

2023

Review of Michael Birkil, *Quakers Reading Mystics* (Brill, 2018)

Mark Bredin

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



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

Recommended Citation

Bredin, Mark (2023) "Review of Michael Birkil, *Quakers Reading Mystics* (Brill, 2018)," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 137, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol137/iss1/8>

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 MICHAEL BIRKEL,
QUAKERS READING MYSTICS
(BRILL, 2018)

MARK BREDIN

Birkel's book, at one level, is a searching historical enquiry establishing the possible direct influence of John Cassian on Robert Barclay, Jeanne Guyon on Sarah Lynes Grubb, Johannes Tauler on Caroline Stephen, Jacob Boehme on Rufus Jones, and Buddhist mysticism on Teresina Rowell Havens. He emphasizes his study to be "strongly shaped by...the principles of historical study" (8). His conclusion is, indeed, rooted in the language of historical probabilities, such as "based on incontestably solid ground" (100) or "are more tentative" (100).

At another level, Birkel's work is more concerned with "imaginative" exploration of the interplay of ideas between author pairs without a literal or direct chain of influence. Unfortunately, Birkel is not always consistently clear about this when engaging with the authors. On the whole, Birkel appears *more* interested in the verbal similarities and echoes of ideas he sees between the paired scholars, independently of direct influences. He is primarily concerned to ask how they might have interacted *had* they known each other. In short, it seemed that direct influence was way down the list of things he was looking for.

The reader who labours conscientiously with this accessible book will gain a better understanding of the Quakers of whom Birkel writes. In addition, they will be rewarded with an appreciation of the non-Quakers within their historical, cultural and linguistic contexts. Without doubt this comparative study sensitizes readers to the mystic vernacular conveying truth that the human is hard-wired to the Transcendent.

However, Birkel's finding of close parallels in most chapters seem extravagant and uncritical, when used as historical evidence of direct literary dependency of Quaker on non-Quaker. It

seems unnecessary and highly speculative, and distracts from the strengths of this book. Is it not the case that we can see what we want if we look hard enough? This is particularly the case with mysticism, with its use of symbol, allegory, and metaphor, to convey truth regarding the mystic author's experience of unity with God. They evoke different meanings to the reader according to their experiences of unity with God. Birkel anticipates this when he writes: "For some readers, the similarities that are found between these paired thinkers may point toward an even deeper, more implicit development of spiritual insight, irrespective of the level of external evidence of influence" (8). I welcome this sentence in his section on methodology. I was indeed pointed towards further spiritual insights.

It would be helpful for the criteria for identifying parallels, when being used for historical reconstruction, be delineated and defended more thoroughly. If not, scholarship's claim for historical dependency, where there is little basis, can be misleading to many who are not trained in historical criticism. It leads to sensationalist historical overconfidence as in the case of those who claim Jesus was well acquainted with Buddhism on the basis of similarities. Studying both together is nourishing and worthwhile, but claiming that Jesus directly drew upon the sayings of the Buddha is sensationalist, insignificant historically, and misleading, and risks leading to wild speculations being given historical substance.

In the case of Cassian's influence on Barclay, while it is "possible" that Barclay read Cassian as a student in Paris, because Cassian was on the reading list, this is not significant evidence. Karl Barth's twelve volumes of Dogmatics were on the reading list in my university, but I doubt many read them! In accepting Cassian's "direct influence" with negligible evidence, there is the risk of fuelling analysis of Barclay's teaching, for example, on prayer through Cassian's apophatic lens. This would lead to seeing things in Barclay that he may never had any inclination either towards or against. It may well be intellectually and actively imaginatively profitable to read Barclay in the light of Cassian, and in such a reading the reader becomes part of the intertextual

weaving together of ideas, but intertextual study is not historical study. Birkel strongly suggests that his “methodology” is “strongly shaped by...the principles of historical study” (8). I am not convinced.

Leading scholar of mysticism, Bernard McGinn, who Birkel quotes in his introduction (2), comments that the roots of mystics “was for the most part directly exegetical in character” (*The Foundation of Mysticism*) meaning biblical. Birkel does not pick up on this. Surely, therefore, it is more likely that the direct sources of influence on Quakers are Scriptural unless there is clear evidence to the contrary, i.e. in the case of Havens with Buddhism. Birkel in other works has helpfully suggested that we read the Scriptures by making friends with those who have gone before us. This invites us to read Scripture by making a friend of Cassian alongside Barclay as they lead us to new insights.

Birkel claims Barclay was directly influenced by Cassian’s understanding of the Bible as a mirror through which one sees one’s own story and inward life fulfilled. I doubt similar vocabulary is historically sufficient to claim Cassian was Barclay’s source. It is important to note that Cassian’s understanding of scripture was not unique to him but dominated Christendom until the arrival of higher criticism after the Reformation (see F.M. Young, *Brokenness and Blessing*). I think it more straightforward that Barclay’s apologetic on Scripture defended this earlier tradition, for which Cassian was a representative, against the new teaching emerging from the Reformation that Scripture was infallible, inerrant, literal and historically accurate. Also, Barclay would have in mind Papal teaching that Scripture is to be received only through the interpretation of Papal sanctioned scholars in Latin.

In the case of Grubb and Guyon, Birkel makes much of the similar language of submission, renunciation and resignation appearing in both (30). Grubb, comments Birkel, writes that the way to God is that “of passive submission to all His holy will...” (34). He emphasizes that their contemplative practice led both to live fearlessly, detached from what others thought of them (35).

Is it not more straight-forward to say that Grubb is influenced by the New Testament's teaching about doing God's will *contra mundum*, as indeed was Guyon? Further, as Birkel notes, there are clear divergences between the two.

Birkel observes that Caroline Stephen mentions Tauler in a very general way and demonstrates that at least one sermon by Tauler was accessible to Stephen. But Birkel acknowledges that there is much in the sermon that would not be to Stephen's tastes. The common contact points, I suggest, would be readily available from a whole host of earlier Quaker writers and the Bible itself.

In spite of my cautiousness of this book's claim to be based on historical principles, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I found the strongest aspect of it was its imaginative interplay between authors that points towards spiritual insights, irrespective of whether the Quaker thinker had read or not read the non-Quaker.

Birkel has implicitly reinforced to me how biblical themes emerge in Quaker writers. The one source of influence we can agree on as central to all is Scripture, especially when Scripture is seen as dealing with people's experience of God, as in the cases of the Quaker writers and the mystics. Perhaps even in the case of Havens it would be interesting to see the extent to which Buddhism has given fresh insights to Havens' reading of the Bible. Many Quakers and other Christians were greatly influenced by Gandhi who opened to them Jesus' teaching. This creates the basis for studying non-Quaker mystics not in terms of literal dependency, but as part of receivers in the intertextual process amplifying our own experiences.