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Review of Quakering Theology by David L. Johns

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DAVID L. JOHNS' *QUAKERING* THEOLOGY BOOK REVIEW

MARGERY POST ABBOTT

David Johns' new book of essays drew me in just by its title. "Quakering Theology" intrigues me. I want to know more about what he means by that and how it might be done. I also have an immediate reaction that "Quakering theology" will make theology more accessible for folk who are not embedded in the academic community. In his preface Johns asserts: "What we *can* do and indeed what we *must* do is *Quaker* (verb) theology, that is, we must texture it and offer it a particular quality." In this process, Johns urges us to think through our identity as Friends, and also to bring that identity into the wider Christian community. This process is intensely relational. He names this as "theology in the spirit," work that can only occur in communion with others, both within the Quaker world and ecumenically.

As Johns opens this conversation, he asks challenging questions about familiar terms. When we speak of faith grounded in experience, "Experience of what?" If we see our faith as incarnational, how do our bodies express this in worship? How do we recognize when silence is empty and fuels despair rather than inspiring faith? He invites us to engage with the God which is disruptive and beyond all knowing as well as the intimate Inward Guide. Are we willing to admit when Quaker "distinctives" are deadening rather than enlivening? All these and more are valuable questions to engage. Sorting through our differing understandings of being a Quaker to see what are matters of language and what are more substantive is a worthy task.

All in all, Johns declares his purpose is to bring a Quaker flavor into the Christian church's understanding of itself even as he prods Quakers to engage among ourselves to better articulate who we are and how we might better unite to act for the glory of God.

I appreciate as well his challenge, particularly to those who adhere to the distinctive features of the Quaker way, to stop defining ourselves by use of negatives — a criticism that is widely heard among unprogrammed Friends in recent years. Defining Quaker meeting

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in terms of no priests, no sermons and no program is a deadening practice.

Today I want to address two threads which are closely interwoven as they flow through Johns' book — that of an incarnational faith and the impossibility of unmediated revelation.

AN INCARNATIONAL FAITH

“Sometimes You Just Gotta Dance.” What a great chapter title. It is so true. It starts with a story of Inuit Friends dancing in Alaska like they hadn't since 1902. That is, since the missionaries came with their prohibitions including dance, which had been a valuable form of communication as well as entertainment for this community. In his discussion of bringing the whole of the body into worship, Johns considers aspects of speech and of silence, noting some of the positives of silence, but emphasizing it as part of the “liturgical restrictivism” of Quaker worship that contribute to “silencing the voice of the body.” (p.9) This concern is one that is quietly alive in parts of the Quaker world. I happen to belong to an unprogrammed Meeting where several people have at times held this concern and have brought their message during worship in the form of sacred dance or of authentic movement. Such messages have been met with a mix of bewilderment, unease and delight, as are messages brought as song. Similarly, individuals are more and more gaining courage to speak of experiences of physical quaking during worship, a phenomena that characterized early Friends and is more present than we realize today.

Johns has struck a chord that resonates in many places. What is missing in his conversation is a fuller articulation of how stilling of the outward senses fosters the development of the inward and how inward change shifts outward action. Isaac Pennington spoke poetically of this dimension of Friends' discipline and invites us to grow in these senses of feeling that parallel the outer senses but are so often buried in the dynamics and rush of daily life, or even in the song and preaching of conventional worship.

Life gives it a feeling, a light, a tasting, an hearing, a smelling, of the heavenly things, by which sense it is able to discern and distinguish them from the earthly. And from this Measure of Life the capacity increases, the senses grow stronger; it sees more, feels more, tastes more, hears more, smells more. Now

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when the senses are grown up to strength, . . . doubtings and disputes in the mind fly away and the soul lives in the certain demonstration and fresh sense and power of life.” —(Isaac Penington in R. Melvin Keiser and Rosemary Moore, *Knowing the Mystery of Life Within*, Quaker Books, 2005, p.)

These inward senses are an essential part of coming to recognize and welcome what comes from Christ and what from fear, greed, or other damaging impulses. They are part of a process that is part of the embodiment of the Light so that its guidance becomes an everyday occurrence. I suggest that this choice to still the outward body in order to develop the often neglected inner senses affirms rather than rejects the incarnational experience and work of Christ.

The other dimension of silence which Johns could helpfully continue to explore is the terror that he mentions. Numerous journals of Quaker ministers reported this terror as an integral part of transformation and experienced it as the “refiner’s fire” that burned away the dross and left what was pure. Friends today have been neglectful in addressing the harshness that can accompany transformation. Instead, we should recognize its authenticity so that we might better enter into what we might experience in worship, rather than fleeing from it.

As is evident in Penington’s words, there is a full, sensory language that grows from the depth of worship and raises up the inward senses that are little valued in modern culture. In this way faith is embodied and then expressed in words and behavior—practices that more and more are being seen in some circles as enriching each other rather than being in sharp contrast.

Johns sees such things as the Quaker prohibition on the outward sacraments as a position that has outlived its time. His insistence that taking bread and wine is a statement of being in communion with one another rather than about being in communion with Christ makes such actions more appealing. In many Quaker circles, the potluck meal and other such gatherings has come to serve this purpose in a more meaningful way than a symbolic taste. Again, the early Quaker recognition of many baptisms as the Spirit works within the soul strikes a chord of recognition that speaks to some Friends today more than the symbolic use of water, as does concept of all of life being sacramental and exploring what it means to take up the cross daily.

Johns’ “Quakering” resonates with my own desire to make our faith more alive and relevant. I like to speak of a “lived theology” — faith embodied in all that we do. I see faith as incarnational, as does Johns,

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but visible in a way that can speak to those whose deepest connection with God — or whatever shapes their lives at the core—and can be expressed in ways other than explicitly through the Christian story. A lived theology incorporates language and behavior—describing, evoking and living into the vision of the New Creation on an everyday basis. In this I share with Johns the excitement and potential of this process.

UNMEDIATED REVELATION

One thread throughout these essays is the question of the nature of revelation. His opening essay on “Blessing and Cursing: Learning the Language of Faith” notes the various modern Quaker theologians, starting with Rufus Jones and Elton Trueblood, who have asserted that “Quaker worship is no different than laboratory science” and then contrasts them with Maurice Creasey’s objections to the influence of the Enlightenment on Quaker thought. (p.4) Among the problems Johns sees are “claims of *unmediated* experience and/or revelation over acknowledgement that revelation must be *mediated* and/or *materially articulated*. He finds this and other dualisms problematic at best and contributing to misunderstandings. From this starting point, he urges readers to rethink what is meant by various familiar phrases. In this light, he brings us to greater awareness of the integrity of language, both in what we say and our demeanor as we speak. Because language can so readily influence experience, the importance of using the language of blessing cannot be over stated.

In chapter 5, “(Re)visioning Sacramental Theology,” Johns delves into the frequent claims by Friends of unmediated revelation in the context of reconsidering the nature of the sacraments and the “persistent problem in Quaker thought . . . the spiritualization of the sacraments” which he sees as linked with dualism. (p. 43) He objects to the unspoken assumption that only the spiritual is of true lasting value, superior to the material stuff of creation. He goes on to challenge the term “unmediated revelation.”

Whatever early Quakers meant by this idea, it surely cannot mean that revelation is unmediated. More than likely, it is a further expression of disenfranchisement from the power of ecclesial offices (p. 45).

Stated in that revised manner, Johns finds that the concept is still valuable. He adds emphasis by stating “unmediated revelation is not

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possible” because it takes us away from the incarnational and material (p. 45). To assert unmediated revelation Johns quotes Mayra Rivera in finding this close to “claiming to have overcome finitude” (p. 46). Yet, Johns later affirms that “Christ as present teacher dismantles the mediatory priesthood” (p.77) as part of his argument about knowing Christ in all his offices in the new covenant of God.

Within the context of this book, it is not until Chapter 11, “Historically Ungrateful?” that Johns’ gives a definition of what he means by “mediated.” Here he returns to address the question of revelation in greater depth, using Baron Friedrich von Hügel’s 1913 address to the Religious Thought Society and a 1998 article by Rachel Britton in *The Friends’ Quarterly*. According to Johns, “What Hügel challenges is [George] Fox’s contention that these ‘openings’ came to him apart from the historical, concrete givenness of a real tradition. That is to say, Hügel challenges the notion of *unmediated* revelation” (p. 94). Johns’ understanding of mediation here includes all sensory, language and other influences, whereas I always read the term in ways more consistent with standard dictionary definitions as based on action involving other humans. He relies on Hügel who gives evidence only that “Fox speaks as though . . . my memory-intuition, my past-present . . . were indeed never essential, indispensable,” and pronounces Fox wrong (p. 96).

Thus, Johns and I read seventeenth century Quaker assertions in a fundamentally different way. Fox was actually quite explicit that he experienced revelation without the intervention of priests, or those trained at Oxford and Cambridge and without having to read it in a book. This seems very much in line with the view that mediation is about human intervention as in settling suits, reaching accords and removing misunderstanding or reaching a compromise. Fox was proclaiming that he could hear God speaking directly to him when he was far from any other human influence: “But as I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition” (Nickalls, *Journal of George Fox*, p. 11).

Thomas Ellwood, a younger contemporary of Fox, points to the new covenant when “Now was all my former life ripped up, and my sins by degrees were set in order before me. . . . Now also did I receive a new law—an inward law super-added to the outward—the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus.” (Thomas Ellwood, *The History of the Life of Thomas Ellwood* (London: Routledge, 1885), in Jessamyn

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West, *The Quaker Reader*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), p. 147.

This inward experience was linked clearly to Jeremiah 31 and related to the direct, inward action of the Spirit, something that was not widely accepted in the seventeenth century and is still controversial in some Quaker circles today. Fox's action was in stark contrast to the concept that only the priest can interpret divine will and must teach and guide his flock (something asserted by Joe Gerick, a previous superintendent of Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends Church in regard to the wrongness of Quaker business process). There is little in modern North American culture or in many churches, to encourage individuals to spend time focused inwardly and expecting to be thus transformed.

Johns argues that no experience is free of our culture, language and other similar intangible influences (p.45). We can all agree with this whole-heartedly. However, our heritage asserts that there is a force that is holy, often named the Light of Christ, which can be sensed by each and every person, even if they never heard of Jesus. This Light, if recognized and obeyed, can guide the individual in their speaking and in their actions, leading them in the way that is holy. Similarly, there is another seed that if nourished will lead to evil. Isaac Penington left us a wonderful body of work to aid in discernment of spirits so that we not be led astray. Ultimately, the test is in the doing: do our actions reflect the fruit of the Spirit? Do they stand up to testing within our faith community?

In fact, a number of years ago I posed the question of how we speak of inward experience to a group that was composed of both evangelical and liberal Quakers after my radically transforming mystical experience and call to ministry. I did not name this in Christian terms even though the evangelicals present saw it as consistent with Christian conversion. Half the group said that if it was Christ at work, that is how it would be named. Half saw this kind of experience as independent of Christianity — that the same experience could be named in different ways in different times and cultures. Surprisingly, half the evangelicals and half the liberals took up each position.

Yet Johns, I suspect, might see these results as the sign of a problem. He sees too many Friends declaring “Quakerism is what Quakers do” — resulting in hyphenated Quakerism. Johns names this as “akin to a pluralism that claims disinterested neutrality, hearing all voices of all perspectives, affirming them all, yet free from the need to

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regard any with seriousness” (p. 130). Many in the liberal Meetings of Friends would argue that this is a grace, the place where Friends connect Christianity with other of the world’s great religions. Douglas Steere actively lived out his belief of the underlying unity and truth that exists across religious traditions. Even doing so he affirmed the distinctions Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity brought to the table and believed each has much to learn from the other, calling it “mutual irradiation.”

In the matter of persons, then, if we were to attempt to characterize this further dimension of presence that goes beyond locatability, we should have to speak of its posture as a readiness to respect and to stand in wonder and openness before the mysterious life and influence of the other. (Douglas Steere, *On Being Present Where You Are*, Backhouse Lecture, 1987, p. 8)

I appreciate Steere’s position that places Quakers within the Christian church, recognizing there is much room for interfaith engagement and relationship. We can gain from even those “hyphenated Quakers.” If we are willing to dig deeply and yet be open to contrary views, such encounters help us learn more fully who we are and the breadth of divine grace in the world. We only get in trouble when such individuals attempt to define the whole of Quakerism.

Because of the inwardness of our practice and absence of many of the outward symbols, Quakers are in a unique position to engage with the various faiths of the world at a time when some, especially Islam, are widely vilified in the public mind. Always in that place of true unity, which Johns would name as Jesus Christ, there is a place for relationship and communion with the others even if their culture and expression of faith are quite different. That is part of the great strength of the emphasis by Friends on the inward dimension. Aided by long practice, testing and attention, it is possible to sense this unity even when language seems to hide it.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In his final chapter, David Johns makes some clear statements about the listening that is so central to Friends worship and practice. I welcome these ideas and invite him to elaborate in future teaching and writing about what his vision of a “post-Quaker Christianity” might entail? For a modest suggestion, one area where his concept

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of Quakering theology might be a fruitful contribution in Friends churches as well as the wider Christian dialogue is in considering the pastoral ministry. In our 2004 book, *Walk Worthy of Your Calling*, Peggy Senger Parsons and I brought together an international group of Friends to consider the nature of Friends' traveling ministry. In this the pastoral ministry was just touched on and it was evident more work would be helpful. Over the years I have come to appreciate those pastors who have sought to be informed by our tradition of listening spirituality rather than simply following paths set out in their training. Often it seems to be a challenge for both the pastor and the congregation, but one that could benefit from in depth conversations in wider venues.