

Quaker Theology #13 Winter 2007

Godless For God's Sake: Nontheism In Contemporary Quakerism. Edited by David Boulton. Cumbria, United Kingdom, Dales Historical Monographs. 146 pages, paperback. US\$18.50.

Reviewed By Chuck Fager

What have we come to in Friends religious thought, when the most exciting book of Quaker theology I've read in years is produced by a bunch of Quaker non-theists—twenty-seven in all?

Well, there will be no hand-wringing about that here: I'll take thoughtful, articulate, and challenging religious thought wherever I can find it – and there's plenty of that in this compact volume. By contrast, the sad fact is that precious little of what passes for "religious thought" that dribbles out of the Quaker "mainstream" and into my mailboxes (snail and e-) is worth the paper it's printed on or the bandwidth it takes up. Maybe it takes being a nontheist for a modern Quaker to get past our ingrained aversion to serious theologizing. If so, that's reason enough to welcome them in the Society.

Indeed, if I never have to read another muddled and half-baked paean to the murky glories of Quaker mysticism, it will be too soon. And spare me any more stale re-hashes of Handbasket Theology, pronouncing us all perdition-bound via the express lane unless we get right with Somebody's version of Christ. Get a life, Somebody.

My complaints come, moreover, from one who definitely considers himself a Quaker theist. Or perhaps more accurately, a failed non-theist. This qualification is important here because it bespeaks a respect for clear and careful thought – and a parallel respectful recognition that when it comes to arguments, the atheists have all – or at least most – of the best ones.

This fact is one of the most ancient yet most open secrets of Judeo-Christian theological history. It is as old as the Book of Job – perhaps the earliest biblical theological treatise. In it Jehovah has to pull rank and hide behind a trumped-up tornado to disguise the divine inability to answer the astringent questioning of his loyal servant from the land of Uz. And down the centuries, how many of His other non-divine defenders have done any better, really? (Perhaps that's why, at the end of Job's book, Jehovah commends the challenger and rebukes the "friends" who had so long-windedly attempted to defend the divine honor, probity – and, between the lines – existence.)

Thus, far from being shocked or scandalized by *Godless For God's Sake*, I looked forward to reading it. Moreover, besides the long pedigree of religious non-theism, I also know that humanism and non-theist-in-all-but-name religious thought is nothing new in American Quakerism. My own studies have traced our humanist-nontheist strand as far back as Lucretia Mott, in the 1840s – that is, more than 160 years. And if space permitted, an essentially unbroken "apostolic succession" could be filled in from her down to the present.

(The fact that this succession has been largely ignored by our historians is only a sign of their bias, not an indication of any lack of material. For some initial explorations in this field, see the essay, "Flowers of Quaker non-theism" by Os Cresson, online at: <http://www.nontheistfriends.org/article/flowers-of-quaker-nontheism/>; or my book, *Shaggy Locks & Birkenstocks*, Kimo Press 2003; and the essay, "Lucretia Mott: Liberal Quaker Theologian," in *Quaker Theology* #10).

In light of this long history, it is distressing, even a bit shocking to see reviewers like the one in *Friends Journal* (November 2006, p. 25) wringing hands and reeling aghast at the infiltration of infidels into their orthodox sanctuary, and calling for a purge to clear up the Society's ranks.

It is similarly distressing, but perhaps not surprising, to find the review blatantly distorting and falsifying the book, wrongly accusing its writers with mindless scientism, epistemological narrowness,

existential joylessness – just about everything but halitosis, all in the face of plentiful evidence to the contrary. This tells little about *Godless for God's Sake*, but shows unmistakably that *Friends Journal* needs some new, more observant, and even-handed book reviewers.

The reality of the book is quite different. For instance, there is much joy in it. As one writer declares, "I woke one morning with an overwhelming delight at being alive." (p. 20) Others speak of deep experiences in worship that are mystical in all but name (pp. 57. 139) – and for that matter, mysticism without God is hardly a new phenomenon either; think Zen.

Nor is their religious thinking confined to a shrunken soulless scientism: there is meditation, metaphor, depth, even revelation here: "For artists," one writer affirms, "making isn't *making up*; in whatever terms you choose, it is *relationship*. If I say God is a metaphor, I don't mean a figure in an allegory, made to stand for the things we know it stands for. I mean an image, found or 'given,' with a deep life of its own, with resonances as yet undisclosed, maybe inexhaustible." (P. 32; emphasis in original.)

Which points to the matter of thinking about how God does or does not "exist." Some of the writers could indeed be considered materialist naturalists in their outlook: what you see (or feel, or count) is what you get, and that's that.

But not all. One author is an accomplished mathematician who writes tellingly about how those in her profession struggle over whether, and how, numbers "exist" or are "real," with various schools of thought but no final resolution:

"Must the existence of numbers," she muses, "be either totally independent of human thought or totally dependent on it? Or might the relationship be more complex? I face a similar dilemma with respect to the theist/nontheist question: am I constrained either to accept the idea of God as an eternal transcendent reality or to reject it along with all religious experience I seem to have? Or might there be another alternative? In both cases, total acceptance and total denial feel equally wrong . . . (T)here are many ways of being real and concrete physical reality is not necessarily the most compelling of these." (P.39)

The self-appointed guardians of some Quaker Orthodoxy may scoff, but the only prejudice thereby revealed is theirs: this is good stuff.

For that matter, like any worthwhile theological tome, the book includes at least one flash of striking, *satori*-like insight:

"Much of what we tend to regard as the achievement of Friends as a whole was, in fact, the work of individual Friends, or small groups of Friends, often in the face of opposition or neglect of their monthly meetings. (One of the most positive – if often tedious – aspects of Quaker culture may be its capacity to produce or attract individuals who are willing to stand up to it)" (p. 75)

This observation also manifests another pervasive feature of the collection, namely the authors' devotion to the Religious Society of Friends. Should meetings be so foolish as to follow the call to attempt a purge – as one, in fact, did (pp. 23-25) – they would be depriving themselves of some of their most devoted and productive members.

What was it that The Man said? "By their fruits ye shall know them." If that's so, then as a group, nontheist Friends have as much claim to a legitimate place in contemporary Quakerism as many who feel they are defending the last true redoubt against the invading forces of unbelief. The proper response to the testimonies in these pages is not scorn or witchhunts, but an invitation to further conversation. And in my case, gratitude that these nontheists have taken the theology they don't accept seriously enough to think and write about it as thoughtfully and engagingly as they have here.
