

2022

Review of Quakers and Mysticism: Comparative and Syncretic Approaches to Spirituality, Edited by John R. Kershner (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019)

Stuart Masters

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Masters, Stuart (2022) "Review of Quakers and Mysticism: Comparative and Syncretic Approaches to Spirituality, Edited by John R. Kershner (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019)," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 136, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol136/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

REVIEW OF *QUAKERS AND
MYSTICISM: COMPARATIVE AND
SYNCRETIC APPROACHES TO
SPIRITUALITY*, EDITED BY JON R.
KERSHNER (BASINGSTOKE: PALGRAVE
MACMILLAN, 2019)

STUART MASTERS

Despite the considerable diversity of belief and practice within global Quakerism, one characteristic that links all these diverse expressions is an emphasis on the experience of a direct inward relationship with God in spirit, albeit interpreted in very different ways. Such an experiential focus on divine intimacy inevitably raises a question about the relationship between Quaker spirituality and mysticism. This has been a controversial issue, in part because, in his influential work undertaken during the early twentieth century, Rufus Jones defined Quaker mysticism in a way that characterized both the Quietist and Evangelical forms of Quakerism as unfortunate deviations from what he understood to be the true Quaker way, rooted in the vision of the earliest Friends. In this rich, wide-ranging, and enlightening collection, ably introduced and edited by Jon R. Kershner, the mystical dimension of Quakerism is given sustained attention. By identifying the mystical influences on the faith and practice of Friends across time, and exploring specific examples of Quaker mystics within their context and in comparative terms, the scholarship in this important volume seeks to challenge, build upon, and modify Jones' definition of Quaker mysticism. The collection is aimed primarily at a scholarly audience. However, because of the accessible style adopted by the contributors, the volume will also appeal to those with a more general interest in mysticism and Quakerism. The book is affordable in its paperback version, and should find a place within the libraries of Friends' meeting houses and churches. Each chapter includes detailed and

informative end notes, accompanied by an extensive book list, and the index is concise but fit for purpose. Kershner's introduction, and the concluding chapter written by Thomas Cattoi, helpfully set the scene for what is to follow, point to the significance of the material covered, and begin to hint at possible themes for further research.

In the first chapter, Michael Birkel and Marie Vandenberg consider the mystical legacy of George Fox and, in particular, his vision of worship as a form of communal mysticism, in which Christ is present in the midst of his people (23–42). For Fox, Christ could only be known inwardly, not via external physical forms. Like other early Friends, he drew on the sensual imagery of the Song of Songs, and the bridegroom-bride metaphor from the Book of Revelation, to describe this experience of divine intimacy. The mysticism inherent within Quaker worship has been neglected within wider scholarship, and Quakers have sometimes assumed that it is a denominational peculiarity. However, given that both the Catholic Mass and the Orthodox Divine Liturgy involve a strong sense of corporate mysticism, it might be argued that Quaker worship represents more a departure from the general orientation of the Protestant tradition, than a practice that is entirely unique within Christianity.

Early Friends downplayed the validity of knowledge received from human sources, giving priority instead to the direct experience of divine revelation. Hence, the relationship between distinctive aspects of Quaker spirituality, and the wider religious context within which they developed, is an important scholarly concern. Three chapters in this volume pay attention to particular mystical influences on early Quakerism. Carole Dale Spencer highlights similarities between the spiritual vision of James Nayler and that of the Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme, particularly in relation to Boehme's book *The Way to Christ* (43–61). Spencer accepts that her hypothesis is somewhat speculative, but the apparent synergies do raise interesting questions about the mystical and spiritualist religious milieu, in which Nayler's theology was formed, and the extent to which specific influences can be substantiated. In his second offering, Michael Birkel describes how George Keith and

Robert Barclay employed insights drawn from the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, for the purpose of Quaker apologetics (85–99). Birkel suggests that Kabbalah offered them imagery and language that was useful in defending the Quaker doctrine of the universal Light of Christ. In view of the strongly sectarian nature of the Quaker movement in the seventeenth century, it is intriguing to observe how Keith and Barclay were willing to use esoteric sources in order to assert the orthodoxy of Quaker theology. As Birkel observes, this suggests that early Quakers may have inhabited a much broader spiritual and theological world than has often been assumed. Christy Randazzo and David Russell develop this theme further, in a fascinating chapter that looks at how Keith and Barclay used the writings of Islamic mystic and polymath, Ibn Tufayl, to defend the Quaker belief in the possibility of unmediated experiential knowledge of God (161–180). They note that, in Tufayl’s mysticism, there appears to be no conflict between inward spiritual experience and an active outward life. In view of this, they suggest that an engagement with the writings of Tufayl may help modify received assumptions about the differences between the faith and practice of first-generation Friends, and that of later quietists.

Three chapters give attention to individual Quakers whose mysticism seems to have prompted a concern for revival and renewal. In each case, their inward spiritual lives counteracted to some degree the influence of the dominant religious culture in which they were situated. Michele Lise Tartar offers a valuable profile of the eighteenth-century New England Quaker, Elizabeth Ashbridge, who is remembered primarily for her published spiritual autobiography (101–119). Tartar describes how her inward experiences led Ashbridge to a desire to reclaim the spiritual vibrancy of early Friends in the context of eighteenth-century Quietism. This was revealed in a powerfully embodied spirituality, unusual among Quakers at the time, suggesting an affinity with the more charismatic and prophetic expressions of the first generation. The writings of Elizabeth Ashbridge may well have influenced the spiritual vision of another eighteenth-century American Quaker, John Woolman, who is the subject of Jon Kershner’s other contribution

to this volume (121–140). He describes how Woolman’s spiritual practice and experience freed him, to some degree, from the limitations associated with the dominant Quaker culture that surrounded him. He came to realize that his inward spiritual experiences inevitably made ethical demands on him in the outward world. All humans have been given a capacity for communion with God, who offers guidance that we can hear if we pay attention, and obey if we are faithful. Although God is unchanging, human life is not, and so divine guidance has to be carefully discerned. It is always context-specific. Woolman’s vision was strongly Christ-centred, and he understood that his inward life and his outward witness in the world should constitute a real participation in Christ’s redemptive work. This Christological focus leads Kershner to explore the links between Woolman’s spiritual discipline and the practice of the *Imitation of Christ*, as it was outlined by Thomas à Kempis in his popular devotional book of the same name. Carole Dale Spencer’s second chapter within this collection takes us out of the so-called quietist period of Quakerism and into the transatlantic evangelical culture of the nineteenth century. She offers a vivid portrait of Hannah Whitall Smith, whose inner life, like that of Ashbridge and Woolman, seems to have yielded spiritual insights which transcended some of the limitations of her religious context (141–159). Whitall Smith’s journey resembled the stages of growth towards union with God described in the classics of Western mysticism. She lived her life within the competing influences of Quaker Quietism and Evangelical Holiness revivalism. Ironically, despite the fact that holiness constituted an essential aspect of early Quaker experience, it was the influence of Wesleyan Methodism that drew her attention to this aspect of her heritage. Whitall Smith’s understanding of holiness as essentially a participation in the way of Christ inwardly and outwardly parallels Woolman’s Christological emphasis. This Christ-centred mysticism led her to affirm universal salvation, a position which was deeply controversial within the Evangelical Protestant culture of her time.

A final set of four chapters explore specific examples of Quaker mysticism operating contextually, in which the Quaker tradition

engages creatively with the surrounding culture, and contributes to the development of existing social trajectories. Stephanie Midori Komashin adopts a comparative approach, tracing how the economic and ecological views of Gerrard Winstanley in seventeenth-century England, and Nitobe Inazō in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan, made the Quaker community a natural home for these men, in two quite different times and places (63–83). In both cases, the essential connection between the inward life, and an outward witness to justice within Quaker spirituality, was significant. Stephen Angell explores the life of influential African-American Baptist minister, Howard Thurman, whose mystical orientation led him in the direction of religious pluralism, a process that seems to have been supported by his links with Rufus Jones and the Liberal Quaker community (181–199). Like Jones, Thurman was attracted to mysticism because of its universalist potential. He worked hard to nurture communities and practices that enabled people to transcend outward divisions based on creed, race and culture, and move towards the unity of a universal faith. In Thurman, we see an example of a mystic whose inward life prompted not only a commitment to social justice, but also a willingness to experiment within an increasingly multi-racial and multi-faith society. During his time as pastor of the pluralist Fellowship Church, the community displayed a significant Buddhist emphasis.

The apparent appeal of Buddhism to many Liberal Quakers is addressed in a chapter written by Sallie B. King (221–239). She notes that, since the Liberal form of Quakerism tends to attract those who have rejected mainstream Christianity, Buddhism can offer contemplative practices and an ethical worldview that is not dependent either on Christian doctrine or traditional theism. King notes parallels between Christian mysticism and Buddhist thought and practice that make this possible: Buddhist meditation mirrors Christian contemplative prayer, the Buddhist emphasis on transcending the ego echoes the importance of yieldedness in Christian mysticism, and the Buddhist path from ignorance to enlightenment is analogous to the Christian journey from sin to salvation. Within a Liberal Quaker context, this seems to enable

people to remain open to a transcendent reality not dependent on a conception of God.

Finally, Esther Mombo offers a compelling account of the singing mysticism of the Kenyan Quaker, Gideon Mweresa (201–219). She explains how the song-writing and singing of Gideon functioned as an important vehicle for the indigenization and inculturation of Evangelical Quakerism in Kenya. His ministry helped overcome the negative attitudes of American missionaries towards Luyia culture and contributed to the development of a distinctively African expression of the Quaker way. Gideon's singing and song-writing were spiritual gifts that he used faithfully, as ministry, to communicate God's message in his time and place. In this way, his life seems to have encompassed the mystical, charismatic, and prophetic characteristics visible in early Quakerism, albeit revealed within a very different cultural context.

The scholarship contained within this much-needed collection suggests that the potential conflict between inner and outer mysticism, highlighted by Rufus Jones, has rarely, if ever, dominated Quaker practice, either in the divergent expressions of the tradition across history, or within different cultural contexts. Each of the case studies shows that Jones was clearly right to emphasise the essential link within Quaker spirituality between an experience of inward divine intimacy and a commitment to outward embodied witness in the world. However, it seems that Jones underestimated the influence of Reformed theology on the development of the early Quaker movement, and over-emphasised the extent of withdrawal from the world in the Quietist period. Thomas Cattoi helpfully reminds us that, as the Reformation seemed to widen the gulf between God and humanity, the faith and practice of Friends represented one specific attempt to close this gap within a Reformed context. Therefore, an engagement with the complex mix of characteristics visible in the earliest Quaker movement may present fruitful opportunities for further research. For example, how has mysticism interacted with the apocalyptic, charismatic, prophetic, and holiness features of Quakerism over time, and within different contexts? How do the mystical dimensions of Quakerism relate to other expressions of

mysticism within Christianity, and within other faith traditions? Does the essential link within Quaker spirituality between inward experience and outward transformation connect with the more mystical forms of liberation theology? The fact that this book provides insightful answers to a number of important questions while, at the same time, opening up a wide range of potential new lines of enquiry, demonstrates its vital contribution to research in the areas of mysticism and Quakerism. This makes it a most welcome gift to both the scholarly community and the Quaker world.