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VALUE OF *QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT* TO ME AND TO FRIENDS

T. Vail Palmer, Jr.

This paper was given April 5, 2012, at the meetings of Quakers United in Publishing, during the year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Quaker Religious Thought.

Quantitatively speaking, if it were not for *Quaker Religious Thought*, my credentials as a published scholar would be slim indeed. By the time I reached the age of 65, they would have consisted of one published lecture (the 1968 Shrewsbury Lecture) and one book review (in the *Anglican Theological Review*. Everything else — articles, comments, book reviews, editorials — had been published in *QRT*.

Before I took on the editorship of *Quaker Religious Thought*, I had spent ten years as treasurer of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group and circulation manager of *QRT*. I have read with interest the account in the 50th anniversary issue of *Quaker Religious Thought*, to the effect that the Discussion Group was in dreadful financial straits when I took over those responsibilities in 1964, but that "this new change . . . seemed to work out well, and Palmer soon had *QRT* back on a more firm financial footing." (Kate Newlin, "A Short History of the First Ten Years of QTDG and QRT," QRT 111 [Dec. 2008]: 14)

A few events during my college years highlight the background for the significant contributions that the Quaker Theological Discussion Group and *Quaker Religious Thought* have made to my own life and the life of Quakerism at large.

As a Quaker child, I had been thrilled by the courage and powerful steadfastness of the first generation of Friends. Their devotion to integrity, peace, tolerance, and justice was a beacon to me in a world that was struggling through economic hard times and hurtling toward war. As a teenager, I had learned from Friends guided by Rufus Jones and Howard Brinton that these first Friends were mystics, steeped in a vivid experience of the presence of God, and committed to an optimistic belief in that of God in every person.

During my undergraduate years at the University of Pennsylvania, I took part in many activities organized by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Young Friends movement. Early on, I was in a small group that met regularly to read and discuss William Penn's *Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers.* This was my first direct encounter with anything written by a seventeenth-century Friend. I was confounded. Penn's message was strongly Christ-centered; he quoted the Bible freely. He wrote of "the benighted state of man after his fall" (Penn 1947: 7) and of "the sins and trespasses in which they were dead." (Penn 1947: 9) I was aghast when our beloved pioneer of religious toleration wrote of Roman Catholicism: "The false church sprang up. . . . In truth she was mystery Babylon, the mother of harlots." (Penn 1947: 11) He scoffed at the Baptists: "They rested also too much upon their watery dispensation." (Penn 1947: 15) Where was the mystical, spirit-centered, optimistic, tolerant early Quaker that I was expecting to find?

During the summer of my senior year, I took part in an exciting and challenging national Young Friends conference at Earlham college, and then joined three other young Friends — from England, North Carolina, and Jamaica — in a caravan that traveled among various Friends in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. We visited local meetings and churches, youth camps, and yearly meeting sessions. We were invited to share our own spiritual messages, and we engaged in lively discussion of religious issues. After the other three left for home, I attended the sessions of the evangelical Ohio Yearly Meeting in Damascus, Ohio. I was welcomed warmly, but specifically asked not to share my own views publicly! I asked myself: why did these Friends fear the dialogue that most of the Friends I had met had so welcomed?

Shortly before my graduation from college, I attended a seminar led by a Friend named Lewis Benson, who had written a pamphlet titled *Prophetic Quakerism.* His message was that Rufus Jones had been wrong about early Friends: Quakerism began not as a philosophical, mystical movement centering on "that of God in everyone," but as a prophetic, Christ-centered movement, focusing on the claim that "Christ has come to teach his people himself."

To me, this interpretation made a lot more sense of the writings of George Fox and William Penn. Too often the mystical interpreters had dismissed the strongly biblical and Christ-centered writings of early Friends as simply speaking in language that their contemporaries would understand. But I had some difficulty with accepting a Christ-

centered understanding of Quakerism. I thought that, in order to be a Christian, a person had to be a biblical literalist, to put aside the critical intellect in one's approach to the Bible. That was a sacrifice I was not able or willing to make. And I did not understand how Jesus could at once be both a human being and divine (at least in any unique sense).

About three years later, I was in residence at Pendle Hill for a month while awaiting sentencing for refusing to register for the draft. I checked out a book from Swarthmore College library: *God Was In Christ*, by D. M. Baillie. Donald Baillie led me through a careful series of arguments, showing how the Christian faith involves a number of paradoxes, including the central paradox of Grace — my experience that the good which I do is entirely my own responsibility and also wholly the work of God's grace in me. From this it was a small leap to the paradox of the Incarnation — of Jesus being both God and human: "The Man in whom God was incarnate would claim nothing for Himself as a Man, but ascribed all glory to God." (Baillie 1948: 126) With Donald Baillie's help, I was finally able to accept the Christian faith as true.

Seven years later, in 1957, I enrolled in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. During my four years of classes there, I also studied books by a number of biblical scholars, including Oscar Cullmann, Walther Eichrodt, G. Ernest Wright, and Bernhard W. Anderson. These scholars were representative of what can be termed the Biblical Theology movement. I also found myself forced back into reading essential works by the great theological pioneer of that movement: Karl Barth. Building on the analytical work of earlier critical biblical scholars, Barth and his followers in the twentieth-century Biblical Theology movement had taken the next step and were attempting a new synthesis, a fresh understanding of the message of the biblical authors. The goal of their scholarship was to recover the theology of the biblical writers, to the extent that they — and we — can feel ourselves into the position of the writers and first readers of the biblical books. I have come to agree with them that our aim is to get into the same drama in which the Hebrews and early Christians were involved, to examine the Old Testament and the New Testament from within. In a word, the goal of our biblical study is: **empathy.**

In the summer of 1957, several Friends had met at a Conference of Friends in the Americas at Wilmington College and had initiated the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. These Friends, sobered

by two world wars, world-wide economic collapse, and the horrors of Naziism and the Holocaust, had come to question Protestant and Quaker liberalism's optimistic faith in human progress; they were also questioning Rufus Jones' and Howard Brinton's interpretation of early Quakerism as a mystical movement centering on an optimistic belief in that of God in everyone. They wanted to establish a forum for discussing theological issues and understandings of Quakerism with one another, as well as with any liberal or evangelical Friends willing to enter the dialogue. They also envisaged founding a journal in which the fruits of this dialogue could be published.

I attended the first conference of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group in 1959, and found it to be a place where I could sharpen my own understanding of what Quakerism was all about. I became a regular attender of the Group's conferences. My time as treasurer of QTDG and editor of *QRT* included thirteen years when I was teaching at Kentucky Wesleyan College and at Rio Grande College in Ohio. During these teaching years there was no Friends Meeting or Church close enough to attend regularly. I continued to be a non-resident member of Arch Street Meeting in Philadelphia. As a member of the QTDG executive committee, I was attending QTDG committee meetings and conferences at least twice each year. QTDG became the center of my connection to Quakerism, my de facto spiritual home.

The Quaker Theological Discussion Group afforded a context in which I could clarify my own understanding of what Quakerism is all about. Colleagues in QTDG made noteworthy contributions to my understanding of major themes in the thought and work of early Friends. Hugh Barbour and Canby Jones showed how George Fox, James Nayler, and Edward Burrough distilled the picture of the Lamb's War out of the profuse imagery of the Book of Revelation. These early Friends understood that they were engaged in an intense, yet always nonviolent struggle against the powers of evil within themselves and in the social and political structures of their world. I was particularly inspired by Canby Jones's insistence that the Lamb's War provides the basis for Quaker testimonies and action in the world today.

My thinking was stretched by Rob Tucker's expansion of the social and political implications of the Lamb's War in his seminal *QRT* essay, "Revolutionary Faithfulness." In his book, *The Covenant Crucified*, Douglas Gwyn has emphasized and clarified my understanding that the first Quakers were not simply a gathering of God-inspired

individuals; they were a people, a community called by God — a covenant community. Doug made it clear that the Lamb's War was indeed, "based on the image of the Lamb, the Risen Lord, in the Book of Revelation, waging cosmic war against the forces of religious, economic, and political repression," but it was also "a covenantal conflict." (Gwyn 1995: 106)

One question on which Friends in the Quaker Theological Discussion Group have held varying views is the question of the place of early Quakerism in the manifold spectrum of churches, denominations, and movements that constitute Christianity. Rufus Jones had positioned Friends in a long tradition of mystical movements, within both Roman Catholicism and heretical sects, stretching back to the Greek philosopher Plato. Hugh Barbour placed Quakerism squarely in the Protestant camp: "Historically and theologically, Friends are Protestants." (Barbour 1969: 2) Lewis Benson, for a period in his life, felt that early Quakers belonged together with sixteenth-century Anabaptists as examples of "Spiritual Reformation" or perhaps "churches of the Cross;" later in life he backed away from this association with the Anabaptists and emphasized the absolute uniqueness of George Fox's vision of Christian faith and community. To me it has seemed clear that the early Quaker vision of Christianity had much in common with the positions of the fourteenth-century Lollards in England and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists in Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands (particularly the strands that became the Mennonites, the Amish, and the Hutterites). I found my views supported and clarified in an essay by Maurice Creasey, "Radical Christianity and Christian Radicalism." He gave special attention to the sixteenth-century "Radical Reformation" (including the Anabaptists) and seventeenth century Quakerism among "groups and movements which, throughout Christian history, have felt after a quality of spiritual life and have sought to embody a pattern of Christian discipleship closer than anything they saw in the church of their own day to that reflected in the New Testament." (Creasey 1973: 7)

On one other specific issue, I have been in agreement with Maurice Creasey. In his 1973 *QRT* essay, "Quakers and the Sacraments," he argued: "The early Quaker abandonment of the Sacraments is an expression of a defective awareness of what is often called the 'eschatological tension' between the 'now' and the 'not yet.'" (*QRT* vol. 5, no. 1: 14) Ten years later I made the same point in a discussion of the sacraments in *QRT* — that George Fox based his argument

for avoiding the Lord's Supper on his conviction "that Jesus Christ *had now come*. . . . He meant this in terms of the final coming of the Kingdom of God. . . . But history since then has proved that Fox was . . . premature in his expectations of the final coming of the Kingdom." ("Preface to a Sacramental Wrap-up," *QRT* vol. 14 no. 4: 4) For myself, I had never found a satisfactory argument for Quaker practice in regard to the sacraments — particularly the Lord's supper — until I heard Alan Kolp give the lecture which was later published as a *QRT* article: "Friends, Sacraments, and Sacramental Living" (*QRT* no. 57 [summer 1984]: 36-52). I have characterized this article as "the finest essay on a Quaker view of sacramental living *ever written*." (*QRT* no. 111 [December 2008]: 53)

One feature of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group that was highly significant, both to me personally and to Quakerism at large, was that Friends involved in it from the beginning came from a broad spectrum of Quaker bodies, including even Arthur Roberts and Everett Cattell from Evangelical yearly meetings.

Building on the work of these pioneers in dialogue, evangelical Friends initiated a call for a conference of American Friends, [see Dean Freiday editorial in *QRT* no. 54 (autumn 1982): 1] which met in St. Louis in 1970 to consider "The Future of Friends." Out of that conference emerged the Faith and Life Movement, which was officially representative of Yearly Meetings of all branches and varieties, and was designed to forward and to broaden the type of dialogue which had been modeled by QTDG.

A major fruit of the Faith and Life Movement was the publication of a series of study booklets over the next eleven years. One of these, *New Call to Peacemaking*, edited by Norval Hadley, a leading Evangelical Friend, was designed for use by Mennonites and Brethren as well as Friends, in preparation for a national Peace Churches conference in 1978. The other Faith and Life booklets were all edited by Friends who had been active in QTDG and included numerous essays written by QTDG participants.

During the 1970s QTDG was also called on to provide a particular service within official Quaker circles. Meetings in Friends United Meeting had become sharply divided over the question of speaking in tongues — was this practice essential to full Christian discipleship? Was it even appropriate for Friends? An evening meeting at the July 1975 sessions of Friends United Meeting was planned to be devoted to a consideration of the issue. Quaker Theological Discussion Group

agreed to contribute to this discussion by devoting one issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* to thoughtful, well-informed articles on this topic. As the new editor I pulled together the desired issue on "Ministries of the Holy Spirit", with articles by five scholars. The usual delays in editing and printing made the schedule tight. The printing was finally complete by Saturday morning, July 5th. The relevant session at Friends United Meeting was Sunday evening, the sixth, at Wilmington College in western Ohio. I picked up the boxes of *QRT* from John McCandless' print shop (outside of Philadelphia) on Saturday morning, and drove to western Pennsylvania, where I pitched my tent in a national forest campground. Sunday morning my car wouldn't start. Somehow I eventually located a mechanic, who got the car going. I found a pay phone and left a message at the Wilmington College switchboard that I was running very late. When I finally arrived in Wilmington, the evening session had already begun. As I dragged into the meeting room with the precious boxes, Canby Jones stood up and loudly hailed my arrival as a miracle wrought by the Holy Spirit!

The first issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* contained a statement of purpose which had been formulated by the founders to the Discussion Group:

> The objective is not to formulate a Quaker creed but to explore more fully the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience. This should include both an historical and contemporary approach, and should be concerned with both the content and application of our faith.

In 1965-66 the steering committee, with input from *QRT* readers, adopted a revised statement of purpose, which has appeared since then on the opening pages of each issue of *QRT*:

> The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This should include an historical and a contemporary approach. The search for unity in the claim of truth concerns both the content and the application of our faith.

By and large, I believe QTDG and *QRT* have consistently, over the years, been faithful to the purpose. Perhaps the "search for unity" has proved to be elusive and has therefore been de-emphasized.

But most of us in the early days of QTDG had hopes for a much more ambitious or expansive outcome from our endeavors. We did not very often or very clearly admit to this goal in public. Perhaps the closest came at the 1965 QTDG conference, where the theme was "The Quaker Contribution toward Reshaping Christianity." Arthur Roberts confessed there, in a paper on "Holiness and Christian Renewal," which was published in the Spring 1967 *QRT*:

> Whatever else may be said about the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, it is not interested simply in *reporting* the religion of the Quakers. It is my hope, shared by others, that the QTDG "aims to restore free, Christ-centered, theologically articulate Quakerism" (see May 1, 1965 *Minutes*). . . .
>
> > We seek *Christian renewal*, whether within Quakerdom or Christendom. . . .
> >
> > We ask again for *the Holy Spirit* to renew the church. And we seek his voice in His revelation, both in Scripture and in the direct guidance given to the church. (*QRT* vol. 17, no. 1: 4, 5, 8)

We had a dream for Quakerism and for its role in world history. It was the vision that was given to George Fox on Pendle Hill, of a "great people to be gathered." For a generation, that vision had become a reality and the world was shaken for miles around — daughters as well as sons prophesied, men and women suffered imprisonment and even hanging on Boston Common rather than compromise the integrity of their faith, spiritual warfare was fought without the weapons of violence or legal compulsion, seeds were planted for a coming struggle against the dire injustice of human slavery.

At its heart, Rufus Jones and John Wilhelm Rowntree had caught and shared this vision for Quakerism as they climbed the Schilthorn together in 1897: "All the plans and all the dreams focused upon the one purpose of preparing the Society of Friends for its mission in the modern world and for deepening the ministry in the meetings for worship." (Rufus Jones, *John Wilhelm Rowntree*, 9th page) And they and the Friends who joined with them accomplished amazing results in their quest of this vision: a series of summer schools, permanent study centers at Woodbrooke and Pendle Hill, a monumental multi-volume history of Quakerism, founding of the American Friends Service Committee and the Friends World Committee. A major part of Quakerism accepted their understanding of early Quakers as being a movement rooted in mystical religious experience and that the

theological essence of Quakerism was belief in that of God in everyone (understood to imply the essential goodness of human nature).

But by the 1950s and 1960s, quite a few of us had become convinced that there were serious, perhaps fatal flaws in Rufus Jones' and John Wilhelm Rowntree's grasp of the Quaker vision. We believed that the earliest Friends had been far more radically Christ- and Bible-centered, and less invested in the value of sheer religious experience, than those two worthies had believed. Having lived through a generation of two world wars, unbelievably cruel totalitarian regimes, and devastating economic depression, we were convinced that our optimism needed to be grounded less on human goodness and more on the grace and power of God. We were convinced that the reforms achieved by the Quaker modernists had run their course — that a theological shift was called for, if the renewal that we hoped for was to be accomplished.

It is clear now, after half a century, that those of us in QTDG have had a far less profound impact on Quakerism than Jones and Rowntree and their colleagues had. One reason is that we have been less united among ourselves, in our attempts to formulate the real essence of the original Quaker vision, than were the modernists of the generation ahead of us. One reason may be that what we were rebelling against was not as fatal to a vital faith as was what the modernists faced: a moribund evangelicalism with its failure to face up to the radical findings of modern science and its fear-based theology ("sinners in the hands of an angry God").

For whatever reason, I am not surprised that QTDG has faced a narrowing leadership base in recent years and has therefore retrenched its programs. But even as those I have shared the vision with have been departing from this earth, I have not given up the dream. I even see signs that it is springing up again — especially among those who call ourselves Convergent Friends. Theology, by itself, will not bring about renewal. Dialog, the willingness to test our findings against those who see a different portion or aspect of the Truth, is essential. Openness to the unexpected leadings of God's love and grace is crucial.

We can have the best theology in the world, and it will not do the job. But bad theology — theology based on fuzzy thinking or on fear of Hell — can be fatal. I believe that QTDG and *QRT* can continue to have a role to play — to keep our thinking honest and our dialog open.