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Fager's "Without Apology: The Heroes, the Heritage and the Hope of Liberal Quakerism" - Book Review

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Book Review

Without Apology: The Heroes, the Heritage and the Hope of Liberal Quakerism by Chuck Fager (Media, Philadelphia: Kimo, 1996), 170 pp.

Chuck Fager is best known among American Friends for his several books of Quaker fiction and nonfiction, but especially for his Quaker newsletter, *A Friendly Letter (AFL)*. Chuck had been a full-time journalist in the sixties and seventies, covering a variety of social issues, particularly the civil rights movement. He brought this background to bear upon current issues among American Friends - especially the controversial ones.

During the the life of *AFL* (134 issues from 1981 to 1993), Friends United Meeting (FUM) supplied a continuing "soap opera," an ecclesiastical melodrama, that Chuck covered with journalistic *elan*. The liberal-evangelical struggles that have come to be known as "culture wars" in the United States played out with intensity across FUM's far-flung constituencies and unresolved theological tensions. Reporting on a body where controversy tended to be managed and swept under the carpet, Fager's newsletters might better have been titled *The Lancet*. I sometimes winced at the "expose" journalistic style of some issues of *AFL*. These were denominational conflicts, not civil ones; and some of the people involved were personal friends of mine. Yet I simultaneously wondered, "if not for this newsletter, how would I ever know about these crucial developments?" Some liberal Friends in the left wing of FUM and beyond chortled at each new instalment of this Quaker "Dallas." To me, however, this was tragedy, no matter how farcical some of the action. Of course, some in FUM were chagrined by Fager's reportage and anathematised him for it.

When *AFL* was laid down in 1993, it was not for lack of readership or a dearth of good material to report. The newsletter will be an important source for future historians of American Quakerism, not only for its information on certain key events, but as a significant phenomenon in its own right.

Fager revisits some of the classic episodes of *AFL* in his new book, *Without Apology*. But added to the painful revelations and incisive analyses of the original reportage is a compelling personal theological statement of American liberal Quakerism at the end of the twentieth century. During the early nineties, Fager was engaged in graduate studies in theology and the Bible. Those efforts have "seasoned" themes from the newsletter into a rich set of insights and paradoxes. Fager is still strongly exercised by the repressive tendencies and political ascendancy of the religious right. But he balances his polemical moments with sobering insights into the mirror-image distortions of Quakerism in the liberal wing. He makes an impassioned case for the integrity and vitality of liberal Quakerism while also challenging Friends to face up to their phobias, enclave mentality and pallid spirituality.

Material revisited and expanded from the newsletter days includes: the clash over homosexuality at the 1977 Friends in the Americas conference in Wichita (Chapter 1); the 1991 "Realignment" initiative in FUM (Chapter 9); and the 1990 "Wicca" controversy in New York Yearly Meeting (Chapter 8). Chapter 7 profiles two American liberal Quaker exemplars, Elizabeth Watson and Jim Corbett, who had figured prominently from time to time in the newsletter.

Fager offers this definition of liberal Quakerism:

An ongoing effort to make visible a particular portion of the true Church, by means of the specific traditions and disciplines of the Religious Society of Friends. This very idea of manifesting the true Church is, we believe, rooted in the early Quakers' unique and inclusive understanding of the Society's Christian background and origins. The key Quaker disciplines by which this part of the Church is constituted are: silence-

based, unprogrammed worship; a free ministry led by the spirit; decision-making by the worshipful sense of the meeting; church structures kept to a spartan decentralised minimum; cultivation of the inward life of both individual and the group; a preference for unfolding experience of truth, or "continuing revelation," over creeds and doctrinal systems; and devotion to the historic but evolving Quaker testimonies, especially peace, simplicity and equality. (pp. xif.)

This is a refreshing formulation, particularly from an avowedly liberal Quaker perspective. The emphasis on the *visibility* of a liberally Quaker church, through fidelity to its idiomatic traditions and disciplines, is a breath of fresh air. I find liberal Friends usually avoidant in discussions of the church in any concrete, accountable sense. Instead of struggling with who we are as a modern Religious Society, liberal Friends often throw in diversionary questions, like "but what about Buddhists, Hindus, or Native Americans?" Fager's definition maintains the sense of an invisible, trans-Christian church, while doing some justice to the fact and responsibilities of a particular, historic Quaker polity.

He makes good use of Barclay's *Apology* in maintaining the invisible and inclusive sense of the church. Admittedly, he does not grapple with the more Christian-specific parts of Barclay's development of the church. Moreover, he adds a sprinkling of "sound-bytes" from George Fox, William Penn, and John Woolman to bolster the universalist side of Quaker tradition. I have seen these "proof texts" used too many times by liberal Friends to paper over the intensely Christian vision of traditional Quakerism. But these minor irritations are offset by the larger framework of Fager's argument.

Chapter 4 makes a good liberal case for the ongoing Christian affinities of Quakerism. Chapters 5-6 offer an engaging anecdotal history of the liberal, inclusivist evolution of Friends on both sides of the Atlantic. This is not a scholarly study as such, but shows a responsible use of sources in glimpsing some defining moments in the liberal Quaker trajectory.

The profiles of Corbett and Watson in Chapter 7 make me wonder if we have entered some kind of *post-liberal* phase among Friends since the sixties. Something has changed in liberalism over the past thirty years. We may need to embrace some theory of postmodernism in order to describe the turn liberal Friends have taken in the latter twentieth century. Like Fager, both Watson and Corbett have re-engaged with the Bible in a manner not seen in classic liberal Quakerism.

Chapter 10 is a strong summary, making good use of Jacques Ellul's *incognito* interpretation of Christian identity in our time. It offers Fager a helpful resolution of the tension between Quakerism's historic Christian identity and internal logic on the one hand, and its current universal outreach on the other.

The book ends with a ringing affirmation of liberal Quakerism and its future. But then a postscript counters with the suspicion that such conclusions are not "Quakerly." What follows is a list of eight prescriptions for the "improvement" of liberal Quakerism: renewed adult religious education and spiritual formation; reclamation of Quaker and biblical roots; better outreach; better interconnections, countering widespread feelings of isolation; overcoming fears of anger and conflict; confronting antichristian prejudices; moving beyond the "NPR (British Friends, read BBC) syndrome"; and a renewal of Quaker volunteer service.

Without Apology admirably complements the spate of fresh scholarship among British Friends, reappraising the century of developments since the Manchester Conference of 1895. Ben Pink Dandelion has identified a tendency of "privatisation" within Britain Yearly Meeting. Jonathan Dale has challenged Friends to move "beyond the spirit of the age." Chuck Fager's call to liberal Quaker renewal stands alongside such challenging statements. It deserves the attention of not only concerned Friends but also scholars. I believe it will prove a significant expression of liberal Quaker revision at the end of this century.

Douglas Gwyn

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