The Quakerization of Everything

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I am delighted to have been invited to reflect on the achievement we are celebrating today, *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*. Stephen and Ben and all the contributors should be proud of this accomplishment—and of the contributions they have made not only to Quaker Studies but also to the broader fields of religious studies and religious history.

I come to this task as a historian of religion in the United States with particular interests in American religious liberalism and spirituality, and therefore with a keen interest in the history of American Quakerism—but not, I should make clear at the outset, as a specialist in Quakerism or Quaker Studies strictly speaking. And it is that outsider perspective I want to bring to my comments today. So in that light my questions are these: Why does Quakerism matter for American religious history, and therefore what is the contribution of *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies* for those who aren’t specialists in Quakerism? It’s a form of the question about denominational history, a question that has been haunting the field of American religious history for decades, as it has wrested with its relationship to its roots in church history. This question asks: What is the value of denominational studies to those (scholars, clergy, interested laity, others) who are not members of the denomination in question?

My first observation along these lines is that this book is an almost-but-not-quite denominational study, and I think that almost-but-not-quite angle is pitched just right. Like another book in the series, *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, this book is perhaps best understood as a movement study rather than a denominational study. Much of the intellectual work of the book is to delineate the varieties of Quakerism and Quaker experience—to articulate the genealogies and meanings of Orthodox and Liberal, Conservative and Evangelical, Christian and post-Christian, Hicksite, Gurneyite, Wilburite and all the rest that can so baffle outsiders. Speaking personally, I’ll note that my dad went to Earlham and my brother and I went to Haverford—and I am a historian of American religion—and yet these categories
still confound me on a regular basis. For this reason alone I am grateful for this book, as I now know where I will turn whenever such confusion besets me again.

But whether we understand this as a movement study or a denominational study, I would still contend that it is primarily an insider study—a study by and for Quakers and scholars of Quakerism. From this impression comes my major point of praise and my one substantive critique of the volume as a whole, which are really two sides of the same coin. In reading many of the essays, I was struck again and again by the reach of Quaker values and sensibilities outside the Quaker fold, and yet the volume as a whole does not attend directly to this dynamic. One idea, for example, to foreground this—and thereby, I think, to reach a larger non-specialist audience—might have been to include a concluding essay framing the subject for outsiders, addressing, in essence, how Quakerism as a topic and Quakers as historical actors have reached beyond the confines of the denominational.

I say this, to be clear, precisely because I think both Quakerism as a topic and this book as a scholarly resource do in fact have much to say to those with other interests in religious studies and religious history. In other words, it’s an indication of the subject’s, and the book’s, reach and scope that I even mention this at all. Now, after making this entirely unhelpful after-the-fact suggestion, I want to repeat that many of the individual essays, by virtue of both their framing and their subject matter, do indeed have much to offer those who work primarily elsewhere, and I want to spend most of my time talking about these aspects of the book.

The obvious places where I see the essays in this collection reaching beyond the denominational are in two places: 1) in the sections on reform movements—abolition, women’s rights, penal reform, and peace-making and peace witness; and 2) in the sections on modernism, liberalism, mysticism and spirituality.

I came to the limited work I have done on Quaker topics because of an interest in the latter, in the history of American spirituality. In my own research on religious liberalism in the twentieth century I became especially interested in the ways the ideas of William James entered the national religious vernacular, especially through his framing of mysticism in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. 
This research quickly brought me to Rufus Jones. I read his work on the history of mysticism with great fascination, especially in light of the use that James had made of George Fox in Varieties. Soon I discovered Jones’s own effort at crafting a popularly accessible account of psychology, mysticism, and religious experience in Social Law in the Spiritual World, an important and understudied book that occupies a pivotal place in my study of liberal religious book culture in the 20th century.

J. William Frost, in his chapter in the Oxford Handbook on Modernist and Liberal Quakers, nicely describes the ambitions of Jones and others among the early generations of Quaker liberals. These Quakers, Frost writes, “wished to affirm Christianity, remain Quaker, be relevant to society, and accept the finding of science.” I like this formulation of Quaker liberalism because it keeps the local and the global dialectically bound. Frost sees how the work of Quaker liberals like Jones stemmed from and spoke to a deeply Quaker context and yet ultimately made a much wider impact.

As Frost tells us, Jones and colleagues in Britain endeavored to recast Quaker history as a movement of mystics, rather than a radical wing of Puritanism, precisely because such a reframing, they thought, would heal the schisms in modern Quakerism. Jones’s popularization of the term “inner light” rather than more traditional terms like Light of Christ or Light Within, as Stephen Angell notes in his chapter, stemmed from this irenic ambition, as did Jones’s attention to the social and political dimension of spiritual life through the American Friends Service Committee.

This historical and theological project of Quaker ecumenism turns out to have been a remarkable if not complete success, both within the Quaker movement—I’m thinking here of the Hicksite-Orthodox divide in the Eastern Yearly Meetings—but also, and more surprisingly, beyond it. Fellow Protestants, often also grappling in their own polities and own religious vernaculars with the dislocations of modernity, found in the Jamesian and Jonesian emphasis on religious experience—experience understood both mystically and psychologically—the tools to bridge their own intellectual and theological divides. So if the question of this review is “why should non-Quakers care about Quakerism?,” here I think is one critical answer.

When we think about the schisms of Protestant modernity we naturally turn to the modernist-fundamentalist struggles of the
1910s and 1920s. Some of those most influenced by Jones, such as the famed Baptist preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick, bore the scars of these battles.

But the psychologically informed mysticism of James and Jones performed other — and I think more significant, if more poorly understood — cultural work. Because of the centrality of silent worship, mysticism was able to create a capacious modern Quakerism that bridged many though certainly not all liberal-conservative divides within Quakerism. It was far less successful in doing so for other Protestants. Fosdick certainly never made peace with fundamentalist Baptists, for example. But the Quaker-inspired mystical synthesis did more successfully—if ultimately ambiguously—breach another emerging and increasingly significant divide, and that is the Protestant / post-Protestant divide. Religious liberals appropriated the Quaker mystical synthesis, in other words, not just or even primarily as a defense of their right flank, but also and even more significantly as a defense of their left flank, as a way of telling rapidly secularizing and scientifically minded moderns that it was still possible to believe. This is the task that James set for himself in Varieties, and accomplished marvelously but on a very high intellectual level; it is the task Jones set for himself as well and carried off, I think, with even greater reach.

Along these lines I think the Frost essay and the volume as a whole might have benefitted from a bit more attention to the Wider Quaker Fellowship, and even more expansively to those we might called Quaker fellow travelers. Let me mention briefly two prominent examples.

In 1926 a young African-American preacher in Oberlin, Ohio, picked up a copy of Jones’s Finding the Trail of Life, and read it in one sitting, on the church steps. He was so enthralled, he later wrote, “When I finished I knew that if this man were alive, I wanted to study with him.” This young man was Howard Thurman. He described an “instant kinship” with Jones upon reading this tale of childhood—such a kinship, in fact, that he began a correspondence with Jones, and then, in 1929, came to Haverford to study. Jones, according to Gary Dorrien, quickly became Thurman’s “mentor” and “model.” Thurman, destined to become one of the great spiritual writers of the twentieth century and himself a leading mystic, attributed to Jones’s teaching his own understanding of the power of mystical religion to address social oppression. Thurman wrote that Jones “gave me
confidence in the insight that religion of the inner life could deal with the empirical experience of man.”

Howard Thurman took Jones’s message about the social utility of mystical experience and crafted from it a prophetic theology of liberation that served as a spiritual cornerstone of the civil rights movement. This “Quaker-influenced mystic and pacifist” was a leader in the movement toward racial integration, especially at his experimental, interracial church in San Francisco, which he founded in 1944. His most important and widely read book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in 1949, sought to recover the faith of Jesus from the Christian Church, which he regarded as a betrayer because of the ways the institutional church legitimized racial oppression. It became a seminal work in African-American liberation theology, one that Martin Luther King, Jr. reportedly carried along on his travels, and one of the spiritual classics of the 20th century.

Jonesian mysticism reached its largest reading audience through another fellow traveler, the greatest liberal preacher of the 20th century, Harry Emerson Fosdick. The story here starts with a young Fosdick. In 1904, Fosdick was, “struggling to find a footing in his faith,” as he put it many years later, and Jones’s *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, “opened the door to a new era in my thought and life.” Fosdick confessed, “much of my message has been rooted in the rich soil which that book provided.” Fosdick was so inspired by Jones, in fact, that he even considered leaving the Baptist Church of his birth and converting to Quakerism; he did not, but did join the Wider Quaker Fellowship, and became a vocal exponent of both pacifism and of a psychologically informed mysticism for the remainder of his life. Fosdick, in fact, was such an acolyte of Rufus Jones that after Jones’s death in 1948 he began work on an anthology of Jones’s writings, published in 1950 under the title *Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time*.

Leigh Schmidt placed Jones and fellow Haverford Quakers Thomas Kelly and Douglas Steere at the climax of his account of the making of modern spirituality precisely because he saw what these Quaker figures accomplished as an act of spiritual genius. In devising a solution to their own crisis, they found one of much more profound and broad applicability. The trajectory from liberal Protestantism to spiritual-but-not-religious in the 20th century, in fact, owes much to precisely these developments in American Quakerism. Jones and those in his wake not only served as harbingers of developments that would sweep much of American religious culture in the twentieth
century, they also did much to bring these changes about. It is only a bit hyperbolic to call the story of spirituality in the twentieth century, seen in this light, the Quakerization of everything.

I want address more briefly the political and social reform elements of the Quaker story and of this volume. After years in which scholars produced excellent work on abolitionism I see the primary intellectual energy in this arena now focused on other dimension of religion, politics, and reform that relate to Quaker subjects, especially in twentieth-century peacemaking and peace witness.

I was fascinated to learn from this volume that a similar dynamic operated in the realm of Quaker social and political witness as happened in the realm of spirituality. Here too we see if not the Quakerization of everything at least the Quakerization of many non-Quakers. This was a new insight for me, and I thought the essays on abolition, penal reform and especially peacemaking drew out this dynamic wonderfully. Akin to my work and Leigh Schmidt’s work on spirituality, in which we see the Quakerization process at work in the realm of spirituality, scholars working on pacifism, such as Kip Kosek in his *Acts of Conscience*, demonstrate this same phenomenon in reform and activism.

Lonnie Valentine insightfully observes the consequences of Quakerization in the twentieth century. “The beginning of the twentieth century,” he writes, “may be said to mark the beginning of the decline of distinctly Quaker ideas and actions for the transformation of society. Other denominations and other non-religious organizations were now doing what Quakers had been doing.” This is the great pitfall of cultural success. Clearly there is no danger of war, torture, and violence disappearing any time so, so the Quaker witness of peace remains vital—yet it certainly became less distinctly Quaker, especially in the interwar years. In the arena of spirituality the process is even more advanced, as mystical and contemplative spiritualities, often under the rubric of mindfulness, have become commonplace. Liberal Protestantism, with the Rufus Jones version of Quakerism in the vanguard, may be in crisis as an institutional entity precisely because of and in proportion to its cultural success.

For these insights and many others I am grateful for this work. The editors and contributors have demonstrated the potential for denominational or movement histories to speak to larger concerns in religious studies and religious history. In these pages we see Quakers
as both harbingers of changes that would eventually sweep across the Anglo-American world and as shapers of those transformations. Congratulations to all involved on this outstanding book.