

Universalist Friends

The Journal Of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship

In This Issue

3 From the Editor

6 *Jesus for the Non-Religious*

Reviewed by Richard O. Fuller

17 *Getting Oriented: What Every Christian Should Know about Eastern Religions, but Probably Doesn't*

Reviewed by Patricia A. Williams

21 *Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time*

Reviewed by Charles C. Finn

27 *Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time*

Reviewed by Laura George

30 *An Introduction to Quakerism*

Reviewed by Patricia A. Williams



The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our conversation with all who search sincerely. Our mission includes publishing and providing speakers and opportunities for fellowship at regional and national Quaker gatherings.

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Larry Spears, Treasurer
Quaker Universalist Fellowship
15160 Sundown Drive
Bismarck, North Dakota 58503-9206
Tel: 701-258-1899 Fax: 701-258-9177
Email: spears@btinet.net
website: www.universalistfriends.org

From the Editor

This issue of *Universalist Friends* is dedicated to reviews of books that Quaker universalists might find interesting. The idea of reviewing books for Quaker universalists arose because the Quaker Universalist Fellowship, our sponsor and publisher, published two books in 2007—so recently they still await reviewing. Please, if you can, review one of them for the next issue. Meanwhile, I will say a little about them here.

They are titled *Universalism and Religions: Quaker Universalist Reader #2* and *Universalism and Spirituality: Quaker Universalist Reader #3*. Clearly, there is a *Quaker Universalist Reader #1*. It appeared in 1986, a collection of the founding documents of modern Quaker universalism. Numbers 2 and 3 collect articles from the two journals inspired by the modern Quaker universalist movement. Reader #2 has five chapters: “What is Universalism?” “What is Universal?” “Universalism and Quakerism,” “Universalism and Christianity,” and “Universalism and Non-Christian Religions.” Reader #3 contains six chapters: “God as Metaphor,” “What God?” “Spiritual Experiences,” “Spiritual Journeys,” “Spirituality and Mysticism,” and “Spirituality and Science.” More information about the two volumes is at www.universalistfriends.org and www.theologyauthor.com.

This issue reviews four books, all but one published in 2007. Their shared topic is, more or less, Christianity and Quaker universalism. Also included are references to the *Tao Te Ching*, explained below. I received reviews of other books, and they will appear in the August issue. If you have a favorite book relevant to Quaker universalism, please review it for us.

The first review is lengthy, but well worth reading, especially for those unfamiliar with the works of John Shelby Spong who, for many years, has argued in print and in speeches

that Christianity must change. Spong is an Episcopal bishop, so he does not look East for change. The second book does. It is by Paul Alan Laughlin, professor of religion. He also argues that Christianity must change, and offers gems from the East to reorient it. The changes both men suggest will seem familiar to Quaker universalists.

These reviews are followed by reviews of two books explicitly on Quakerism. Patricia A. Williams's book argues that the original, seventeenth century Quakerism is a theology for our time, congruent with and even enhanced by modern science and biblical criticism. There are two reviews of this book, one by a Quaker whose orientation is western, the other by a non-Quaker familiar with eastern religions. The second book on Quakerism contains a history of Quaker theology and an overview of Quakerism today, worldwide. The two books are complementary.

I wrote the review of the Laughlin book. His first chapter contains an excellent discussion of the contrast between West and East in their views of God/Ultimate Reality. Reading it, I discovered why I find it so odd that many people today, among them some Quaker universalists, find the word *God* so offensive. Although my background is Episcopal and decidedly western, the God that grew up with me as I grew up became more and more eastern, although I had little knowledge of eastern religions. A few years ago, I bought a copy of the *Tao Te Ching* and discovered articulated there my God (in a "godless" religion!)—the Tao. Later, I excerpted those passages that speak directly of the Tao and handed them to some of my more spiritual friends, also western oriented, who immediately said, "Yes! That's how I feel about/experience/conceptualize God!" Those verses are listed below by number. Truly, mysticism is universal and its Object everywhere the same, if ultimately indescribable.

Patricia A. Williams

References

Tao Te Ching: A New English Version, Stephen Mitchell, Harper Perennial, 1992. The following verses in the Tao Te Ching refer directly to the Tao: 1, 4-8, 14, 25, 32, 34, 37, 41, 51, 52, 62, 73 and 77.

The mission of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is to foster the under-standing that within everyone is a directly accessible spiritual light that can lead people to equality, simplicity, justice, compassion and peace.

QUF Steering Committee, November 2005

SUBMISSIONS

We are seeking articles from 500 to 3,000 words. These may be essays on personal experience of arrival or maturation in Quaker universalism or of worship or they may be scholarly works focused on Quaker universalism, history, biography, sociology, scripture, and theology, both Christian and non-Christian. We also welcome book reviews, poetry, personal essays, and letters. Use inclusive language. Please send your submissions by U.S. mail on diskette or CD in WORD to Patricia Williams, P.O. Box 69, Coveseville, VA 22931 or as WORD attachments to email to theologyauthor@aol.com. Please put UF in the subject line. We do not accept anonymous submissions without very good reason. **Deadline for next issue: June 15.**

Jesus for the Non-Religious by John Shelby Spong (293p.
HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, CA, 2007)

Reviewed by Richard O. Fuller

My first encounter

I was both shocked and relieved at my first reading of *Jesus for the Non-Religious* by John Shelby Spong.

I was fascinated by the chapters in Part 1, although I am not competent to judge their scholarship. My more biblically-literate friends tell me that Spong's views on the Bible are those of the Jesus Seminar, of which he is a member. In the first ten chapters Spong hammers at traditional Christian understandings of the story of Jesus' life. A sample of the chapter headings: "There Was No Star Over Bethlehem; The Parents of Jesus—Fictionalized Composites; Miracle Stories in the Gospels—Are They Necessary?; The Crucifixion Narrative—Liturgy Masquerading as History."

I was shocked because Spong attacks the "historical truth" of these stories without mercy, with no apparent regard for the feelings of people who take them as history. Chapter after chapter Spong engages in eloquent acts of demolition. My feelings of relief came because, as a member of this Christian culture, I have suffered under the fundamentalist assertions that Spong here demolishes. I am relieved to hear him say what I dare not: "On every level, each of these assertions has become for me not only literal nonsense but also little more than theological gobbledegook." (p. 8)

In Part Two, Spong addresses the question, How did the misconceptions he has just demolished arise in the first place, and what can we guess about how the Gospels came to be written in the way that they were? His over-all argument is that the Jewish followers of Jesus, trying to represent the power of

the “Jesus experience” in their lives, turned back to their culture’s scriptures and presented Jesus’ life as an act of God, very much on a par with the acts of God in the lives of Moses, Elijah and Elisha. Spong says that, within first-century Jewish culture, the stories of the synoptic Gospels were recognized as guides for devotional experience in the synagogue; they were not thought of as literal history.

We are not reading history; we are watching the gospel writer paint a portrait drawn from the Hebrew scriptures, designed to present the Jesus experience as an invitation into oneness with god; and in that portrait he uses the only language he has available, the magnificent language of his religious tradition.
(p. 127)

However, with the “gentile captivity of the church,” the Jewish liturgical framework of the stories was lost and they were understood to be historical reports. I am not competent to judge Spong’s controversial work, but I found it appealing, plausible and persuasive. And it was fascinating to see a former church official take the scriptures very seriously, as indications of the action of God in the world, while at the same time vehemently declaring that they have been profoundly misunderstood, and that much evil has come from those misunderstandings.

In Part three, Spong tries to look back through the written work of Jesus’ early followers to discern who this Jesus was, who so profoundly affected them. Spong works to represent the power of Jesus in concepts acceptable to modern sensibilities. He says Jesus demonstrated, in words and deeds, that the tribal boundaries the Jews had placed around themselves limited their ability to see that God was everywhere, in everyone, including the traditionally “unclean:” Samaritans, menstruating women, tax collectors—everyone. Jesus’ teachings blew the minds of his followers wide open, releasing them from tribal mentality, “that they might have life and have it abundantly.”

As a non-religious imbibor of the predominant Christian culture, I was profoundly touched by this interpretation of Christ. And by Christ I mean, and I think Spong means, the splash and ripples that went out, responding to the rock of Jesus plunging into our space-time.

So that was my first reading of the book. It was a profoundly emotional experience for me, one I have shared with friends. However, as I prepare this review for a broader audience, I feel the need to add material with which I'm less emotionally involved, and to place the book more clearly in its cultural context.

John Shelby Spong was bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark for 24 years before his retirement in 2001. The book he published immediately previous to the one discussed here is *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Discover the God of Love*. Earlier he wrote *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die : A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*. Taken together, all of his titles have sold over a million copies, so he represents, to some degree, a large segment of Christians of whom I know little. Some of these people pay \$3.33/month for an online weekly newsletter from him, available at johnshelbyspong.com. I find this all quite heartening. Of course not everybody does. He has received at least 16 credible death threats from people who regard themselves as Christians. (p. 230)

Spong is part of a reform movement that some call "Progressive Christianity." I see the message of this movement as having a potential as significant as that of the protestant reformation, sweeping aside old patterns of religious practice, offering a fresh understanding of the old faith that allows future generations renewed access to their traditions. As Spong says, "Only time will tell." (p. 136)

John Shelby Spong writes in his preface, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called on the Christian world to separate Christianity from religion and he spoke of something he called 'religionless Christianity.'" (p. xiv)

Later Spong says, "I was drawn . . . to the person of Jesus in powerful and compelling ways. I was also bothered and ultimately repelled by the distorting myths that surrounded him, and stifled by the controlling religion that appeared to have captured him. (p. 291) . . . "I seek a Jesus beyond scripture, beyond creeds, beyond doctrines, beyond dogmas and even beyond religion itself. Only there will our gaze turn toward the mystery of God, the mystery of life, the mystery of love and the mystery of being." (p. 137)

Christianity must change or die

John Shelby Spong writes:

I believe that I am witnessing the death of Christianity, as it has been historically understood. (p. 7) . . . Today that first-century supernatural language not only blinds us to the meaning of Jesus, but actually distorts Jesus for us. (p. 95) . . . The idea that the ultimate truth of God can be reduced to creedal or doctrinal formulas is both ludicrous and spiritually suicidal. (p. 135). . . The issue is usually posed by saying that either resurrection is real or Christianity was built on an illusion and will not endure. I do not believe it is quite so simple. (p. 117) . . . Destroying Jesus is not my goal; destroying the layers of ever-hardening concrete that have encased him is." (p. 14)

This former bishop seeks to end theism

Spong writes:

I am elated to discern that theism is nothing more than a human definition of God and that atheism is simply the denial of that human definition. (p. 133). . . Theism is not God; it is rather a human coping mechanism. (p. 220) . . . I am a God intoxicated human being, but I can no longer define my God experience inside the boundaries of a theistic

definition of God. Therefore, when I say that God was in Christ or when I assert that I meet God in the person of Jesus, I mean something quite different from the theological definitions of the past. (p. 214) . . . Christian people can no longer live in denial. Theism is not morally neutral. The death of theism is greatly to be desired. (p. 237)

A blistering critique of the church today, and of traditional church-goers

Spong's words are scathing. Here are some samples: . . . in . . . the Episcopal Church, the idea that sickness was punishment for sin did not get removed from our prayer books until the revision of 1979. (p. 78) A God who answers prayers is the last aspect of the supernatural theistic deity that people are willing to surrender. (p. 75)

Scrape away from traditional Christian teaching the piety and the stained-glass attitudes, and one finds cesspools of anger, boiling cauldrons that have ignited religious violence in every generation. Christians need to own this part of their history. (p. 234)

The basic modus operandi of the Christian church throughout history has been to make its people constantly aware of their failures, their inadequacies and their weaknesses. (p. 235) . . . Punished people always punish. That is the peculiar law of humanity. (p. 236)

Spong holds: "In our society race, gender and sexual orientation are the major arenas of prejudice" (p. 250) and he enumerates ways in which Christian churches have been leaders in maintaining all of these. He continues:

We will never become whole by rejecting or hating others. (p. 253)

Moral judgment is not life-giving; love that transcends the boundaries of judgment, as Jesus' love did, is. (p. 273)

A creation story consistent with modern scientific understanding

I find Spong's rendition of our origins lacking in several areas, but I am delighted with his attempt. It practically cries out: "What can't thou say?"

He offers a creation story that sets our galaxy as one among many and offers a narrative with single-celled life emerging on earth. He sees the roots of the Christian story in the social development of animals.

Sometimes the hunt in packs required, as the price of success, the sacrifice of one or more of them. Because the survival of the species had apparently become a higher value than the survival of a single member, these creatures accepted that price. Here was the rudimentary development of tribal identity, later called patriotism, which would honor the one who was sacrificed so that the pack could survive. (p. 218)

Later, with the dawning of self-awareness:

These human creatures had evolved to the place where they could look out on the world from a new center as separate, self-aware and self-conscious beings. It was probably both a startling wonder and a traumatic moment of fear and enormous anxiety . . . [having the ability to] know you are going to die. . . ." (p. 219)

Human beings began to ask questions like these: Is there someone or some presence in the universe like me, self-conscious and aware, but possessing more power than I possess. . . . How can I secure the blessing of this power? (p. 221)

In Spong's view the first anxiety-reducing answers to these questions take the form of animism. Later, anxiety-reducing answers are offered in the form of deities. He claims that the more rigid and "certain" a faith-system, the more anxiety is kept at bay. "It is this claim to possess absolute truth that keeps anxiety in check. Relativity in religious claims must be repressed, because it always allows our original debilitating anxiety to return." (p. 223)

Spong says that earlier instinct for the protection of the group at the expense of individual life, freely given, becomes an evolutionary stage that must be transcended. Suicide bombers are higher on the evolutionary scale than "dog eat dog," but we must do better. Where fundamentalist Christianity puts "original sin" as a force each individual must struggle against, Spong puts "tribalism."

This tribal tradition arises out of our deep-seated survival mentality and it feeds something at the heart of our insecure humanity. We are tribal people to our core. [Yet,] . . . the more we sink into tribal attitudes, the more our lives are consumed with hatred; and as a direct result, the less human we become . . . unless [tribalism] is transcended, a deeper humanity ceases to be a possibility. . . . One cannot be fully human so long as one is consumed with hatred against those who threaten one's survival. (p. 241)

I find very astute this focus on anxiety and our defenses against it.

Spong sees in the life of Jesus a transcending of fears of the "other," with the "unclean" Samaritans as his prime example. However, Jesus' words and deeds go far beyond that, breaking the tribal Jewish taboos around the roles of women, tax-collectors and work on the Sabbath. "In Christ there is 'neither Jew nor Greek.' . . . The power of Jesus had expanded Paul's tribal boundaries and, through him, had enabled the

followers of Jesus to embrace the world. (p. 243) . . . It is nothing less than a breakthrough in human consciousness.” (p. 244)

The crucifixion

Spong does not flinch from entering and remaking the central moments of the Christian story. The title for chapter 25 is: “The Cross: A Human Portrait Of The Love Of God”

What does the Jesus’ experience reveal about life, about God, about purpose, and about the eternal search for oneness and about what it means to be at one with God? Only if we can answer this question can the cross become for us a usable symbol instead of a sign of the theistic deity’s sadistic nature, which required the sacrifice of the son to pay the price of sin. (p. 284)

And as he seeks a “usable symbol,” Spong has the wisdom to speak directly from his own experience.

I experience love as something beyond me. I cannot create it, but I can receive it. Once I have received it, I can give it away. So love is a transcendent reality that I can engage, and by which I can be transformed; I can grow into a deeper understanding of it and contemplate its source, which I call God.(p. 285)

It is through the expanded consciousness of these transcendent experiences that I look at Jesus of Nazareth and assert that in his life I see what the word “God” means. (p. 285-6)

. . . the Christ path is . . . to seek divinity not externally but as the deepest dimension of what it means to be human. It is to enter divinity only when we become free to give ourselves away. It is no longer to speculate about who or what God is but to act out of what God means. . . . “God was in Christ” is not a doctrine that leads to theories of incarnation and trinity; it is an acclamation of a presence that leads

to a wholeness, a new creation, a new humanity and a new manner of living. (p. 286)

Spong turns to the stories of the crucifixion to understand the reverberating power of Jesus in the hearts of his followers. He does not take the crucifixion stories as history; he has already established to his satisfaction that no followers were present when Jesus was crucified. Rather Spong hears in these tales who Jesus was, for his followers. They found that Jesus

. . . was betrayed but he loved the betrayer. He was forsaken but he loved those who forsook him. His arrest was challenged but he demanded that his defenders put up their swords. He was falsely accused but he was silent in the face of his accusers. There was nothing defensive about him. . . . He was crucified and he loved his killers. Hostility and rejection, abuse and death—these did not diminish his humanity. That is a portrait of a fully human one who has no need to hate or to hurt. . . . Human dignity departs in the oldest of all human endeavors, the struggle to survive. . . . [Jesus' followers] remembered him . . . as a whole person, one who possessed his life so fully that he could give it away. (p. 288) . . . Seen from that perspective, the cross is not a place of torture and death; it is the portrait of the love of God seen when one can give all that one is, and all that one has, away. The cross thus becomes the symbol of a God presence that calls us to live, to love and to be. (p. 289-90) . . . The call of Jesus is thus not a call to be religious. It is not a call to escape life's traumas, to find security, to possess peace of mind. All of those things are invitations to a life-contracting idolatry. The call of God through Jesus is a call to be fully human, to embrace insecurity without building protective fences, to accept the absence of peace of mind as a requirement of humanity. . . . This is surely

what the author of the Fourth Gospel meant when he quoted Jesus as proclaiming that his purpose was “that they might have life and have it abundantly” (10:10). (p. 290)

Easter

Spong sees “Easter” as a six-month period in the lives of Jesus’ followers. They had scattered like leaves when Jesus was arrested. As they re-gathered and tried to make sense of their experience, as they shared with each other what his life had meant to them, and what his death must mean. . . They found that within each of themselves and among them as a group, he was alive. He had not died.

Jesus had opened doors into the disciples’ souls that cried out for understanding. They were caught between the transforming memory of his life and the chilling reality of his death. . . . At some point something happened to them that transformed his death into another expression of his life-giving love. (p. 115)

Stirring shifts in consciousness, along with dramatic changes in character, theology and worship, gripped the followers of Jesus at some point following the crucifixion. (p. 119)

None of this means that the transforming experience we call Easter was not real. It does mean that it was like an ecstatic moment breaking in upon their consciousness from another realm, another reality before which they were awestruck and to which they could respond only with worship. (p. 122)

In the Easter moment, the ecstatic experience was the dawning realization that death could not bind the God presence the disciples had met in Jesus of Nazareth. . . . To see him “raised,” however does not necessarily mean to feel his flesh; it means to embrace his meaning. (p. 123)

I must stop, closing with the same raw emotional state with which I opened. This review escapes my effort to control it. Spong's Christ beckons me. I want to tell you more of what Spong said, and simultaneously I cannot bear to go on.

Richard O. Fuller is a member of
Twin Cities (Minnesota) Friends Meeting

Getting Oriented: What Every Christian Should Know about Eastern Religions, but Probably Doesn't by Paul Alan Laughlin (290p., Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa, CA, 2005)

Reviewed by Patricia A. Williams

Paul Alan Laughlin intends to orient his readers in two senses: to introduce them to major Eastern religions and to encourage them to revise Christianity radically through integrating it with Eastern wisdom. He is especially concerned to replace the personal God of the monotheisms of the West with the impersonal Ultimate Reality of the religions of the East.

The book is reader-friendly. Each chapter begins with a list of objectives and ends with a clear conclusion, questions for discussion, and recommendations for further reading. Laughlin also supplies charts and boxes within the text, plus a glossary and an index. The book is well-written and interesting, even if the guiding metaphor of a journey sometimes becomes tedious.

There are five chapters. The first offers preparations and provisions for the journey (here's that metaphor!). This chapter contains one of the best discussions of West vs. East I have encountered. It begins, "Simply put, *transcendence* means 'otherness' and *immanence* means 'within-ness'" (p. 43). The God of the West is transcendent, above, beyond, other. The Western God predates the universe, is a "higher" power, is non-natural or supernatural, other than the universe, external to it and to anything in it. This God is personal, traditionally male, and decidedly anthropomorphic—lord, king, father. Under this God, to treat anything in the universe as divine constitutes idolatry, for God and the universe are distinct. The distinction results in a profane universe: not-God, secular, available for human manipulation and exploitation. Humanity, being other

than God, is alienated from God, sinful, in need of an external revelation and/or savior to close the chasm between human beings and God.

In contrast, the Ultimate Reality of the East dwells within—within the universe and all its occupants, including us. It permeates all things. It is “coextensive with the universe, though not necessarily identical to it” (p. 44). Because it permeates us, we are divine, yet ignorant of our true identity, needing education. The religions of the East approach Ultimate Reality through what Western tradition has called the way of negation: Ultimate Reality is best described by what it is not. By any name—Brahman, Sunyata, Tao—it is deeply hidden, indescribable in positive terms, and therefore sometimes conceived as nothingness. Yet it is experientially knowable. Because Ultimate Reality permeates the universe, the universe and all its contents are sacred, to be respected. People are not in need of external salvation, for they are already divine. Instead, they require inner enlightenment, the alleviation of their ignorance.

Chapter two discusses Hinduism, emphasizing that it accepts many paths to God and, so, may provide a counterweight to the monotheisms’ exclusiveness.

The third chapter discusses Buddhism, mentioning that it springs from Hinduism and has two schools, Theravada and Mahayana, the latter broken into several sects. Laughlin thinks Zen Buddhism (from the Mahayana tradition), in its emphasis on inwardness and meditation, has most to offer the West.

Next is a chapter on the religions of China, presented with much history. Finally, the chapter zeros in on two religions, Confucianism and Taoism. Laughlin finds Confucian-style ethics all-too-prevalent in American culture which, like Confucianism, attempts to cultivate people into good manners via education, to have people be all they can be. Like America, Confucianism is striving, masculine, and militaristic. America needs less of it, not more. In contrast, Taoism is quietist and

feminine, emphasizing simplicity and spontaneity. Taoism can bring balance and wisdom to Christianity.

The final chapter applies the wisdom of the East to Christianity, which has largely ignored mysticism and spirituality. Here, Laughlin focuses on the Bible as myth, poetry, and metaphor. On the whole, it is not to be interpreted literally. Thus, where Christianity thinks Jesus is literally God incarnate, and only Jesus is divine, Laughlin interprets the incarnation mythically. The incarnation offers a mythical archetype for all people. All are innately divine, all intrinsically filled with the Holy Spirit. From this perspective, Jesus becomes an example for us all, a unique historical human being, one who undergoes a spiritual quest and, in so doing, become the archetype of the “mystically self-realized person” (p. 220). Jesus’ teachings, Laughlin finds, resemble those of Taoism.

Laughlin succinctly summarizes the re-oriented Christianity he envisions:

Gone are the supernatural God, sinful humanity, uniquely divine Jesus Christ as atoning Savior, and factually true Bible. In their place is a mystically based Christianity, replete with an intimately indwelling Deity, divinely infused humanity, mythical Jesus evidencing an archetypal Christ, and metaphorical scripture (p. 254).

As Quaker universalists will recognize, Laughlin’s Eastern-oriented Christianity offers us—well, it offers us a version of Quaker universalism. From its beginning, Quakerism has emphasized the inner life, the Inward Light, mystical experience. For Fox and his followers, humanity could become divine (Fox described himself as son of God), could become perfected, like the pre-Fallen Adam and Eve, or even like Jesus Christ, who resisted temptation rather than succumbing to it, as Eve and Adam did. From its beginning, Quakerism has been willing to learn from other religions and to value the spirituality of those who never heard of Jesus or read a Bible.

For those who have little acquaintance with Eastern religions or need a refresher course, this book is clear, informative, and interesting. For those who want a mystical, quietist, non-anthropomorphic religion, one already exists in the West—Quaker universalism. For too long, we universalists have hid our Light under a bushel. Let us go forth and tell others that the spiritual, inward-oriented religion they are busy inventing exists here and now, in the Western tradition. Let us invite them to worship with us and discover their own, unique inward path to a fulfilled spirituality.

Patricia A. Williams is a member of the
Charlottesville (Virginia) Friends Meeting

Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time by Patricia A. Williams (198p., William Sessions Limited, York, England, 2007)

Reviewed by Charles C. Finn

Patricia Williams's *Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time* will be as refreshing as it is illuminating for modern readers who have come to view with suspicion the very word "theology." So much of the theological contention in the Christian past translates for many living in today's world into irrelevancy. With scientific discoveries over the past four centuries combined with scholarly biblical criticism over the past two centuries effectively destroying for any thinking person claims of biblical inerrancy or papal infallibility, what leg can theology still stand on?

A leg called Quakerism, according to Williams. Or, more precisely, the early Quakerism of George Fox and Robert Barclay, hearkening back to the theology of the early followers of Jesus before scriptures were written and doctrines were decreed that remains the mainstay of unprogrammed Quakers today. So if "Quaker theology" seems an oxymoronic contradiction in terms, given all the traditional theology Quakers have eliminated in their quest to pare mystical Christianity down to its essence, Williams's book will be not only a delightful surprise but a fascinating read. Perhaps her greatest skill is condensing a vast amount of research into well organized, clearly written prose. Amazing, a theology easily readable.

In "Background," Williams sets the context for what is to follow by reviewing the tumultuous times in mid-seventeenth century England when religious and civil strife spawned every manner of challenge to authority, including that of the itinerant visionary preacher George Fox. She introduces themes that the ensuing pages will build upon: that the early Quakers

emphasized spirituality—direct experience of the divine rather than intellectual speculation; that they found salvation through transformation of life rather than through intellectual beliefs; that the original interest of Robert Barclay in writing the definitive work on early Quaker theology was to defend Quakerism as Christianity’s third way against both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism; that the goal of the present volume is “to demonstrate how well original Quaker theology fits into our contemporary intellectual climate and to contrast it, as Barclay did, with Christian orthodoxy, which Barclay deemed untenable then and certainly is unsustainable today.” Williams concludes this introductory section with a summation of early Quaker theology: “What stands out about early Quakers is their sense—their experience—that the Holy Spirit (the inner Light) is active, here and now, and will lead all people to salvation, here and now, if they do not resist.” She then asks what the rest of her book will answer in the affirmative, “Can early Quaker theology remain vital now?”

Having set the stage, Williams launches into the first of her book’s three parts titled “The Stable Core: The Light Within” in which she describes Robert Barclay’s theology of early Quakerism which underlies contemporary unprogrammed Quaker worship. The four chapters in Part I discuss Quakerism from the standpoint of intellect, experience, collective action, and daily living. After elaborating at length on each of these standpoints, she helps readers synthesize the stable core with three summary points.

The first underscores that the foundational Quaker doctrine is that all people have a measure of divine Light within them, which doctrine springs from the Quaker experience of personal transformation combined with humility and attention to others. “Humility says, if I possess the Light, then so must everyone.”

All else follows logically from this core Quaker theology. “Because the Light is divine, everyone should heed it. To heed

it, people must listen for it, and a good listener listens in silence, without distractions.” Hence, silent Quaker Meetings for Worship developed, with each one present communing inwardly with the Light without the distractions of liturgy or outward sacraments

But more than manner of worship is affected by the Quaker foundational doctrine.

“If everyone has a measure of the Light, then logically, everyone deserves equal respect.” This equal respect, Williams elaborates, translates into the Quaker testimonies of equality, truth telling, simplicity and peace. Quakers look for the Light, therefore, to inform their communal decisions as it informs their individual ones. This recognition of the centrality of community, resulting in Quaker Meetings of Worship for Business and other collective enterprises, brings home a startling Quaker contribution. While mysticism usually connotes an individual’s relationship with the divine, the theology of early Quakerism, bridging early Christianity with unprogrammed Quakers today, witnesses to a *corporate* mysticism.

In Part II of her book, “Scripture: The Challenge of Rational Criticism,” Williams demonstrates that modern biblical criticism supports and even enhances early Quaker theology while undermining Christian orthodoxy, whether Protestant or Catholic. Before bringing early Quakerism to bear upon the topics of the fall of Adam and Eve, salvation, the authority of scripture, and universalism, Williams helpfully clarifies that divisions within Quakerism itself stemmed from conflicting beliefs about Scripture:

The nineteenth century saw Quakerism split into factions. It remains fractured today. The fundamental division is between Christ-centered Quakerism, which theologically (and often liturgically) is orthodox Protestantism, and Quaker universalism. Theologically, Quaker universalism represents the original Quakerism of Fox and Barclay, which, as we

have seen, is unorthodox—rightly so, it thinks, for it finds orthodoxy defective when compared to the Christianity of the New Testament. In Christ-centered Quakerism, salvation occurs after death and then only for believers in Christ’s salvic action as a sacrifice for sin. In Christian orthodoxy, Christ saves believers only. In Quaker universalism, as in Barclay and Fox, all people have the divine Light within, and all can experience salvation here and now, whatever their religion, sex, color, or sexual orientation, if only they heed the Light. To Quaker universalists, as to Fox and Barclay, people’s theological beliefs are, on the whole, unimportant.

How striking—a theology that de-emphasizes theological beliefs!

The key point that Williams keeps returning to: the Bible is not the primary source of revelation for Quakerism. In fact, it is not even necessary! “Those who never read it, who have not heard of Jesus, can find salvation, here and now, by turning to the Light within. The great American Quaker, John Woolman, visits the natives of the land to discover what they can teach him about the Spirit, although they remain unacquainted with the Bible.”

Which is not to say the Bible is unimportant to early Quakers. Cherishing it deeply, they were steeped in it. What saved the day for them and their modern counterparts is their metaphoric grasp of the spiritual meaning behind biblical narratives. Thus when modern biblical criticism undermines the history of many of those narratives, Williams reminds us that Quaker theology remains unshaken because it depends on the spirituality of the Bible, not its literal truth.

As Quakers are not only open to but embrace the gift of new understandings from biblical criticism, so too do they welcome science’s marvelous discoveries about the universe we live in. Which brings us to Part III of Williams’s book,

“Science: The Encounter with Empirical Knowledge.” Starting out as a philosopher of science, Patricia Williams’s understanding of and appreciation for the scientific saga over the past 400 years is particularly keen.

Spelling out the attributes first of science, then of early Quakerism, and finally of Christian orthodoxy, Williams offers cogent reasons for the compatibility between science and early Quakerism on the one hand, and the threat science consistently poses to orthodoxy on the other. “For the type of truth it sought, Quakerism focused on experience. It accepted continuing revelation. Thus, early Quaker theology requires only a slight change of perspective to embrace science’s discoveries, based on experience, as continuing revelations of God’s creative work. Rather than pulling Quakerism and God apart, science increases Quakerism’s understanding of divine creativity.” Music to the ears of one long drawn to the Creation-centered spirituality of Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, all grounded in Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of cosmogenesis, a cosmos becoming!

A particularly fertile insight of Williams with regard to the interplay between evolutionary psychology and Quakerism is how each enlarges the other.

Employing a metaphor as Quakers love to do, Williams suggests that evolutionary psychology paints the bottom of the picture and envisions the possibility of filling in the middle through reason, while allowing room at the top for spiritual transformation. Yet, it cannot posit the last, for science historically has abandoned spiritual explanations for any behavior in the universe, including that of humans.

However, Williams point out, we know empirically that spiritual transformation such as the early Quakers proclaim possible for everyone happens to some. “Quaker theology seems to answer what evolutionary psychology cannot, a philosophical conundrum known surreptitiously as the ‘problem of the good.’”

In a chapter titled “A Theology for Our Time,” Williams sums up the thrust of her wonderfully stimulating book.

Here, then, is a theology that works in the contemporary world. It is a combination of the core theology of the seventeenth century Quakers whose main tenet is that everyone has the divine Light within, whether characterized as the divine Christ, the Buddha-nature, the Atman, the Tao, or simply the Islamic Sufi’s love of the God who loves. It is a theology for a globalized world, crossing ethnic and religious boundaries. Yet, for the individual, it can be a theology centered not only on the divine Christ, but the historical Jesus who spoke of God within and among us, of love, of entering the kingdom of God, here and now, who practiced humility and equality and never devised a liturgy. It is, as Barclay argues, the theology of the New Testament, while being neither doctrinaire nor exclusive.

Mystics across Earth cheer.

An Appendix “On Metaphor” ends with a distillation of the essence: For Quakers, the Light is a transforming inner power permeating all nature, including our own, and they have developed a theology for it. May readers hungry for such a theology find Patricia Williams’s fine book and have their appetite whetted.

Charles C. Finn, is a member of the
Roanoke (Virginia) Friends Meeting

Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time by Patricia A. Williams (198p., William Sessions Limited, York, England, 2007)

Reviewed by Laura George

As a truth-seeker who is still searching for God and an appropriate community with which to worship, I was immediately drawn to the latest work by Patricia Williams, titled, *Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time*. Not only is this book a perfect primer for those who wish to read a condensed yet thorough history of the Quaker movement, the book also provides strong evidence that Quakerism is the only form of Christianity that has kept pace with modern science, current social theory, and the biblical discoveries unveiled over the last century. As a result, Williams has convinced this reader, who has studied all of the primary religions and most of the mystical branches of each, that Quakerism stands ready to face the challenges of the twenty-first century and the needs of contemporary seekers of Light.

For example, Williams does a superb job of detailing how the founders of Quakerism, George Fox (1624-1691) and Robert Barclay (1648-1690), managed prophetically to anticipate that many of our prior assumptions about the construction of the Bible would one day be questioned. Indeed, the discovery of the Gnostic Gospels in 1945 and the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, have added a dramatic new layer of insight into the actual teachings of Jesus and his probable sect, the Essenes. Both Fox and Barclay rightly deduced that the Bible, just like every other book written by human beings, was likely to contain error. Consequently, they based their theology on a working hypothesis that the Bible might one day be subject to critical analysis and found to be lacking both in substance and in inspiration. Today, we know that the Bible is just one snapshot

into the finer complexities of the Supreme Being. Therefore, when Fox and Barclay rejected the Protestant view that scripture was the ultimate authority, they took the brave and enlightened position that the Holy Spirit would continue to reveal divine truths to us in successive generations.

In addition, Williams illustrates how Quakerism, because of its emphasis on the transmission, acceptance, and revelation of Light, is uniquely poised to marry recent scientific discoveries with spirituality. Although the allegory of God as Light is used almost universally by the mystics of all faiths, in the Quaker tradition all Friends are taught to believe in and seek the Light. Thus, unlike orthodox Christianity, Quakerism encourages its members to adopt a healthy and curious mindset so that scientific theory may be incorporated into an ever-evolving belief system.

Science offers a world-view to replace the fictitious orthodox Christian one. Underlying the perceptible material universe are quantum particle-waves, and perhaps quantum strings, suffusing all things, so spirit-like and active as to confound the concept of matter. . . . Science reveals a transformative world. Core Quaker theology fits into this world, for it, too, is transformative. The spiritual Light pervades us all.

Williams also points out that while the mystical traditions of other religions provide a lucky few with a glimpse into the unseen world of radiant Light, Quakerism offers *everyone* this opportunity and in a manner that is welcoming and uncomplicated. Surely, the simple message which underlies Quakerism and which Williams aptly restates—“the Light is divine, experiential, transformative, and within everyone”—will one day reach all Christians. But first, we need to remind our orthodox brothers and sisters that religious tolerance hardly fulfills Jesus’ admonition to love thy neighbor. Indeed, when Fox and Barclay broke from the most base and offensive dogma

of orthodox Christianity, that only those who have faith in Jesus as a savior may enter the kingdom of heaven, they set the stage for a unifying theology capable of reaching people of all faiths.

As a result, Quakerism may truly be, as Williams argues, the most accessible and evolved belief system for those who seek God through the Christian tradition. Moreover, because our country is predominantly Christian, Quakerism offers orthodox and fundamentalist Christians an alternative path that is much more rewarding and one that they may easily understand. Ultimately, all of humanity will reach the elevated state of consciousness espoused by the Quaker tradition. We will all come to know the Light. Truly, this is most beautiful tenet of Quakerism and the one which now draws me again and again to my local Friends Meeting House.

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Laura George is the founder of The Oracle Institute and author of *The Truth: About the Five Primary Religions & The Seven Rules of Any Good Religion*. To learn more about the Institute, visit: www.TheOracleInstitute.org.

An Introduction to Quakerism by Pink Dandelion (255p., Cambridge University Press, New York, 2007)

Reviewed by Patricia A. Williams

The purpose of *An Introduction to Quakerism* is to review the history of Quaker theology (Part I) and to present an overview of Quakerism as it is today, worldwide (Part II). The book is successful in both endeavors. It provides the most comprehensive history of Quakerism available today.

Part I consists of three sections. The first presents Quakerism from its beginnings in the mid-seventeenth century through the 1820s. Despite many permutations, during this period Quakerism enjoyed a unified theological culture. Dandelion discusses Quakerism's fiery beginnings during the English civil war, its accommodation to the restoration of the monarchy in the 1660s through the 1680s, and its quietist period after the Toleration Act of 1689 when non-Anglican sects were no longer persecuted.

The second section deals with the fracturing of Quakerism in the nineteenth century—the rise of Hicksites, Gurneyites, Wilburites, etc. The final section largely discusses the rise of liberal Quakerism, with its acceptance of biblical criticism and science and its accent on spiritual experience over against the word of Scripture.

Part II continues the discussion of the various factions of Quakers, concentrating on current Quaker diversity. It presents Quakers' differences in theology and worship, in their stances toward "the world," and in their continued frictions, despite the desire for (and sometimes movement toward) unity.

Dandelion takes as the organizing principle of the entire history what he sees as the founding experience of Quakerism. That principle is literal belief in Christ's second coming, based on the book of Revelation and enhanced by the social

upheavals of the civil war, yet solidified and transformed by the inner, mystical experience of Christ's second coming within the individual, on Christ as Inner Light, come within human hearts to teach his people himself. Apparently at the height of the civil war, Fox took the second coming rather literally (as did many during this period), but as hopes for establishing the reign of Christ on Earth through battle and political action failed during the Commonwealth period under Cromwell and vanished completely at the restoration of the monarchy, Fox shifted from a literal interpretation to a mystical one. Christ has come—is here, now—within the human heart, and if all turn to him, his reign will be established on Earth. Such a view leads to condemnation of “the world” or “worldliness,” of political action, fashion, cheating in commerce (or anything else), lying, drunkenness, lust, and squandering the world's resources. With the world stubbornly refusing to be transformed, Quakers during the eighteenth century withdrew from it, engaging in practices and wearing apparel that set them apart from their worldly compatriots. Dandelion characterizes the nineteenth century Quaker groups primarily by their diverse definitions of what constitutes “the world” and their degree of withdrawal from it.

However, making the second coming central to the totality of Quaker history stretches a good idea to the breaking point. By the nineteenth century, the larger culture had moved on. Its religious concerns were chiefly focused on the rise of biblical criticism and of science, both upsetting the authority of the Bible. Quakerism moved on, too. The major division of 1827 centered around the question of which was primary, biblical authority or the authority of the Inner Light. And (as Dandelion notes), the rise of liberal Quakerism at the end of the nineteenth century, which rejected a first coming, made nonsense of the second.

Dandelion goes to great lengths to make his book clear and accessible. It is replete with tables, boxes, and charts, offers

a six-page list of important dates, recommends books for further reading, and provides an index. All are valuable. However, its accessibility is marred by a prose style that is heavy, even for a reader familiar with academic prose. Moreover, its very comprehensiveness makes the section on the nineteenth century difficult to follow, for it is a complex period of disagreements and divergences. This *Introduction* is not for Quakerism 101. Indeed, it is probably not meant for beginners. Pink Dandelion is Program Leader at the Centre for Postgraduate Studies at the Quaker center, Woodbrooke, in England. His book provides an excellent introduction to Quaker theological history at the graduate level of Quaker studies.

Nonetheless, certain parts of it may be particularly helpful to Quaker universalists. For example, Table 3.1, pp. 148-9 lists the characteristics of universalism and, beside each, their aberrations. I found in every aberration something I have long felt amiss in Quaker universalists. To select one of many from the list, the legitimate universalist sense that religious experience is ultimately indescribable metamorphoses in its aberration into a religion so inadequately communicated that it seems unreal.

Another example. Part II begins with the statement that “Quakerism worldwide can be divided into two, three, or six types. The two types . . . are the programmed and the unprogrammed” (p. 175). The three are unprogrammed Liberal and Conservative and programmed Evangelical. The six, like much comprehensive detail in the book, are staggeringly complex and best bypassed here.

The Liberals have a liberal-Liberal tradition, which Dandelion helpfully describes as semi-realist. In this tradition, God is real, but statements about God are “interpretations” (p. 193). I would have said “metaphors,” but the point is well taken.

Further clarification is provided by Table 6.1, p. 243 giving the differences between Liberal and Evangelical Friends. Prior to the table is a telling summary, “Liberal and Conservative

Friends identify primarily as Quaker. For Evangelical friends, they may see themselves as Christians primarily, who happen to be Quaker” (p. 242).

For those looking for a comprehensive, graduate-level history of Quaker theology, presented in detail, with fairness and insight, this is the book. For me, a semi-realist—and often anti-realist about theology—the detailed discussion of the nuances of the numerous Quaker factions reminds me of Theseus’s observation in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (V.i.14-17):

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the [theologian’s] pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Let us mend our divisions by being less certain of notions uncertain and by exercising a healthy skepticism toward an unattainable infallibility of faith and knowledge.

Patricia A. Williams is a member of the
Charlottesville (Virginia) Friends Meeting