

Foreword

THIS IS A BOOK which claims to be about Quaker renewal but the insights Wess Daniels lays out here so clearly can be applied to the renewal of any faith tradition. Wess weaves a line between the dangers of anarchic individualistic resistance to the wisdom of the tradition and the strictures of abstracted doctrine held over and against the changing needs of communities in fresh contexts. I use “weaves” deliberately because this model is like a woven fabric, a quilt of many pieces laid out by many apprentices and sewn together in holy obedience to our present-day callings. Later the quilt will be reconfigured, subtracted from and added to, remixed, collectively re-sewn in a new and exciting a pattern and shape. This book is manifesto for faith renewal globally and in that, for greater cross-cultural cross-contextual dialogue and understandings. If we all authentically involve ourselves in the processes outlined here, we cannot but add to mutual understanding and world peace. For whilst the first motion is crisis, this is intrinsically a model of creative and constructive participation at its most communal level.

As Wess Daniels says:

A model of this nature must take seriously all of the components of contextual theology: tradition, culture, dialogue and praxis. Building on these threads, the model developed here will be called a “convergent model of participatory renewal,” convergent because the model is a synthesis of tradition and emergence of God’s work in today’s context, participatory because the model derives insights from culture studies’ understanding of “participatory culture,” an emerging culture that celebrates production over consumption, grassroots organizing, decentralized authority and collaboration as the means by which people are actively engaged with popular culture.

We engage with our own tradition, with what we are called to do, with the context we are embedded within, and with each other. Wess calls us to listen to the insights of MacIntyre, Bevens, and Jenkins and to find in faithful examples of church history those who have already modeled renewal for us along the way without knowledge of any book or theory. As is so often the case with good theory, it seems like common sense when it is pointed out to us and we start to see it everywhere.

MacIntyre's insights into the importance of tradition and, when working well, its self-generated renewal underpin convergent holiness, and help us understand the work of those who carry reflexive renewal forward, who struggle creatively with the quest for authenticity, who seek to cross the binary divides of the culture wars and internal fragmentation, who wish to return to essentials away from the propertied inertia of a task-oriented organization that has made a captive of tradition. We can see what we are not to do as well as what we can. We can hear the need to listen, to engage, to utilise, to fuse, to move from death to life, to resurrect our faith vehicle through complex synthesis. We are even given criteria to measure success:

Has the tradition truly succeeded in overcoming a crisis? If it has, it will fulfill three exacting requirements. . . . The first requirement is that the newly enhanced scheme is able to systematically and coherently resolve the problems that the tradition initially found to be intractable. Second, it must be able to explain how and why the tradition, before the new concepts were adopted, became sterile and incoherent within its previous paradigm. Third, continuity between structures must be tended to carefully in these first two tasks. . . . Therefore, the three criteria could be summed up as (a) resolution of the previous problems, (b) explanation of what went wrong, and (c) continuity of some shared beliefs and practices with the tradition of enquiry.

We are not here to save Quakerism or any other tradition but to nurture our spiritual life as part of the people of God. This is a theme taken up on a wider platform by Douglas John Hall, Canadian theologian, who argues that the church needs prophecy rather than preservation. What is critical, he says, is not the context we find ourselves in but how we respond to it. Douglas John Hall argues that focusing on membership numbers for example is unimportant in the faith order of things, rekindling our spiritual essence is crucial to spiritual authenticity.

The work of Bevans offers us a model of post-colonial contextualisation that undercuts hierarchies of limited agency and arid theorisation based on notions and abstractions. It helps us challenge the individualism of the Enlightenment project, the way in which contract took over from covenant. It gives us agency again as everyday mystics, seeking to practice the Presence in the midst of the whole of life, in which we can start to live life as a prayer without ceasing. In this place and space (a practiced place), in Jenkins' term, we can be resolved as fans of God, participants in the creation of a culture of faith, co-creators in a bricolage of poaching. Here we remix and play, fools for God. Here agency and wisdom is extended beyond the faith elites, the professors, to us all. However, this is not then a free-for-all, a libertarian frenzy of freedom without responsibility, but a place to play within the parameters of the wisdom of the tradition, within the discernment of the community and the insights of the collective, our localised neighbourhood, our valley of love and delight, our holy syndicates.

In summary, Wess Daniels tells us:

A convergent model for participatory renewal is based on the insights of MacIntyre, Bevans and Jenkins. The process is initiated when apprentices seek to overcome the confrontations, incoherences and break down of schemata that arise within their tradition. In order to bring about convergent renewal they must put in dialogue the original texts and interpretations of their tradition and current cultural artifacts and practices, putting them together (through same-saying and concept borrowing) in a way that (a) remixes the original texts of the tradition with new texts while maintaining their continuity—their uniqueness and complementarity; (b) as it resists a passive culture of consumerism in order to foster an authentic subjective experience; (c) and drawing on many voices forming an open work of shared power and knowledge; (d) and by doing so they will have created practices of an alternative participatory community that gives witness in the world.

It is model of covenantal renewal, of mutual open-ended promise-keeping and faithfulness. As I say, it can apply to all faiths. The first half is handbook for all of us.

For Quakers however, this book is timely and adds a further dimension. The compelling case studies of early Friends and Freedom Friends Church not only make original contributions to Quaker studies but also

act as an affirmation of the many calls for convergence worldwide in Quakerism today. As I write this, British Friends are looking towards a new vision of Quakerism in exactly the ways described here, perceiving crisis and incoherence, dialoguing with the past and with the new context within and outwith Quakerism and working together to create a participatory community that can lend its hands to God.

This is an erudite but accessible volume. It is critically important in all that it unpacks for us. Significantly too, I feel the text walks the walk. It doesn't just profess the theory, the substance of faith, it possesses it. It shines as an example of the very theory it outlines. It adds to the fabric of renewal in an authentic way. It is part, an important part I believe, of the remix of retrieval and restoration, the collage of covenantal community. Now we need to act.

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