

2022

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Nim Njuguna

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Recommended Citation

Njuguna, Nim (2022) "Quaker Youth Ministry and Theopraxis in a Multicultural Context," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 135 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol135/iss1/5>

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QUAKER YOUTH MINISTRY AND THEOPRAXIS IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

NIM NJUGUNA

“Theology is exciting. It is about God’s word, God’s world and God’s people. It is vitally important for the church to nurture young Christians into thinking, speaking and writing about God and the world, and it is even more important that the Church listen to their voices. Theology Slam encourages us to do just that: listen to God, listen to the world, and listen to the voices emerging within the Church, so we can join into God’s work in the world today.”

—Archbishop Justin Welby – Archbishop of Canterbury ¹

As Quakers, we believe there is that of God in everyone and thinking theologically is an essential and inclusive activity of faith seeking understanding. We embrace the mystery that is God who transcends our comprehension and yet within whom we essentially exist. We believe we are summoned by the quickened Spirit through our testimonies to work for a more just, peaceful and sustainable world.

I am a Quaker. I am part of a worldwide Quaker community, and I inhabit that knowledge daily. It helps me live the way I want to. The knowledge and reality of that community membership informs my life and gives me the strength I need to live faithfully, to speak truth to power, to witness in the world.²

Theology is exciting if it allows itself to be open to dialogue unbound from preconceived notions of what theology is because of what it has always been. Theology is envisaged here as a reflective way of seeking to think consistently and faithfully about God’s activity in contemporary society. Theology is not to be confused with faith, but it is reflection on the product of that faith evidenced in God’s activity in people’s lives. It involves looking at both the world in which we find ourselves and the theology from which we seek guidance. This kind of theology reaches beyond the usual classical traditional settled boundaries; the majority of Quakers have always tried to adapt traditional approaches to contemporary needs, hence the affirmation of continuing revelation.

Otherwise, theology becomes no more than an exercise in dissecting past doctrinal statements in abstract fashion without actively engaging with the human dimension of people lives, their moral choices and the hope and comfort they impact the world with. A living theology is a divine presence unfolding and spreading wide from below rather than an incursion from above. It is a theology that goes beyond current circumstances of lived experience to exploring the big picture of God's activity in the world transforming lives continually and not just a onetime experience.

THE THEOLOGIA PROJECT

In 2015, George Fox University began an Initiative to deepen the level of theological knowledge based on Quaker values among young people in ways beyond standard youth groups.

They held weeklong camps with a small group of 25 high school students engaged in theology in classrooms, but primarily through experiential learning. My article is based on my reflections after reading and listening to the presentations of the third and final year of the initiative.

Unlike other youth ministry summer camps I've been a part of leading, we intentionally did not need to fill every minute with activities and programmed elements. Every moment in Theologia—from meals to walks in between gatherings to van rides—was filled with an expectancy that God may speak and move.³

What I found so encouraging in reading reports from the Theologia group, was a seeming hunger from both the Theologians and professors for the opportunity to connect theology and lived reality by not domesticating God into a fashioned shape but tracing His presence in daily life.

These members of Theologia were intent on embracing change and contemporary experimental forms of expressing and practicing their faith, drawing from scripture, tradition and seen through personal and communal experience.

The theological culture that informed their practice is derived from orthopraxis rather than on fixed orthodoxy supposedly derived from an original pristine Christianity. To know God is to feel His

presence with us now. Orthopraxis approaches inform our lived theology and draws special attention to the aesthetic of life embedded in our imagination, emotion, feelings and heart.

This approach of Theopraxis enhances practice informed by theory through personal reflection via contextualisation in actual situations. Being highly relational, they immersed themselves in knowing through doing by experiential hands on experience.

When teaching on Shalom and poverty, we took Theologians to a community centre near Oregon's capital building to meet a community leader and area pastor. The pastor shared how they facilitate community gathering space and transitional housing opportunities for members of the city who are experiencing homelessness.⁴

This affectionate spirituality allowed them to rejoice with those who rejoice and also weep with those distressed. When we enter the world of the 'other' with the giving of ourselves, our feelings are involved.

Orthopraxis emphasises correct practice and is affirming of Quakers' belief in ongoing revelation that comes from the Inner Light. The Theologians kept reflecting on whether they were living up to the core Quaker beliefs of bringing the good to the world. Right belief and right behaviour must go hand in hand; however, Theologians were encouraged to trust and value their experience as authentic if coming from the Inner Light.

Theopraxis is God's purposeful activity and involves a two-dimensional interaction between human and divine in which the Holy Spirit is the catalyst. This interaction occurs in both personal and communal contexts and does not recognise the split between the sacred and the secular. Theologia group members gave themselves over to the spirit of the dance by embracing orthopraxy and pocketing their logic.

This intergenerational group offered their personal theology at the 'set apart sacred time' which created a dynamic culture of mutual engagement on an equal basis. They had to de-role from their normal roles of learner tutor without denying individual responsibility for group learning. They were all acknowledged as sophisticated at thinking theologically about their everyday issues in relation to God. They bonded well by sharing in formal and informal settings, which provided physical and psychological safety, allowed them to begin to

analyse problems and, through theological reflection, seek to integrate their theology with real human situations.

After conversations on aspects of the theme, Theologians gather in groups of four with their college aged facilitator to debrief their time and converse on personal points of tension, education, and application.⁵

The result of these on-going reflections was a sort of transformation in their being in thinking, perception and doing. A healthy mutual understanding was possible through a fundamental and ongoing commitment to self-awareness through their commitment to open discussions and dialogue. Theology then becomes the art of perpetual conversation that is freed from echoing familiar phrases by disciplined reflection in its current social implications.

We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.⁶

Their deep theological engagements delivered new challenges, outcomes and insights beyond that which each brought to the encounter. By allowing authentic bonding dialogue to happen they were exposed to the truism, we learn best in community because we learn from one another; a dual understanding of oneself and mutual understanding

American writer, futurist and business man Alvin Toffler once remarked, 'The illiterates of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.'⁷

This sort of participatory pedagogy, an active participatory and collaborative approach to creating new awareness, knowledge and insight through reflective, exploratory new encounters enhanced their sense of self. From this vantage point, they engaged openly with questions of what it means for theology to be lived as Theopraxis and how this theology can be brought to life in harmony with God's purpose in which we discover His truth.

THEOLOGY IS CULTURALLY CONDITIONED

"We are seekers, but we are also the holders of a precious heritage of discoveries. We, like every generation, must find the Light and Life again for ourselves. Only what we have valued

and truly made our own, not by assertion but by lives of faithful commitment, can we hand on to the future. Even then we must humbly acknowledge that our vision of truth will again and again be amended.”⁸

All theology is culturally conditioned and inherently contextual as it is shaped by the social and dominant group’s interests and a sense of priorities. The Theologians seemed to acknowledge that Christianity as default is gone, at least in the Western World. They were now intent on engaging and changing the world not by conforming to it, but by finding ways of being contemporary and relevant. They were learning how to sidestep the futility of trying to graft old theological concepts, with conservative sensibilities, to an age of globalisation.

Our professors each take a day of the institute to guide our Theologians in the particular aspects of the theme. For Shalom we included: A. teaching, conversation and experience of shalom and poverty; B. racial reconciliation and creation.⁹

As Quakers, we truly believe that there is that of God in everyone and in practice this would translate as living to the best in ourselves and being respectful to ‘that of God’ in others. Starting from this position of mutual respect, we are able to engage in frank discussions on diverse and complex issues informed by our Quaker theology which, at its best, is an ongoing living conversation. We need to explore and come to terms with the environments that we have lived in our whole lives and notice what influences we have been subjected to.

Theology needs to be contextualised taking into account the Word, tradition, culture and social change in an increasingly multi-ethnic and urban society. Our world view and interpretations of theology change over time and sometimes we have to confirm or modify some of our cherished beliefs. There are elements of this context that challenge the orthodox conception of God’s order and design as traditionally understood. There are also rich elements of celebration as they transform our understanding concerning God’s relationship to the diverse world. Every culture and tradition benefits from the insights that other cultures bring.

Despite our declarations of good intent on social justice and our genuine heartfelt commitment motivated by our Quaker values, inequality and marginalisation persist even among us. The journey towards genuine diversity and inclusion can only be effective if we challenge the systemic marginalisation created to perpetuate privilege

which justify, consciously or unconsciously, the marginalisation of minority people. We have to intentionally cultivate integrity and be brave in confronting injustice at every level and especially in eliminating ethnocentrism which ascribes positive aspects to one's own culture and negative to others. Our Quaker values are a unifying force.

Quakers' theology and spirituality is rooted in a personal experience of the Inner Light or Light Within that potentially provides illumination for helping us to transcend the limitations inherited from our indigenous cultures. However, if the Society of Friends is thin in critical reflection on diversity and inclusion in our Meetings, Institutions and society, our Spirit led action and activism will miss the purpose and meaning of constructive social provocation which leads to true reconciliation.

I believe a good starting point for engaging with multicultural reality is to ask ourselves, 'what kind of theologians do we hope our students will grow up to be?' and 'How do we teach them how to break down cultural barriers in order to engage the "other" without destroying their identity or culture?' Being aware that we all hold some strong learned cultural stereotypes that we believe to be unquestionably true will make it possible to begin to engage in authentic dialogue. Cultivating humility, compassion and trust will help us acknowledge the boundaries between us and face the inescapable degrees of cultural bias as ultimately social constructs.

These young Theologians are not a homogeneous group and issues of class, race, gender, disability, sexuality, etc., form the basis of their lived experience. Each person's theological interpretation and their spirituality is evoked from their day to day experience of their faith through their individual encounter with the world. The theology that will speak 'to their condition' needs to refine itself to be able to express itself with an authentic voice regarding lived realities of contemporary fractured postmodern society.

The group seems to have created a dynamic culture of mutual engagement on an equal basis by de-rolling their assigned roles without denying individual responsibility for group learning. I was left with a feeling of a group of committed Theologians engaged in dialogues, questions in a mutually enriching place where theopraxis reflection is characterised by their focus on life experiences rather than purely on doctrine. This is a good grounding for Theologians to grow and to articulate their theological understanding and beliefs. Theology then becomes the art of perpetual conversation that is freed from echoing

familiar phrases. To distil their experience as usable learning, the theologians were constantly engaged in action/reflection paradigm.

After conversations on aspects of the theme, Theologians gather in groups of four with their college aged facilitator to debrief their time and converse on personal points of tension, education, and application.¹⁰

The millennial generation find themselves in a world radically different from that in which their parents grew up. An authentic encounter for meaningful dialogue accepts being present to who they are and to what they are seeking. Trying to engage them from a position of an inherited theological party line is to muddy the waters with particularity and contradictory worldviews. Therefore, engaging this particular group of young theologians is less about developing new theological techniques or trying to remould old ones, rather, it is about cultivating new attitudes with an open heart that honestly attempts to seek answers to their question like, ‘how does all this stuff fit in the world I find myself in?’

For Christ and culture, exploration of music, film, and social media.... people in a circle around a campfire, laughing and dancing with profound and beautiful freedom Perhaps one of the more profound spiritual experiences at Theologia of Christ in everyone was not in a formal setting or with individual insights, but beyond mere words in the form of dance. ... We did not need to explain or expound upon these words—they were enough to simply speak them aloud and allow their truth to resonate in our midst. I would say it’s appropriate to call the experience a sacred moment, one where listening to each person’s individual reflection was revelatory and transformational for all.¹¹

Here, various activities were utilised to structure dialogue that moves beyond pseudo sense of community by encouraging a healthy celebration and sense of community that could replicated by theological institutions and beyond. It’s as if the celebrants were saying, ‘your story of God is not given to you to keep, it is given to you to share in whatever way because it contains insights that also contribute to my story.’

This calls to mind William Wade’s reflection:

I have never been to heaven, so I cannot tell you what kind of music is sung in God’s royal village. But know this, God has no personal favourite songs. He hears all that we sing in whatever

language. It is sufficient for us to compose hymns of praise to him with our own music and in our own language for him to understand.¹²

This theologically fluid manner of engagement afforded good grounding for these young theologians to grow, articulate their theological understanding and beliefs, grapple with intellectual issues while focusing on character building. This will enable them to be both engaged in social justice and discernment in their prophetic role. I was left with a feeling of hope that these young theologians engaged in constant dialogue in mutually enriching symbiotic encounters are taking small steps that inspire and are life affirming transformations.

The postmodern mind-set has created a desire in the younger generation to experience things first-hand rather than simply be told what to believe and how to live. It is not enough for them to believe God exists, to learn about God, or to hear about other people's encounters with God. They want to experience the presence of God and know God on a personal level.¹³

I will give the last word to one of the tutors involved in this project who speaks beyond the project.

I will conclude with this: as a youth and young adults pastor for over a decade and having led and participated in dozens of summer camps, Theologia remains one of the most Christocentric and affecting youth ministry initiatives I have personally experienced. The expectancy that God can and would speak to and through everyone involved, and not just the adults on stage, is a significant value I hope is adopted and practiced by more youth workers and local churches. What can we, as Theologians of religion, learn about God from the young people in our midst?¹⁴

ENDNOTES

1. The final of Theology Slam 2020 — a competition to find engaging young voices who think theologically about the contemporary world.
2. Ben Pink Dandelion, *Celebrating the Quaker Way* (2010)
3. Quaker Youth Ministry and Theopraxis in a Multicultural Context Final Report. Hereafter called "The Report."
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

6. Richard Rohr (2011). *"Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life"*, p.201
7. Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970), pg. 141
8. *Quaker Faith and Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting 1994*
9. "The Report."
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. William Wadé Harris, Liberian missionary to Côte d'Ivoire, 1914 (cited in James Kraybill. *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*).
13. Abram Bergen, "Youth Encountering God." *Direction Journal*, 31 (1), 18-25. Spring 2002: pp. 18-25.
14. "The Report."