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REVIEW OF CHERICE BOCK &
STEPHEN POTTHOFF (EDITORS),
*QUAKERS, CREATION CARE, AND
SUSTAINABILITY* (LONGMEADOW,
MA: FRIENDS ASSOCIATION FOR
HIGHER EDUCATION, 2019)

KEVIN J. O'BRIEN

On the day I finished reading *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, Steve Mnuchin, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, publicly dismissed the authority of climate activist Greta Thunberg. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Thunberg made a speech calling for global divestment from fossil fuels. In response, Mnuchin joked, “Is she the chief economist? Who is she? I’m confused.” He went on, “After she goes to college and studies economics in college, she can come back and explain that to us.”¹

I suspect that, like me, most readers instinctively take the side of a 17-year-old activist when she is mocked by a 57-year-old cabinet secretary. However, I bring up this exchange not to defend Thunberg—I am confident she can handle that herself—but to raise the question assumed in Mnuchin’s comment: What kind of expertise do we need to guide us in the face of climate change? To whom should we be listening, and why? By the time you read this, Steve Mnuchin’s dismissal of Greta Thunberg will be a distant memory, but the issue of who has authority to speak about climate change and other environmental problems will remain vital and urgent.

The excellent collection *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability* makes it clear that many aspects of the Quaker tradition and many contemporary Quaker thinkers belong in this conversation. What I appreciate most about the book is the way it embraces many different kinds of authority, bringing a broad range of Quaker voices into conversation about what can and should be done about environmental degradation. The over two dozen authors in this book demonstrate that many kinds of authority can and must inform our perspectives on creation care and sustainability.

Lamenting that a short review does not allow time to engage all the ideas and authorities in a book this rich, I will focus on three different kinds of authority it gathers before reflecting on the two sets of voices from which I found myself wanting to hear more as I finished.

THE AUTHORITIES IN QUAKER HISTORY AND TESTIMONY

The first chapters emphasize the resources in Quaker history. With chapters on the work of George Fox (ch 1), John Woolman (ch 2 & 7), and Rufus Jones (ch 6), the book reviews key environmental ideas from some of the tradition's most authoritative witnesses. Other chapters find wisdom in less commonly-celebrated voices, identifying ecocentric ideals in early Quaker farmers (ch 3) and exploring the Quaker influence on the author and no-till gardening advocate Ruth Stout (ch 4).

Three themes introduced here are carried on throughout the rest of the book. First, Quakers have longstanding traditions of not only respecting and caring for the nonhuman world, but also learning from it and being shaped by encounters with ecosystems and nonhuman animals. Second, Quaker commitments to peace and simplicity are particularly relevant to our contemporary crises, in which the violent destruction of ecosystems and cultures is partly caused by overconsumption. Third, Quaker spirituality has much to teach those who want to convert themselves or others away from unsustainable consumptive practices.

The book also admirably explores the limitations of Quaker ideas and practices. In an excellent essay of constructive theology, Cherice Bock argues that while there is much to learn from inherited Quaker wisdom, early Quakers also often replicated "the more problematic aspects of the Enlightenment" and embraced a troubling dualism between the spiritual and the material.² Similarly, Douglas Burks's celebration of ecocentric ideas in some U.S. Quaker farmers notes that others were far more anthropocentric, understanding the land as primarily a source of profit rather than a partner.

I appreciate the balance of these perspectives, which insist that Quakers who care about the environment have much to learn from their traditions, but also that these ideas must also be analyzed in light of the problems we face today.

EXPERT AUTHORITIES

The middle section of the book brings many contemporary authorities into the conversation. Authors include experts on shamanism (ch 8), process philosophy (ch 9), creation spirituality (chs 10 & 11), natural history (ch 12), art (ch 13), ethics (ch 14), decolonization (ch 15), physics (ch 16) and food studies (ch 17). Two chapters offer explicitly constructive theological arguments about Quaker environmentalism, with attention to both Christ-centered Quakerism (ch 5) and more liberal strands (ch 6).

Another theme emerging here is the compatibility of Quakerism with science. Authors insist that Quakers have long appreciated, valued, and celebrated the study of the natural world, and that Quaker education inherently includes learning to think scientifically. For example, Donald Smith draws on his own expertise as a physicist to make a nuanced argument about nuclear power, but he admirably spends most of his chapter giving the reader the tools to make up their own mind.

Another crucial theme is the importance of non-Western perspectives to enhance the predominantly-Western Quaker tradition. In one of the most interesting chapters, Stanley Chagala Ngesa explores the intersection of his work in Quaker studies with the traditional teachings he inherits as a shaman of the Maragoli people in Kenya. He argues that Quakerism and Maragoli shamanism share a deep appreciation for the wisdom of ancestors and a pantheistic view that God is in all things. Sara Jolena Wolcott's chapter more critically asserts that climate change and other forms of environmental degradation are rooted in colonization, a history in which Quakers have participated in direct and indirect ways. She therefore argues that part of the work of creation care among Quakers should be "to grieve, to apologize, to unlearn, re-learn, and build stronger relationships with others impacted by these histories."³

AUTHORITY IN ACTION

The final chapters of the book offer stories and insights from activists, including Quaker Earthcare Witness (Ch 18), the Earth Quaker Action Team (Ch 19), the Quaker Institute for the Future (Ch 20), the Quakers of Aotearoa New Zealand (Ch 21), the Friends World Committee for Consultation (Ch 22), a student activist at Wilmington

College (Ch 23), and the Friends Committee on National Legislation (Ch 24). The book also contains 10 appendices, most of which are statements from these groups or from yearly meetings on relevant issues.

In these chapters we see a distinctively Quaker synthesis of mystical and activist spirituality. Naturally, different authors emphasize different strands: the General Secretary for Quaker Earthcare Witness focuses on spiritual change, arguing that that “without a profound transformation in heart and consciousness, in our fundamental relationships with the rest of creation, there is little chance... of averting a major collapse of the systems that support all life on earth.”⁴ In the next chapter, a member of the Earth Quaker Action Team emphasizes direct action far more strongly, recounting the organization’s strategies to put “direct pressure on decision makers who have sided with the dirty fossil fuel past, failed to embrace a renewable energy future, and are willing to overlook the immense life-threatening impacts disproportionately laid upon poor and marginalized communities.”⁵ Later chapters consider more personal changes, campus reforms, and international organizing.

Again, the great strength here is the diversity of perspectives that are allowed to coexist, and the reader is invited to imagine conversations between these activists about their common goals and their distinct priorities.

MORE VOICES, MORE QUESTIONS

My main response to *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability* is deep appreciation for all that it does. Of course, no one text can do everything, and part of an honest appreciation should involve continuing some of the conversations that begin as one reads. I do that here by asking about two sources of authority that are not as present as they might have been.

1. *Economists*

One reason I began this review with Steve Mnuchin’s dismissal of Greta Thunberg is that, as I read, I found myself thinking about economics a great deal. Most authors in the book seem to assume that mainstream economics is deeply problematic and needs to be resisted. Robert Howell’s chapter, “Ethics, Economics, and Science,” spells this out in the most detail, arguing that the “mainstream neoclassical economic system” in industrial societies is based on a flawed ethical

theory, ignores its own limitations, and depends upon “incoherent” financial and monetary policies. Instead, he calls for a more ecological economics that focuses on sustainability and natural limits rather than growth and profit.⁶

I share Howell’s concern that mainstream economics makes troubling assumptions, and that capitalism as currently practiced encourages ever-increasing rates of consumption while reducing governmental capacities to regulate or limit environmental damage. Still, I would be very interested to read how Quakers within mainstream economics might respond to these critiques. Are there voices within or sympathetic to the Quaker tradition that would defend the dominant expression of economic science? Is there anything to learn from mainstream economic systems and those who believe in them? If so, how can we have productive conversations across our differences? If not, how can we convince people to disinvest from capitalism as it is currently practiced? More discussion with economists—and with their critics—will be essential to answer these questions.

2. *The More-Than-Human World*

From a very different direction, I would also like to learn more about how Quaker discussions of sustainability can better incorporate the perspectives of the more-than-human world. A common theme in this book is a call to expand from the Quaker maxim that there is “that of God in every one” to an even more inclusive “that of God in every thing” or “that of God in all creation.” As Laurel Kearns puts it, “the theological affirmation of the divine presence in others, which has always formed the basis of Quaker ethical practice, can also serve as a foundation for a Quaker ecological ethic when we expand the circle of others.”⁷ A number of authors make the case that this is a faithful reading of the Quaker tradition. For example, Jon Kershner powerfully summarizes John Woolman’s view, “right here (wherever that may be) is a holy place because God already fills every landscape.”⁸ This is an exciting theological assertion, and deserves extensive discussion among Quaker thinkers and activists.

That conversation will need to consider: what is required in order to listen to the voice of God in other creatures? Quakers who believe that there is a divine spark in every human being have developed habits of listening in meetings, in conversations, and in activism. Quaker advocacy organizations devote substantial energy and resources to empowering marginalized peoples across the world to speak for themselves, to claim their agency. What would it look like to do the

same for non-human creatures, for landscapes, for ecosystems, for the atmosphere? Can we listen well enough to nonhuman creatures to understand how they express God's presence? Can we discern a collective will in a complex and diverse ecosystem? Can we attend to the voices of the more-than-human world in a way that does not distract from the very real needs of our marginalized human neighbors?

I don't have answers to these questions, and I don't know that anyone else working in ecological ethics and theology yet does, either.⁹ But if we believe that God is present in all of creation, we need to get better at listening to, learning from, and deferring to the non-human creation. Quakers will have distinctive and vital insights to contribute to that work, and I look forward to learning about them.

AUTHORING THE FUTURE

Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability offers a wealth of resources to engage the questions I've asked, and many others. The work of figuring out how human beings can thrive alongside the rest of God's creation is enormous, and this book demonstrates that there is room within it for activists and scholars and historical figure and many others. I am inspired by the editors and authors here, and I hope that many people read and think with this book.

The world is groaning in travail, and too many of us are unresponsive, consumed by pettiness, violence, and dishonesty. The core assertion of this book is that, in the face of this travail, we all have much to learn from Quaker history, Quaker testimonies, and Quaker activism. This is a sign of hope, suggesting that healing and new creation are possible if enough of us learn critically from the best of Quakerism by honoring the past, questioning our present realities, and committing ourselves to build a positive future for the whole creation. May we learn from these authors, and may we get to work.

ENDNOTES

1. Cristina Cabrera, "Mnuchin Attacks Greta Thunberg, Says She Needs to Study Economics." *Talking Points Memo*, 1/23/2020. (<https://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/mnuchin-attacks-greta-thunberg-says-she-needs-to-study-economics>).
2. Cherice Bock, "Quakers & Creation Care: Potentials and Pitfalls for an Ecotheology of Friends" in *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*. Edited by Cherice Bock and Stephen Potthoff. Longmeadow, PA: Friends Association for Higher Education, 2019, p 76.
3. Sara Jolena Wolcott, "Seeking Truth in History and Pedagogy: ReMembering and Decolonizing are Crucial for Sustainability," in *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, p 273. It would be interesting to see this call for decolonization brought into dialogue with other theological

thinkers who are doing this work outside of Quakerism, such as George Zachariah (*Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics From the Grassroots*. London: Equinox, 2011) and Melanie Harris (*Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017).

4. Shelley Tanenbaum, "Earthcare as a Quaker Value" in *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, p 321.
5. Walter Hjelt Sullivan, "Earth Quaker Action Team: Reclaiming the Lamb's War for Justice and Sustainability in the Twenty-First Century," in *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, p 336.
6. Robert Howell, "How are we to Live? A Quaker Approach to Environmental Ethics and Economics," in *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, pp 243-5, 247-8. A classic text at the intersection of theology and ecological economics is Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr. *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
7. Laurel Kearns, "Quaker Ecological Foundations and the Universe Story," in *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, p 179.
8. Jon Kershner, "Woolman and Wilderness: A Quaker Sacramental Ecology" in *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, p 131.
9. There is excellent work on the subject that has developed in important directions. See, for example, Trevor Bechtel, ed. *Encountering Earth: Thinking Theologically With a More-Than-Human World*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).