

Emma Lapsansky-Werner
Haverford College, Philadelphia, USA

Fortunately, we can count on Larry Ingle to tackle the complicated issues buried inside the ‘simple’ Quaker belief and worship systems. In *Quakers in Conflict*,¹ his study of the nineteenth-century Hicksite/Orthodox schism, he took on some of the issues of Quaker communities behaving badly. Now, with this new study of Nixon, Ingle takes us readers into a thicket of one individual Quaker behaving badly, and, as we loyal Ingle fans would have expected, he does it well. He makes a clean argument that is artfully crafted, meticulously documented, deliciously provocative and sweeping in its inclusion of William Saffire, Herbert Hoover, Albert Upton, Rose Mary Woods, Jessamyn West, Whittaker Chambers and the teenage Nixon heeding an altar call in one year, and questioning the ‘truth’ of the Bible a few years later. Ingle weaves it all together in a seemingly seamless tapestry crafted of what Ingle sees as some of the threads of the shamed president’s sense of being ‘personally uneasy, even torn’.²

Ingle suggests that Nixon’s Quakerism had been rent asunder—‘torn’—along two axes. In the first dimension, Ingle argues, Nixon had embraced the posture of the most radical of the seventeenth-century religious nonconformists among which Quakers could be counted. This fringe group—the ‘Ranters’ as they were known—emitted not only disdain for the religious hypocrisy of the established church communities and hierarchies, but also refused to moor themselves to any sort of community restraints, steering *only* by a personal and inward-driven rudder.³ (The radical religious communities of Quakers that survived this seventeenth-century turmoil soon developed what would be called ‘clearness’ committees, to help ‘discern’ the fine line between individuals’ irrationality and divinely inspired nonconformity. More on this below.)

In Chapter 10, aptly entitled ‘Nixon’s *Need* for Religion’, Ingle lays out what he sees as the second gash in Nixon’s relationship with his ‘Quaker upbringing’. In this chapter, Ingle suggests that by the end of his presidency Nixon had relegated

1 Ingle, H. L., *Nixon’s First Cover-Up: the religious life of a Quaker president*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015.

2 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, p. 175.

3 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, p. 219.

to the past all vestiges of the ‘influence... [of his] Quaker heritage’,⁴ yet he still ‘needed’ some sort of religious touchstone for a wide range of nefarious political and social (and perhaps self-worth) purposes.

Indeed, it is in Chapter 10 that Ingle’s argument most sharply hits its mark: that Nixon, who never understood nor made friends with his religious upbringing, nevertheless ‘needed’ religion—perhaps *any* sort of religion—in order to manage his relationship with his heritage, his political ambitions, his restless intellectual/theatrical questioning of what’s ‘real’, his spiritual need to be of ‘service’ to his sense of a wider human community, and perhaps many other internal needs masked both by his private nature and by his unwillingness or inability to embrace introspection. In this chapter also, Ingle makes his point that Nixon ‘craved’ the ‘security’ of a religious doctrine, *any* religious doctrine (perhaps even Catholicism with its ‘dogma, so well-defined’)⁵ in order to achieve ‘[inner] peace at the center’.⁶

But, despite Ingle’s thoroughness and convincing evidence for plumbing the well of the second of the two American ‘Quaker’ presidents, readers can hope that his study of Nixon will inspire future scholars to explore broader, deeper, innovative, nuanced questions about modern Quakerism and its ‘behaviour’ in the world within and without (in two senses of ‘without!’) Quaker confines.

Let us try this, for starters: in the narrative frameworks of ‘Quakers’, in both the popular lingo and the language within Quakers’ own circles, the implications of Quakerism’s deeply charismatic qualities are often overlooked or underplayed. In fact, Quakerism, with its lack of an agreed-upon, written ‘guide-book’, is subject to chameleon-like qualities attendant to whatever individual delivers it to a given region, in conjunction with whatever else is happening—politically, economically, sociologically—in the area where that particular charismatic Quaker chooses to locate. So, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century California ‘Quakerism_s’ (emphasis on the ‘s’) look like a not too smoothly blended melting pot of western-frontier isolation and of Hannah and Joel Bean’s experience in Iowa and Hawaii blended with the arrival of Indiana Friends like the Milhouses. The ‘Quakerism’ of those nomadic Indiana Friends was, in turn, marked by their North Carolina ancestors who had moved across the Appalachians in order to escape the pollution of slavery, and had thereby cosied up to the Methodists who were their co-religionists on that Indiana frontier. (The Methodists, with their camp meetings, organs and enthusiasm must have been a welcome distraction from the loneliness of the nineteenth-century frontier.)⁷ Add to that the implications of the 1819 Congressional offer of a cash grant to any denomination that would

4 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, p. 175.

5 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, p. 179.

6 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, p. 6.

7 A rich discussion of this phenomenon can be found in Bruce, D. D., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: plain-folk camp-meeting religion, 1800–1845*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974.

take Christian 'civilisation' to the frontier, and the result is a volatile mix of generic Christian camp meetings, silent 'unprogrammed' Friends with 'recorded' ministers and other itinerant denominations seeking to civilise the 'wilderness' with their own versions of theology. By the time Quakers like the Milhous family and the Hoovers get to the west coast, the Quakerism of their British ancestors had been flavoured with spice of many locales.

Another example of what might be termed the 'Quakerism/regionalism' phenomenon is New Englander Sybil Jones. Out of a New England Methodist background, Jones, along with her husband Eli, transplanted *her* flavour of Quakerism to Ramallah in the 1860s, with the consequence that middle-eastern Quakerism still retains that flavour today. Similarly, the Kaimosi, Kenya brand of Quakerism carries the clear stamp of Emma Brown Malone's inspiration from American evangelist Dwight Moody, that had led her to establish the Cleveland Bible College in 1892. Other examples can lead us to examine the marriage of Quakerism and region: the Coppock brothers—the only Quakers to join John Brown on his 1859 Harper's Ferry mission to incite slave insurrection—were from Iowa. What—a scholar might ask—is unique about Quakerism in that western state that resulted in John Brown's message resonating there?

Even though Quaker communities are united in their connectedness to seventeenth-century founder George Fox, a fundamental defining quality of Quakerism is the importance of the individual's inner 'leading'—the integrity of one's personal relationship to the Divine. This lack of a central authority and/or a universally agreed-upon unifying set of beliefs, somewhere along the way—perhaps with the imagery developed in the widely read nineteenth-century novels *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby Dick*—has often left 'Quakers' stereotyped (even among themselves) as moral beyond reproach, especially in the area of social action/social reform.

It may seem that Friends and non-Friends, attempting to get their minds around 'Quakers' in history, have painted members of the Religious Society of Friends with a broad brush that doesn't give sufficient attention to region, charisma or even individuals' commitments and experiences. For example, what are the implications of the story of British botanist James Backhouse, who planted his brand of 1820s capitalist Quakerism (informed no doubt by his financier and railway-building family) among convicts in Australia? Likewise, the Cadbury family's late nineteenth-century construction of England's Bournville chocolate factory and the Buxton family's development of a model mining-town in Iowa: both of these idealistic communities arose out of a marriage of 'Quaker' energies and modern industrial capitalism. In the 1950s, a group of Quakers moved from North Carolina to Monteverde, Costa Rica in order to escape the contamination of a militarised nation and to begin life anew in a country committed to not supporting an army. Each of these intentional communities is 'Quaker', but they do not have the predictable similarities that one finds in Catholic monasteries around the world. Such variety in Quaker religious expression invites future

scholars to expand and enrich both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ appreciation of the peculiar thought and behaviours of ‘Quakers’ in their local/regional settings, while remaining aware that the tradition of travelling Friends and of a vigorous publishing history means that Quakers in any given locale are surely aware that their co-religionists, in other regions, are interpreting their religion with different emphases and priorities. Nixon certainly knew, as he called on his ‘Quaker’ heritage, that his ‘mishmash’ was part of a larger matrix of many kinds of Quakers. Those of us trying to understand Nixon need to know that too.

The importance of, and tension about (and the absence of), sacraments and creeds also needs to be seen not just in the context of the attempts at unity that underlay the American Quakers’ 1887 Richmond Conference⁸ or Britain’s 1895 Manchester Conference. To situate Nixon and his ‘religion’ fully, we need a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century manifestations of the fracturing and fragmentation of Quaker families and communities. To frame the question another way: to what extent did the Nixon family’s notion of religion as ‘private’ stem from a *general* lack of clarity among Friends about what their religion *was* at its ‘centre’?⁹ To what extent do Quaker communities attract and sustain individuals whose sense of self and religion is highly malleable? To what extent were the Nixons wary of too much religious ‘exposure’ lest they alienate their close F/friends and/or extended family, or expose their own lack of understanding of their own liquid religion?

In his exploration of Quakerism as a ‘Living Faith’,¹⁰ Wilmer Cooper outlines some of the inconclusive-ness of Quakers’ ideas about what other religions often consider to be doctrinal benchmarks: e.g. the nature of God and of Christ; the depravity of human nature; definitions of sin; expectations for the afterlife; the characteristics and value of rituals and sacraments; the vetting, installation and responsibilities of religious authorities. Without some context for these concerns, an investigation of one lone ‘Quaker’ (Nixon) lacks texture and gradation. Ingle hints at these aspects of the story, and while we cannot expect one study and one man to take on the whole of these—and other—issues that are collateral to really understanding Nixon and his life choices, a reader might wonder how much of Nixon’s life and religion were focussed on covering up not only the layer-cake of his own interior life, but also covering up some of the many layers of so-called Quaker theology that were murky to him because they were murky in the matrix of Quaker communities. Despite his own rich history of probing Quakers-in-conflict, did Ingle neglect to lay out for Quaker and non-Quaker readers a sense

8 A detailed discussion of this meeting—which involved only 12 American Orthodox Yearly Meetings (and none of the international or Hicksite Friends)—is in Hamm, T. D., *The Transformation of American Quakerism: orthodox Friends, 1800–1907*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988.

9 Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism*.

10 Wilmer Cooper, A., *A Living Faith: an historical and comparative study of Quaker beliefs*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2001.

of how difficult it is for a typical Quaker find the ‘there–there’ in this theological tradition founded on the concept of ‘continuing revelation’?

Quaker ‘theology’ has some qualities similar to Tagalog, the Filipino national language that has been defined as a ‘living language’ because it has been ‘evolving’ for several centuries. The Filipino government has simply embraced Tagalog’s evolution, and every few years the government re-certifies the changes. Wikipedia describes it thus: ‘the 1987 constitution designated [Tagalog] as the national language mandating that as it evolves, it shall be further developed and enriched on the basis of existing Philippine and other languages.’ This is so very like the every-generation re-releases of *Faith and Practice*—the closest thing Quakers have to a ‘manual’ or ‘guidebook’. *Faith and Practice* (known in some regions as ‘Christian Disciplines’) is—in the Quaker tradition of ‘continuing revelation’—regionally specific to a given yearly meeting, and subject to revision every quarter-century or so! And yet, parts of Ingle’s argument imply that there is somehow a ‘centre’ to Quaker faith, and that we will understand Nixon by measuring his conversation and his behaviours alongside the yardstick of that centre.

Another obstacle to understanding Nixon’s Quakerism is that most of the data available to approach that understanding was created by Nixon for a public audience—an audience that Nixon surely knew did not have a clue about any of the nuances of Quaker faith or community life! Even today, probably most people in the world live their entire lives without ever encountering a real live ‘Quaker’—let alone a Quaker who can offer information about his/her own faith, and/or the various stripes of similarly labelled but culturally/theologically different *other* kinds of Quakers! This pothole is not Ingle’s fault, any more than it was Nixon’s, but the next job that scholars need to do in order to put Ingles’ work into context is to expand upon studies like Margery Post Abbott’s *Certain Kind of Perfection*,¹¹ which aims to make discussions of Quakers’ theological diversity accessible not just to Quaker insiders but to a wider audience also.

As if these were not enough obstacles in Ingles’ path, there is the problem that so much of what we can ‘know’ about Nixon’s development (e.g. his ‘Quaker Upbringing’, the ‘Wilderness Years’, or Watergate) comes from extrapolation from what the Quaker president was exposed to—not how he perceived and/or processed that exposure. We know that while a student at Whittier he took J. Herschel Coffin’s course on the Philosophy of Christian Reconstruction, and we know that he considered the implications of the course content. We know that he knew and admired Herbert Hoover, and that he thought of Hoover (the other Quaker president maligned by his constituency) as a ‘man of great character’.¹² However, we do not really know what Nixon and Coffin, or Nixon and Hoover,

11 Abbott, M. P., *A Certain Kind of Perfection: an anthology of evangelical and liberal Quaker writers*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1997.

12 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, p. 132.

talked about in their private conversations. We don't really know how Nixon made sense of these and other defining 'Quaker' people and experiences, over time, in the recesses of his own 'self'. Nixon lived through the years when Quakers of many flavours grabbed onto the tag line about 'speaking Truth to power' as if to suggest that 'truth' and 'power' were, by nature, at odds with each other. Did Nixon struggle with that concept too?

Did Ingle—a Quaker himself—succumb to the temptation to distance the embarrassing Nixon from those who are 'really Quakers'? Whatever the limitations of Ingle's perspective, there can be doubt that his provocative study has made an important contribution to helping a wider audience discover how elusive are the targets of 'Quaker faith' and 'Quaker practice', which Ingle describes as Nixon's 'mishmash of "science, religion, and philosophy"'.¹³ Scholars' next steps might well take us towards thinking of Nixon, not as anomalous, but rather to think of Quaker communities as fertile ground for such 'anomalies' as the opinionated Herbert Hoover,¹⁴ the fanatical A. Mitchell Palmer,¹⁵ the monomaniacal James Nayler,¹⁶ the zealous Elias Hicks,¹⁷ the tragic Norman Morrison¹⁸ and the self-righteous Richard Nixon—each of whom engaged in extreme behaviours supported by a 'Quaker faith' that assured them that if they felt sufficient inward conviction, outrageous behaviours could be justified.

Perhaps the question could be framed in an even more provocative way. To what extent is this religion—which many of us have lauded for its capacity to promote independence of mind, unswerving integrity, unflinching personal responsibility, even heroism and nobility—marred by its potential for a dark side? To what extent might Nixon's story be a cautionary tale for Quakers and for chroniclers of Quakers/Quakerism: a tale in which the light of integrity and moral conviction casts a shadow of hubris, insensitivity, self-righteousness and spiritual isolation? Within a few years of their founding in the 1650s, early

13 Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, p. 41.

14 Katherine A. Sibley's recent study (*A Companion to Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014) explores three presidents who have been 'caricatured, defamed, or dismissed'.

15 A graduate of the Swarthmore, a Quaker college in his home state of Pennsylvania, Palmer refused the post of Secretary of War in 1912 because of his non-violent Quaker convictions. Nevertheless, by 1919, as Attorney General, out of this same Quaker conviction to do the 'right thing', he authorised the violent 'Palmer Raids', which violated the civil rights of American political dissenters. See Shepley, N., *The Palmer Raids and the Red Scare 1918–1920: Wilson, Palmer and the breaking of American socialism*, Luton: Andrews UK Ltd., 2011.

16 See Neelon, D., *James Nayler: revolutionary to prophet*, Becket, MA: Leadings Press, 2009.

17 Webb, S., *Elias Hicks: a controversial Quaker*, Durham: Langley Press, 2010.

18 Welsh, A. M., *Held in the Light: Norman Morrison's sacrifice for peace and his family's journey of Healing*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2008 explores some of the aftermath of Morrison's extreme behaviour, borne out of his Quaker faith.

Quakers developed systems of ‘clearness’—the requirement that a member who planned a behaviour or a publication submit his/her plans to older/wiser members for review, before the plan could be put forth in public with the label ‘Quaker’. Individuals who breached this rule would be censured or publicly disavowed by the community, as was James Nayler. However, in modern times, when the Quaker ‘clearness committee’ and the tradition of Quaker elders’ monitoring and censure has greatly diminished, has unmonitored ‘Quaker conviction’ provided a fertile ground for seeds of demagoguery and smugness to sprout alongside nobility, heroism and altruism? Is the really important lesson from Ingle’s work a message about the connections between individual Quaker ‘heroism’ and group-monitoring of that heroism? In a provocative and ultimately heart-rending narrative, Larry Ingle has crafted a wrenching tale of one man’s tangled and tragic relationship with his Quaker heritage—a tale that offers intriguing possibilities for future scholars.