

2017

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Recommended Citation

Dudiak, Jeffrey (2017) "The Wordless Mystical and the Spirituality of Belief," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 129 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol129/iss1/5>

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THE WORDLESS MYSTICAL AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF BELIEF

JEFFREY DUDIAK

In our day, at least among what passes as urbane and polite company, anything short of an enthusiastic affirmation of the full range of religious expression, including none, as anything other than the manifestation of an enriching difference, and as the enlightened antidote to any suggestion that some religion is true to the exclusion of others, means that one risks being stained with the dirtiest of modernist sobriquets: that of being a “fundamentalist”! In fact, this litmus test of liberality, dividing the drive toward acidic *ethnos*-cleansing in the name of universal reason,¹ on the one hand, from the base, parochial *mythos* of *ein Volk*, in the name of simple common sense, on the other, separates, from both sides, “us” against “them.” Anyone who has travelled widely among Friends, weaving their vine through our various branches, would be hard pressed to imagine that we do much if anything more than simply reproduce this dichotomy among ourselves, across which we, too, are polarized and, it seems to me, paralyzed—at least insofar as we might hope to think beyond our particular ideological boxes, insofar, that is, as we might hope to *think*.

That is, behind the “self-evident,” liberal Quaker truth that religious hybridity is a sign of intellectual sophistication and spiritual progress, as behind the contemporary version of the opposing camp that sees in such dalliances an infidelity to genuine, historic, Christian Quakerism, lies a metaphysic that is not only far from self-evident, but that establishes the divide around which the opposing sides rally precisely their opposition—and as a philosopher it is that shared framework, rather than the polemics issuing from either side, that most interests me. I have explored this phenomenon elsewhere, and in this brief presentation can only provide some indications and possible implications of it, beginning and focusing on the understandings that underwrite the side of the argument for which the acceptance and celebration of religious hybridity has become both a point of pride and an unchallenged tenet of faith.

THE WORDLESS MYSTICAL

Ever since Rufus Jones brought his significant intellectual gravitas and lavish moustache to bear upon the Religious Society of Friends, it has become standard fare among liberal Friends to understand Quakerism as a mystical religion, even as that understanding has been virtually ignored by Prof. Jones's own orthodox tradition, and rejected by Quaker evangelicals. As a non-originally liberal Friend (although it is in a liberal meeting that I now have my membership), perhaps I can be forgiven for never being quite sure what these Friends mean, positively speaking, by mysticism, or for suspecting that it does not quite mean the same for all. It is not that I am totally opposed to some holy obfuscation. In fact, I myself frequently labour to introduce a measure of just this when things get a little too certain, even when we get a little too dogmatic about our uncertainty itself—which, with mysticism, often appears to be the case. Indeed, the claim to mysticism seems most pointedly, and in practice, to play a restrictive role: the banishment of the definitive, that is, of definitions, at least in matters religious.²

This identification with mysticism is most often fleshed out across the traditional Quaker assertion that the real action, religiously speaking, transpires “beyond words,” which is accompanied by the idea that if the depth of mystical experience is not simply negated by an attempt to translate it into discursive signifiers, it at least exceeds them to an inexhaustible degree, rendering them inept (if not laughably or sadly pathetic) attempts to capture in a thought the reality aimed at. Faulting and finite words—human *logoi*—when they do not hinder true, “wordless” religious experience, at least fall short enough that if they are yet called upon to function as a crutch, even a necessary one, as the spiritually lame learn to walk, they must certainly be transcended if one is, religiously speaking, to run, and especially if one is to soar. In any case, on this schema mysticism is opposed to theo-logy, to the idea that any *logoi* would be adequate to that which is “reached” in mystical experience—for “God” too is but a word, even if the Word *par excellence*.³ Theology, then, is perceived, if not with disdainful condescension, then at least with sympathetic toleration, “if one needs that sort of thing,” provided one does not take it too seriously, that is, as other than a *via* point as opposed to a terminus, as an optional, and ultimately inadequate, idiolect. Of course, the early Friends, who translated to us moderns this ancient, apophatic motif, never wearied of describing their experience, and its

Source—and, moreover, without much ambiguity—as quite certainly “this rather than as that,” in broadside after broadside, pamphlet after pamphlet, in sermon after interminable sermon, in treatise after polemic, proliferating their testimony to it at a truly prodigious rate. So if we modern, liberal Friends yet adhere to this teaching, we certainly seem to understand it in a radically different way than did our forebears, for better or for worse.

Nevertheless, there is both some phenomenological and some theoretical (including theological) warrant for such an intuition, and, technically speaking, for the priority of intuition over interpretation in the affairs of the spirit.⁴ For example, take the very element in which we bathe: the air we breathe, the ground beneath our feet and the skies above our heads, the energies that compose and sustain us, and of which we ourselves dispose. The modality in which we relate most fundamentally to all of this is always prior to, and conditions the condition of possibility for, perceiving it as an object over against us, the latter always a derivative, and partial, relationship to that which first sustains us. Now, my suspicion is that for at least those whose spiritual sensibilities have been forged across the Abrahamic religions, that which exceeds definitive description is not so much a matter of an element from which we emerge,⁵ as it is a “voice” that calls us forth: “let there be ..., and there was” Religious life, which on this model is all of life, is vocational; we are always already a response to a call prior to whatever attempt we might subsequently make at conceptualizing this lived reality, and which necessarily exceeds it by an essential degree, because any attempt at conceptualization is already implicated in it as interior to the process it would hope, *après coup*, to circumscribe.

But pushed to the extreme, that is, in converting this sensitivity into a principle, this framework renders concern for the theological (in the broad sense of anything we might “say” about the *content* of our religious experience) otiose, or at least diminishes it to the point of indifference. How one says things, if one need say anything at all, does not matter. One does not, at least insofar as one transposes oneself down to the level of the truly fundamental, hear the words, which serve merely an auxiliary function in any case, but “feel where the words come from,”⁶ which is what counts, after all, even if no specification can be given of that “where” without lapsing into precisely what is to be avoided. The result is that we are left speaking as vaguely and

elusively with each other as possible—which usually means speaking about something else.⁷ This is the new basis of our (religious?) society, then, that struggles not to give collective articulation to our religious experience, but unites around our principled refusal to do so.

Such a schema, of course, opens the field to all comers. One is encouraged to be “open to new light, from whatever source it may come,”⁸ welcomed to draw on other traditions—religious, spiritual, pagan, secular—to supplement, and even transform, the Quaker way, provided, of course, that any beliefs articulated across such borrowings are taken as conduits for spiritual exploration and edification, and do not transgress the prohibition against claims to trans-personal truth. So, let them all come!: Hindu-Quakers, Jewish-Quakers, Wicca-Quakers, non-theist-Quakers, and whatever else one fancies, to join the now also hyphenated older-order liberal-Quakers, Orthodox-Quakers, Evangelical-Quakers, and Conservative-Quakers.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF BELIEF

And, yet, one is perhaps not being simply flippant in wondering whether this phenomenon testifies to the healthy expansiveness of Quaker spirituality, or, as we stock our spiritual pantry with borrowed victuals, to the poverty of contemporary, Quaker religious life. Might a richer engagement with our own religious tradition provide a depth that the currently practiced, stripped-down version—open to everything because committed to nothing but openness itself—simply cannot?

One wonders, also, along with Derek Guiton in his recent, controversial book (which, more often than we are comfortable with, speaks truth to the power of our “liberal orthodoxy”), whether, despite the liberal Quaker creed that “all we are doing is using different language to refer to the same thing, ... it is obvious that we are using the same language to refer to different things.”⁹ That is, is the mantra that we are all saying the same thing, despite a plethora of incommensurable assertions, not rather a dogmatic assertion that blinds us to the reality that this claim itself is a matter of religious belief, in fact the imposition of a master-belief that enforces one particular version of religious metaphysics, a version that henceforth governs acceptable and unacceptable forms and modes of religious expression under the benign banner of “toleration:” for the “belief”

that the essential is beyond words, across the shape given to mysticism in modernity, henceforth organizes and polices the entire religious landscape of contemporary (liberal) Friends. Could it be that our supposed unity is in fact illusory, and unachievable on the non-terms across which it is confessed, unless it is imposed?

In contrast to this heretical orthodoxy, I would like to entertain the possibility that beliefs *do* matter, and this because, hermeneutically considered, we not only give formation to our traditions, but are formed by them, across what H.-G. Gadamer refers to (in one of the least musical of phrases in one of the least musical of languages) as *wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein*, or the “historical formation of consciousness.” To belong to a religious tradition is to participate in a trajectory of response to a call that, while always open to critique and expansion and innovation, has among its functions the ongoing articulation of that call itself in creative continuity with the tradition in question—the dialectic between creativity and continuity constituting the living spirit of that particular tradition qua tradition.¹⁰ This circularity between our traditions and our experience of “the divine” or “God” or “the Spirit” or “the Life Force” or what have you (as there is no neutral, non-tradition-bound articulation of “that which calls”¹¹), each conditioning the other, is I think a better description of a living spirituality than is the static (and I suspect illusory) phenomenon that we have an immediate connection to the divine, if that is taken to mean one that is neither nourished by, nor demands, articulation.

Neither I nor you, I suspect, want to be counted among those “closed-minded, sticks-up-their-butts” who balk at the welcoming of one and all into the Quaker fold. And there is no question that the liberalizing, universalizing tendency among this particular caste of contemporary Friends has yielded some very good fruit. But, short of swallowing whole the metaphysic entailed by the modernist reading of mysticism, it is not self-evident that every attempt at hyphenation will succeed in enriching the Quaker trajectory. If conservatives tend to too readily shy away from innovation out of fear of losing what they have got, liberals tend to be too quick to adopt the new, mindless of what of worth is being left behind. Indeed, the debate over whether hybridity evinces the maturation of Quakerism or its degeneracy is among the most crucial in our generation, and we should perhaps be mindful of reflexively allowing this question to be approached in such

dichotomous, either-or, terms. For myself, I am still trying to discern the meaning of our hybridity, and the underlying structures against which we might understand and evaluate it.

ENDNOTES

1. The reason why this trajectory can accommodate every and all religious expression (up to a point!) is that in each case such expressions are permitted only insofar as they are “reasonable,” i.e., subject to a purportedly universal Reason, and thus “domesticated” (i.e., largely privatized). The use of the term “fundamentalism” is an intimidation tactic employed by us liberals to label and isolate any religious expression that refuses to be brought to heel, that refuses to bow down before the true God: human Reason.
2. This is why non-theist (as opposed to agnostic) Friends are not really liberals in this sense; for them the non-existence of God is quite certain.
3. Emmanuel Levinas has provocatively denominated the name/word “God” (i.e., “the admission of the stronger than me and in me”) as “the apex of vocabulary.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 156.
4. In hermeneutic terms, “intuition” names an immediate relationship with that to which I relate, suggesting direct access, whereas “interpretation” names a mediated relationship, enacted across something else—language, for example.
5. As tends to be the case, at least across a rough and ready characterization, for “pagan” religions.
6. John Woolman, in his *Journal*, records these often quoted words by a native American chief who asked that Woolman’s address not be translated, for, as Papunchang said: “I love to feel where the words come from.”
7. The alibi of not taking religious expression seriously results in the phenomenon of not taking religion seriously, and for our placing our focus elsewhere, perhaps in social work, activism, or politics. However, it is not clear that Quakers can continue to make unique contributions even in these areas if they are severed from the religious sensitivities that birthed those concerns and gave shape to often quite distinctive, Quakerly approaches to them.
8. This frequently quoted phrase is drawn from *Quaker Faith & Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 4th ed., 2009), Advice number 7. Interestingly, the following line—“Do you approach new ideas with discernment?”—is almost never quoted along with it.
9. Derek Guiton, *A Man that Looks on Glass* (Milton Keynes: FeedARead Publishing, 2015), p. 6.
10. One of the most important aspects of engaging a tradition is that it provides the possibility of an “other” perspective that can call into critical question contemporary assumptions. Without this broader perspective, without a deep respect for traditions, we are more blindly enslaved to present prejudices than we might otherwise be. If on the one side (the orthodox), we Quakers have forgotten our tradition’s suspicion of religious traditions and have too readily sought to ground ourselves in them in an uncritical way, on the other (liberal) side we have too often employed our tradition’s suspicion of religious traditions as an excuse to jettison anything in the tradition that does not “speak to our condition” as thoroughgoing “moderns”—often impoverishing ourselves in the process.
11. Indeed, our preference for one or another of these terms, and our allergy to others, is itself a product of our experience of, and engagement with, our traditions.