

2022

Understanding the Holy Spirit as Ruah, God's Breath

Laurel D. Kearns

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



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

Recommended Citation

Kearns, Laurel D. (2022) "Understanding the Holy Spirit as Ruah, God's Breath," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 138, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol138/iss1/4>

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.

UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY SPIRIT AS *RUAH*, GOD'S BREATH

LAUREL D. KEARNS

As I begin this response, I want to quickly acknowledge that both Steve Angell and Grace Ji-Sun Kim have more expertise on the issue of pneumatology than I do, as I am primarily trained as a sociologist who focuses on religion and environmentalism. Their stimulating papers lured me to wade into more theological waters than I am used to, so in that spirit, I offer my thoughts on the topic, inspired by their work.

I found Steve Angell's article very informative in its tracing of the origins and understanding of the Quaker peace testimony. A history, albeit partial, of how the non-violence commitment grew, whether it was refusing to fight in the army, or to plunder ships, or to own slaves. Through many examples, he illuminates the working of the Holy Spirit among Friends. These individual discernments quickly grew into a collective understanding of the peace testimony, that we now consider central to Quakerism. Angell's article goes on to survey the many ways that the Quaker commitment to pursuing alternatives to violence has encouraged the important work of reconciliation, including the powerful witness of Quakers in African contexts such as Burundi. And I love the ending description of the Holy Spirit as "the active, loving, yeasty activity of God that makes us love and grow and heal and forgive one another"—a little bit of yeast goes a long way! But at the end, I realized that I had hoped that Steve Angell would talk about the Quaker understanding "that there is that of God in everyone" and the Inner Light in conversation with the understandings of the Holy Spirit that he presents. Although historically they were distinct understandings, have they become conflated in more contemporary understanding? Additionally, what might be distinctively Quaker that isn't captured by more common understandings of the term Holy Spirit, as the paper traces the role of the Holy Spirit in forming the peace testimony, and yet, throughout Quaker history, it seems that the understanding of that of God

in every person became central to articulating the peace testimony (and I acknowledge this is asking way too much of a limited article length).

Grace Ji-Sun Kim's paper focuses on the more traditional theological understandings of the Holy Spirit, adding in the very useful Korean conceptions of *han* to aid in our understanding of the enormous challenge of responding theologically to the ongoing destructive unfolding of climate change. These two papers led me to ponder this question: how might the Spirit be understood differently, if it is connected to the sense for Quakers that God is already there, the Light Within, that speaks if we will still ourselves enough to listen, or work to create the social conditions that allow people to see that of God in themselves and others, and therefore the value of each individual?¹ This contrasts with seeing the Holy Spirit as something that "falls upon" us, that comes *down* as the Spirit, an understanding often depicted as the Dove/Pigeon that Luke 3:22 describes as descending on Jesus at his baptism, an animal incarnation of God, as Swarthmore theologian Mark Wallace points out.² I encourage you to explore Wallace's vision of the Spirit in *When God was a Bird*.

What I have been naming is that Quakers have an immanent sense of God, a bodily sense of God, and that, as Kim notes in invoking Sallie McFague's notion of the world as God's body,³ is an important theological understanding in the face of climate change and the environmental degradation that her paper lays out. In teaching theology students, I have pondered how to make that understanding of the degradation of God's body more palpable, and I have taken my cue from those scholars who point out that reading Genesis 1:1 as "the Spirit of God hovered over the earth" perpetuates a problematic dualism of spirit as separate from materiality, as separate from body. The Hebrew term is רוּחַ/*ruah*, and when it was translated into Latin as Spiritus, that Greek dualism crept in. Biblical scholar Ted Hiebert, in "Air: The Most Sacred Thing," points out that in Hebrew, the same word *ruah*, is used for breath, air, atmosphere, wind, and spirit. Hiebert comments:

Air is not regarded as a material element of the natural world, which as a created substance, is empty of divinity. On the contrary, air as both atmospheric winds and breath is described in the Hebrew Scriptures as having a divine character. It originates from God, it is God's, it is a medium of the revelation of God, and it is an indication of God's presence. For the biblical theologian, *ruah* is sacred.⁴

Understanding *ruah* as God's breath and sacred presence rather than Spirit reduces the tendency toward a body/spirit separation, for breath by definition is not separate from body. Kim recognizes this, noting that, "One cannot limit the Spirit as Spirit is wind, breath, energy, and life-giving spirit. Spirit will be on and in all of creation and cannot be excluded from some and not from others." This, however, seems to contrast with what she states elsewhere: "it is really in the Holy Spirit as *person*, the person of God and as God's personal *presence* that the Spirit has an *empowering* presence." I think there is much to be gained by the understanding of *ruah* as breath, for it too is an empowering and personal presence. In Kim's discussion of the powerful Korean understanding of *han* as a concept of suffering in the Quaker Theological Discussion Group panel discussion, she mentions *hansoom*, collective breath, an intriguing concept. As the COVID epidemic has aptly demonstrated, air is a collective resource, communally shared, and bad air has far reaching communal implications of great suffering.

In focusing on God's breath as an entry into discussing climate change, I recommend the following: the work of Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Jewish Renewal Movement, who frequently invokes the understanding of *ruah* as breath, and reminds us that trees are our breathmates.⁵ The work of Catherine Keller, a leading process theologian, who, in her extended reflection on pneumatology and spirit in *Face of the Deep*, comments on the understanding of *ruah* as "the pneumatic oscillation—storm, wind, breath, spirit, who is not some thing sent from a God above, but who 'is' whatever is divine..."⁶ There are other theologians who also have worked to free the 'spirit' from immateriality—Sallie McFague, already mentioned, or Jay McDaniel,⁷ in his naming of God as

the breathing, the center, or Sharon Betcher in *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*.⁸ In their readings of the text, one comes to the Hebrew understanding that God's breath, and thus God, animates the whole world and every living thing—the two cannot be separated.

And it is that latter point that I want to push forward. In the biblical texts, the phrase the breath of life is what animates the earth creature—adam, made of *adamah*—and all creatures. Although it is found in many places, few notice it in the Noah account as descriptive of all the animals on the ark with whom the covenant is made (Genesis 9:12-13). It is more clear in Psalm 33:6 (“By the word of the Lord the skies were made, and by the breath of God's mouth all of their creatures”). These texts remind us that humans and animals are creatures (stemming from created) enlivened by God's sacred presence, and this recognition erases some of the great distance propounded by more anthropocentric theologies and biblical interpretation in Christianity. When *ruah* is translated as spirit, or even soul, and only when referring to humans, this close connectedness between all creatures is lost, so I am thankful to Kim for expanding pneumatology to include all creatures, all elements of creation. As Hiebert aptly phrases it: “all living beings share the same breath, and breathe the same air.”⁹

In *When God was a Bird*, Mark Wallace provocatively points out that if the “spirit” descended as a pigeon/dove, or hovered (fluttered) over the face of the deep, then might we reclaim the bird form of God as an invitation to reclaim a Christian form of animism, and to reject our cultivated colonial reactions to that term, reminding us that it again points us to an immanent understanding of God.¹⁰ This certainly would resonate with many whose ancestral traditions recognize the presence of the sacred in the creation, but whose colonial Christian heritage has dangerously banished all of that sense, for it is much easier to destroy nature if it has no sacredness to it. How might we act differently if, as John Wesley admonished, we saw that:

God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the face of every creature; that we should use and look

upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hallow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.¹¹

If we are to see the face of God in every creature, is this not the same as there is that of God in every creature? And if such is true, then a species going extinct, one haunting aspect of climate change that happens every day, is the diminishment of God.

Similarly, understanding theologically that air is God's breath establishes the community of creation in opposition to an anthropocentric focus on a vast human/animal divide often tied to interpretations of the *imago Dei*. Kim helps us to redirect that understanding of the *imago Dei* into an empowering image of God, drawing upon Sallie McFague's work. Understanding air as God's breath also brings plants and algae into the circle of relatedness. They are essential to the ongoing re-creation of air, of atmosphere, essential to the act of breathing—they breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen. Without them, we animals do not have the oxygen we need, so in our mutual plant-animal breathing, we engage in an interspecies ritual of communion. The living biotic community of earth exchanges God's breath, recreates God's breath.

So, what if we saw air pollution, and in particular, greenhouse gases as the defilement of God's breath, as destroying the life-giving nature of the breath of life so that climate change is the result of the defilement, the suppression, of God's presence. Thus, deforestation diminishes God's breath, just as species extinction diminishes the praise choir of creation, as the Psalms remind us.

This lines up with what I hear both of our speakers saying in their meditations on the Holy Spirit. I suggest that to move from spirit to air/breath aligns with the Quaker understanding of that of God in everyone, and there is that of God in everything. While Quakers often use the term the Light of God, this sense of

the breath of God, the *ruah* spirit within each reflects that same insight of animation, enlivening. For some Quakers, God's presence is not constricted to only those who believe a certain way, nor to humans only. And if one is to acknowledge the breath of God in everyone, then to take a life, to snuff out a person's breath akin to snuffing out the light of a candle, whether through acts of violence, such as police brutality and choking, or by genocide in Rwanda in the powerful story that Angell relates, or by contributing to the staggering millions of deaths related to air pollution and climate-related catastrophes, is indeed an egregious sin and wrong-doing.

Following Hiebert's lead, *ruah* is also translatable as the atmosphere, the context in which we live and breathe, the source of our being.¹² Thus, Angell points to how the Holy Spirit is at work in resolving violent and armed conflicts, changing the atmosphere and enabling others to see beyond their own narrow interests and group identities to begin to see the value of all humans no matter how they are culturally and socially "labeled." There are two deadly poisons in our atmosphere—that of greenhouse gasses, warming the world and lighting it on fire—in the wrong way, I might add, since many envision the Holy Spirit as a flame—and a growing love of violence and guns—even to the point of sacrilegious images depicting Jesus or the Bible with the American flag and an automatic rifle. Violence often accompanies the dehumanizing language that erases our shared humanity and the shared creatureliness of us all. In contrast, many understand the basic Quaker insight that if you do not see the humanity in the "other" illumined by the Light of God in each of us, then it is too easy to justify violence and the degrading treatment of others, based on sexuality, race/ethnicity, gendered or non-gendered identities, forms of embodiment, class, nation and political affiliation. And if you don't see that of God in the creation, as Kim reminds us, then an understanding of the Genesis 2:15 command, as she suggestively reinterprets it, "to guard and protect the creation" is easily skewed to seeing it as *dominion* over natural resources, a term that refers to its value for human use, a term that occasionally enters Kim's ponderings, but I believe best shooed away!

As you can see, both articles are far more rich than my reflections, but I wanted to ponder our Quaker understandings of that of God in light of the spirit as holy breath, and to wade into the theological territory that Angell and Kim explore in equipping us to respond more urgently, more spiritually, to the escalating violence and climate change that is already happening.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Quaker historians point out that this is an understanding that has evolved.
- 2 Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 27.
- 3 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).
- 4 Ted Hiebert, “Air: The Most Sacred Thing,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. by Norman Habel and Peter J. Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 11.
- 5 Arthur Waskow, “Prayer Service because the Earth Really Matters and We Hear the Trees Pray,” The Shalom Center, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://theshalomcenter.org/prayer-service-because-earth-really-matters>.
- 6 Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 234.
- 7 Jay McDaniel, *Living from the Center: Spirituality in the Age of Consumerism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 45.
- 8 Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
- 9 Hiebert, 13.
- 10 Wallace, 25.
- 11 John Wesley, *Sermon 23*, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, III” I.11
- 12 Hiebert, 11.