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Friends and Watershed Discipleship: Reconciling With People and the Land In Light of the Doctrine of Discovery

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FRIENDS AND WATERSHED DISCIPLESHIP: RECONCILING WITH PEOPLE AND THE LAND IN LIGHT OF THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

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Members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) express frequent adulation for the denomination's heritage of standing up for social justice.[1] As a member of the denomination, I share this pride in our heritage, and yet, I feel increasingly convicted in relation to Quaker scholarship and praxis that we need to reevaluate our history and current practices with recognition of the "wicked"[2] web of interconnected social, economic, and environmental injustices we currently face as a global community. This necessitates awareness of our part in creating the current situation, and a willingness to actively work to change the problematic areas of our theology and practice to live our "testimony to the whole world" faithfully in the current context.[3] Using the hermeneutical lens of postcolonialism, I will critique some aspects of Quaker history, suggesting a reframing of Quaker theo-praxis in the direction of watershed discipleship.

I. Placing Myself: Context and Hermeneutical Lens

I speak from the context of a committed Quaker who wants the Society of Friends to live faithfully and contribute our part in shifting humanity's trajectory from fear- and greed-filled overconsumption to loving and equitable sharing of creation's bounty. As a European American citizen of the United States, I live on land formerly under the care of the Kalapuya people, who are now part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. I acknowledge the work my community needs to do toward reconciliation with land, people, and other creatures, and therefore with God. I also speak as a Christian Friend, recognizing the breadth of belief among Friends. I speak mainly to Friends in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, who generally hold the centers of power and scholarship in our denomination, and I encourage white Friends to actively engage in the difficult and multi-

dimensional work of repentance and reconciliation as we learn to decolonize our theology.

According to Kwok Pui-Lan, postcolonialism does not necessarily refer to a time after colonialism has occurred, but instead, it is "a reading strategy and discursive practice that seeks to unmask colonial epistemological frameworks, unravel Eurocentric logics, and interrogate stereotypical cultural representations."[4] In light of this definition, I will interrogate the representations Friends typically construct of ourselves, paying attention to the Eurocentric logics underlying our self-identity as a community.[5]

"Decolonization [is] a process which begins with the rejection of myths," particularly the hagiography we tell ourselves about Quaker heroes of the faith.[6] This requires what postcolonial scholars refer to as "ambivalence" about Quaker history: awareness that although we may have meant well, the practice of our faith has often suffered from the "capacity to be co-opted by empire even when most intent on resisting it."[7] We have therefore been (and continue to be) complicit in the destructive impacts of colonialism to cultures, the land, and other species, particularly through colonialism justified by the Doctrine of Discovery. I will next explain this doctrine, and conclude the paper with a description of watershed discipleship, which catalyzes just and loving action locally and globally in line with the postcolonial idea of "planetarity," rather than colonialism's "globalism."[8]

II. Overview of Quaker Complicity in Colonialism

Quakerism emerged at a time when Western Christianity was inextricably linked to European empire building through colonization and resource extraction. Those of us who are white in the US, Canada, and the UK have benefitted and continue to benefit from colonialism and its unjust practices of stealing land, acquiring natural resource rights, and destruction of cultural and natural systems in the name of economic profit and wealth. We have often spoken out against injustices, but we still benefit from them and more or less acquiesce to the status quo, and we have been less cognizant of the impacts of our actions on the land and other species than we have of social injustices.

One important beginning place for Friends of European descent is developing an awareness of the Doctrine of Discovery, and recognizing the role it has played in historic and current Friends'

economic and social power based on natural resource access. Friends did not create the Doctrine of Discovery, but many have benefitted from its ideology, and continue to operate under its assumptions.

The Doctrine of Discovery refers to a series of papal bulls, formulated in the fifteenth century, in which the Catholic Church and European nations reinforced one another's justification for conquest of land, people, and natural resources. These documents authorize Christian nations to enslave Muslims and other people groups that are not Christian, claim terra nullius (or empty land) for European heads of state if that land is currently occupied by other-than-Christian groups, and forbid anyone to travel to lands newly "discovered" by Europeans to trade with, teach, or provide weapons or other tools to help the Indigenous people become strong enough to resist European dominance.[9] In an act of watershed conquest, a European explorer could claim an entire watershed if he was the first European to encounter the mouth of a river. The Catholic Church sanctioned this practice for the purpose of evangelism, ascribing a benevolent intention to the political and economic machinations of the monarchs.

While Friends did not yet exist, these papal bulls formed the basis for the patent English King Henry VII gave to the explorer John Cabot in 1496, authorizing him to claim lands for the English crown. This precedent was also used to provide William Penn a charter for the land in the "New World" that became Philadelphia and its environs. Although Friends take pride in Penn's purchase of the land from the Native people who lived on the land he was "given," often reminding one another that his was "the only treaty never ratified by an oath and never broken," he was far from perfect: he owned slaves, and some were inherited by his children.[10] His treaty was not broken in Penn's lifetime, but it was broken egregiously by his son, who swindled the Delaware out of a large portion of land in an event called the Walking Purchase.[11]

We can appreciate that Penn's integrity and awareness of the humanity of Native people exceeded some from his time, while recognizing his shortcomings. His behavior was not representative of all Friends in the American colonies—nor does it extend to Friends today, living on lands acquired through justification from the Doctrine of Discovery, with broken treaties, forced displacements, massacres, and many other unjust practices strewn across the colonial history of the Americas. Friends were directly involved in running Indian

boarding schools with the purpose of "improving" (read: assimilating) Native people to European American standards.[12]

In addition to justifying land claims by European colonists, the Doctrine of Discovery also supported the legality of the slave trade. Friends remember our denominational role in the abolition of slavery, but are less inclined to remind ourselves that many early Quaker colonists owned slaves, and some Friends were directly involved in trading slaves.[13] Furthermore, not many people of color chose to join this denomination, because Friends often did not make them welcome in our meetinghouses during and after the abolition movement.[14] Friends' abolition efforts did not extend to creating equitable social and economic systems, even within our own meetings, nor did the denomination pay reparations for the many benefits white Friends enjoyed in land acquisition and commercial trade based on an economy of slave labor, or the unequal access to land and resources European Americans enjoyed (and continue to enjoy).[15]

Friends benefitted from the Doctrine of Discovery as they settled land across the United States. They could acquire land free or inexpensively simply by being white men (or married to white men). While this had the perhaps positive benefit of creating Quaker communities across the country that persist until this day (many where our Quaker higher educational institutions still reside), the land was only dubiously owned by the US government, it was not available equally to all people, and it contributed to ecosystem destruction and species loss. While Friends did not create these policies, the Friends community was mostly white and took advantage of the readily accessible land they could homestead. In living memory, my own great-grandparents, Fanny and Glen Beebe, were the first to homestead a 240-acre plot in eastern Oregon in 1939. Civil engineers built a series of dams and canals, opening up new areas to irrigation. My great-grandparents received land[16] and painstakingly cleared it, disrupting the delicate high desert ecosystem, planting cash crops and raising dairy cows. Additionally, they donated part of their land for a Friends meetinghouse.

Another example is George Fox University—my institution and alma mater. The land on which it sits was donated in the 1880s by the Deskins, who received the land as a Donation Land Claim from the US government in 1846,[17] 13 years prior to Oregon's statehood in 1859, and also prior to treaties with the Kalapuya and other local tribes in 1851 and 1855.[18]

The US government continues to use the Doctrine of Discovery as justification for land rights claims. A 2005 ruling determined that if a tribe repurchases land it traditionally held, the land is not subject to tribal authority but is still part of the US, citing the Doctrine of Discovery.[19]

The Doctrine of Discovery also served to legitimate unjust access to power and resources by those with European heritage in other areas of the globe, including Africa and Latin America. Missionaries helped cement colonial power on these continents. Friends missionaries in the early twentieth century perhaps did not intend to champion their political empire, but their efforts had the effect of drawing new regions into dependency on a global economy when they had previously been self-sustaining, and teaching Western culture as a necessary part of adopting Christian Quakerism. Friends missionaries have largely recognized the error of these ways and are working to correct missteps, but much damage to communities, natural resources, and economic independence has already been done. African and Latin American Friends now outnumber North American and European Friends,[20] and the version of Quakerism they received was decidedly colonialist. My spouse's grandparents, Paul and Leona Thornburg, served as Friends missionaries in East Africa, and although they were kind and loving people, their style of evangelism tended to uphold and teach Western cultural assumptions.

Friends of European descent have difficult questions before us. What is our responsibility to the people whose land we now legally "own," but which was acquired through shady or illicit means? What is our responsibility to the ecosystems our ancestors destroyed, and which our lifestyles continue to sicken and fragment? What can we do now to work toward reconciliation with the land, other species, and diverse people groups?

III. Quakers & Watershed Discipleship

Watershed discipleship invites Christians to a way of following Jesus that, if enacted fully, requires Friends of European descent to move through repentance toward reconciliation, taking our place within the community of creation. As a reversal of watershed conquest, which authorized domination of entire watersheds "claimed" by European explorers when they first made landfall at the mouth of a river, watershed discipleship deconstructs the basis of the Doctrine of

Discovery and engages in restorative justice with God, people, and creation.[21]

First used by Ched Myers in 2010, the term "watershed discipleship" encourages us to see ourselves as part of the community of all life in a region, becoming indigenous, with a lower case i: not in a way that appropriates the cultures of Native peoples, but in a way that commits to a place and its inhabitants in a creative blend of traditional knowledge and innovation to meet current social, economic, spiritual, and ecological needs.[22] As Wendell Berry restates the Golden Rule, "Do unto others downstream what you would have those upstream do unto you."[23]

The three main tenets of watershed discipleship are:

1. We are in a watershed moment of ecological crisis, which demands that environmental and social justice and sustainability be integral to everything we do;
2. Following the incarnational Jesus as embodied disciples in our watersheds;
3. Being disciples of our watersheds, learning from the creatures and non-human entities in our regions.[24]

A movement heavily influenced by Mennonites, watershed discipleship flows from the peace church tradition, calling peace churches to reevaluate who and what is included in our vision of holistic peace.[25] Watershed discipleship challenges peace churches to recognize that while our ideas relating to peace and reconciliation have been based in Christ's message, we have much work to do in rejecting the historical-material reality that underlies colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy, as has been detailed in the prior section in regards to Friends. Enacting watershed discipleship means following Jesus in breaking down the systemic power structures designed to subjugate and conquer the natural world, women, people of color, those with less economic means, and cultures deemed "other."

1. Watershed Moment of Ecological Crisis

The first aspect of watershed discipleship, recognition of the watershed moment of ecological crisis in which we find ourselves, requires attention to our historical and cultural context, recognizing the social, ecological, economic, and spiritual nature of our culture's destructive behavior.

Most ecotheologies invite awareness of the current ecological-historical moment, but have a harder time getting us to actively repent, in the form of doing anything about it. In our best moments, Friends emphasize both contemplation and activism, and as such, Friends need a theological framework that not only gets us to think in a different way, but to live faithfully, disrupting the practices of imperialism. Watershed discipleship's other two tenets move from description to action.

2. Disciples in Our Watersheds

The second aspect is to be embodied disciples within our watershed, which means partnering with those who are working on similar things in our region. Friends believe in that of God in every one, so being disciples within our watersheds is an opportunity to find that spark of God in our neighbors in order to build healthy, resilient communities ready to adapt to and mitigate anthropogenic climate change. Jesus formed partnerships with those in his watershed in his peripatetic regional ministry, drawing his main 12 apostles from a range of expressions of Judaism, from revolutionaries to those within the organized religious sphere to those working to support Rome to working class folks. He also challenged elitist interpretations of scripture, refocusing the community of faith when it became distracted by infighting and upholding the status quo.

For Friends of European descent, since we are predominantly relatively well-off economically and hold other culturally-conditioned privileges and power, being disciples in our watersheds will likely mean taking a back seat as far as leadership goes, and listening well regarding the areas of injustice experienced by those with less political and economic power, both here and abroad. Environmental injustice is tied to the impacts of racism more closely than any other metric.[26] Therefore, living as disciples within our watersheds, who are hoping to do unto others downstream what we would want those upstream to do unto us, requires careful and focused attention regarding where our food and other products come from, and where they go when we are finished with them. It requires us to listen well to those around us, and believe them, actively working to lessen the impact of environmental toxins and to create more just access to land and resources.

Living as disciples within our watershed also includes recognition that the land belongs to God, not to us—regardless of the laws by which our current society functions. This scriptural truth can help us reorient toward more just sharing of land and natural resources, and may help us truly live out reconciliation with Indigenous folks and implement reparations for the enslavement and ongoing economic inequity experienced by people of color and Indigenous communities.

3. Disciples of Our Watersheds: Watershed as Rabbi

And finally, the third tenet of watershed discipleship is to be disciples of our watersheds, to learn from the land and its creatures, as learning from a wise rabbi. While Friends have developed the practice of close attention to one another and the Spirit in our meetings for worship, becoming disciples of our watersheds extends this practice into our interactions with the landscape we inhabit and the creatures with whom we share space. This idea is already present in Friends theology in that we believe in the sacramentality of all life: each moment and interaction is an opportunity to experience connection with the Holy.

Living as disciples of our watersheds can ground us in our own bodies, as incarnate members of the Body of Christ, connected through our embodiment with the web of all life. Paying close attention to the landscape and other creatures can teach us about and draw us into relationship with God: Augustine and other theologians call creation God's second book, a way we can learn about the nature and character of the Creator God, who became flesh and dwelled among us.[27] As disciples of our watersheds, we gain the humility to know that we are made of soil, and will return to soil: we participate in seasons and cycles, death and resurrection, growth and decay, biodiversity, and a niche for each one.

4. Watershed Discipleship in Action: A Friends Imperative

Becoming disciples in and of our watersheds is not something we can do passively. These are not beliefs we can hold, but they require active steps, and relationships. Most Friends probably care about the future of this planet and its species. But the network of problems is vast

and feels daunting. The history of the problem goes well beyond our lifespan.

Watershed discipleship provides ways for us to begin caring for creation in the social and economic spheres of our collective life, while also grounding us in a robust and meaningful faith basis for these actions. By living as disciples, we move from the role of fixer, to the posture of learner and co-laborer, teachable participants in a shalomic community.

Being disciples in and of our watersheds requires us to build relationships with people who are seeing and addressing similar problems, and form partnerships toward innovative and creative solutions. These relationships draw us into more complete and experiential knowledge of injustice, convicting us regarding further actions we can partake in to reconcile God, people, and creation.

Practicing attention to the other entities in our watersheds, committing to learn what we can through and from them, helps us to see ourselves as participants in the community of creation. As we build relationships with the creatures and landscape of our watershed, we find that we care a great deal about the health and wellbeing of our region. It is difficult to truly love an individual or a place we do not know,[28] so discipling ourselves to our watersheds is an act of love in which we learn over time to truly be members of our local place.

Seeing our care and concern for our particular place as an expression of love for those downstream helps watershed discipleship avoid elitism. Within the bounds of planetarity,[29] we remain committed to our personal places out of love and care for the local and global community. We recognize we are all connected in a global ecosystem, which encapsulates economy and society.

Rather than an idealistic ecotopia somewhere in the distant future, watershed discipleship invites steps in the direction of discipleship in and of our watersheds each day. For those who are beneficiaries of colonialism, each step toward becoming a disciple of and within our watershed requires repentance, grief, and courage. It is not easy to be counter-cultural, or break habits and practices of over-consumption and inattention.

And yet, this is in many ways what Friends have always attempted to do. We have tried to listen well and to act on what we hear, to live in a way that takes away the occasion for all war, to insist on responding to the Light in each person, and to live with integrity to

meet the needs of our time and place. Watershed discipleship helps us not only understand our past and present, but also move forward into right relationship with God, people, and creation. This fits within and expands our understanding of Friends testimonies, and calls us to repentance, humility, and participation in the community of creation.

ENDNOTES

1. This paper was originally presented to the Quaker Studies Unit and Pentecostal–Charismatic Movements Unit to the panel: "Quakers and Pentecostals in a Colonized World," American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA, November 23, 2019. Many thanks to Ekaputra Tupamahu for his insightful critiques as a respondent to the panel.
2. H. Rittel and M. M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 no. 2 (1973): 155–169. J. Dillon, R. B. Stevenson, and A. E. J. Wals, "Special Section: Moving from Citizen to Civic Science to Address Wicked Conservation Problems," *Conservation Biology* 30 no. 3 (April 2016): 450–455, https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12689.
3. This expands the first generation of Friends' commitment to follow Jesus' commands to nonviolence, their "testimony to the whole world," to include all creation.
4. Kwok Pui-Lan, *Post-Colonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 2.
5. This critique is in line with Quaker theological practices of "remixing" Quaker traditions with current cultural context, and seeking the "truth" of Quaker history rather than only telling ourselves the hagiography. C. Wess Daniels, *A Convergent Model of Renewal: Remixing the Quaker Tradition in a Participatory Culture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015). Pink Dandelion, ed., *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2004), 2. These Friends did not directly address postcolonial theory or environmental concerns, however.
6. Tabitha Mustafa and Sandra Tamari, "Palestine and Israel: A Decolonial Framework for Justice and Peace," *Friends Journal* (March 1, 2018), https://www.friendsjournal.org/palestine-israel-decolonial-quakers/.
7. Mayra Rivera and Stephen D. Moore, "A Tentative Topography of Postcolonial Theology," in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* (Fordham University Press, 2010), 3–14, at 7.
8. Spivak quoted in Mayra and Moore, *Planetary Loves*, 7, 14.
9. Particularly papal bulls Dum Diversas (1452), Romanus Pontifex (1454), and Inter Caetera (1493).
10. Although Penn wrote in his will in 1701 that his slaves were to be freed upon his death, his later wills did not include this. Slavery was unofficially allowed when the colony began, and then placed into law in Pennsylvania in 1700. Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 40–41. T. Westcott, "William Penn Was a Slaveholder," *Notes & Queries: A Medium of Inter-Communication for Literary Men, Artists, Antiquaries, Genealogists, Etc* 6 no. 161 (1852): 512–513.
11. Francis Jennings, "The Scandalous Indian Policy of William Penn's Sons: Deeds and Documents of the Walking Purchase," *Pennsylvania History* 37 no. 1 (1970): 19–39. H. A. Jacobson, "The Walking Purchase," *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 9, no. 1/2 (1911): 16–35.

12. Joan Greene Orr, "Civilize the Indian: Government Policies, Quakers, and Cherokee Education," *Southern Friend* 10 no. 2 (1988): 27–38. "Friends' Boarding-School for Indian Children at Tunessassah," Friend: A Religious & Literary Journal 33, no. 3 (September 24, 1859): 24.

13. Donna McDaniel and Vanessa Julye, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African Americans, and the Myth of Racial Justice* (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press of FGC, 2018). Darold D. Wax, "Quaker Merchants and the Slave Trade in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History & Biography* 86, no. 2 (1962): 143–59.

14. McDaniel and Julye, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship.*

15. While some individual Friends did pay reparations to freed slaves, Friends did not engage as a denomination in reparations or system-changing activities that would make up for the social and economic privileges. Since this was not done at the time of abolition or in the intervening years, the question of repairing that damage extends to the current generation. For more on Friends and reparations, see: Gary B. Nash, *Warner Mifflin: Unflinching Quaker Abolitionist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 4–6, 93, 101–109.

16. Native Paiute and Shoshone had been restricted to reservations in the second half of the nineteenth century, but eastern Oregon land had not been very usable due to its aridity. The Vale-Owyhee Government Projects Land Settlement Association (1929) utilized the Homestead Act (1862) to build dams and canals so the land could be farmed. The land was vacant of human inhabitants, and it was inexpensive to those who could show they had at least $2,000 in the bank, two years of successful farming, and who built a home on the land. Timothy A. Dick, *The Vale Project, Research of Historic Reclamation Projects* (Denver, CO: Bureau of Reclamation History Program, 1993), 14–17.

17. Daniel D. Deskins received the Donation Land Claim, married Sarah, and passed away in 1876, and Sarah donated the land to Friends to use for their school. It is important to note that, although slavery was never legal in Oregon, Oregon's Constitution and Bill of Rights contained laws excluding "negros and mulattos" from residing in the state. These laws were rescinded in 1926 but not fully removed until 2002 (Article XVIII, Oregon State Constitution, Oregon Historical Society Digital Collections, https://digitalcollections.ohs.org/undated-draft-of-the-oregon-state-constitution-article-xviii-schedule).

18. The 1851 treaty was never federally ratified and therefore considered non-binding, and the 1855 treaty was even less equitable.

19. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Opinion of the Court, City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of N. Y., 544 U.S. 197 (2005), fn 1, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/544/197/.

20. According to Friends World Committee for Consultation, as of 2017, 49% of Friends live in Africa, 14% in Latin America and the Carribbean, and 6% in Asia and West Pacific, with 22% of Friends residing in North America and 9% in Europe and the Middle East ("Finding Quakers Around the World," Friend World Committee for Consultation – World Office website, 2017, http://fwcc.world/fwccworldmap2017).

21. Ched Myers, "A Reflection on Isaiah 5, Ecological Solipsism, and 'Watershed Discipleship,'" Partner's Circle E-News, Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, July 2010.

22. R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Complacencies and Cul-de-sacs: Christian Theologies and Colonialism," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, eds. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 22–38.

23. Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), 135.

24. Ched Myers, ed., *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 2.

25. Randy Woodley, also involved in the watershed discipleship community, offers an important biblical and theological basis for the connection between care for the land of Turtle Island (North America), the value systems of many of those who lived here prior to European contact, the vision of shalom present in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the good news of Jesus. Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*, Prophetic Christianity Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

26. Robert D. Bullard, et al., "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty, 1987–2007: A Report Prepared for the United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries," United Church of Christ, 2007.

27. Augustine, "Sermon 68," in Sermons III (51-94), ed. John E. Rotelle, transl. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991).

28. Ched Myers, "From 'creation care' to 'watershed discipleship': Re-placing ecological theology and practice," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32 no. 3 (September 2014): 250–275, at 266.

29. Spivak quoted in Mayra and Moore, *Planetary Loves*, 7.