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Reviews of The Liturgies of Quakerism and Towards Tragedy/ReclaimingHope; First Review

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Pink Dandelion, whom I persist in calling “Ben,” has presented Friends with two challenging books extending and deepening his *Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1996). Their topics are so vital to American Friends that it is sad their strictly disciplined academic style and combined price tag of nearly $200 may keep them from wider use.

Towards Tragedy/Reclaiming Hope consists of six papers presented for a joint seminar at Woodbrooke in 2001, edited for fuller integration and supplemented with three tiny contemporary essays by the same authors, plus a summary of Sophocles’ Antigone. It also includes a Foreword by Richard K. Fenn of Princeton, whose work Ben cites in both books. The first main essay, by Richard E. Sturm of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, addresses “The Ancient Origin and Sense of Tragedy” and distinguishes between suffering, tragic events, and the impact of tragic drama. Tragedy can be defined as “heroic characters succumbing to a terrible disaster or misfortune that seems to have been inflicted on the protagonists partly . . . through their own activity [in which] morally admirable actions [create] a tragic error.” This can reveal *Tragedy as a Critique of Virtue* in drama or fiction. Sturm, however, looks more carefully into the earlier relation of tragic drama to community rituals. He analyzes the origins of tragedy from Thespian drama, studied by Gerald Else, and the influence of Gilbert Murray’s insight on stories as creations to undergird old existing rituals. Nietzsche’s analysis saw the psychological antitheses and balance of intellect and ecstasy of Apollo and Dionysius. For Sturm, the Christian Gospel is the proclamation of the Cross and Resurrection. He concludes that “Tragedy is an experience in the heart and mind . . . in which pity and fear are evoked from suffering, and a discovery of wisdom, truth or justice.” (p. 27) It arouses com-
passion, since “both tragedy and the gospel ultimately call for trust in providence, divine care for human suffering.”

Yet, except for a fitting reference to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sturm has little to say about the times that were the setting for the timeless tragedies. Sophocles played key political roles through Athens’ greatest glory and its disastrous campaign against Syracuse. His audiences would have to survive the tragic Peloponnesian War (at 90, Sophocles didn’t; Euripides and Plato did). Visiting my French cousin near Poitiers in 1952, I found that her husband, a pastor in the Église Réformée, had led his rural congregation in staging the French version of Antigone, stressing, of course, the autocratic hubris of Creon. About Jesus, my Scottish churchman cousin Robin Barbour, who led tanks during and after the Battle of Britain, wrote a totally scholarly article on “Gethsemane in the Tradition of the Passion,” finding the Synoptic Gospel stories authentic. But he noted that Jesus was not just praying for strength to suffer, but to understand the rejection of the nonviolent power of God’s Kingdom by his holy people in their holy city on their holiest holiday. Jesus foresaw its destruction. Bonhoeffer had to lead the Confessing Church in Hitler’s Germany through a war that he foresaw—and finally prayed—would destroy it. We as Christians and Quakers have lived through sixty years when all humanity and our human culture has faced destruction from nuclear weapons. For us the possible End of Time has been now, within history. Some of us must now live knowing we also face it personally, perhaps within a decade. So this book should be important for both old and young Friends alike.

The second Tragedy/Hope essay is by Douglas Gwyn, on “The Early Quaker Lamb’s War.” I do not know of any better summary of early Friends’ worldview in 24 pages! Gwyn shows the overwhelming experience of inner judgment as Quakers “stood still under the Light.” He sets the paradox of the surrender and death of the old self and its fruit, the rebirth of the Seed or Spirit of Christ, as a new self within. This rebirth, in turn, led to a far-from-passive proclamation of a new era and social reordering. Like Gwyn’s book, Covenant Crucified, this essay focuses on the tragedy of James Nayler, whose reenactment of Palm Sunday as he let his followers lead him into Bristol, was also the crisis that checked the nationwide growth of the Quaker movement. Nayler believed himself to be taken over within by the Spirit of Christ, and he hence felt called to reenact Jesus’ acts, healings, and miracles. Leo Damrosch showed the challenge that this presents to modern Friends who claim to live by the same Spirit as
Jesus. But Gwyn makes clear that the message of Fox, and Nayler’s proclaiming “the Day of the Lord” as a warning to society, made Christ’s Second Coming “to teach his people himself” an outward, as well as an inward, Day of Judgment. By “the Apocalypse of the Word,” Gwyn means mainly the unveiling of God’s judgment within us, but this is just where we Quaker historians were awakened by the “orthodoxford” or Marxists’ understanding of the intense hopes and visions of the English Revolution. English Socialists shared the Levellers’ and Commonwealthsmen’s experience of defeat after 1656. It predated the stalling of the Lamb’s War, which Gwyn rightly dates from London’s failure to repent after the plague and great fire of 1665 & 1666. Gwyn shows how Friends’ faith that martyrdom was a “Lamb’s-War” weapon saved them from a purely inward withdrawal like the Familists. But Gwyn also notes that “the Tragedy of the Lamb’s War” plunged Fox into months of depression in 1659. It had been paralleled five years before by the tragedy of Cromwell’s hubris in his failed Crusade to capture the West Indies from “papist” Spain. Gwyn concludes by summarizing the “secularization” of Friends, as they became a sect by fixing times for Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly meetings.

Tragedy/Hope’s third essay, by Brian Phillips of Oxford, on “Apocalypse without Tears,” is on British Friends throughout the nineteenth century. Says Phillips, “Easter Sunday sans Good Friday [is] nothing remotely like the apocalypse of the [battles of] the Somme and Passchendaele.” (pp.58-59) He expands the role of hubris, “the collapse of [Friends’] utopian social and political project which had imagined itself . . . the Kingdom of Christ on earth, shrunk to a comfortable, if rather austere, suburb in the life of the nation.” However, Phillips’ central concern is that because British Friends identified themselves with trust in progress and in a spirit of “Friendly patriotism,” they saw themselves as “an essential resource in a project of national regeneration” in a new moral and spiritual tutorial role to the nation and the Empire.” (pp. 62-63) He notes “the creeping hubris in much Quaker public discourse” (p. 66) and ridicules the usually unsuccessful visits to “continental” monarchs of the Quaker “peace elite,” such as J. Allen Baker. He does not, however, discuss the smaller achievements such as Joseph John Gurney’s & Elizabeth Fry’s persuasion of the Dutch and Danish kings to abolish slavery in their colonies, Quaker relief to both sides in the 1775 siege of Boston, and the Irish 1798-99 “troubles” and later famine; nor does
he reference what Joseph Sturge achieved in Finland _en route_ to a mission to dissuade the Tsar from the Crimean War, which was undermined by his own government. Phillips talks only about British Friends, yet he ignores their condemnation of the Crimean and Boer wars and ignores Peter Brock’s classic text on the Quaker Peace Testimony. He sees Corder Catchpool’s choice of prison over unarmed public service in World War I as “recovering a prophetic voice.” American Friends opposed to both war and slavery found our Civil War a far deeper tragedy than any this essay discusses.

While Phillips stresses Liberals’ false hope in progress, the fourth and fifth _Tragedy/Hope_ essays, both by Pink Dandelion himself, are on “the Loss of Hope” and “the Loss of Providence” among twentieth-century Friends’ beliefs. He begins with the loss felt by the white upper class “Establishment” in England’s loss of power and empire, infecting the newly powerful “Beatles” and working classes with despair, too. He speaks of “the Shock of the Great War” of 1914-18, when almost a million British (9% of men under 45) were killed. They are still named on memorials on every village green. In Europe as a whole, 8,500,000 of 65 million mobilized had died. Leonard (and also Virginia) Woolf spoke for the many “who had fought . . . and had seen the Whig view of history demolished in the deaths of their comrades” in both World Wars. In England the failed 1926 General Strike (which Ben says killed the Quaker socialism of 1910-19), and the doubling of unemployment in 1921-31, led on to the Depression that spread to America. He does not comment on the worse economic disasters of Germany, Austria, and Russia. I too can witness how high British income taxes and death duties were—over 50%!

Postwar hopes for a new Welfare State and social revolution did not prevent Britain’s loss of its world empire and the indignity that Anthony Eden faced when Russia and the USA forced him to give up Suez in 1956. Ben says the immigrants from former colonies and lower middle class “meritocrats” had new power but no new ideals. But England knew better than we in America did what they risked in the Cold War, as the Aldermaston marches showed. “The consequences for the believer in the loss of belief in a God who can intervene . . . [a]lready undermined by Enlightenment ideology, . . . suggests that the experience and knowledge of two world wars and the Holocaust diminished remaining belief in the element of divine providence,” (p. 94) in Meetings and Churches (and Synagogues). Ben takes the reader through the options for twentieth-century theology: a “wholly other” God (as with Figgis and the Barthians);
Tillich’s “Ground of Being;” a finite, flexible, basically human God; a
creative Spirit only within individuals; and finally, the “death of God.”
He outlines the Quaker responses that his other book details: “the
first Liberal Quakers had been brought up as Evangelical Christians;
the following generation grew up with this mentality of seeking, . . .
individuals making sense of their spiritual experience through their
own interpretations.” (p. 104) “Quakers have come to live in the pre-
sent, far removed from their initial radical sense of historical time. . .
. Quakers do not believe in the first coming, let alone the second. . .
. Self becomes the site and the goal of religious learning, without
teaching and values about suffering.” (pp. 105-06) He wants a multi-
faitth England to learn of a “transcendent, interventionist” deity from
Muslims.

Rachel Muers contributed the sixth Tragedy/Hope essay from
Girton, a women’s College of Cambridge University, claiming that
“new voices” of feminist and liberation theology point toward two
fragile new hopes. These include a new self-recognition of pluralistic
“Englishness,” and new thinking about the Resurrection that is nei-
ther just “a happy ending of a sad story” nor optimism about the vic-
tors of history. “Hope as a divine gift and its close association with
love forces one to differentiate it carefully from optimism.” She too
quotes Bonhoeffer on our having “lost the ground under one’s feet”
and removing “the ordinary power of choice” when “home became
a foreign land.” (pp. 109-11) It becomes necessary to talk about the
“divine providence” of the tragic vision [which] expands to encom-
pass a whole world within the creative, judging and transforming
action of God . . . that goes beyond the existing alternatives.” Lest we
refuse to face the reality of suffering and concrete injustices, the rela-
tivity of our truths or the fact of living in one world, “the possibility
of tragedy that conflicting voices, demands and good be placed
together on one stage.” (pp. 115-19)

None of these essays speaks of faith or hope as separate virtues or
personal possessions. Rather, if we watch endlessly for its signs, “trust
in God becomes . . . the power that finally frees [people]. It arises as
and with responsibility, inseparable from love and compassion.” To
cite Bonhoeffer again, “Hope in relation to the divine reality of the
resurrection . . . is given to those who hope, not created by them.”
(pp. 119-20) I wish she had expanded on this. Reason does not cre-
ate an afterlife; we are called to die with Christ, but we must leave our
resurrection in God’s hands. A fine review by Alex Ross of Peter
Sellars’ opera, “Doctor Atomic,” scored by Adams, interprets in depth the tragic decisions of Oppenheimer around the first nuclear explosion at White Sands, NM. Ross begins and ends with the new grasses and birds that now cover the site. He quotes Sellars: “There is incredible regeneration in this world. The good thing is that . . . there will be wildflowers growing at this test site. All our private storms, which seem like the end of the world, blow over, and there is a new day. That’s the deepest thing in life. . . . I feel that some weird strange hope exists in the created universe.”

The Liturgies of Quakerism centers upon Quaker silence. Dandelion develops futher his themes in his Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers; The Silent Revolution (Edwin Mellon Press, 1996), based on his survey that showed that many (or most) British Friends did not know what they believed. The book is thus more compact and integrated than Tragedy/Hope, for all its interlacing. Not that Liturgies lacks sources; his bibliography lists 162 (he cited 90 in his 31 pages of Tragedy/Hope essays). Never before the last decade has so much been said about silence, though the pillar-work of Richard Bauman still stands. This is a book on the sociology of religion, which would justify the contrast between fixed forms and inner experience implied by its title. However, the churches talk of liturgy because it is in the New Testament, where leitourgeia and its cognates (leitourgein, leitourgos, and leitourgikos) are used (respectively 6, 3, 5, times and once by Paul in Romans, by Luke-Acts, and Hebrews) always means acts of service, as by a slave or priest, but always personal acts, based on human relations. Friends indeed have always put walking the walk before talking the talk, like African-Americans and the Hebrew tradition stressing Halakah over Haggadah (which may explain the attraction of Quakerism for attenders of Jewish heritage). But Ben’s contrast of form and substance (as for Catholic sacraments) may reflect too a reaction against the imposing of forms by “Establishment” authority. Quaker tradition is always in tension with our concern for community and interaction, human or divine, which Ben identifies as intimacy.

Ben’s work is much more careful than this may suggest, and it aims to explain, as a source of Quaker disunity, the way in which by maintaining Friends’ outward discipline of silence we have let its inner meaning be totally changed or dissipated. He begins with a good presentation of the preached “Lamb’s-War” message of early Friends,
both personal and cosmic, and the months of self-searching and self-denial described about their Convincement by many early Friends. He interprets these in terms of “the End of Time,” about which he and Gwyn have written, and for which he provides also diagrams. I noted, however, that he does not reconcile the experiences of entering through Days of Judgment into the timeless “Everlasting Day,” where Friends “know one another in that which is eternal,” (Fox, p. 13) and early Friends awareness of the crisis or kairos in English and world history. He does note carefully how Quaker claims of perfection before 1656 separated them from the entire created world. He sees that Barclay and Penn—who were the earliest Friends trained in theology after Nayler—realized that Friends only achieved perfection “in their measure.” They said the universality of the Light made even spiritual experiences with the sacraments valid (though not necessary). Penn and Barclay only wrote after 1666, when the stalling of “The Lamb’s War” and Quakers “doing time” in prison made appeal to other humanists for understanding and toleration vital.

I am not convinced that this drove them and most other Friends into any “interim theology” for life between the First and Second Comings of Christ. Both Penn and Barclay were deeply involved in the “Holy experience” of a new age in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. There the separation of sacred and secular arose not in ideals, nor Quakers’ status as leaders, but between worship and daily work and economy. The latter areas, as Fred Tolles showed,13 were guided, when no longer directed by divine “leadings,” by long-established Quaker “Testimonies.” Non-Quaker Pennsylvanians knew they lived under a theocracy as much as New Englanders. Ben rightly stresses that Friends there and elsewhere became separatists by the boundaries of customs and community more than by any understanding of time, in that age of progress, Ben’s analysis of Quietism (which he calls “French influence”) stresses that instead of releasing purified human emotions, it stressed “becoming merely a vessel for God.” (p. 48) He blames Barclay for dividing the Quakers’ world into Inner and Outer [though Fox did so without leaving God out of either] and “emphasizing the intimacy of their relationship with God and its direct nature without connecting it explicitly to the Second Coming.” (p. 51) Ben summarizes well Barclay’s Apology, and in the following chapter Joseph John Gurney’s Observations, on the Catholic and Anglican sacraments: they are merely outward, though they might be helpful to immature people. This became standard Quaker teaching up through 1887.
In treating silence also as outward, Ben disputes Barclay’s claim that “the devil cannot counterfeit silent waiting upon God.” (p. 44) Ben rightly ties the rise of Evangelical Quakerism in Britain to the sharing of prominent families, such as the Gurneys (one could add: the Darbys, the Frys, William Allen and others), in activities as well as prayer and Bible study with Christian reformers, antislavery abolitionists, and builders of model communities. He sees the relation of American Quaker Evangelicals to the intense experiences of conversion at interchurch revivals and Holiness camp meetings more in terms of strong emotions (release from Quietism) than of moral transformation. Thus he may undersell (as I think Punshon oversells) the importance of these experiences in the release of Quakers from Testimonies of dress, speech, and outward simplicity. He cites well Bill Taber’s appropriately austere story of the rise of Conservative Friends, but he does not note that John Wilbur’s opposition to Gurney’s “creaturely activity” and human initiative in Sunday Schools echoed the response of Friends generally to mass meetings by John Wesley and America’s “Great Awakening,” and particularly to the staging of revivals and altar calls in our “Second Awakening” of 1830-50. In this book, as in Tragedy/Hope, Ben is concerned with Quaker worship as outward silence maintained by Elders who “have their authority clearly limited to matters of form,” (p. 69) while inwardly liberal Quaker belief became pluralistic and “experience, not scripture was primary, [as] friends were to be open to new Light from whatever quarter,” (p. 66) particularly non-Christian faiths. For Ben, this is linked to Friends’ living in the “eternal now” of “realized eschatology,” “having lost their sense of imminent end-time” and also their own heritage in the book of Revelation. (pp. 71-73) He ignores, however, the Gospels’ “Kingdom-come-and-coming” message.

Ben’s chapter on “Present-Day Practice” shows the sociologist at his greatest alertness. He describes the many creative aspects of an Evangelical Friends Church (probably referring to places such as Reedwood Friends Church under Ken Comfort and Carole Spencer), and a North Carolina Conservative Friends Meeting that also stresses “participation by each participant,” (p. 83) taking their Book of Discipline seriously. Then, bypassing both FGC and FUM Friends in America, he discusses Liberal Friends in the 500 Meetings in Britain. Here he applies the material from his Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers (1996). In 1989, 1692 British Friends had answered Ben’s questionnaire, which asked what they did during silent Meeting. The highest numbers of replies in his summaries were respec-
tively, “Thinking; opening up to the spirit; listening; meditating; praying; seeking God’s will.” (p. 119) I imagine this would fit American FGC Friends, too. But since “vocal ministry is deemed by definition to come from God,” and because there is “a lack of structured opportunities to talk about belief” in Britain [if not America], he found meaningful messages to be rare and brief. (pp. 96-98) He does quote a Friend who said (as I would) that “Quakerism is a tradition that enables people to confront themselves, their existence, moral dilemmas, etc. and find wholeness and identity.” (p. 97) His image of silence is simply an outward framework in which “Rules are about the protection of the means to experience. . . . God is to be praised slowly,” (p. 105) not ecstatically. This covers the dangers of “enthusiasm” (in the modern sense), the emotions shown these days in mass meetings of fundamentalists (Muslim, Baptist, or Hebrew), or what we remember of Communist mir druzhiba or Fascist youth assemblies. Yet he may underplay the central role of inner listening. I hope this is what Ben means when he says, “individual discernment is replaced by collective devotion as the check on the legitimacy of God’s word.” (p. 103) He may regard “clearness committees” and “Gospel Order” as negative, when indeed both can encourage spiritual growth.

This brings us to Ben’s climactic chapter on “Reading Liberal Silence: New Intimacies and the End of Time.” Yes, “silence may be our awkward assertion that God does not exist” (p. 114) and at best show the fuzziness and tentative and still-seeking nature of our beliefs, our “certainty about uncertainty.” (p. 118) Admittedly, for non-theists, “agnostics and atheists, the silence is safe,” and “intimacy is no longer with God but with self and with community.” (pp. 124-25) Ben’s discussion, however, wholesome where it is cautious and careful, seems to me to overlook three the key truths which Quaker tradition could help us face. First, as said in my first review, Ben’s concern for “God’s time,” which had created movements open to total social change like early Quakerism, early socialism, and the American Civil Rights movement, are not the only crises that challenge us, when our kairos is the threat of nuclear, worldwide disaster. No rapture here; why is it Christ who is coming?

Second, the rational clarity that Ben wants for us is no longer possible now, when science and metaphysics can no longer undergird theology as during most past centuries. Not only the “Big Bang,” ”black holes,” the expansion of the universe, and the identity of matter and energy are under question, but so are the systems for knowing these—quanta, probability, imaginary numbers, multiple dimensions, and a jun-
gle of nuclear particles—despite their remarkable pragmatic achievements. This makes it harder than ever to claim that we know reality. What does it mean that humans only partly know the universe?

Third, though Ben blessedly does not boast about faith, define God’s initiatives, or make a conventional split of faith and knowledge, I think we, like early Friends, are called to respond as whole people by trusting in God and the cosmos as we do to people we love, and to expect surprises in our darkness. Whole humans “by nature” have interwoven emotions, minds, awareness and responses. For me, whatever we learn from other great persons, this is what we learn to do, and to be, from Jesus.

Trying to answer my challenge to Ben, I’d like to tell about a week’s visit I was free to make in 1952 to a conference of Christian students in West Berlin from all over East Germany, in the years before “the Wall” went up. Their cities were still ruins after the war, and the Russian takeovers in Prague and Warsaw were even more recent. They asked each other what to hope for. A third World War would be even more horrific. They had no hope that their communist government would disappear, and yet to give their lives for sabotage would be futile.

After we had talked this over for a couple of hours, a pastor to students, Johannes Hamel (one of my heroes for his honest stands as a member of Bonhoeffer’s “Confessing Church” under both the Nazis and Communists), stood up and said: “This is a bad time for human hopes. But perhaps we can find greater freedom from depending on human hopes. We do not know what is coming. But we know who is coming.” He did not mean in a literal sense that Jesus would return on the clouds of heaven, but he went on: “I suggest we sing ‘Nun Danket’ (‘Now Thank We All Our God’).” The East German students sang it with joy!

I want to add that besides the nuclear and other crises that threaten the world physically, Friends need to face a spiritual challenge deeper than any recently. The two ends of the Quaker spectrum are so widely divided that they are threatened by the self-righteousness of non-theists and biblical literalists within our Meeting community, as well as beyond. In the Center of our spiritual lives, however, the Spirit, whether we call it the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, or the Inward Light, we in America face the challenge of an American triumphalistic belief. While it might have developed out of Quakerism
and Pietism through Methodism and the Baptists, being held, perhaps even honestly, by our President and many of his appointees, its very hopefulness bears tragic possibilities. While it shares with Quakerism experiences of Leading, Guidance, Providence, and Perfection, it could easily devastate the world and all human relationships. Here the same Quaker faith that leads us from tragedy to hope can also help us move from overconfidence to humility. Here the convincing work of the Spirit may yet teach us such balancing and testing processes so as to lead us into the centered places of humility, silence, self-scrutiny under the Light of Truth and the guidance of Elders and Gospel Order. Yet these powers of the Spirit for good are the hardest to teach or even talk or write about; they emerge from the crucible of spiritual encounter with the living Christ.

Notes


3. This might be parallel to our ritual reading of the poem, “The Night before Christmas,” as well as biblical rituals for Jephthah’s daughter, Passover, and the Eucharist.


7. A tragic drama could be written about Fox’s interview with Cromwell on March 9, 1654/55, when each man out of genuine wisdom pointed out in vain the other’s shortcomings. Fox was accused falsely of plotting an uprising, and validly, of rejecting parish clergy. Penn’s father, the Admiral of the Royal Navy, gained the only fruit of Cromwell’s expedition by capturing Jamaica the same spring.


9. See pp. 73-76. Corder’s daughter, Heather Moir of Chocorua, New Hampshire, married to an auto-garage owner, has been Clerk of Friends World Committee.

10. To a Friend who pointed out the absence of Geoffrey Nuttall’s and my books, it was simple to answer that, thanks partly to the work of Doug Gwyn and T. Canby Jones, our central ideas about Puritan experience of the Spirit, and Quakers’ treatment of the Lamb’s War, may have become so standard as not to need citations. Ben used the classic
“Rowntree Series” of histories by W. C. Braithwaite and Rufus Jones mainly for quoting early Friends (which Dandelion does directly, and well when needed). However, within such complete bibliographies, I am grieved to find, from American sources, Isichei but not Benjamin, and Bill Taber but not Lewis Benson, nor Wil Cooper’s definitive Living Faith. From Britain, Dandelion used Janet Scott but not Richenda, Maurice Creasey but not Hugh Doncaster, and neither Elfrida Vipont Foulds nor Roger Wilson, Alastair Heron, nor Caroline Stephen, who was perhaps the first (along with Emerson, Whittier, and Rufus Jones’ cousin and schoolmaster, Augustine Jones—but independently) to try to identify Quakerism with mysticism.


12. Ben illustrates by Friends’ response to the World Council of Churches’ Lima declaration on Baptism, Eucharist, & Ministry (1982), which nonetheless is part of a major swing in interchurch circles from dogma to experiences of grace and the Spirit.


14. I wrote about “Quakers, Quarks, and Queries” in the festschrift for Paul Lacey, The Inward Teacher, ed. by Michael Birkel (Richmond, IN: Earlham College Press, 2002).