written of the experience of suffering and dying with Christ, such as John Woolman, as Jon Kershner mentions—another point of contact between these two papers. As Carole notes, these are enticing possibilities, not yet verified data. But this is precisely the kind of bold exploration of possibilities that makes for new breakthroughs in Quaker studies.

Her suggestion that Nayler's connections to Behmenists may have contributed to Quaker rejection of Boehme in the 1670s is insightful, although it may be good to remember that other elements were also in play. In his *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Rufus Jones points out that the disapproval of Boehme's disciples by the Minute of the London Morning Meeting of Friends for the 21st of Seventh Month in 1674 was based on their approval of external sacraments.<sup>3</sup> Five years earlier, Rebecca Travers, in her *Testimony for God's Everlasting Truth*, responded to an anti-Quaker tract of Robert Cobbit, in which she repeatedly derided him for his dependence upon "J.B." or "Beamond" (recall that "Boehme" was usually rendered as "Behmen" in England), whom, according to Travers, Cobitt elevated above Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Are there possible connections here?

The relationship of Friends to Jacob Boehme is long and elusive. Carole Spencer notes that Friends throughout their history are repeatedly attracted to the densely poetic thought of the obscure German theosophist. Rufus Jones published his *Little Book of Selections from the Children of the Light* in 1909. In the end pages of this brief book there is an announcement for the other volumes in *The Religion of Life* series.<sup>5</sup> Volume four was to be *Jacob Boehme: Selections from his writings*, by Rufus Jones. The book seems never to have been published.<sup>6</sup> As a fellow traveler who has made an effort to translate Boehme's obscure ideas, I can sympathize with Rufus Jones's second thoughts. Jones returned to Boehme later, devoting fully four chapters of his *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*,<sup>7</sup> including a chapter entitled "Boehme's influence in England," where he notes Justice Durant Hotham, with whom George Fox was acquainted and Ralph Fretwell's "Epistle to the Behmenists," though Jones does not notice a possible connection to James Nayler. George Fox, for his part, in the so-called *Cambridge Journal*<sup>8</sup> seems to have expressed an interest in seeing Fretwell's *Epistle to the Behmenists*, as a letter from Alexander Parker to George Fox speaks of asking "Edw:Man" to "send down ffretwells Book, I suppose he intends to see the shortly, and if he can find ye Book to bring in with him."

Finally, Carole Spencer's attention to early critics of Quakerism is important. Sometimes outsiders can see more clearly than insiders. Her reference to Henry More points to this, and it may serve Quaker historians to exercise this historical generosity in other areas as well. The frequent claim made by non-Quaker polemicists that the Quaker

RESPONSE TO CAROLE SPENCER'S AND JON KERSHNER'S PAPERS • 59

Christ was so inward that it left little emphasis on the historical figure of Christ is a case in point. In the past, many Quaker historians defended Quakers against such charges. It may be time to move more fully beyond apologetics and hold open the possibility that the critics were in fact perceptive.

Further, her paper suggests that early Quakers read texts that were outside mainstream theology but did not always refer to them very explicitly in print. This raises the question of how wide the gate of acceptable theology was among earlier Friends, and it hints that there may be other similar discoveries to be made for other Quaker writers.<sup>9</sup>

## RESPONSE TO JON KERSHNER

Turning to Jon Kershner's essay, what is most exciting about this paper is its unexpected angle of vision. While John Woolman has long been recognized as someone who integrated the inward life of the mystic and the outward life of the social reformer, it is the introduction of the eschatological vision that invites new discoveries. What follows is not meant as a critique of Jon Kershner's fine essay but rather an appreciation of how it opens further questions, consideration of which may offer us a further glimpse into the rich spiritual cosmos of John Woolman.

There are words from John Woolman in Jon Kershner's paper that merit further weighing. "Resignation" has a long history, not only among the German mystics as *Gelassenheit* as mentioned above, but also among the great spiritual voices of the seventeenth-century French school of spirituality, especially the two pairs of Jeanne and François: Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales, and Jeanne Guyon and François Fénelon. Might attention to the subtle differences among these writers lead us into further insight into John Woolman's use of the term?

Likewise the word "principle" has a history, even among earlier Friends. A famous example is George Fox in his letter of spiritual counsel to Elizabeth Claypoole:

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God...Therefore be still awhile from thy own thoughts, searching, seeking, desires, and imaginations,

60 • MICHAEL BIRKEL

and be staid in the principle of God in thee, that it may raise thy mind up to God, and stay it upon God.<sup>10</sup>

James Nayler also speaks of a divine principle,

but a straight Way there is betwixt these, in which the Seed ariseth, which is a diligent, watchful, patient meekness, feeling the godly Principle moving, and following it in faith and obedience in all things without hast or ends, further then what is opened in the life of obedience...

So *the first* which is *earthly* the Law kills because of *sin*, and want of *obedience*, but he that is born again is of the Spirit, and lives because of *righteousness* and *obedience*, so the boaster is excluded, being concluded *under sin* that the mercy may arise in the meek principle over all, to fulfil all.<sup>11</sup>

It could be worthwhile to explore the various dimensions of meaning in this concept of “principle” among Friends that preceded John Woolman to see if that sheds more light on its role in his thought.

The relationship between mysticism and ethics, between an inward experience of divine presence and a leading to do work in the world, has been a topic of conversation among Friends for a long time. Hugh Barbour, in his magisterial *Quakers in Puritan England*<sup>12</sup> reflects on Quakers as neither “basically mystics nor a mere blend of mysticism and sectarianism.” Friends “did not withdraw from the world except to attack and transform it.” The inward experience carried an unavoidable ethical dimension, to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. Others, such as Douglas Gwyn, have carried on this conversation in more recent decades. Rufus Jones struggled with the issue over a century ago in his *Social Law in the Spiritual World*,

We turn now to the affirmation mystics. They do not make vision the end of life, but rather the beginning. They are bent on having an immediate first-hand sense of God— but not just for the joy of having it. More important than vision is obedience to the vision. There are battles to fight and victories to win. God’s Kingdom is to be advanced. Error is to be attacked and truth to be established. Those who would see God must gird for service. Those who would have a closer view of the divine must seek it in a life of love and sacrifice.

Instead of seeking the Absolute by negating the finite, the mystic of this class finds the revelation of God in the finite.... His mission on earth is to be a fellow worker with God— contributing in

## RESPONSE TO CAROLE SPENCER'S AND JON KERSHNER'S PAPERS • 61

the normal daily life his human powers to the divine Spirit who works in him and about him, bringing to reality a kingdom of God.<sup>13</sup>

What does attention to eschatology add to this rich mix? When Jon Kershner writes, “Woolman believed he was taken into the revelation itself, as he was taken into eschatological scenarios,” I find myself reminded of concepts of the Lord’s Supper among Protestant Reformers. Unlike Martin Luther, for whom Christ was physically present in the sacramental species, for John Calvin there could be no real, localized presence because the body of the ascended Christ remained in heaven. The way that one of my church history teachers once explained this is that while for Luther the body of Christ came down to earth during the sacrament, for Calvin it was as though the Spirit raised the faithful, for the moment, to heaven, where they experienced the body of Christ. I mention this because I wonder if it matters which way John Woolman and the apocalypse interacted. Was it so much that John Woolman time traveled to the end of all things, or that the eschaton was experienced within? Was it eschatological anticipation (πρόληψις) or eschatological internalization? The former sounds more adventurous to those with otherworldly Wanderlust, but the latter may be more consistent with Quaker tradition, and with the mystics whose works John Woolman owned and read, such as Jacob Boehme (for whom heaven and hell are within<sup>14</sup>) and John Everard. On the other hand, if it is correct to interpret John Woolman as understanding that he was transported to the scenario of the final cataclysm and beyond, did he also see himself as conveyed to the events of the cross, or at least the scenario of the apostle Paul, whom he quotes when he says that he has died and risen with Christ? In his vision, John Woolman notes that he was “carried in spirit” to the scene of the oppressed miners—a phrase that is used in Revelation but even there borrowed from Ezekiel. John Woolman identifies with Paul who identifies with Christ, and John of Mt. Holly identifies with John of Patmos who identifies with Ezekiel. How are we to grasp the textured quality of a mystical experience that has so many layers?<sup>15</sup> Again, these are simply questions to promote further conversation.

In each of these fine papers, the presence of Rufus Jones persists, as the great interpreter of Quakerism as a species of mysticism. For all the praise and blame that his name has undergone, his legacy continues as a force to be reckoned with among Quaker historians and theologians. These two papers, and this response, are heirs to his enduring influence.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Frederick Tolles, "John Woolman's 'List of Books Lent,'" *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association* 31 (1942), 72-81.
- 2 See, for example, Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "The Letters of James Nayler," in *The Lamb's War: Quaker Essays to Honor Hugh Barbour*, ed. Michael Birkel and John W. Newman (Richmond, IN: Earlham College Press, 1992, 38-75, esp. 43.
- 3 Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (NY: Macmillan, 1914), 233.
- 4 Rebecca Travers, *Testimony for God's Everlasting Truth*, in Mary Garman et al., eds., *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker Women's Writings, 1650-1700* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, Publications, 1996), 320, 332.
- 5 Rufus M. Jones, *Little Book of Selections from the Children of the Light* (London: Headley Brothers, 1909), 91.
- 6 Other authors to be included in these volumes of selections were Isaac Penington, William Penn, and Thomas Browne. In addition to the *Children of Light* volume, only the one on Penington, by Henry Bryan Binns, found its way into print.
- 7 Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (NY: Macmillan, 1914), 151-265).
- 8 *The Journal of Journal Fox Edited from the MSS*, ed. Norman Penney, Cambridge: University Press, 1911, vol. 2, 305.
- 9 Robert Barclay, for example, was acquainted with Knorr von Rosenroth's Latin translations of Jewish mystical texts. See the forthcoming article "Robert Barclay in Kabbalah" by Michael Birkel in *Quaker Studies*.
- 10 *Journal of George Fox*, ed. John L. Nickalls, Cambridge University Press, 1952, 346.
- 11 James Nayler, *Milk for Babes: and Meat for Strong Men: A Feast of Fat Things; Wine Well Refined on the Lees...*(London, 1661), 21, 6.
- 12 Hugh Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964), 254.
- 13 Rufus M. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World* (London: Headly Brothers, 1904), 152-54.
- 14 Michael Birkel and Jeff Bach, *Genius of the Transcendent: Mystical Writings of Jakob Boehme*, Boston: Shambhala, 2010, 30-31,43-47). Boehme held to this view despite that fact that the horrors of the Thirty Years War that raged around him persuaded some of his contemporaries that the great end was near.
- 15 For a fuller discussion of John Woolman's relationship with John of Revelation, see Michael Birkel, "Silence in Heaven: The Revelation to John Woolman," *Quaker Theology* #15 <<http://quakertheology.org/issue15-birkel-01.htm>>.