

# Guided by the Light, Living God's Justice: The Theological and Spiritual Writings of John Punshon

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## Abstract

This paper reviews the four main publications in which John Punshon explores aspects of Quaker theology and spirituality. It seeks to outline the key themes addressed in these writings, to identify enduring preoccupations, to track changes of emphasis over time and to assess Punshon's contribution to the development and dissemination of Quaker thought.

## Keywords

John Punshon, Quakers, Holy Spirit, Testimony, Evangelicalism.

## *Alternative Christianity (1982)*

In his first publication, the Pendle Hill pamphlet *Alternative Christianity*, published in 1982, John Punshon begins to address issues he will return to again and again as a Quaker teacher and writer during the next 20 years.<sup>1</sup> The primary purpose of this pamphlet is to argue that the Quaker way represents a legitimate, coherent and distinctive expression of Christianity. He asserts that 'Quakerism is a united outlook in which principles and testimonies are related to one another and together express the Quaker understanding of divine truth, rather than a haphazard growth in response to outside circumstances' (p. 7).

Quakerism is an alternative Christianity, he suggests, because it does not neatly fit within the framework of either the Catholic or Protestant traditions. This leads him to outline distinctive features of Quakerism and identify points of continuity with and divergence from these other churches. Punshon notes,

<sup>1</sup> Punshon, John, *Alternative Christianity*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1982.

but does not elaborate on, the close theological linkages between Quakers and Anabaptists. In making this connection and suggesting that Quakers are neither Catholic nor Protestant, his position is similar to that of Mennonite scholar Walter Klaassen.<sup>2</sup>

Punshon argues that, although the Quaker way shares a common narrative and world-view with other Church traditions, it diverges fundamentally on the question of how Christianity should be practised. He writes that Quakerism 'is a Christianity which emphasizes the importance of intense inner conviction and a hostility to outward and visible ceremonies and forms' (p. 13). The orientation of Quaker practice, therefore, reflects both a recognition of and a response to the tendency of outward symbols and rituals to obscure rather than reveal the spiritual substance of religious truth. This insight produces an emphasis on direct inward experience of the Holy Spirit as a source of guidance and transformation and a rejection of outward sacraments, liturgy, creeds and the sacerdotal function of a set-apart priesthood, along with a suspicion of human institutions and power systems.

If the value of outward and physical forms resides exclusively in what they point to rather than in themselves, then questions about the basis of religious authority, and especially the place of the Scriptures, come to the fore. For Friends, authority is found primarily in the guidance of the living Word of God as discerned by the gathered community in dialogue with the Scriptures, which were themselves inspired by the Word and continue to be illuminated by it.

Because Friends base their interpretation of Scripture on the discernment of the community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Punshon concludes that the Quaker approach to the Bible is closer to the Catholic than to the Protestant position. In addition, because it tends to interpret Scripture in relation to current circumstances and experiences, he suggests that the hermeneutic of Liberation Theology is broadly consistent with that of Quakerism. However, having made these comparisons, Punshon goes on to outline the significant ways in which Quakerism diverges from the Catholic tradition, particularly in terms of the Quaker rejection of hierarchy and sacerdotalism, and the belief that the apostolic succession proceeds through the people of God collectively.

He therefore characterises Quakerism as essentially prophetic and congregational rather than priestly and hierarchical. The Quaker way is radical, in that it refuses to set divine revelation in stone; charismatic, in that it gives priority to the inward guidance of the Holy Spirit; and prophetic, in that it focusses on God's power to speak and act through all people.

2 Klaassen, Walter, *Anabaptism: neither Catholic nor Protestant*, Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973.

*Encounter with Silence: Reflections from the Quaker Tradition* (1987)

Punshon's second major publication, *Encounter with Silence: Reflections from the Quaker Tradition*, published in 1987, explores the nature of Quaker spirituality and, in particular, the place of silence within the faith and practice of Friends.<sup>3</sup> By associating Quaker unprogrammed worship with the practice of Christian contemplative prayer, he again identifies a connection between Quakerism and the Catholic tradition. However, he reiterates the Quaker suspicion of outward forms due to the perceived tendency of physical symbols to distract from spiritual substance.

Punshon is willing to accept that liturgy and images may have value when used as windows onto the divine presence. However, he remains cautious about the dangers of idolatry, including within Liberal Quakerism, which 'may turn the anti-symbol of silence into an idol' (p. 67). Silence is not an end in itself, but rather the state of mind required to be truly attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Quaker spirituality, therefore, focusses on the removal of all barriers that stand in the way of full communion with God, so that a deep and multi-dimensional relationship with the divine can be cultivated.

The practice of silence and stillness enables the Spirit to do its work within the human conscience and encourages an attitude of resignation as a form of reverence, in which people come to accept their creatureliness before God. Punshon notes that, by its nature, such a practice is about 'process, relationship, incremental growth and fluidity in the spiritual life' (p. 115). It must be maintained day in, day out, and requires ongoing attention and vigilance. He describes the unprogrammed waiting worship of Friends as a practice in which people collectively make themselves available to receive divine guidance and demonstrate a willingness to be obedient to God's will. It acknowledges human fallibility and requires people to surrender their personal agendas, plans and pride to seek communion with God and offer themselves in God's service.

Punshon suggests that worship is held in anticipation of transformation and that its ultimate purpose is to conform people to the image of God. Although he does not address the programmed form of Quaker worship in any detail, Punshon is willing to recognise it as a valid expression of Quaker practice. He argues that the purpose of vocal ministry within worship 'is the spiritual formation of Friends, not their instruction' (p. 74).

A key test of its worth, therefore, is the extent to which it stirs the active work of the Spirit in others. Punshon notes that vocal ministry 'falls like a seed in one's own life and the discipline of waiting in silence gives time for germination and for the process of discernment' (p. 76). For Friends, vocal ministry has always been understood as an act of prophecy and he explains that, for early Friends, ministry

3 Punshon, John, *Encounter with Silence: reflections from the Quaker tradition*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, and London: Quaker Home Service, 1987.

was regarded as a kind of flute for the Holy Spirit to play on. The message passes through us, it does not come from us.

Punshon regards the unique Quaker method of making decisions, a discipline of corporate discernment within a meeting for worship, as a crucial aspect of the Quaker way. He writes that

business meetings have a premier place in schooling us in listening to God ... . They are a sign and an example to the world of how we could all live in a reconciling spirit. They are the first place to which the concerns laid upon individuals are brought. They train us to hear the kernel of truth in the utterances of others as we learn to look through complications and distractions with a simple eye. They are the basis of our ministry and our common life and where the source of our unity is to be found. (p.99)

Friends do not look for consensus, but rather seek to discern God's will and 'are willing to sacrifice the despatch of business efficiently to the principle that the minority might be right' (p. 98).

Finally, in this work, Punshon seeks again to indicate what is distinctive about the Quaker way. For him, Quakerism represents an example of a prophetic 'Pentecost church' rather than a hierarchical 'Last Supper' tradition. The former is dedicated to making humans instruments of God's will through a focussed attention on the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The latter tends to emphasise the authority of an outward institution and gives priority to remembering and re-enacting Jesus' sacrifice. This means that Quakerism stresses the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Christianity over doctrine and structure. Faith is a matter of rising above human limitations rather than accepting dogmatic truths. Punshon asserts that, since revelation continues, inward spiritual experience is paramount—'I am sure that reason and observation, ministry, preaching and scripture can point me towards God, but I have not found them a substitute for the direct experience' (p. 53).

### *Testimony and Tradition: Some Aspects of Quaker Spirituality (1990)*

*Testimony and Tradition: Some Aspects of Quaker Spirituality* is based on John Punshon's 1990 Swarthmore Lecture.<sup>4</sup> In it, he undertakes an extended reflection on the nature of Quaker spirituality and practice. Punshon suggests that a fundamental deficiency within human nature is a lack of moral consistency and stability, and that this is often the cause of disorder within creation. The human inability to fully recognise such a weakness is itself a symptom of the malady.

However, divine guidance offers a route out of this predicament, given that all people have direct access to God in Spirit. The struggle between good and evil, bondage and liberation must first be won within the heart of each person.

4 Punshon, John, *Testimony and Tradition: some aspects of Quaker spirituality*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1990.

The world will change only when individuals change. For Punshon, 'the spiritual teaching of Quakerism is predicated on the possibility that we can be released in this life from the personal insecurity and warped judgment which results from sin, and that our moral freedom is a philosophical ultimate' (p. 45).

The way of the cross represents the essential pathway leading out of darkness to new life. Drawing on the work of William Penn, Punshon argues that to take up the mystical cross is to go through an intense inner struggle leading to liberation from sin.<sup>5</sup> Grace has the power to transform people by pointing their minds away from themselves and towards God. When this happens, 'the pride and self-sufficiency with which we seek to protect ourselves from the hostility of the world are transformed into the Christ-like humility which overcomes the world' (p. 30). The result is a change of loyalty, from Caesar to God, and a willingness to refuse to compromise with the ways of the world when they conflict with the divine will.

For Punshon, the way of the cross involves submission to the correction and guidance of the Light within. This is a kenotic experience, but one that brings spiritual growth, reflected in enhanced powers of individual and communal discernment that strengthen the Spirit-led life. This 'requires the discipline of giving up ourselves, the abandonment of preoccupation with our own concerns, and a wholehearted devotion to God. The Light within is our companion and helper in this endeavour' (p. 73).

By its nature, the Light is not coercive. People are free to choose how they respond to what it reveals. However, when they are obedient inwardly their lives visibly change outwardly. This is what Quakers mean by testimony. Punshon asserts that, although testimonies reveal Quaker convictions, their source is not to be found in human values; rather, they reflect divine revelation and the will of God. Testimonies are compelling not because they represent positive human qualities but because they communicate something essential about the nature of God. Like vocal ministry, they speak through people and not about them.

Testimonies are therefore primarily a form of communication. If a testimony does not say something to somebody, it is not a testimony. Historically, through their testimonies, Friends have sought to give a witness to what the Truth required of them. So, Quaker testimony should be understood as a revelation of God's justice.

Friends are called to be willing co-operators with God, and agents of the justice and mercy that characterises the kingdom of heaven. This may bring suffering. 'The life of Christ is a standing reminder to us that sacrifice is a quality of discipleship and not a ritual. It is a living prayer of intercession' (p. 93). The suffering of God's people binds them to Christ, the slaughtered Lamb. This is not a sacrifice made to placate an angry God; it is a costly witness to God's justice and nonviolence within an unjust and violent world.

5 Penn, William, *No Cross, No Crown*, York: Sessions of York, 1981, p. 30.

Testimonies are lived, not thought. They have to be put into practice in the common experiences of life and, because they are fruits of the Spirit, testimonies require people to maintain a careful balance between contemplation and action.

Finally, as part of these reflections on the spirituality of Friends, Punshon returns again to the definition of Quaker distinctiveness in comparison with Catholicism and Protestantism. He feels that, as in the Catholic tradition, Friends emphasise the importance of discerning the guidance of the Spirit, but at the same time reject the idea that this Spirit is confined to or mediated exclusively by the institutional church. He suggests that Quakerism represents a middle way between the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Ultimately, it is opposed to both, because it prioritises direct personal encounters with God over both church tradition and scripture as the basis of religious authority.

*Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church (2001)*

John Punshon's final book, *Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church*, published in 2001, reflects the second half of his 20-year ministry as a Quaker teacher and writer and is somewhat longer than the three previous works combined.<sup>6</sup> This substantial volume was a product of his period of residency in North America during the 1990s, when he taught at George Fox University and Earlham School of Religion. It focuses on the Evangelical expression of Quakerism found in the Friends Church, in which traditional Quaker faith and practice has been influenced by Protestant Evangelicalism, usually of a Wesleyan flavour.

Punshon seeks to assess the extent to which the Quaker way and Evangelicalism are compatible, and to consider how the Friends Church might renew its commitment to its Quaker heritage within an Evangelical framework. Chapter One provides background information about the development of evangelical Quakerism. Punshon argues that the loss of Quaker distinctiveness represents a real danger for the Friends Church and suggests that a lack of clarity about identity has undermined its capacity to grow at the same rate as other Evangelical denominations. He suggests that it is precisely by embracing its Quaker roots and particularity that the Friends Church can establish a clear and distinctive identity.

Chapter Two considers the work of Christ and the significance of conversion within both early Quakerism and the Evangelical tradition. Human sin involves alienation from God and a breach of the covenant, leading to death. Salvation consists of reconciliation with God, the re-establishment of a covenantal relationship and the experience of new life. Reconciliation with God and the regeneration of human nature has been made possible by God's action through Christ in the Incarnation. Because humans are morally imperfect creatures

6 Punshon, John, *Reasons for Hope: the faith and future of the Friends Church*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2001.

existing within a fallen world, regeneration cannot be achieved without divine assistance, but leads to a genuinely transformed life. In view of this, Punshon asserts that people are saved by grace through faith and that faith without works is dead. Conversion and repentance involve a turn to God and a changed life.

This process is described vividly in the conviction narratives of early Friends. He notes that Quakers have always emphasised the inward nature of the experience, but argues that the form of conversion described by the first Quakers conforms to modern Evangelical principles. Quakers find themselves in unity with the Wesleyan form of Evangelicalism in rejecting predestination and affirming God's grace, human choice and the possibility of real change in this life. Both are holiness traditions.

In Chapter Three, Punshon explores the Quaker doctrine of the Light. He notes that both Quakers and Evangelicals stress the importance of an intimate and personal relationship with Christ. However, in some ways, the Quaker understanding of the Light differs from the mainstream Evangelical position. For Friends, the Holy Spirit is available to all without exception and so salvation is also universally available. There is a unity between the Light as Christ's living presence in the world and the Jesus of history. The Light reveals and transforms; it shows people their darkness and sin and leads them to new life. This is Christ acting as inward teacher and guide, who exemplifies God's essential character. Unlike Evangelicals, Quakers have tended to see the Light in universal terms, unconfined by culture, creed or text. In addition, based on the prologue of John's Gospel, Friends have proclaimed Christ, rather than the Bible, to be the Word of God.

This raises questions about religious authority and the Bible that are dealt with in Chapter Four. In his previous works Punshon argued that the Quaker approach to Scripture shares similarities with that of the Catholic tradition. Here he seeks ways to link the traditional Quaker view with the Protestant Evangelical position. He recognises the need for a balance between scriptural authority and the Holy Spirit and notes that Friends have always asserted that the leadings of the Spirit will be consistent with what the Scriptures declare. Given that the Spirit was active as the church discerned the canon of Scripture, revelation is clearly not limited to the Bible. Both the Holy Spirit and the Bible should be regarded as 'true guides' providing 'saving knowledge' and the testimony of Scripture offers an essential test in any discernment process.

Punshon asserts that early Friends accepted the infallibility of the Bible when read in the Spirit that gave it forth. However, he argues that the concept of inerrancy cannot be sustained because the authority of the Bible does not stand alone; it interacts with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the corporate discernment of God's people.

Chapter Five addresses the issue of covenant. Punshon contends that God is eternal and unchanging and that there is a divinely ordained order to creation. God deals with humanity in an orderly and predictable way. In the new covenant, the church must maintain a delicate balance between the free movement of the

Spirit and the need for community order. For Friends this means being guided by the living Spirit rather than by creeds and recognising the active presence of Christ within the community in all his offices.

In Chapter Six Punshon addresses the issue of Quaker worship. In his previous works he focused almost exclusively on unprogrammed expectant waiting. Here he explores the place of programmed worship within Quakerism. He asserts that worship is primarily about divine encounter, whether spontaneous or ordered, and so the key question is whether programming draws people towards divine encounter or distracts them from it. It is clear that, although early Quaker worship gave priority to spontaneity and inwardness, it did provoke emotional outward expression such as quaking, preaching and singing in the Spirit. The rapid growth of Evangelical Quakerism in America during the nineteenth century was due, in part, to the attraction of exuberant and emotional worship for those who found silent meetings increasingly arid and lacking in spiritual vibrancy.

The programmed worship of the Friends Church has traditionally included a period of 'open worship' comparable in status to outward Holy Communion or the Eucharist in other church services. Punshon encourages Evangelical Quakers to maintain the silence and stillness of 'open worship' as an essential element within programmed services. This is an aspect of traditional Quaker practice that can help establish the distinctiveness of the Friends Church. He makes a similar argument for the uniquely Quaker practice of discernment and decision-making, which is the focus of Chapter Seven.

Chapter Eight considers the Quaker way as a holiness tradition. Punshon notes that, in terms of its anthropology, Quakerism bears a strong family resemblance to Wesleyan holiness. A key conviction of both groups is that humans can experience real change in this life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which brings them into the right relationship with God. However, although the Quaker form of holiness has tended to regard this as an ongoing relational process, Wesleyan holiness has often viewed sanctification as an instantaneous event. Punshon suggests that the traditional Quaker concern for sustained spiritual vigilance and moral endeavour is a judicious approach that the Friends Church would do well to maintain.

Chapter Nine considers eschatology and surveys the various understandings of the Millennium in Christian theology. Punshon notes the longstanding tension that exists between the idea of the kingdom come and the kingdom yet to come. He recognises that early Friends proclaimed a realised eschatology and proposes that the kingdom of God exists wherever God is obeyed. In addition, he argues that Christianity has a very clear political dimension, including caution about the dangers associated with wealth, which has a tendency to corrupt, and patriotism, which can undermine the Christian's ultimate loyalty to God's kingdom. Distinctive and consistent Christian moral standards are worth defending against the ever-changing ways of the world.

Finally, in Chapter Ten, Punshon reviews the prospects of the Friends Church. He contends that, although religion seems to be declining within the modern



world, postmodernism provides a place for Evangelicals to stand. Quakerism is well suited to this situation, as it has always been a narrative-based faith. Again, he suggests that the limited growth of the Friends Church is due, in large part, to its failure to find and occupy a distinct niche. Therefore, in order to survive, the Friends Church needs to differentiate itself and have confidence in its distinctiveness. The best way to do this would be to honour Quaker peculiarities and, in particular, essential doctrines and practices associated with Friends, including continuing revelation, the universal Light, Christ as inward teacher, holiness and the practice of open worship.

### Summary and Conclusion

It seems that John Punshon conceived of his writing ministry more as a practice of eldership than as a purely scholarly pursuit. He suggests that true faith experience and understanding develops primarily within the worshipping community rather than in the academy. However, in practice, his writings make a valuable contribution at both levels. In these four works he offers sophisticated and nuanced interpretations of the Quaker way, built firmly upon Christian and biblical foundations. In doing this, he seeks to define Quaker distinctiveness, emphasise the value of Quaker peculiarities and clarify the relationship between the faith and practice of Friends and those of other Christian traditions.

Such an endeavour inspired him to enter into a deep engagement with and illumination of the character of Quaker faith and practice, revealing its fundamental spiritual and theological orientation. For him, an essential dimension of this faith and practice is a steadfast commitment to Christian–Quaker ethics that reflect God’s peace and justice and may require the faithful to engage in costly witness against the ways of the world.

His writings offer important challenges to all the main expressions of contemporary Quakerism. To the Liberal pluralist he communicates an understanding of the Quaker way that makes little sense if divorced from its Christian and biblical roots. To the Evangelical he robustly defends the peculiarities of Friends and warns of the negative consequences of dispensing with Quaker distinctiveness.

Although his writings are primarily addressed inwardly, to the individual Friend and the Quaker community, they also offer invaluable insights into the nature of Quaker faith and practice for those outside looking in. In the first half of his writing ministry Punshon characterises Quakerism primarily as an alternative form of Christianity that is neither Catholic nor Protestant, comparing and contrasting it with the Catholic tradition. In the second half of his ministry he considers the Friends Church as an expression of Quaker faith and practice within an Evangelical framework, and assesses the compatibility of Quakerism with the Protestant tradition.

Throughout these writings, he continually warns about the dangers associated with focusing on outward physical symbols instead of the inward spiritual

substance. He also argues that the Quaker way is essentially a Pentecost-type church, being prophetic and congregational in orientation, as opposed to Last Supper-type churches, which tend to be priestly and hierarchical in nature. It is through these observations and distinctions that he describes the specific contribution Quakers make to the church catholic in all its diversity. Throughout his life, John Punshon offered his spiritual gifts in the service of his faith community, and this faith community has been greatly enriched by his work.

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