Legacies of Early Quaker Women

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The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and the application of our faith.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

It is with great appreciation for the fine work Arthur Roberts has performed over the last decade as editor of *Quaker Religious Thought* (1989-2000) that I prepare this issue. The last 22 issues have had among them many really impressive essays, and as I look over them I am again reminded of the great contribution Arthur Roberts has made to us all through his service. The essays in these issues are characteristically insightful and cover a broad spectrum of important topics. Add to his editorial contributions Arthur’s own essays including “The Universalism of Christ in Early Quaker Understanding” (#71, 1989, 2-18), “Quakers and the Broader Christian Movement” (#88, 1997, 7-19), and “A Quaker Understanding of Jesus Christ” (#93, 1999, 9-23), and we have a really fine decade of contributions which deserve to be considered again and again as our readers continue to explore what it means to address issues—classic and contemporary—from perspectives of Quaker faith and practice.

The present issue does precisely that. It focuses on the legacies of two early Quaker women and asks what sort of impact the lives of Mary Dyer and Margaret Fell have had upon the Society of Friends and beyond. These essays were both presented at our Quaker Theological Discussion Group meetings held in Boston (November 1999), and they have been adapted in the light of the discussions that ensued.

Of particular interest to me is the historic impact these women played within the emerging Quaker movement. David Johns challenges the notion, affected somewhat by selective memory, that Friends do not venerate saints. While it is true that early Friends objected to the official canonization and orchestrated veneration of saints by the established church, Johns points out with lucidity that Friends have indeed embraced a long tradition of functional hagiography rooted firmly in the desire to let our lives preach. What, then, of the Quaker testimony against lifting up particular persons and days? Are Friends duplicitous here, venerating their own while denouncing such practices elsewhere? Not entirely.

What Friends have objected to is the potentially negative impact the lifting up of some persons can have upon others if it implies that others are excluded from categories of exemplary faithfulness. Thus,
Friends have emphasized the lifting up of the example, rather than the individual, believing that all have the capacity to respond faithfully to God’s leadings, and that such faithfulness should be regarded as the norm rather than the exception. Rather than cut down the stature of those rising above the rest in society so that the masses won’t feel so bad, the Quaker impulse has been to exhort the higher vision of the larger community, elevating the common sense and vision until it becomes more closely attuned with the active reign and will of God in the world. This is a leading reason why we describe ourselves as a “religious society.” The expectation is that all will be aspiring to the highest measure, not merely a select few.

Friends have also objected, and rightly so, to the exploitation of heroic persons and events by those with ulterior motives. Indeed governments, religions, organizations and individuals yoke the moral authority of exemplary lives and momentous events to the furthering of particular causes which may be unrelated, or even contrary, to the ethos of the co-opted party. Sometimes such exploitation is inert and rather unobjectionable: athletes and sports products, or denture wearers and fixatives. More objectionable, however, is the long-standing practice of manipulating an audience into moral compromise by means of yoking the high moral authority of heroic figures and events—especially religious ones—to questionable causes, products and programs.

Such manipulation of moral authority has been one of the central reasons Friends have objected to the veneration of special persons and days. Indeed, collective heroic memory can be called to present in motivating righteousness rather than compromising it, and this is one of the central aspects of Quaker concern regarding official hagiography. David Johns’ essay helps us consider the exemplary function of Quaker martyrology, thereby casting into sharper relief central aspects of Quaker testimonies on special lives and events.

Sally Bruyneel helps us appreciate more fully the historic contribution of Margaret Fell Fox in the formation of the early Quaker movement. While George Fox and others receive worthy credit for extending the movement in significant ways, the consolidating and networking contribution of Margaret Fell Fox cannot rightly be overlooked. Bruyneel’s essay also reminds us of the importance of performing sound historiography when drawing lessons from heroic figures of the past. All too easily those who would liberate us from oppressive confines sketch inappropriate parallels between heroes of
the past and the underprivileged we hope to liberate in the present. While Margaret Fell was indeed a woman, she was not afflicted with obstacles of lowly social status or means to be overcome by bootstrap courage. If anything, it was her willingness to put life and limb, and even social position, on the line for the sake of the truth, that determined her contribution to the Friends movement. Our indebtedness to Margaret Fell is keen precisely because the work of so many others would not have been possible had it not been for her advocacy and support, and Sally Bruyneel helps us consider important ways in which this was so.

Finally, Gregg Koskella offers us an incisive review of Miroslav Volf’s recent book on the character of the church. Volf is one of the important theologians emerging on the international landscape, and it is a privilege to have one of his former students engage his work so effectively and helpfully. This essay will be a bit technical for some of our readers, but every sentence is worth it. Further, you cannot engage important theological works without doing so within the realm of theological discussion, and yet Koskella’s review essay brings the high points of Volf’s book home in extremely helpful ways. Not only does he suggest ways in which Volf’s critique of individualism challenges programmed and unprogrammed Friends alike, but he also raises important considerations as to how Quaker faith and practice might inform broader discussions regarding what it means to be the church of the living Christ in the world today.

Walk cheerfully!

—Paul Anderson
July 2000