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Front Matter -- Quaker Religious Thought, no. 6

J Calvin Keene
The past score of years has witnessed a remarkable development of interest in the meaning and significance of history as it is related to us today. For generations the western world, absorbed by its great discoveries and the power they had given it, had placed its greatest emphasis upon the individual and his present day, disregarding or paying little attention to the experiences of the past. But in recent years we have discovered our need for interpreting our own day and experiences, and out of this need we have once more been willing to turn to the past, questioning how it is to be understood and its wisdom made available. This is no merely theoretical topic, of interest only to scholars, but is of the utmost importance. The lossness of our day, cut off as it has been from our past, and the disasters which threaten us both nationally and individually are factors faced by every thinking person. We discover that the present cannot be understood in terms of the present alone, hence we turn toward the past with high expectation that it may have help to offer us. For the Society of Friends this interest raises the question of what our Quaker-Christian past holds of judgment, wisdom, and inspiration.

It was out of this concern with the meaning and value of history that the second Barnesville Conference of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group was held on July 1 to 4 at Barnesville, Ohio. Representatives of ten Yearly Meetings were in attendance, to hear papers and to participate in discussion on the general topic of “Quakerism in the Context of History.” Three of these papers form the content of this issue of Quaker Religious Thought; the remaining two will appear in the Spring 1962 issue. In the publication of these articles we are for the first time departing from what has been the policy of this magazine. Previously each major article was accompanied by criticisms from the pens of several Friends. We feel that this temporary change of policy is justified by the fact that each of these
articles underwent the fire of criticism at the time of its reading and by the editor, and since each was rewritten in view of these comments it does contain in its present form the benefits of group thinking.

The serious reader will find in these papers much wisdom and much to ponder upon. Everyone knows that the past cannot be taken over wholesale and made into the present—for better or worse we are persons of the latter half of the twentieth century, not of the seventeenth and even less of the first. On the other hand, we have arisen from the past and our foundations are laid in it. How, then, are we to draw from it its deepest meanings and values and allow it to speak its message? These questions are of great interest to us all; to them the authors have directed their best thought.

J. C. K.

Quakerism and the Historical Interpretation of Religion

CHRIS DOWNING

When all my hopes . . . in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition," and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.

Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give Him all the glory . . . Thus when God doth work, who shall hinder it? and this I knew experimentally.

And this I knew experimentally—that there is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition. What Fox brings together here suggests to me that he, too, contended with the very issue that confronts us: the relation between the historical and the spiritual elements of faith. Faith for him is certainly not a simple matter of an objective knowledge of fact and yet it is clearly faith in the God who speaks to man, who reveals himself in history, in Jesus Christ; it is not faith in man's own capacity for an historically unmediated relation with God. The bifurcation in American Quakerism (at its worst) marks a tearing asunder of what is here so naturally brought together—the Christ of history and the Light within—a disruption leading to an external objectivity or a self-confident subjectivity. Each makes faith too easy and too weak to grapple seriously with life as it confronts us in our so-called post-modern world.

QUAKERISM AND ITS RELATION TO ITS OWN HISTORY

Nor can we simply return to Fox's answer, though we do need to return to an understanding of it. We cannot put it as he did; for, though (as Rudolf Bultmann points out) our relation to revelation is always the same, our way of talking and thinking about it does change. What we look at may be the