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## REVIEW OF *THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF QUAKER STUDIES*

JON R. KERSHNER

It says something about the complexity of all religions that a movement founded on the single idea of an inward, spiritual experience of God, would be described in thirty-seven essays and over 600 pages. *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, edited by Pink Dandelion and Stephen Angell, addresses Quaker history, thought, and practice in a concise fashion, while giving adequate attention to Quakerism's geographical, social, and theological permutations. As Dandelion and Angell state: "The range of styles and types of Quakerism worldwide is huge."<sup>1</sup> This *Handbook* represents the most comprehensive study of Quakerism to date, and makes accessible to a broader audience the scope of interdisciplinary scholarship that comprises the field of Quaker Studies. Within the limitations of this review, I have focused my comments on three contributions the *Handbook* makes to religious and Quaker Studies. Namely, I first mention some of the main achievements of the *Handbook*. Second, I describe the complexities within Quaker Studies as described in the *Handbook*. And third, I suggest an important trajectory for future research that arises from the scholarship in the *Handbook*.

### I. ACHIEVEMENTS

One of the main achievements of the *Handbook* is the attention it pays to the theological motivations of Quaker praxis and the evolving inter-relationships of historical practices and changing theological impulses. For example, Michael Birkel's essay on "Leadings and Discernment," David John's essay on "Worship and Sacraments" and Michael Graves' essay on "Ministry and Preaching" describe how Quakers have thought about their religion as a lived experience, and how the original spiritual motivations for practices have changed over time.<sup>2</sup> Modern Quakers have constructed new theological justifications to support traditional practices.<sup>3</sup> This type of analysis allows contemporary scholars to do theology by inference, charting the relationship of thought and praxis, and then using that analysis as a

basis for comparisons with other denominations. The interdisciplinary and broad research presented in the *Handbook* highlights how spiritual insight has been applied in lived experience in a diversity of ways.

Another achievement of the *Handbook* is that wherever possible, it is global in scope. Quakerism is an international, trans-continental religion. As Margery Post Abbott identifies, the majority of Quaker's in the world today are in the Global South,<sup>4</sup> far removed geographically and culturally from the historic centers of Euro Quakerism. Jacalynn Stuckey Welling's essay on Quaker missionary efforts traces this development, and contends that "negotiating local customs with a faith that was both Christian and culturally relevant was often difficult or complicated for both local leaders and foreign missionaries."<sup>5</sup> *Handbook* authors have described how Quaker practices and spiritual insights have translated to African and Latin cultures, and where they have been adjusted or rejected according to cultural needs. Examples of this are too numerous to recount here, but the *Handbook* joins select few other surveys of Quaker Studies in its attempt to view Quakerism in its global context.<sup>6</sup> The growing recognition that Quakerism, and thus, Quaker Studies, is already a global endeavor, is developed in these essays and constitutes a key achievement of the *Handbook*, and, as I'll discuss later, has implications for the future trajectory of Quaker Studies.

A third achievement of the *Handbook* is that it helps to demythologize Quakerism. By presenting Quaker Studies in interdisciplinary and international perspective, and by challenging biased and hagiographic interpretations of Quaker history and thought, the authors present a much more complex and much less altruistic version of Quakerism than has sometimes characterized Quaker scholarship.<sup>7</sup> This achievement helps to situate Quaker Studies among denominational studies more generally, and so encourages a less-sectarian approach to Quaker Studies. Consequently, the *Handbook* points to the way extrinsic religious and cultural pressures has shaped Quaker thought and practice.

## II. COMPLEXITIES

The demythologizing of Quakerism deserves further attention, because this achievement emerges in the *Handbook* as a description of the complexities of religious studies in general and in particular the complexities of a spiritualist religion, like Quakersim, which

maintains an ambiguous relationship to text and liturgy. It is to these complexities that I now turn.

A challenge common to all students of religion is that of peeling back the biases that affected previous interpretations. The *Handbook* is especially helpful here. For example, Birkel notes well how twentieth century Quaker Scholar, Rufus Jones, defined an epistemology of the religious life that borrowed from William James, and that assumed a positive understanding of human consciousness characteristic of modernity.<sup>8</sup> Birkel argues that Jones' positive view of human consciousness and psychology influenced his interpretation of spiritual discernment and its goals.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Jones implied that the "origins" of religious knowledge did not justify them, but, rather, they were justified in the positive benefit they had on society.<sup>10</sup> As Birkel points out, this represents a shift from earlier Quakers who were less optimistic about the natural capacity of human nature to enact good and, so, were more concerned with obedience to divine revelation.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Robynn Rogers Healey exposes the "assumptions about Quietist Quakerism [that] have produced interpretations of Quakerism in the long eighteenth century that conceal the diversity that was its lived experience."<sup>12</sup> She shows that simplistic definitions of the era - such as those that equate eighteenth century Quakerism with social reclusiveness and spiritual detachment alone - are insufficient to describe the expansions of geographical influence and contributions made to commerce and industry by Quakers of this era.<sup>13</sup> The result of revisiting these previous interpretations is a more nuanced approach to Quaker Studies.

Moreover, the complexity of Quaker history and theology is seen clearly in the way it has changed over time. The revolutionary apocalypticism of the first generation was moderated in the second generation in the pursuit of religious toleration and acceptance. Nikki Coffey Tousley's essay traces this development across the theological themes of sin and perfection. Her research shows that the writings of second generation Quaker theologians Robert Barclay and Elizabeth Bathurst were influential in rejecting Augustinian notions of original sin.<sup>14</sup>

However, Tousley asserts that the first generation of Quakers had already rejected original sin by the time of Barclay and Bathurst.<sup>15</sup> This assertion is repeated later in the *Handbook* by Max Carter and Simon Best, so might represent a point of disagreement among scholars of Quaker Studies.<sup>16</sup> While it is clear that second generation

Quakers like Barclay and Bathurst rejected the idea of original sin,<sup>17</sup> I am not convinced that the first generation of Quakers did. Fox would have considered original sin a ‘notion,’ meaning that philosophizing about it was only an intellectual exercise and had little bearing on one’s spiritual transformation. However, Fox and his peers operated in a Calvinistic world that assumed original sin.<sup>18</sup> What was distinctive about early Quakerism was that they believed that original sin was conquered in their experience. Early Quaker William Dewsbury wrote, “I was conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity, and in that state lived...”<sup>19</sup> The dramatic conversion experiences of the first Quakers implied a radical break with their old life, such that the previous state of sin was overthrown and a new transformed and perfected state installed.<sup>20</sup> Whereas the early Quakers believed original sin was spiritually operative, what Fox called “the bad cursed state,” in their transformed state they believed they were removed out of the “curse” and established in the state of Adam and Eve *before* the Fall, and before the “curse” became effectual.<sup>21</sup> However, Fox accused the religious establishment of his day of dwelling in the state of Adam and Eve *in* the Fall and, so, still under the “curse” and in the state of original sin.<sup>22</sup> Getting the early Quaker view of original sin right is important because, without it, scholars miss the radical message the early Quakers were proclaiming. It also highlights Quakerism’s emergence out of Calvinistic Puritanism and the specific points of departure Quakers wanted to emphasize. The Quakers assumed the Puritan theological categories, but in the apocalypse of the heart, those categories were fulfilled and transformed into the eschatological reality they foreshadowed.<sup>23</sup>

That the established church of seventeenth century England would react violently to the Quaker message probably relates, in part, to the ambiguous “theological epistemology” that Jeffrey Dudiak and Laura Rediehs identify in early Quaker conceptions of religious knowledge, and which has been subsequently perpetuated and expanded by later generations of Quakers.<sup>24</sup> This epistemological ambiguity, to some extent, illumines the reason that Quaker religious expression has such a broad and diverse range, and is indicative of the complexities of Quaker Studies. Dudiak and Rediehs argue that the particular referents of George Fox’s central message that “Christ has come to teach his people himself” are unclear.<sup>25</sup> What is to be understood by “Christ”? And, what “teachings” are to be expected?<sup>26</sup> There is little to suggest that the early Quakers recognized the importance of clarifying these epistemological questions, and the schisms of nineteenth and

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twentieth century Quakers, described well in the *Handbook*, might be one consequence of that ambiguity.<sup>27</sup>

The complexities of Quaker Studies are also apparent in the subtle and multifaceted way Quaker thought has been influenced by outside forces. In his chapter on Evangelical Friends, Arthur Roberts argues that cultural pressures such as increased “mobility, television and multiple affinity circles,” among others, have influenced Quaker worship patterns and practices.<sup>28</sup> Just as relevantly, Carole Spencer and Doug Gwyn demonstrate how various Quaker groups of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were influenced by either Wesleyan theology or the theological liberalism of Friedrich Schleiermacher,<sup>29</sup> while Best and Carter show that Quaker youth programs of the period were modeled on Christian Endeavour societies and the YMCA.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the *Handbook* shows the development of Quakerism within its contexts, and how larger cultural pressures and movements can be assessed, in microcosm, within a religious body. Denominational studies are always a part of historical and cultural studies more broadly construed. The complexities within Quaker Studies, highlighted in the *Handbook*, demonstrate the interconnected way religion is expressed, and the insufficiency of comprehensive, overarching historical and theological categories for analyzing the multifaceted values and convictions people use to construct theological viewpoints. Viewpoints that emerge within a tradition like Quakerism are diverse and reflect internal theological ambiguities, as well as external cultural interactions, which necessitate interdisciplinary approaches to Quaker Studies in forums that are as diverse as the influences on Quakerism have been.

### III. CONCLUSION: TRAJECTORIES

I now turn to discuss, by way of conclusion, an important trajectory for the future of Quaker Studies as identified throughout the *Handbook*. While the *Handbook* addresses key insights from the Global South,<sup>31</sup> we are only beginning to scratch the surface of Quaker Studies from the perspective of global religion, and there is a rich field of inquiry yet to be undertaken there. The attention given to the Global South in the *Handbook* is a real service to contemporary understandings of Quakerism, and raises further questions that need to be studied from anthropological, theological, and sociological perspectives. For example, how important is the history of Quaker origins to the rank

and file in African and Latin American Quaker churches and meetings? What local practices have shaped Quaker identity in those settings? Traditional Quaker testimonies like discernment and simplicity arose as challenges to tendencies within Euro society, are these testimonies seen as universal or are they giving way to new and more relevant testimonies that are specific to the Global South?<sup>32</sup> How are Yearly Meetings and churches organized, and what views of authority are at play in their functioning?

The *Handbook* sheds new light on Quakers in the Global South, but future scholarship is needed to address Quakerism there within its own context. Ethnographic research could trace the relationship of belief and practices to experiences of poverty, political turmoil, violence, and colonization. As scholars of Quaker Studies, we desperately need more data from Quaker communities outside of Britain and North America in order to understand the global makeup of Quakerism today.

In short, the *Handbook* is a landmark achievement in its comprehensiveness and nuance. It demonstrates Quakerism to be a diverse and complex religion that is constantly changing and interacting with external pressures, and it shows Quaker Studies to be a cutting-edge and active field of scholarship. However one of the greatest contributions of the *Handbook* to Quaker Studies is the trajectories of future research it sets forth. This is particularly helpful in light of efforts to establish a Quaker Studies Group at the American Academy of Religion, where the issues raised in the *Handbook* can be explored.

## ENDNOTES

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19. William Dewsbury, *The Faithful Testimony of That Antient Servant of the Lord, and Minister of the Everlasting Gospel William Dewsbury: In His Books, Epistles and Writings, Collected and Printed for Future Service* (London: Printed and sold by Andrew Sowle, 1689), 44.
20. See: Dewsbury, *Faithful Testimony of That Antient Servant of the Lord...William Dewsbury*, 52-53; Francis Howgil, *The Dawning of the Gospel-Day and Its Light and Glory Discovered: By a Faithful and Valiant Follower of the Lamb, and Labourer in the Work and Service of God, and a Sufferer for the Testimony of Jesus, Francis Howgil, Who Died a Prisoner for the Truth in Appleby Goal in the County of Westmerland, the Twentieth Day of the Eleventh Moneth, One Thousand Six Hundred and Sixty Eight* (London, 1676), 43-44.



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32. See Birkel’s discussion of discernment in the Global South. Birkel, “Leadings and Discernment,” 258–259.