

## Roundtable Review

### Hardly Quakerism?: Religious Identity and H. Larry Ingle's *Nixon's First Cover-Up*

At the 2015 Annual Conference of the American Academy of Religion, one of the Quaker Studies Group sessions was devoted to a roundtable review of H. Larry Ingle's book *Nixon's First Cover up: the religious life of a Quaker President* (University of Missouri Press, 2015). We present the papers here in the order they were given, and Larry Ingle's response.

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In many cases, when members of the Religious Society of Friends have taken it upon themselves to write Quaker history, their historical work has been a vehicle for them to write about their own notions of what the essence of their religion is, and to make a case about the future direction of the Quaker movement. The seminal Rowntree History series, the multivolume work by Rufus M. Jones and William C. Braithwaite, for example, was not solely supposed to exemplify disinterested historical investigation; it was intended to lay a foundation for Quakerism to embrace liberal theology. Wilmer A. Cooper, the founding dean of Earlham School of Religion, once observed that Quakers placed a particular importance in history because 'Friends have no creeds to provide an anchor or guideline for our life together; therefore they keep their traditions alive by telling their stories over and over again.'<sup>1</sup>

1 Cooper, W. A., *A Living Faith: an historical and comparative study of Quaker beliefs*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2nd edn, 2006, p. 186. Other examples of works of Quaker scholarship that have involved making a historical case for a certain kind of Quakerism would include Thomas D. Hamm's *The Transformation of American Quakerism* and Carole Dale Spencer's *Holiness, the Soul of Quakerism*. Hamm admits that he conceived of his project initially as an attempt at undermining the intellectual foundations of pastoral Quakerism, though he felt that under the tutelage of his dissertation committee it became a more objective work. Spencer is forthright that her scholarship attempts to place holiness theology at the center of Quakerism. See Hamm, T. D., *The Transformation of American Quakerism: orthodox Friends, 1800–1907*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

This way of writing American religious history is not unique to Quakers. Mormon scholars like Richard Bushman have seen their work as an act of devotion, while historian George Marsden saw the hand of providence in the life of Jonathan Edwards. H. Larry Ingle's *Nixon's First Cover-Up* should be understood as part of this approach to history. It is at once a history, providing the most comprehensive account scholars have yet about Richard Nixon's religious life, and it is also a religious argument about the shape and character of Quakerism.

Professor Ingle's contribution to historical scholarship is praiseworthy. Though in the past two decades a few books have dealt with aspects of twentieth-century Quaker history, such as Allan F. Austin's *Quaker Brotherhood* and Hans A. Schmitt's *Quakers and the Nazis*, the recent past of Quakerism is still largely unexplored historical territory. As such Ingle's latest work is one of the most recent accounts we have of the denomination. Ingle's book is also useful to Nixon scholars because of its detail; it brings many instances when the former President mentioned religion or interacted with people of faith to light, and details Nixon's relationships with Evangelical Billy Graham and Protestant New Thought champion Norman Vincent Peale. While scholars Gary Scott Smith and David L. Holmes have examined religion and the presidency, and include chapters on Nixon's religion in their works, Ingle's study is the only monograph on the subject and the only account that foregrounds Nixon's Quakerism in its investigation.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the religious project of this book is more problematic. *Nixon's First Cover-Up* argues that Nixon was not really a Quaker, that he abandoned Quakerism and gave only an occasional 'public backwards glance' to the faith of his childhood. Ingle writes that Nixon 'choose to act as though he had created his own religion [though he did so] without formally reputing Quakerism'; in Ingle's narrative Nixon's religion was 'a faith unique to himself'.<sup>3</sup> The book suggests instead that Nixon's religious views as an adult were akin to 'Ranterism', a mid seventeenth-century form of antinomianism. Ingle's characterisation of 'Ranterism' strongly resembles the personally centred religiosity of 'Sheliaism' that Robert Bellah and his co-authors described in *Habits of the Heart*.<sup>4</sup> The first cover-up of Ingle's title is the idea that Nixon did not really practise an authentic version of Quakerism,

Hamm, T. D., 'Theoretical Reflections of a Skeptic about Theory', in Dandelion, P., (ed.), *The Creation of Quaker Theory: insider perspectives*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004, p. 186.  
Spencer, C. D., *Holiness, the Soul of Quakerism: an historical analysis of the theology of holiness in the Quaker tradition* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007).

2 Holmes, D. L., *The Faiths of the Postwar Presidents: from Truman to Obama* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), pp. 99–123. Smith, G. S., *Religion and the Oval Office: the religious lives of American presidents*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 260–92.

3 Ingle, H. L., *Nixon's First Cover-Up: the religious life of a Quaker president* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015), pp. 5, 11.

4 Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., and Tipton, S. M., *Habits of the Heart: individualism and commitment in American life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, p. 221.

and he contends that Nixon should have publicly converted to a ‘more mainstream and less sectarian faith’ that would have been closer to his views.<sup>5</sup>

That Nixon was not really a Quaker has served as an article of faith for one faction within Quakerism since the 1960s. As one Friend put it in the pages of *Friends Journal* in 1972:

After years of study and self-denial, I have finally figured out the definitive position of liberal Friends on all questions of church discipline, membership, doctrinal clarity, theological coherence, corporate actions, and what Quakerism is and isn't, to wit: There is no pale and Richard Nixon is beyond it.<sup>6</sup>

As a matter of religious practice, trying to disassociate oneself from Nixon could be seen as commendable. By saying Nixon's pursuit of war and public corruption were un-Quakerly, liberal Quakers were, and many still are, trying to maintain the behavioural norms that regulate their community. One might compare this effort to contemporary commentators who have suggested that ISIS is ‘Anti-Islamic’.<sup>7</sup> To exclude Nixon from Quakerism is thus to keep intact and pure a vision of a peaceful and progressive Quaker identity.

The issue that this claim poses for a scholar like Ingle lies in the fact that other factions with the denomination, particularly programmed pastoral Friends in the Midwest and evangelicals in California, seem to have supported Nixon. Nixon grew up among these Friends, and though Ingle insists that Nixon's life shows the ‘absence of any formal religion... especially evangelical Quakerism’, his own careful chronicling of the man's religion's life may leave his readers with a different conclusion. Prominent Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood once told Richard Nixon that he ‘stood in the mainstream of the Quaker tradition’, and while Trueblood may have been a bit overzealous, the statement was not made without grounds.<sup>8</sup>

To evaluate Ingle's argument that Nixon's religion was ‘hardly Quakerism’, we should consider how we define membership in religious groups. What would it mean for Nixon's faith to be ‘Quaker’ in the first place? Religious membership can be defined in numerous ways, but I particularly want to take a moment to talk about Nixon in terms of three of them.

First and most obviously, religious groups can be defined through formal

5 Bellah, R. N., et al., *Habits of the Heart*, p. 13.

6 J. H. McCandless, quoted from May, I., ‘The President's Friends and Foes: Richard Nixon and the divisions of American Quakerism,’ *Quaker History* 102 (2013), p. 24. Ingle actually uses remarkably similar language to McCandless, suggesting that if Nixon publicly articulated what Ingle perceives to be his position, that he alone defined his religion, this ‘would have put him beyond the pale of Quakerism’. See Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, p. 5.

7 Awad, N., ‘CAIR Director: ISIS is not just un-Islamic, it is anti-Islamic’, *Time* (5 September 2014), <http://time.com/3273873/stop-isis-islam/>, accessed 25/10/2016.

8 ‘D. Elton Trueblood to Richard Nixon’, 4 November 1971, Elton Trueblood Papers, Box 12a, Correspondence–Nixon, Richard.

membership. Traditionally the Religious Society of Friends has considered people to be ‘Quaker’ if they held formal membership through a Monthly Meeting. Anyone who violated the discipline regulating Quaker life, either through their conduct or theology, was formally disowned and lost their membership. Though disownments declined after the nineteenth century, they have existed until the present. Nixon, however, was a lifelong member of East Whittier Friends Church in California. As Ingle briefly mentions, in 1973, there was an attempt by eastern Quakers to convince East Whittier Friends Church to disown Nixon, but this attempt failed and the Church’s minister wrote an article defending Nixon’s membership to the American public.<sup>9</sup> By the standards of most Quaker Yearly Meetings and contemporary Quaker organisations like the Friends World Committee on Consultation, Nixon’s formal membership would have been enough to qualify him as a Quaker.

Second, scholars might attempt to define religion by looking within a religious group to see if they consider someone their co-religionist. Ingle’s book is excellent at portraying the unease that anti-war Quakers felt about the Nixon, as well as his own hostile reaction towards them. Particularly revealing is Nixon’s remark to H. R. Haldeman regarding Quaker protesters outside the White House, to the effect that he hated the ‘New Quakers’, that he thought they ‘joined the Quaker church to avoid the draft’.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, neither Nixon nor these protesters regarded the other side as authentically Quakers.

Yet Ingle’s book gives scant attention to the widespread support Nixon received from programmed Friends. Throughout the 1950s, Nixon regularly graced the cover of Quaker periodicals or was featured in inspirational quotes within their pages. The 1959 book *Through a Quaker Archway*, which sought in the words of its editor Horace Mather Lippincott to include contributions from ‘eminent members’ of the Society of Friends, included a piece of Nixon’s alongside those from Harvard Professor Henry Cadbury, author Jessamyn West and artist Fritz Eichenberg.<sup>11</sup> While I have no quantitative data on the matter, a careful reading of the denominational publications like *Quaker Life* and *The Evangelical Friend* makes it clear that a sizeable portion of the denomination supported Nixon even until the last months of his presidency. My own work has suggested that support for Nixon among American Friends was most likely higher than it was among the general public.

Third, scholars looking to pin down someone’s religious affiliation might look at that individual’s self-definition to discern their religious identity. Both Pew and Gallup, for instance, rely on people self-reporting their religious affiliation to generate the demographic data we have about the American religious landscape.

9 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, pp. 166–67.

10 Ingle, *Nixon’s First Cover-Up*, p. 182.

11 Nixon, R. M., ‘Are Goodwill Trips Worthwhile?’, in Lippincott, H. M., (ed.), *Through A Quaker Archway*, New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959, pp. 250–66.

Ingle's suggestion that Nixon was trying wilfully to fool the public into thinking he was a Quaker, that he was engaging in a cover-up, of course means that he discounts the validity of almost all of Nixon's public statements on the matter. Though Ingle admits that Nixon's religion made 'little difference politically', he insists that he and other Nixon critics are to be forgiven if they 'denominate the man a liar' and refuse to believe any of his statements on the matter.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Ingle strikingly records many moments where Nixon spoke about his Christian and Quaker faith throughout his life. Nixon could be quite eloquent on the matter, mentioning his 'Christian creed... [which] includes the noble thought of Quaker founder George Fox: "There is that of God in everyman."' <sup>13</sup> Several of Nixon's associates recall him engaging in private prayer during various times of trouble. As Ingle recounts, in interviews several months before his death Nixon explicitly identified himself as a Quaker, and declared he had a regular practice of Bible reading.<sup>14</sup> Nixon's downfall as a politician was his inability to keep secrets; it seems unlikely he could have successfully engaged in a much more thorough cover-up regarding his religious views and left no evidence behind.

These metrics suggest that Nixon's religious affiliation with Quakerism was less precarious than indicated. It is worth interrogating what Ingle thinks excludes Nixon from being a proper Quaker. His most forceful argument is that Nixon should not be classified as a Quaker because his youthful Second World War service in the Navy represented a 'major break with his religious tradition'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, as Ingle mentions in the book, military service was not uncommon within the Religious Society of Friends. Indeed, outside of liberal Quakerism it was perhaps the norm. Thomas Hamm and his co-authors looking at Indiana Yearly Meeting during the Second World War discovered that approximately 90 per cent of the eligible men engaged in military service.<sup>16</sup> Pacifism would have been even more atypical in the evangelical religious milieu in which Nixon was raised.

This particularly affects how scholars view Vietnam. If pacifism was not the de facto practice of the entirety of the Religious Society of Friends, Nixon being President during the war is less remarkable. It might be a fruitful line of inquiry to go beyond the question of *whether* Nixon's Vietnam policy was compatible with Quakerism, but instead to examine how Nixon saw his policies as in keeping with his own Quaker faith. Ingle, for instance, dismisses both Nixon's and Henry

12 Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, p. 7.

13 Richard Nixon, quoted in Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, p. 129.

14 Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, p. 211.

15 Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, p. 48. This follows liberal Quaker writer Howard Brinton in identifying the essence of Quakerism with a series of practices or 'testimonies', which together constitute proper Quaker belief, a key one of which is usually the peace testimony. See Brinton, H. H., *Friends for 300 Years*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1994.

16 Hamm, T. D., Marconi, M., Salinas, G. K., and Whitman, B., 'The Decline of Quaker Pacifism in the Twentieth Century: Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends as a case study', *Indiana Magazine of History* 96 (March 2000), pp. 45–71.

Kissinger's claim that Nixon's ending the war in Vietnam and eliminating the draft were linked to his Quakerism.<sup>17</sup> Yet I believe there is more to uncover here. Historian of US foreign relations Jeremy Suri, in his recent biography of Kissinger, suggests that Kissinger's Judaism was a critical aspect of his foreign policy leadership, despite the fact that he rarely mentioned it as connected to his actions.<sup>18</sup> Nixon, who professed to be influenced by Quakerism and was raised in the faith just as it ended plainness and its closed endogamous separation from the rest of Protestantism, must have been equally shaped by his faith background.

There is also much to be learned about Quakerism as a religious group and about conservatism from studying Nixon *as a Quaker*. *Nixon's First-Cover Up* overlooks the fact that a discernable group of powerful Quaker Republican conservatives existed from at least the mid 1920s onward. These individuals included figures like editor of the *American Friend* Walter C. Woodward, President of the United States Hebert Hoover, President of Haverford College Felix Morley, and Earlham College professors E. Merrill Root and Elton Trueblood. Nixon was supported by many of these people in his rise to prominence.<sup>19</sup> Ingle, despite asserting that Nixon had cut 'ties with his "Quaker heritage"' during the Second World War, still documents a few of these connections, such as the fact that Nixon's first campaign for Congress was backed by Herman L. Perry, an influential Whittier California Republican and a Quaker.<sup>20</sup> He mentions Trueblood supporting Nixon, though he omits some important events like Trueblood's 1972 speech at the Republican National Convention endorsing the President. Ingle also documents that Nixon was an attender of the secretive Bohemian Grove club for high-level Republican and business leaders, where he gave a eulogy for Hoover, though Ingle disavows that there was any Quaker connection in this action.

Yet correspondence at the Hoover Presidential Library makes it clear that, as a young Congressman, Nixon was mentored by Hoover, that their relationship was close and that Hoover had been the one who had first sponsored Nixon to attend the Grove and introduced him to powerful figures in the Republican Party. Rather than being hardly a Quaker, there is a strong case to be made that Nixon was a key leader of one of the most politically powerful constituencies in his denomination, one that managed to get one of their number to the Presidency twice in the course of the twentieth century. Nixon simply was not the religious outsider as he has been portrayed.

Despite these concerns, *Nixon's First Cover-Up* is still ultimately an accurate and important work of scholarship. It addresses a period of Quaker history that has

17 Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, p. 181.

18 Suri, J., *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

19 This material was addressed in my conference paper, May, I., 'The Quaker Republicans: Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon and the weighty Quakers in the Republican Party,' in *Quakerism and the Political Right*, West Chester, PA: Quaker Historians and Archivists, 2014.

20 Ingle, *Nixon's First Cover-Up*, pp. 61, 63.

seen too little attention. The fourth chapter, 'Two Friends and a Friend', about the Alger Hiss case, shows the book at its best. In the chapter Ingle suggests that the Quaker connections of all the participants in the Hiss case were far more complicated than historians have recognised. Ingle uncovers an almost cloak-and-dagger-style story of the American Friends Service Committee trying quietly to negotiate between their ally Hiss and their fellow Quakers, Nixon and Whittaker Chambers, to get the latter pair to drop their allegations that Hiss was a Soviet spy. This is information not available from other scholars. In a later chapter, Ingle provides the most detailed analysis available of the worship services held in the White House during Nixon's presidency. People studying Nixon, Quakerism and American politics will find useful material in this book.

Yet those readers should also be aware of what the book excludes. Ingles' interpretation does not confront the deeply troubling reality of Nixon's membership within the Quaker fold. Scholarship cannot afford scrub away the disquieting legacy of the second Quaker President; it has to grapple with the past. There is more work that needs to be done to understand Nixon's relationship to the Religious Society of Friends; it will probably get easier as years pass and the issues become less raw and emotionally charged. When that work is undertaken, the scholars who do it will surely benefit from the fact that Larry Ingle has made yet another of his critical contributions to the scholarship on Quakerism, and has trailblazed their way.