

# The Formative Spirituality of John Punshon (1935–2017)

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## Abstract

John Punshon has been one of the premier Quaker historians and spokespersons over the last four decades. Serving as Quaker Tutor at Woodbrooke, Visiting Professor of Quaker Studies at George Fox University, and the first Geraldine Leatherock Chair of Quaker Studies at the Earlham School of Religion, John Punshon has contributed greatly to present historical and theological understandings of the Quaker movement, and he will be greatly missed. From his childhood experiences in a local church whilst living with his grandparents during the War to his education at Oxford, his public and political service and his development into a leading interpreter of Quaker history, faith, and practice, his own reflections, shared at Milton Keynes Friends Meeting in 2003, provide a basis for understanding the origins of his thought and convictions as represented more extensively in his writings and spoken ministries. He will be greatly missed, but his contributions extend beyond the boundaries of space and time.

## Keywords

Quaker, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oxford, George Fox, Bible, prayer, sacrifice, the Way of the Cross.

When William Penn, whose portrait still adorns the walls of Christ Church College, was expelled from Oxford in 1661 for his nonconformist views and alternative worship venues, who would have thought that one of Oxford's alumni three centuries later would become one of the leading Quaker interpreters and ministers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? Having experienced a number of faith traditions in his earlier years, John Punshon actually joined the Friends movement while at Oxford. He described it thus in his address to Friends at Milton Keynes over a decade ago:

‘After my first meeting for worship, (which I describe in *Encounter with Silence*) I knew that what I really wanted in religion was simplicity. I sided with the synagogue against the Temple. Simplicity of worship and the vision of a church without earthly authority is what made me a Friend.<sup>14</sup>

Born in 1935 to Arthur and Dorothy Punshon in Hackney, east London, John received a strong classical education that was accompanied by an intellectual curiosity which served him well at university and beyond. Despite being stricken with polio at the age of 14, he lived a full and productive life. With a quick wit and a twinkle in his eye, he inspired thousands with his teaching and public ministries in Britain, Africa, the Americas and worldwide. John passed away on 10 March 2017 after a second battle with myeloma. He is survived by his wife Veronica, their children—Tom Punshon and Sophie Miller—and their grandchildren, Victoria and James Punshon and Tabitha and Esther Miller.

Memorial services were held at Milton Keynes Friends Meeting on 7 April and at Wanstead Friends Meeting in London on 12 August, where his ashes were interred. John and Veronica were married there in 1962, and their children were raised in that Meeting. At both memorial services the sharing of memories was full and extensive, and loving appreciation continues to be expressed to the family from those who have known John and have been touched by his many ministries over the years. Incidentally, upon visiting Wanstead’s burial grounds, one may also run across the gravestone of Elizabeth Fry, which John had helped to rescue several years earlier from a neighbouring Friends’ property undergoing relocation. In that sense, he rests in good company!

During the Second World War, John was sent to the countryside to live with his grandparents, as the relentless bombing of London made it unsafe to remain in the city. Continuing in his Milton Keynes biographical narrative, he described how:

In 1940, when I was five, I went to live in Devonshire with my grandparents because of the war. My grandfather, a retired London policeman, was working as a labourer on a farm on the edge of Dartmoor. It was an idyllic place to grow up, and I cannot imagine a happier childhood. I was sent to Sunday school at the Baptist church in the town under the protection of a slightly older child who lived in the next cottage over the hill. The Baptists shaped my outlook fundamentally, and I thank God for those good folks, all dead now, I am sure, who took care of us.

There at the Okehampton Baptist Church, John reports having learned several lessons that remained with him for the rest of his life. First, he learned the value of making Christ the foundation of his life. In order to weather life’s storms, of which there are plenty in adulthood, a solid foundation is essential. Second, he felt deeply loved within that community, and such an attitude became the gold standard, in

1 John Punshon, ‘My Faith In Practice,’ delivered on 28/09/2003. In this essay, to be published in *Quaker Religious Thought* 129 (2017), pp. 56–62, John describes the developments in his life in three phases: Childhood, Adolescence and Grown-Up Faith.

his view, for the faith communities of which he longed to be a part. Third, he discovered the spiritual power of music—particularly in the worship of God—knowing that the great compositions of Western culture were written for settings of worship rather than concert halls. These learnings stayed with him his entire life, and they contributed to his ecumenical attitude among Friends and beyond.

As an adolescent John Punshon applied himself to his studies, and he found himself owning more profoundly his Christian commitments. This led to a new set of discoveries that would also shape his life.<sup>2</sup>

By the time I got to the sixth form, I perceived that there was a wholeness about my studies. Art, music, literature, architecture, and history seemed not self-explanatory but interdependent. Moreover, the whole appeared to be more than a sum of the parts. I found myself looking at a tradition with many aspects, the driving force of which, the spirit, the soul, if you like, was the Christian religion. I chose fulfilment as my theme today [rather than ‘journey’], because, since those days, my religious life has been dedicated to a sounding of the depths of that tradition. But it is from the inside. I have a basic commitment to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour, and I can say the Nicene Creed without equivocation. They were the keys that unlocked the door and admitted me to this world when I was still in my teens. It ultimately led me to become an evangelical Friend and to be recorded as a minister of the gospel in Indiana Yearly Meeting.

This search for wholeness led John to explore a vast array of academic disciplines and he was ever the full participant in extracurriculars while at school and college. Recorded in Oxford’s *The Brazen Nose* (1955–57), J. A. Punshon is listed as participating in the Second Torpid rowing team, the drama performance of *Saint Joan*, and as a founding organiser of the Buchan Society for debate. During his undergraduate studies, Punshon came into contact with the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which further set the trajectory for his convictions and life.<sup>3</sup>

Bonhoeffer is known mainly for two ideas: ‘religionless Christianity’ and ‘cheap grace,’ which is the one that was important to me. The phrase occurs in his book (called in English) *The Cost of Discipleship*, which I read as an undergraduate. In it, Bonhoeffer contrasts two kinds of faith. One seeks comfort, and finds it in the familiar rituals of Christianity. The other also seeks comfort, but finds it in self-denial and not self-satisfaction. Hence, the distinction between cheap and costly grace. The cost lies in the conscious decision to follow Jesus, which inevitably involves hardship and maybe death, as he himself promised it might. The grace is a vision of the glory that is to come and the assurance that one belongs to the one who has overcome the world. There is nothing new in this because you can read it in the pages of every Christian moralist from Justin Martyr and Saint Augustine through Francis of Assisi, George Fox, and William Law down to C.S. Lewis and Billy Graham in our own day. William Penn’s masterpiece is called, deliberately, *No Cross, No Crown*.

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Following his undergraduate studies Punshon served in legal, political and educational venues in the north London area, where his *vita* records the following occupations: Research Assistant, Labour Party Head Office (1957–59); Editorial Assistant, Trades Union Congress (1959–61); Assistant Teacher, Stratford Grammar School (1961–67); Law Clerk, J. L. Williams, Solicitors (Holborn, 1967–73); Legal Executive, Cartwright Cunningham & Haselgrove, Solicitors (Woodford, 1973–76); Head of Social Studies, Corpus Christi High School, London E.11 (1976–79).

It was during this time that John and his family were active among Friends locally and beyond, where he served Friends as Clerk and Elder of Wanstead and Cotteridge Meetings and Ratcliff and Barking Burial Grounds Committee. He also served on several Central Committees of Britain Yearly Meeting, including the Committee on Christian Relationships, the Publications Committee, the Library Committee, the ‘Gifts and Discoveries’ Programme, and the unofficial campaign to make Wardenship a Friends House responsibility.

During these years, John was also quite active in politics. He stood for parliament in 1964 and 1966 (Labour, Ilford North), though unsuccessfully. He served as a city councilman (London, Borough of Leyton, where he continued to serve in the trajectory of Reginald Sorenson, a lifelong friend of John’s parents and family) from 1958 to 1964. An avid learner and reader, Punshon continued to grow intellectually and spiritually, which is what led him into the field of Quaker higher education. The night his father died in 1973, however, John describes a pivotal change in his experience and understanding. When he got home from the hospital that night, he read the New Testament all the way through, and it was as though he was reading it for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

[I]t was as if I had never read it before. It was full of Bonhoeffer’s words, what seem to me now to be the great realities of religion—sin, sacrifice, judgment, prayer, providence, salvation, glory, faith, hope, spirit—all those things. The theologians I had been accustomed to read were preoccupied with how to construct a faith out of inadequate and untrustworthy historical records and to remove miraculous events to a symbolic realm in which they exercised great power, but were not, literally, true. It struck me very forcibly that the theologians of the liberal tradition were in exactly the same position as the Puritans whom Fox condemned for seeking Christ in the pages of a book and not as a presence immanent in the world. I came to an experience similar to that of George Fox: ‘... and when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition”, and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy!’

John then describes his grown-up faith as especially being formed by his reflection on two parables of Jesus. The first, that of the Pharisee and the Publican, challenges

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our spiritual pride. The problem with the Pharisee is not that he was bad; it is that he was good, very good, and proud of it. What we see in this story is the

absolutely unacceptable claim that God is more interested in your attitude than your performance. The parable is saying that since we cannot live perfect lives; what matters is how we live our imperfect lives, and that is the first step to imitating the humility of Christ. It is also the first step to recognizing that we are all the same, and there are no exceptions to the rule.<sup>5</sup>

The second parable John mentions is that of the latecomers to the Kingdom and their just reward. Whereas some labourers in the vineyard had been working all day for a day's wage, they were incensed when others came in at the last hour and also received a full day's wage. The whole point of the story is that grace is not fair, but it is the way God works—extending undeserved love to the world—simply to be received, not bargained for.

This parable is important to me because it led me to understand that grace is the most important thing in the universe, because it is the nature of God to love us in this way, and that, in turn, it is our task to recognize the grace in our own lives, and to pass it on to others, freely and indiscriminately.<sup>6</sup>

From these stories of Jesus it struck John that what mattered was not one's works, but one's attitudes. And that is because works follow from one's attitudes. Jesus did not simply say, 'Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13). He put it into action and gave his life out of love for the world. And, in the very next verse, he invites us to do the same as his 'friends'—inviting his followers to share in that costly venture of loving the world, radically and sacrificially. One can thus see the connection between Punshon's reading of Bonhoeffer, his understanding of Christ and the Way of the Cross, and his interpretation of the early Friends movement as embodying those core values. He continues,

The life of Jesus is more than his teaching, because he personifies that teaching, and as Bonhoeffer pointed out, discipleship, ultimately, means being willing to carry the cross. We have to take the risk. When we look back at early Quakerism we find a deep understanding of this reality, and it is the rock upon which, historically at any rate, London Yearly Meeting was built, and this is where I try to stand.<sup>7</sup>

These core insights account for John Punshon's transition, then, from his political, legal and educational service in London to a calling to explore the richness and history of the Quaker heritage. As he had become something of an authority on the history and ethos of the Friends movement during his years in London, John Punshon was appointed the Quaker Tutor at Woodbrooke in Selly Oak, England in 1979, remaining until 1990. It was during that time that I got to know John and

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Veronica Punshon, as I served as a Friend in Residence at Woodbrooke in the fall of 1988 while finishing my doctoral thesis on John's Christology at the University of Glasgow. During that semester John and I had many conversations about the heart and character of the Quaker movement, and those engagements continued over the next three decades. He had also met Jack and Geraldine Willcuts, who also sojourned at Woodbrooke a year or so earlier, and John thereby developed an interest in coming to the Pacific Northwest.

When the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana, invited him to come and assume the first appointment of the Geraldine Leatherock Professor of Quaker Studies he insisted that they procure a self-sustaining endowment before he would come. That would ensure the position's long-term continuation, which it did. Before he made the move to Earlham, where he served from 1991 to 2001, though, he came to serve as Visiting Professor of Quaker Studies at George Fox College in Newberg, Oregon, in the fall of 1990. There he spoke at our Quaker Heritage Week and taught our class on the History and Doctrine of Friends. I was building our house at the time and, one December evening when John and I visited the site, he wrote on the framed plywood of one of the walls, 'John and Veronica will sleep here.' That prophecy did indeed come true, as John also returned several times to speak and to minister among Friends in the Pacific Northwest in the years following.

John's appointment at ESR, though, was pivotal in its impact among American Friends especially. As a member of Whitewater Friends meeting in Richmond, he was recorded as a Friends minister in Indiana Yearly Meeting (1993) and was a frequent speaker at yearly meetings, churches/meetings and colleges/universities around the world. He ministered in Kenya and Honduras and delivered the Johnson Lecture at Friends United Meeting (1987, *Patterns of Change*), the Swarthmore Lecture in London Yearly Meeting (1990, *Testimony and Tradition*) and the Western Yearly Meeting Quaker Lecture (1993, *Enriching the Worship*). He also wrote several articles on Quaker theology and history for encyclopedias, dictionaries and festschriften.

His books include a concise treatment of Quaker history (*Portrait in Grey*, 1984), an invitation to Quaker unprogrammed worship (*Encounter with Silence*, 1987) and a thoughtful analysis of the evangelical tradition among Friends (*Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church*, 2001). In my view and in his, John Punshon's most important book is arguably his third, as there he connects his understanding of the original vision of Fox, Barclay, Penn and the early Friends with Christ-centred Quakerism and its expansive vitality. In his view, the connection between the authentic faith and the vital future of Friends is inextricable.

John also contributed many essays to *The Friend*, *Friends Journal*, *Quaker Life*, *Evangelical Friend* and *Quaker Religious Thought*, and his Pendle Hill pamphlets include *Alternative Christianity* (#245) and *Letter to a Universalist* (#285). Within these writings the above account of John's personal and spiritual development can be seen, and as the power of the written word continues beyond the boundaries of time and space, through them, his life and insights continue to speak.

While his formative spirituality can be seen in his reflections and writings, in ‘another venue’<sup>8</sup> John Punshon describes his intellectual development as having ‘outlived communism and fascism and never succumbed to the charms of phenomenology, existentialism, or deconstruction’. He ‘received a literary and classical education at his English grammar school and Oxford University, and is, therefore, immune to postmodernism’. He ‘spent most of the 1970s acquiring the rudiments of theology and biblical criticism’ and, in the 1980s, ‘encountered non-theist modernism which’, he concluded, ‘was an unwarranted inference from the central Quaker tradition’. In trying to assess its significance he ‘came to see universalism, pluralism, non-theism, and experiential-expressive religion as the inevitable consequences of postmodern ways of thinking’. In the 1990s he ‘learned to face postmodernism in two ways: first, to acknowledge the limitations of modernity, and second, to see revelation as the only reliable source of knowledge of God’. He thereby ‘came to reclaim the evangelicalism of his childhood that has always been implicit in his writing, and what subconsciously he has always believed’.

Following his service at ESR, John and Veronica returned to England and lived in Milton Keynes, where John participated in civic and ecumenical leadership. In sharing about his ‘faith in practice’ at Milton Keynes Friends Meeting, John concludes his overview of his adventuresome life and its fulfilment as follows. ‘It is really very simple. I love God, I read my Bible, I say my prayers and I try to be good. That is my faith in practice.’

### Author Details

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8 Described in a cheeky and politically incorrect account of his intellectual sojourn, provided by Veronica Punshon.