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Author(s): Stephen A. Kent

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# PSYCHOLOGY AND QUAKER MYSTICISM: THE LEGACY OF WILLIAM JAMES AND RUFUS JONES

Stephen A. Kent\*

Periodically Quakers discuss the extent to which their Society arose as the result of mystical insight among its early members. Interpreters who emphasize early Quaker mysticism assume that the presumed experience of God in the form of "the Light within" bespeaks the supernatural rather than natural origins of the Society. They support their interpretation by citing the claims of several early Friends, particularly George Fox, who insisted that they had direct intuitions of God through prayer, contemplation, and revelation. Most prominent among these Quaker interpreters was Rufus Jones, whose studies of early Quaker mysticism reflected wider trends in the analysis of religion at that time.<sup>1</sup> Jones's work had stimulated a spate of articles among Friends, some of which are supportive of his basic claims;<sup>2</sup> many of which are very critical.<sup>3</sup>

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\*Stephen A. Kent is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

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1. Jones's most prominent discussions of Quaker mysticism include: *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London, 1909); *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1914); *New Studies in Mystical Religion* (New York, 1927); *Some Exponents of Mystical Religion* (New York, 1930); *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1932); "Introduction" to William Charles Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (London, 1912); "Introduction" to William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London, 1919); and his three essays on "Mysticism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* v. 9 (New York, 1917).

2. John R. Yungblut, "Comments on J. Calvin Keene's 'Historic Quakerism and Mysticism'", *Quaker Religious Thought*, v. 7 no. 2 (Autumn, 1965), 18-25; also his "Comments on Daniel E. Bassuk, 'Rufus Jones and Mysticism'", *Quaker Religious Thought*, v. 17 no. 4 (Summer, 1978), 27-30 and J. Floyd Moore, "Comments on Daniel E. Bassuk...", *ibid.*, 31-36.

3. J. Calvin Keene, "Historic Quakerism and Mysticism," *Quaker Religious Thought*, v. 7 no. 2 (Autumn, 1965), 2-17; Daniel E. Bassuk, "Rufus Jones and Mysticism", *loc. cit.* 4-26; Donald Durnbaugh, "Baptists and Quakers—Left Wing Puritans?," *Quaker History*, v. 62 no. 2 (Autumn, 1973), 67-82; Melvin B. Endy, Jr., "The Interpretation of Quakerism: Rufus Jones and His Critics," *Quaker History*, v. 70 no. 1 (Spring, 1981), 3-21.

Non-Quakers also have examined the role that mysticism played in Quakerism's early days, and of these studies Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (1911) is the most enduring.<sup>4</sup> Her study is, however, over seventy years old, and in recent years mystical interpretations of religious group origins have waned as historians and sociologists continue to explain the group's appearance and development strictly in socio-cultural terms.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, mystical interpretations of religion underwent a resurgence during the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to the increase in meditational activities and mind-altering drug-use,<sup>6</sup> and occasionally Quakers were mentioned in this scholarly literature.<sup>7</sup>

Complementing and often competing with the mystical interpretation is a psychological perspective which claims that early Quakerism emerged or flourished as the result of complicated psychological dynamics of its early leaders. These psychological interpretations are quite varied in content and contain at least three distinct branches. One branch insists that early Quakers' religious experiences bespoke their basic insanity or mental instability. As does the mystical assertion about Quaker origins, the insanity claim has historical precedent from Quakerism's earliest period since several of the new movement's opponents levelled this charge in attempts to both explain and discredit it.<sup>8</sup> The second branch of psychological inter-

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4. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York, 1911, 1961 ed.).

5. See, for example, Durnbaugh, *loc. cit.*; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London, 1972); Stephen A. Kent, "Relative Deprivation and Resource Mobilization: A Study of Early Quakerism," *British Journal of Sociology*, v. 33 no. 4 (December, 1982), 529-544; David A. Martin, *Pacifism: An Historical and Sociological Study* (New York, 1966), 55-70.

6. Arthur J. Deikman, "Experimental Meditation," *Journal of Mental Disorders*, v. 136, 329-373, rpt. in Charles T. Tart, ed., *Altered States of Consciousness*, (Garden City, New York, 1972), 203-223; "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," *Psychiatry*, v. 29, 324-338, in Tart, 25-46; Robert E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, (New York, 1972, 2nd ed. 1977), 154-189; Paul L. Adams, "Metapsychiatry and Quaker Meditation," in Stanley R. Dean, M.D., ed., *Psychiatry and Mysticism* (Chicago, 1975), 185-193. Adams's article cites both Rufus Jones's *Spiritual Reformers* and William James's *Varieties*. The uncredited reference to James comes from the section of *Varieties* that is immediately prior to James's discussion of George Fox.

7. Walter Houston Clark, "The Psychology of Religious Experience," *Psychology Today*, rpt. in H. Newton Malony, ed., *Current Perspectives in the Psychology of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), 233.

8. Charles L. Cherry, "Enthusiasm and Madness: Anti-Quakerism in the Seventeenth Century," *Quaker History*, v. 74 no. 2 (Fall, 1984), 7-17; Stephen A. Kent, "The 'Papist' Charges Against the Early Quakers," *Journal of Religious History*, v. 12 no. 2 (December, 1982), 187-88.

pretation is less extreme, claiming instead that supposedly mystical experience differs from other psychological phenomena only to the extent that interpreters impute qualities of 'otherness' to it. As James Leuba asserted in part as a response to Rufus Jones's work, "there need be no differences between religious and non-religious ecstasies other than those due to a different interpretation—the interpretation being itself the cause of important affective and volitional phenomena."<sup>9</sup> Finally, a third branch ignores the psychological dynamics of Quakers themselves but instead focuses on the Quakers' curative effects on mentally distressed persons. These effects are the result of the Quakers' application of their religious principles to persons suffering extreme mental imbalance.

Many of the non-Quaker discussions about Quaker origins were put forward by prominent intellectual figures. For example, the noted Harvard philosopher, Josiah Royce, undertook an extended psychological discussion of the Quaker leader, George Fox.<sup>10</sup> Over two decades later the psychologist of religion, Anton Boisen, examined George Fox's mental health in light of William James's interpretations of religion.<sup>11</sup> Recent psychological discussions of early Quakerism appear in socio-cultural studies by Michael McDonald and George Rosen.<sup>12</sup>

Playing an ambiguous role in the mystical and psychological interpretations of early Quakerism by both Friends and non-Friends is the psychologist, William James. In his classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James devoted several long passages to early Quakerism, especially to the mental instability, personal power, and religious insights of George Fox.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, he singled out Quakerism by bestowing upon it his highest personal praise and undoubtedly Quakers took note. James eulogized the group by insisting that "[t]he Quaker religion which [Fox] founded is something which is impossible to overpraise. In a day of shams, it was a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness, and a return to something

9. James H. Leuba, *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism* (London, 1925), 315.

10. Josiah Royce, "George Fox as a Mystic," *Harvard Theological Review*, v. 6 (1913), 31-59.

11. Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World* (New York, 1936, rpt. 1962); *Religion in Crisis and Custom* (New York 1945, rpt. 1955).

12. Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981); George Rosen, *Madness in Society* (New York, 1968, rpt. 1969).

13. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1902, rev. 1902, rpt. 1909), 7-8, 291-296, 411.

more like the original gospel truth than men had ever known in England.”<sup>14</sup> A remarkable feature about James’s influence is that advocates of both mystical and psychological interpretations viewed his work as substantiating their claims at the expense of their opponents. The fact that James’s *Varieties* influenced competing interpretations of Quakerism suggests the rambling manner in which he developed his argument—its psychological pragmatism was overshadowed by the wealth of long, illustrative quotations from western religious figures.

James’s direct impact on both the Society of Friends and its prominent proponent of mystical interpretations, Rufus Jones, was sufficiently complex that I have devoted an entire article to it.<sup>15</sup> His influence, however, had equally far reaching effects on psychological scholars who offered interpretations of Quakerism and who often quoted both him and Jones as either supporters of or opponents to their own interpretive arguments. The purpose of this article is to review and evaluate the mystical and psychological scholarship that discussed early Quakerism subsequent to James’s and Jones’s influential work. Not only will the review reveal the frailty of the evidence garnered by both mystical and psychological advocates who utilized James and Jones, but also it will allow Quaker scholars to locate their own debates on these issues within the broader context of the history of ideas on the origins of religious groups.

### *The Mysticism of Quaker Religiosity: Evelyn Underhill*

Despite his evaluation of religious experience which in its final analysis took a psychologically pragmatic direction, William James was cited time and again by persons giving mystical interpretations of the early Quaker movement. Evelyn Underhill, for example, incorporated James’s categories, “sick soul” and “healthy-minded” soul, into her classic analysis of mysticism,<sup>16</sup> although her emphasis on Fox’s presumed mysticism differed from his. While James had used Fox as an example of a distraught (if not “sick”) but powerful personality,<sup>17</sup> Underhill used him as “a typical example” of a mystic whose mystical insight did not come suddenly but rather as

14. James, 7. Rufus Jones quoted this section in *George Fox: Seeker and Friend* (London, 1930), 11-12.

15. The article, entitled “Psychological and Mystical Interpretations of Early Quakerism: William James and Rufus Jones,” will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Religion*.

16. Underhill, 98-99; see also 7, 8, 192.

17. James, 7.

a “gradual and increasing lucidity.”<sup>18</sup> In support of this claim, she, like James, quoted from Fox’s account of the emotional trauma that he suffered in his late teens and early twenties, and the section that she used begins with a passage that James had elided in his quotation from the same part of his *Journal*.<sup>19</sup> Worth noting, too, is the fact that she connected Fox and Jacob Boehme at least with regard to the quality of mystical experiences,<sup>20</sup> just as had James and Jones.<sup>21</sup> Even if Underhill’s association of the two figures might have been influenced by Rufus Jones’s work,<sup>22</sup> Marghanita Laski’s more recent psychological study on religious ecstasy also associated Boehme and Fox and cited James as its source.<sup>23</sup>

*The Psychology of Fox’s Mysticism: Josiah Royce and Rachel Knight*

In a relatively small book entitled, *George Fox: Seeker and Friend* (1930), Jones not only mentioned James’s discussion of both Quakerism and Fox but he also referred to “a careful psychological study” done by a colleague and friend of James, Josiah Royce.<sup>24</sup> During the year that he had attended Harvard (1901-1902) Jones seems to have audited a metaphysics course under Royce and in 1932, reflecting back upon this time, he wrote that “Professor Josiah Royce had a larger influence on my intellectual development, I think, than any other one person.” He even believed that Royce had written “the best study...that any one has written” on the psychology of George Fox.<sup>25</sup> He did, however, believe that Royce had not ap-

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18. Underhill, 177-178; see also James Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness: A Psychological Study* (New York, 1920), 155 n.9.

19. Underhill, 177-178; see George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, rev. and ed. John L. Nickalls (London, 1694, 1975 ed.), 10-11, 12, 14.

20. Underhill, 238, see also 469.

21. James, 410-411 n.2; Jones, *Studies*, 495.

22. Underhill, (1911 ed.), 185 n.2, citing Jones, *Studies*.

23. Marghanita Laski, *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular & Religious Experiences* (London, 1961), 119-120. The argument that Fox was influenced by Boehme was refuted a number of years ago in Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford, 1946), 16 n.13.

24. Jones, *George Fox*, 11,12,13; Royce, *op.cit.*

25. Rufus Jones, “Why I Enroll With the Mystics,” in Vergilius Fern, ed., *Contemporary American Theology*, v. 1 (New York, 1932), 196, 197. At the end of 1902 Jones wrote to his wife about a lively conversation in which he and several others, apparently including Royce, had a long discussion about philosophy and religion. Around this same time he heard a debate between several prominent thinkers, including the early psychologist of religion, G. Stanley Hall, on an unspecified topic, and Jones lamented that James was not

preciated the quiet, preparative period that Fox had spent before he began his very active religious life.<sup>26</sup>

Royce's study, which Jones discussed but did not cite, appeared in 1913 and was a contribution to the work that James had begun in *Varieties*. Royce proposed to "sketch some personal peculiarities of the founder of Quakerism, George Fox, and in the end to show what place was filled in his life by what may be called experiences as a mystic." He attempted to do this through clarifying "the place that the experiences of silent worship occupied in the mental life of Fox himself, and why he found this form of what is technically called mysticism a valuable feature of his religious consciousness."<sup>27</sup> He concluded that what distinguished Fox as a mystic was his possession of "a consciousness of the presence of the divine which was a central figure in what he calls the 'Light'; namely, in that Light which he believed to be the most precious possession of all believers."<sup>28</sup> Unique in Royce's discussion, however, was his identification of the dynamic between Fox's mental health and social and political forces of seventeenth century English society. He identified, for example, the causes of Fox's mental illness in 1659 as "the political troubles of the time and the sympathetic distresses caused by persecution of Quakers."<sup>29</sup> This insight has been verified unintentionally by subsequent research.<sup>30</sup> As evidence supporting this proposition Royce further says that Fox's prophetic visions...usually relate[d] to important political, social, or religious crises," and that "He always vehemently condemned the practice of the state clergy in preaching for hire."<sup>31</sup> Royce even realized that "What made [Fox] historically important was his practical work as a leader of men, as an organizer of religious communities, as a social reformer, and as a consistent expounder and exemplar

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there among them. See the Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library, Collection 1130, Box 38D, Letters from [RMJ] to EBJ, 1902, [letter dated December 31, 1902]. The literary evidence from Jones's work, however, indicates that James was much more influential on him than Royce, at least in the first two decades of the century.

26. Jones, *George Fox*, 33.

27. Royce, 53.

28. *ibid.*, 45; see Jones, "Introduction," to Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, xxxi.

29. *ibid.*

30. James Fulton Maclear, "Quakerism and the End of the Interregnum: A Chapter in the Domestication of Radical Puritanism," *Church History*, v. 19 (1950), 261-262; Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven, 1964), 202; Fox, *Journal*, 353, 354.

31. Royce, 42, 49.

of...the ideal of a spiritual unity of all men.”<sup>32</sup> Despite his insights into the social and political influences on Fox’s life, however, Royce failed to see any element of social or political protest in Fox’s barefooted walk through “bloody Lichfield,” and instead gave it a strictly psychological interpretation.<sup>33</sup>

Royce’s psychological insights into George Fox’s “mystical character” and mental health were utilized in another mystical interpretation of early Quakerism that was published in 1922: Rachel Knight’s *The Founder of Quakerism: A Psychological Study of the Mysticism of George Fox*.<sup>34</sup> As in the case of Jones’s studies of Fox and the early Quakers, however, she too failed to pick up and expand upon Royce’s insights into the effects of society and politics on the psychological health of Quakerism’s “founder.” Dedicated to her Quaker teacher, personal friend, and psychologist of religion, Edwin Starbuck, Knight’s study assumed an orientation to mysticism that dominated many of the psychological and mystical studies of Fox and Quakerism during the first part of this century.<sup>35</sup> For her, mysticism was a catalytic force that impelled Fox to act against the evils of the world. That is, mysticism was a force that seemingly

32. *ibid.*, 38.

33. *ibid.*, 50 n.1.

34. Rachel Knight, *The Founder of Quakerism: A Psychological Study of George Fox* (London, 1922).

35. Starbuck’s *Psychology and Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*, preface by William James (New York 1899, 3rd ed. 1911), 22, argued that religious conversion usually occurred between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, and therefore it tended to be an adolescent phenomenon which aided in the maturation process. He mentioned Fox in his study, and he had read Fox’s *Journal*. Fox certainly received religious insights throughout his adolescence (or so his *Journal* indicates), although many came at a later age than Starbuck’s study might suggest. Jones owned a copy of Starbuck’s book, and pencil marks in the introduction indicate that Jones had read at least that far into the text. (This book sits in the Rufus M. Jones Study at Haverford College). Starbuck’s study of conversion is mentioned, however, in one of the better analyses of Quakerism, Richard T. Vann, *The Social Development of English Quakerism 1655-1755* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 83 n.45, because Vann attempted to identify the ages of the Quakers’ conversions. Although he was hampered by limited data, he found that the median age at conversion of the prominent early Quaker ministers, the so-called “Valiant Sixty,” was 23, while the median age at conversion for people from Norwich, Buckinghamshire, and Norfolk was about 33 (Vann, 83-84). Vann, who was critical of Starbuck’s use of language when discussing religion, admitted admiration for James’s *Varieties* (Vann, 83 n.45). Worth mentioning is the fact that William James wrote the preface to Starbuck’s book. An interesting autobiographical account is Edwin D. Starbuck, “Religion’s Use of Me,” Vergilius Ferm, ed., *Religion in Transition* (Freeport, New York, 1937), 201-260.



originated from a realm outside of the world but which compelled its possessor to challenge certain conditions in society. To support this claim about the seminal nature of mysticism for Fox (and by extension, for the other early Quakers) she utilized Royce's article on the group's 'founder' as well as James's *Varieties*, Jones's *Studies of Mystical Religion*, and Underhill's *Mysticism*.<sup>36</sup> When she discussed the similarities between Fox and Boehme she cited Rufus Jones.<sup>37</sup>

*Mental Illness and Religious Insight: Anton T. Boisen*

At least one other psychological interpretation of Fox and the early Quakers must be placed within the sphere of influence of James's *Varieties*: Anton T. Boisen's personally revealing study published in 1936, *The Exploration of the Inner World*.<sup>38</sup> His own mental breakdowns had been alleviated through religious insights, and as a result he became convinced that "many forms of insanity are religious rather than medical problems and that they cannot be successfully treated until they are so recognized."<sup>39</sup> A sufferer of mental illness "is facing what for him are the great and abiding issues of life and death and of his own relationship to the universe. He thus shows invariably marked religious concern."<sup>40</sup> In order to find examples of the healing powers of religion, Boisen turned to personal accounts of historical figures, and among the accounts he discovered "there is none more illuminating, from the standpoint of inquiry, than the autobiography of George Fox, the great founder of the Society of Friends."<sup>41</sup> Boisen was particularly concerned with Fox's "disturbed period which began in his nineteenth year and continued until his twenty-third," a period which, Boisen claimed, "seems to have been singularly free from the grosser sex maladjustments, which figure so prominently in most of our hospital cases."<sup>42</sup> His religious experiences, which began with the "'opening' that training at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to 'fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ...'", enabled him to rebuild his life and to work out his *Weltanschauung*, that is, his world-view." Some of his insights were "of great social value." Throughout his

36. Knight, 110, 121-122, 205, 253, and also 36; on James see 58, 81, 223, 264, 266, and also 139; on Jones see 35, 153-154; and on Underhill see 54-55.

37. *ibid.*, 33, 35, footnoting Jones, *Studies*, 495.

38. Boisen, *op. cit.*

39. *ibid.*, 7

40. *ibid.*, 60.

41. *ibid.*, 61.

42. *ibid.*, 64.

career Fox continued to listen to commands that he felt were from the Lord, as demonstrated in his barefooted walk through Lichfield.<sup>43</sup>

As part of his criticisms of what he claimed was the insensitivity of the mental health establishment of his time to the religious roots of many mental problems, Boisen next constructed an exercise in which he brought Fox before a variety of experts, including Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, who addressed themselves to psychiatric problems and then evaluated the extent to which Fox would have received a sympathetic and helpful hearing from them. If he were brought, for example, before William James, a representative of "the Doctors of Philosophy," then Fox would receive a sympathetic ear since James had "really grappled with the problem which George Fox represents, and that with the keenest insight." Boisen based this interpretation, of course, on James's *Varieties*.<sup>44</sup> James Leuba, however, would not be as understanding of Fox as would James, since, as indicated by his *Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, he seemed to have "little first-hand acquaintance with the mentally ill. He is, moreover, apparently content to look upon psychoses, and even some of the psycho-neuroses, as organic in origin, and therefore he makes no constructive attack upon the problem from the standpoint of psychopathology."<sup>45</sup>

*Recent Interpretations of Quakerism and Mental Health: Michael MacDonald and George Rosen*

Boisen's narrative may appear to be a fanciful use of history, but the positive opinion he maintained of the way in which George Fox achieved mental healing through religion received indirect support in a recent study of "popular beliefs about insanity and healing" in seventeenth century England by Michael MacDonald.<sup>46</sup> MacDonald speaks of George Fox in a very complimentary manner:

Finally, some of the leaders of the Dissenting sects possessed special powers of persuasion and healing. George Fox in particular enjoyed an extraordinary gift for calming raging lunatics and people who were thought to be possessed or bewitched. He believed that his miraculous

43. *ibid.*, 65, 66, 67.

44. *ibid.*, 90-91.

45. *ibid.*, 97; see Clark, 232-233; Peter A. Bertocci, "Psychological Interpretations of Religious Experience," in Merton P. Strommen, ed., *Research on Religious Development* (New York, 1971), 32-38.

46. Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981).

cures were an extension of his mission to teach troubled souls God's truth, and he repudiated the use of force to restrain or treat violent madmen. The key to healing the insane, in Fox's view, lay in his ability to communicate his conviction that the inner light resided in everyone. The remarkable narratives of his dealings with mad people show that he could, through gentle persuasion, somehow establish a bond between himself and men and women whose capacity to understand was apparently ruined. Although Fox rejected violent medical treatments of insanity, neither he nor the other Nonconformist healers condemned medicine altogether.<sup>47</sup>

MacDonald also points out that Fox's techniques with the mentally deranged "closely resembled" the humane healing practices which were pioneered by the Quaker asylum for the insane, the York Retreat.<sup>48</sup>

If Fox (and possibly other Quakers) apparently could cure cases of mental illness, then also he and his cohorts could cause it, or at the very least generate extreme behaviors among their followers, and then utilize these behaviors to the group's advantage. So argued George Rosen, an investigator into historical examples of mental illness. Rosen, who had Ph.Ds in both medicine and sociology, presented several examples of religiously extremist enthusiasm from Quakerism's first decade, including instances in which Quakers were "brought to fall, foam at the mouth, roar..., swell in their bellies," and "walk or...run through the streets completely naked."<sup>49</sup>

47. *ibid.*, 228.

48. *ibid.*, 230; see Mary Glover, "Mad Quakers," *The Friends' Quarterly* (October, 1972), 341-355; Samuel Tuke, *Description of 'The Retreat': An Institution Near York for Insane Persons of the Society of Friends*, intro. Richard Hunter and Ida Macalpine (London, 1813, rpt. 1964). Fox's *Journal* relates, for example, the following incident from 1649: "Now after I was set at liberty from Nottingham gaol..., I travelled as before in the work of the Lord. And coming to Mansfield-Woodhouse, there was a distracted woman under a doctor's hand, with her hair loose all about her ears. He was about to let her blood, she being first bound, and many people being about her holding her by violence; but he could get no blood from her. And I desired them to unbind her and let her alone, for they could not touch the spirit in her, by which she was tormented. So they did unbind her; and I was moved to speak to her in the name of the Lord to bid her to be quiet and be still, and she was so. The Lord's power settled her mind, and she mended and afterwards received the Truth, and continued in it to her death" (*Journal*, 43-44); also cited in Henry J. Cadbury, ed. *George Fox's Book of Miracles* (Cambridge, 1948), 121; see also 121-122. On Fox and medicine, see Cadbury's discussion in *ibid.*, 45ff; Cherry, 4-5.

49. Rosen, 208, quoting an anti-Quaker petition that is excerpted in William Charles Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* ed. and rev. by Henry J. Cadbury, forward by L. Hugh Doncaster (Cambridge, 1912, 2nd ed. 1955),

His explanation of these activities was both functional and historical. Functionally, he saw the behaviors of the early Quakers simply as techniques that helped their group to convert people by claiming that their "strange physical effects" were "evidence of divine inspiration." Furthermore, their enthusiasm helped solidify the religious commitments of persons who already had been converted. In short, the early Quakers' extravagant behaviors served as one example of the fact that "[r]eligious movements frequently endeavour to mobilize the emotions in order to intensify the fervour of their adherents or to convert non-believers."<sup>50</sup>

Historically, Rosen saw the Quakers' extreme behavior as demonstrations of their "prophetic character" and "their relationship to the world of obscure heresies and sects out of which they emerged." Quakers "belonged to a period which was still close to the Middle Ages," and in that earlier time the practice of going naked was "a sign of penance or of having divested oneself of all earthly goods." He was misled by R.A. Knox, however, into thinking that Quakers were not millenarians, so he did not understand fully the manner in which Quakers utilized nakedness as part of their warnings about the immanent period of divine judgement.<sup>51</sup>

### *Psychological and Mystical Interpretations: A Summary and Assessment*

In the course of this discussion three somewhat distinctive positions emerge regarding psychological and mystical interpretations of Fox, and by extension, of early Quakerism. Royce, Underhill, Knight, and Boisen suggest that psychological distresses sensitized Fox to religious, and indeed mystical, experiences, and that for the most part these experiences helped him channel his talents and energy into creative activities. William James and Rufus Jones put forward similar arguments and subsequent authors seemingly followed their

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108; and rpt. in full in George Fox, *Saul's Errand to Damascus in The Works of George Fox*, v. 3 (Philadelphia, 1831), 588.

50. Rosen, 207, 208. Quaker historians themselves have acknowledged instances of insanity or "near-insanity" among the early Quakers, including a suicide by a man who might have expected to undergo a miraculous resurrection. See Cadbury, 13-16; Barbour, 117-119.

51. Rosen, 209; R.A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford, 1950), 150. On naked prophecy see Kenneth L. Carroll, "Quaker Attitudes Towards Signs and Wonders," *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society* v. 54 no. 2 (1977), 70-84; "Early Quakers and 'Going Naked as a Sign'" *Quaker History*, v. 67 no. 2 (Autumn, 1978), 69-87.

lead. Fox's ability to translate psychological distress into religious insight and productive activity suggested a pattern that was, presumably, common among other Quakers. God, it seemed, either caused people to receive direct religious revelation or else used people's psychological configurations as channels through which to reveal mystical insights.

Contrasting with this mystical interpretation is a psychological one that viewed religious expressions as manifestations of mental distress or imbalance. As did James Leuba before him Rosen believed, or at least strongly suggested, that "mystical" insight must be studied as forms of psychological phenomena.<sup>52</sup> Rosen, however, even went so far as to suggest that the Quakers' religious activities resembled acts of mental illness. This "mysticism" versus "psychology" debate about early Quakerism mirrors a larger debate within the field of the "psychology of religion" itself.<sup>53</sup>

MacDonald offered still another interpretation of Fox, and by extension early Quakerism, which linked Fox's sensitivity to the mentally ill with the principles that he developed as the result of both his own psychological struggles and the religious tenets that he held. Since a number of early Quakers were involved in attempts to heal the mentally ill MacDonald probably thought that Fox's sensitivity was more or less representative of them as well.

One way to evaluate the strengths of the competing mystical and psychological interpretations of early Quakerism is to examine the 'facts' that the interpreters use to support their positions in light of recent historical research. Admittedly this approach generates its own set of problems, since historians themselves operate within explicit or implicit conceptual frameworks that color their own selections and interpretations of historical data. Nevertheless, scholars recognize certain studies of the early Friends as examples of sound and sensitive research, and several of these studies remain definitive works years after their publication. Since these standard sources discuss all of the incidents, attitudes, and events that both sets of interpreters cite as support for their positions, researchers can evaluate the factual basis for the mystical and psychological claims. After doing so the obvious conclusion is that neither group of interpreters has sufficiently documented its claims to make its basic assertions convincing. Judged by contemporary standards, the facts that they muster in support of their mystical or psychological posi-

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52. Leuba, 244-245, 260-261, 309-310, 315-316; Rosen, 2, 4-5.

53. Clark, 233-234.

tions actually justify the validity of socio-cultural explanations of the group's appearance and development and undermine the basic claims of both perspectives.

Mystical and psychological interpreters use incidents from the life of Fox to bolster their arguments, yet modern research has shed light on these same incidents in ways that actually undermine the mystical and psychological claims. For example, both Boisen and Underhill focused their discussions of Fox on the traumas that he suffered during his late teens and early twenties. Both authors often mentioned Fox's own vague admissions of severe "temptations" during this period, with Underhill viewing them merely as part of the struggle between "superficial and spiritual consciousness" and Boisen specifically denying that these temptations had their origins in sexual maladjustments.<sup>54</sup> One respected historian of the seventeenth century dissenting sects, however, Michael R. Watts, offers an interpretation that specifically contradicts Boisen: "It is probable," he specifies, "that they were associated with the awakening of sexual desires."<sup>55</sup> Documenting the fear of masturbation suffered by a Methodist preacher, John Nelson, in the eighteenth century, Watts concludes that "Nelson's account of his temptations [in his nineteenth year] and of his restless search for spiritual consolation is reminiscent of the experiences of George Fox nearly a century earlier and probably had similar cause."<sup>56</sup> There may well be, therefore, a very mundane explanation to Fox's religious struggles and resolutions that both Underhill and Boisen completely overlooked, and this explanation suggests the importance of locating Fox within a socio-cultural climate of Puritan 'repression' about sexual matters.<sup>57</sup>

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54. Boisen, 64; Underhill, 177-178.

55. Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters*, v. 1 (Oxford, 1978), 187. Worth mentioning here is that Boisen's own bouts with mental illness had a great deal to do with sexuality, despite his insistence that his "problem" (as he called it) was religious in nature. He spoke, for example, of his "precocious sexual sensitivity, dating from my fourth year. With the onset of adolescence the struggle became quite severe" (Boisen, *Exploration*, 2). Almost certainly this "struggle" had to do with masturbation. Later in his life, when he was 26, his preoccupation with a YMCA worker, Alice Batchelder, served as his primary motivation to enter the ministry. He believed, incorrectly, that by doing so she would agree to marry him. For a summary of Boisen's sexual traumas, see Lucy Bregman, "Anton Boisen Revisited," *Journal of Religion and Health*, v. 18 no. 3 (1979), 213-216.

56. Watts, 418.

57. Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York, 1977), 615.

Boisen made other comments about Fox's revelations that are either overturned or significantly qualified by more recent scholarship. When discussing Fox's 'revelation' about the inadequacy of university training for the qualification of Christ's ministers, Boisen interpreted this strictly within a context of psychological functionalism — it allowed Fox to construct a new self conception and new goals for his life. While not wishing to deny the probable importance of this 'revelation' for Fox, we must appreciate the social issues of his time in order to realize how it came to be such a dramatic insight for him. Fox's 'revelation' differed little from conclusions that other religious sectarians reached — the governmentally sanctioned system of university-trained ministers, along with their legally sanctioned tithe payments, had to be overturned. By reaching this attitude, Fox aligned himself with current attitudes held by other radicals of his age — Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Fifth Monarchists, etc., and even John Milton.<sup>58</sup> Fox's 'revelation,' cannot, therefore, be understood simply as either a mystical insight or a psychological reconstruction of his personality. It was, at core, a poignant social and political criticism that gave Fox a 'divinely sanctioned' justification for rejecting a social system that disadvantaged him and others. Although Royce identified Fox's hostility toward the tithe-collecting and state-supported ministers, he mentioned this only in a discussion of Fox's honesty and his apparent skill at managing his money. The protest element in Fox's hostility was completely overlooked.<sup>59</sup>

Just as Boisen failed to locate Fox's revelation about the qualifications for ministry in its social context, so too did he, as well as Royce and Knight, neglect to see the social commentary that was implicit in Fox's barefooted, prophetic walk through Lichfield in the winter of 1651/52. The Quaker historian William Charles Braithwaite realized in 1912 that Lichfield had been the site of a civil war battle between parliamentary and royalist forces in 1643, during which one prominent parliamentary commander was killed and the church spires were damaged from bombardment.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, two Protestants had been martyred there within the previous century — one in 1612, only twelve years before Fox's birth.<sup>61</sup> Fox himself had

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58. Hill, 82-83, 112-113, 244; Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York, 1977, 1979 ed.), 84, 100, 104, 194, 422, 424.

59. Royce, 42.

60. Braithwaite, *Beginnings* 2nd ed., 56 and n.; Edward Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England...*, v. 3 (Oxford, 1704, rpt. 1826), 454-456.

61. Braithwaite, *Beginnings* 2nd ed., 56 and n., 29.

just been released from prison in Derby where he had been held for almost a year as a result of his religious beliefs. Any interpretation of Fox's walk through the town's streets during which he wailed, "Woe unto the bloody city of Lichfield" as he saw blood running down its lanes must therefore view his behavior as a protest against religious persecution. It should not be taken as an example of "pathological" or "extremely bizarre behavior" as claimed by Knight, Royce, Boisen, and even James.<sup>62</sup> Despite the fact that Boisen realized that some of Fox's "insights had great social value," and Royce appreciated that Fox's psychological depression in 1659 was in direct response to the political troubles of the period, neither author, unfortunately, had analogous insights about his behavior in Lichfield.

### *Fox's Sensitivity to the Mentally Ill*

Even Fox's powers to heal the emotionally distressed, which MacDonald emphasized, depended in large measure upon the social and cultural conditions of mid-seventeenth century England. As MacDonald points out, Fox's compassion for the disturbed seems to have been related to his religious beliefs, but MacDonald does not indicate that Fox, as well as other Quakers, often failed in their efforts to heal mental and physical illness.<sup>63</sup> Their failures reveal as much, if not more, about the types of illnesses and healings that were accepted at this time as do their successes.

Quakers believed that they had reconstructed the Apostolic Church so they felt that they could perform healing and curing miracles in the manner of the Apostles. Mental distress was, Keith Thomas informs us, among the easiest types of illness to cure since the healer's "greatest asset was his client's imagination."<sup>64</sup> He illustrated this fact with a story about Fox:

When we learn that one of George Fox's patients, John Banks, had visions that Fox alone would be able to cure him, we are not surprised to discover that he turned out to be one of the Quaker leader's successful cases; on the other hand, when Fox met a cripple at Kendal and told him to throw away his crutches, it is no wonder that, although the man did so, he remained a cripple.<sup>65</sup>

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62. Knight, 82; Royce, 50 n.1; Boisen, *Exploration*, 67; James, 7.

63. Cadbury, 12.

64. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), 209, and also 208-211.

65. *ibid.*, 148.



MacDonald's interpretation of Fox's healing abilities is therefore not incorrect, it simply is incomplete. Fox's religious principles were aids in his psychological healing, as MacDonald claims, but their efficacy lay in a complicated relationship between the nature of the illness and his patients' willingness to be influenced by his powerful personality. All of these factors interacted within a cultural milieu in which people both lacked effective treatment for mental illness and held strong beliefs about the possibility of 'miraculous' cures.

### *Alternative Orientations to Early Quakerism*

Alternative orientations toward early Quakerism deemphasize the psychological dynamics or mystical claims of the movement's early followers and instead emphasize the social-psychological factors that contributed to the Quakers' beliefs and practices. This social-psychological orientation sees people's psychological attitudes and resultant behaviors primarily as reflections of socio-cultural elements within the society in which the individuals are located.<sup>66</sup> As a sectarian group that appeared in mid-seventeenth century England, therefore, early Quaker ideology and the behaviors that it fostered were the results of predominant beliefs in Christian millenarianism that achieved heightened salience by the parliamentary victory in the English civil war. As Quakers and other radical sectarians hoped, Christ was about to return as predicted in the Book of Revelation, and in so doing would establish an Edenic society in which would be abolished the perceived social injustices that had not been eliminated by the 'divinely ordained' victory of the parliamentary side over the King's forces.<sup>67</sup> As is typical with most millenarian beliefs, the Quakers' millenialist expectations combined apocalyptic imminence with longings to return to a mythically golden age, i.e., true Apostolic Christianity.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, contrary to Rosen who rejected a

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66. This perspective has been developed in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 87-125. In a review article on ten books about religion and society in England and the United States, E. Brooks Holifield commented on the "striking number of historians [who] have appealed to Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as a system of symbols establishing moods and motivations by formulating and confirming conceptions of a general order of existence." See E. Brooks Holifield, "Religion and Order in England and America", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, v. 25 no. 3 (July, 1983), 526.

67. See, for example, Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Oxford, 1971), 102-106.

68. This theme is discussed in Yonina Talmon, "Pursuit of the Millennium: The Relation Between Religious and Social Change," *Archives Europeennes*

millenarian dimension to the movement, most contemporary scholarship locates Quakerism within the millenarian context of mid-seventeenth century beliefs.

Many of the facts that the mystical and psychological interpreters utilize to support their positions gain new salience when located within this conceptual framework. Keith Thomas already has identified the sense of Apostolic restoration that propelled Quakers to attempt healings, and to this insight we need to add only that they viewed their successful healings as signs of both Christ's imminence and their select role within the soon-to-be-established social order. Their millenarian belief in their ability to restore religion to its Apostolic state also legitimated their opposition to state-supported ministers and tithes, since they argued that the Apostles preached the gospel freely and received only voluntary contributions. The religious enthusiasm that Rosen mentioned also bespoke the group's apocalyptic excitement, as did their presumed mystical visions. Fox's politically charged revelations, prophetic walk through Lichfield, and mental disturbances in 1659 all can be interpreted as manifestations of millenarian beliefs. In 1659, for example, Fox's mental despair was the result of a struggle between his belief in Christ's imminent return and some Friends' desires to influence contemporary events by becoming active in political and military affairs.<sup>69</sup>

Unless psychological or mystical interpreters of early Quakerism can maintain the uniqueness of their positions at the same time that they locate their perspectives within established scholarly research on the group, they will never regain a significant place in discussions about Quaker origins except within the context of the history of ideas. William James failed to put his psychological comments on Quakerism within an appropriate social context, and Rufus Jones neglected the Quakers' social climate when he developed his interpretation of early Quakerism as a mystical group. Subsequent authors who cited the works and adopted the perspectives of these scholars also failed to place their facts within a socio-cultural context, and as a result their interpretations seem shallow and unsubstantiated in light of contemporary research on the group. As continual refinements occur within the cross-disciplinary fields of social history and historical sociology it seems doubtful that psychological or mystical interpretations of religious phenomena ever will stand alone again as unique intellectual perspectives.

*de Sociologie*, v. 3 (1962), rpt. in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion*, (New York, 1958, 2nd ed. 1965), 526.

69. Bryan Ball, *A Great Expectation* (Leiden, 1975), 195-210.