Activist Spirituality

The source of authentic Christian action

THE SOURCE

Importance of activist spirituality

'Let justice flow down like water and righteousness like an ever flowing stream' (Am 5:24)

'True godliness does not turn people out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it (William Penn)

We have seen that 'prophetic-activism' is an essential hallmark of authentic spirituality, but spirituality is the vital source of life-giving activism. For a Christian this finds its source in the person of Jesus: both the example of his life and teaching and the empowering of his resurrection life through the person and work of the Spirit.

Historically some Christians have been guilty of creating a false tension between the 'contemplative' life and the 'activist' life; with the implication that 'contemplative spirituality' is the true spirituality, and the one to aspire to, while the activist is just caught up in 'good works' and has a shallow spirituality. Closely linked to this type of thinking has been the belief that 'evangelism' is the primary calling of the church, while 'social action' is a distraction from the gospel and what Christians should have as their primary concern.

While such thinking may not be as overt as it once was in some quarters of the church, its legacy is more widely present than many would wish to admit. While we reject completely such a dichotomy and have argued strongly that every Christian must be a 'contemplative-activist' (or 'mystic-activist'). Nevertheless, we mention it here because of the effect it has had on popular notions of spirituality.

Personal spirituality

Personal spirituality is a very difficult thing to distil. This is simply because it is so very personal: part of our deep inner life that is sometimes not even fully clear to ourselves.

The only way we can hope to gain some understanding of a person's spirituality in by listening to their words and watching their actions. These give us clues as to the ideas, influences, values and vision that motivates them. The choices they have made the circumstances they have embraced, and so much more. It all has to be handled subtly and sensitively.



Exercise: Examples of activist spirituality

To help us engage with the ideas of personal activist spirituality we shall work in small groups. Each group will engage with, either the story of John Woolman, or the story of Dorothy Day. They will then discuss the questions raised at the end of their particular story. Finally, we will then all reflect back to the whole group on our main thoughts and ideas.

JOHN WOOLMAN

John Woolman (1720-1772), the American Quaker, is a remarkable example of the activist for social justice energised by a deep spirituality. He has been described as a 'saint and prophet in one' and 'possibly the greatest Quaker of all.' Or as 'a universal saint ... but his saintliness was Quaker before it was universal ... a really good person.' He was driven by a passion that was granite-like in its determination yet astonishingly gentle in its communication.

John gave his life to opposing every form of slavery, challenged militarism and materialism, displayed a great respect for the native American peoples and sensitivity towards the natural world and all living things. It is said 'his life was marked by 'reverence', 'simplicity', 'frugality' and 'toil.'³

Spiritual development

Born in Rancocas, New Jersey on 19th October 1720, one of thirteen children. He had a deep spiritual sensitivity from a very early age:

'Before I was seven years old I began to be acquainted with the operations of Divine love.' 4

"About the twenty third year of my age I had many fresh and heavenly openings, in respect to the care and providence of the Almighty over his creation in general, and over man as the most noble amongst those which are visible ... to place my whole trust in God was best for me ... in all things I might act on an inward principle of virtue ..." ⁵

Throughout his writings there are frequent references to 'openings' (God speaking to him), 'drivings' and 'drawings' by the Spirit or by Truth; also 'divine breathings' by which he would communicate what he believed to be God's will. These are all indications of an astonishing spiritual sensitivity and motivation. This lay at the heart of his whole persona. While he had remarkable personal courage, 'holy boldness', for an activist he displayed

⁴ DV Steere (Ed) '**Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings'** The Classics of Western Spirituality SPCK 1984 p 163 (The edition of 'John Woolman's Journal' used for the 'Quaker Spirituality' abridgement is the Oxford University Press edition 1971 edited by Phillip Moulton)





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¹ J Punshon '*Portrait in Grey*' Quaker Home Service 1984 p116, 119

² DE Trueblood 'The People called Quakers' Friends United Press 1971 p153, 167

³ DE Trueblood '*The People called Quakers*' Friends United Press 1971 p153

remarkable sensitivity and tenderness always choosing use persuasion rather than debate.

Simplicity in living

By his late teens John felt a serious call to spiritual life. He had to make his own way in life; having been trained by his father in legal work, gained skills as a tailor, owned and ran a shop and a large apple orchard John seemed on his way to prosperity:

"The road to large business appeared open; but I felt a stop in my mind ... for though my natural inclination was toward merchandise, yet I believed Truth required me to live more free ..." ⁶

Business was to be for the service of truth not the accumulation of wealth, so John looked for 'holy sufficiency' rather than 'holy poverty'. He lived a very simple life, travelled widely on pastoral and missionary journeys always totally resigned to what God would have in store for him.

One of John's abiding concerns was the way many Quakers and other Christians were caught up with the trappings of wealth rather than spirituality. He saw the insatiable human desire for possessions as something by which the rich prevented the poor being able to acquire what they needed for survival.⁷ The comforts of materialism were also one of the major obstacles in people's reluctance to free themselves of owning slaves.

Abolition of slavery

Of all the passions John had it was a total opposition to slavery, and all the institutions that supported it, that drove him the hardest. He would travel relentlessly most of his life to achieve this goal; speaking, writing, ⁸ persuading. His life-long position, expressed when he was still a young man would always be:

'I believed slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion' 9

In 1754 he would write:

'We entreat you to examine whether purchasing a Negro, either born here or imported, doth not ... (promote) manstealing, the only theft which by Mosaic law was punished by death ... We entreat you in the bowels of gospel love, seriously to weigh the cause of detaining them in bondage ... your hearts are not sufficiently redeemed from the world.'10

Quoted in R Foster 'Streams of Living Water' Harper Collins 1998 p 141



⁶ 'Quaker Spirituality' p 176-7

An important point made by SR Graham in 'The Protestant Tradition in America' in G Mursell (Ed) 'The Story of Christian Spirituality' Lion 2001 p 282-3

⁸ His first, and probably most influential book, after his 'Journal', was a small volume entitled, 'Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes'

⁹ 'Quaker Spirituality' p 169

He would always refuse to sign a legal bill of sale for any slave¹¹, on one occasion encouraging a dying man to give a slave their freedom as part of his last will and testament. 12 Staying in Quaker homes where slaves were owned he faced a deep spiritual struggle. 13 He would often pay the slaves for their care towards him as a witness to his hatred of slavery. 14 On one occasion discovering slaves in a Quaker home giving him hospitality he quietly left to make a point; challenged by the witness the next day the slave-owner set all his slaves free!¹⁵

The moment of truth comes in 1758 at the Philadelphia Quaker's Yearly Meeting where the issue of slavery was discussed. 16 Amid all the debate John Woolman stood nervously to make his case. Among his powerful words he says:

'My mind is often led to consider the purity of Divine Being and the justice of his judgements, and here in my soul is covered with awfulness ... Many slaves on this continent are oppressed and their cries have reached the ears of the Most High! Such is the purity and certainty of his judgements that he cannot be partial in our favour ... Should we now be sensible of what he requires of us ... neglect to do our duty in firmness and constancy, still waiting for some extraordinary means to bring about their deliverance, it may be that by terrible things in righteousness God may answer us in this matter. 177

The impact of his words led American Quakers to universally outlaw slavery from among their community, understood to be the first body of any kind to take such complete and dramatic action against slavery and its institutions. 18

It was a long road to make this decision a reality. John was not alone in the work but he was the most powerful voice and witness. The struggle was made harder as Quakers believed that in giving slaves their freedom they must financially recompense them for their bondage, this bankrupted some Quaker families in the process.

In the deep South the horrors of slavery had a profound effect on John. He believed that slavery was as harmful to slave owners as to slaves and that the price was and would be overwhelming:

'... it appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the land ... in the future the consequences will be grievous to posterity!'19

¹⁹ See **Quaker Spirituality'** p 172



¹¹ As a young man he was once compromised in writing a bill of sale for a slave, deeply conscience-struck he challenged the man concerned and would never do it again. Read the account in 'Quaker Spirituality' p 168-9

¹² Read the account in 'Quaker Spirituality' p 175-6

¹³ See Quaker Spirituality' p 171-2

¹⁴ See *Quaker Spirituality* p 180-2

¹⁵ Read the account in 'DE Trueblood '*The People called Quakers*' Friends United Press 1971 p162

¹⁶ The Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, would later say the meeting 'must be regarded as one of the most important religious convocations in the history of the Christian church' quoted in 'Streams of Living Water' p 141

17 See Quaker Spirituality' p 189

¹⁸ A point made by R Foster in 'Streams of Living Water' p 142

Many see this as a premonition of the horrors of the American Civil War (1861–1865), which he would fortunately not live to see.

Opposition to war and violence

The Philadelphia Quaker community faced moral crisis during the days of the French and Indian War (1756-1763); their peace stance was severely tested. Would they fight? Pay taxes to support the war? Show loyalty to faith or colony? Many left the colonial legislature in which the Quakers had a majority and as a result lost political influence. Others chose to fight.

John Woolman's position was quite clear:

'I was fully convinced that the proceedings in wars are inconsistent with the purity of the Christian religion. ²⁰

When soldiers were billeted in his home he refused to accept payment for them.²¹

Respect for Native Americans

Unlike many of his contemporaries John developed a deep respect for the indigenous peoples.

'Having many years felt love in my heart towards the natives of this land who dwelt far back in the wilderness, whose ancestors were the owners and possessors of the land where we dwelt ... I believed that some of them were measurably acquainted with that divine power ... '22

He as deeply concerned with the corrupting effect the settlers were having on the Native American communities by deliberately selling them rum. ²³ He shows a wonderful sensitivity to Indian culture and spirituality:

'... during these meditations the desire to cherish the spirit of love and peace amongst these people arose very fresh in me ... Love was the first motion and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward in my following the leadings of Truth amongst them. ²⁴

There was a significant response from the indigenous community, responding to John's praying without interpretation a leader commented, "I love to feel where the words come from." ²⁵

²⁵ See *Quaker Spirituality'* p 212; the leader was a man called Papunehang



²⁰ See *Quaker Spirituality* p 187

²¹ See **Quaker Spirituality** p 187

²² See **Quaker Spirituality'** p 204-5

²³ See **Quaker Spirituality'** p 206-7

²⁴ See **Quaker Spirituality** p 208

Sensitivity towards creation

John was sensitive towards all living things:

'Thus he whose tender mercies are over all his works hath placed a principle in the human mind which incites to exercise goodness toward every living creature; and this being singly attended to, people become tender-hearted and sympathizing ... ²⁶

As a child he thoughtlessly killed a mother robin with a stone, suddenly aware her chicks would starve he killed them as well; subsequently overwhelmed with remorse for his act. The event lived with him for the rest of his life.²⁷ Seeing stagecoach horses cruelly treated he chose to walk from London to York, on a visit to England, rather than support their pain and rarely posted letters that were carried by the coaches. Aware of human potential for environmental damage he wore undyed cloth and shoes.²⁸

John died of smallpox in England, in York in September 1772, where he was buried at Bishophill graveyard.

As Richard Foster says, 'John Woolman wrestled with the knotty issues of war and peace, race and equality, wealth and simplicity, with a striking blend of compassion with courage, tenderness and firmness. And he did this not in some detached, academic way, but right in the midst of the vicissitudes of life. John Woolman was a prophet for his day, a prophet who took the Quaker testimonies for equality, simplicity, and peace and forged them into instruments of social revolution, ever tempering them in the stream of 'Divine Love.' 29

Questions:

- 1. What impression does the story of John Woolman make on you?
- 2. How would you describe his spirituality?
- 3. What appear to have been his greatest spiritual influences?
- 4. What do you think is his greatest spiritual legacy?
- 5. What do you think it is important to learn from John's story?
- 6. What does his story teach us about the relationship between spirituality and activism?

²⁹ See 'Streams of Living Water' p 144



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²⁶ See *Quaker Spirituality*' p 164 also 233

²⁷ See **Quaker Spirituality'** p 163-4

See **Quaker Spirituality'** p 203 also 232. John's comments are written in such a way that some suggest he wore undyed materials for environmental reasons others that the dyes were made by slaves and avoided for that reason; there is no reason why both views are not valid.

DOROTHY DAY

Dorothy Day (1897-1980), a radical Catholic who has been called 'a saint', 'a prophet', and 'a legend'. She brushed aside these labels, "Don't call me a saint - I don't want to be dismissed so easily!"30 Some suggest that to call her 'a living reproach' would be a much more accurate description.31

Searching

Born in New York City ³² on 8th November 1897. She had a happy sensitive childhood with a great deal of spiritual awareness. At fifteen in a letter to a friend she writes:

'How I love the park in winter! ... God is there. Of course he is everywhere, under the trees and looking over the wide expanse of lake. He communicates himself to me and fills me with a deep quiet peace. 33

From the University of Illinois at sixteen, through to journalism, and becoming a reporter on the left-wing newspaper 'The Call', at nineteen, saw Dorothy drawn deeply into socialist politics and seemingly away from God. Committed involvement with the radical politics in New York she mixed with communists and anarchists, becoming involved with the poor, and passionate about justice. She lived a promiscuous 'bohemian' lifestyle, experienced prison following a Suffragette protest, When war broke she refused to support it, but her passion is quite clear:

'I hate being utopian and trying to escape from reality. Now we are in thick of war there is so much work to be done ... What good am I doing my fellow men? They are sick and there are not enough nurses to care for them ... It's the poor who are suffering. I've got to do something. 34

She worked in a hospital, got pregnant, endured a harrowing abortion, this was followed by a fleeting and unsuccessful marriage.

Natural Happiness

By 1926 film rights for a book she had written ³⁵ enabled her to buy a beach house on Staten Island NY, brought a change to her rhythm of life and a spiritual re-awakening. Deeply in love and living with Forster Batterham, a

^{35 &#}x27;The Eleventh Virgin' a strongly autobiographical novel about her early life



³⁰ See J Forest 'Love is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day' Marshall Pickering

³¹ A description coined by Emilie and Henry William Griffin about Dorothy in conversation with Richard Foster, Quoted in R Foster 'Streams of Living Water' Harper Collins 1998 p 155 see endnote 26

Dorothy would move around with her family to San Francisco, Chicago, New Orleans and New Mexico, but New York would always be her centre

³³ D Day 'The Long Loneliness: the Autobiography of Dorothy Day' Harper Collins 1997 p 33-4 ³⁴ See **'The Long Loneliness'** p 88

biologist, anarchist and atheist. Idyllic days, much time spent walking the beach, fields and woods, whatever the weather:

'(Foster's) ardent love of creation brought me to the creator of all things. But when I cried out to him, "How can there be no God, when there are all these beautiful things," he ... complained I was never satisfied. We loved each other so strongly that he wanted to remain in the love of the moment; he wanted me to rest in that love. He cried out against my attitude that there would be nothing left of that love without faith. 36

Dorothy became pregnant. Her faith grew also, within the local Catholic community. Their daughter Tamar Teresa was born and baptised - and Forester left. She had become a Catholic and a single parent. She moved into the city, close to a local church. A variety of jobs, brief periods in California and New Mexico, but back in New York the 'great depression' had begun:

'It was time for pressure groups, for direct action, and radicalism was thriving among all groups except the Catholics. I felt out of it all. It was that very year that Pope Pius XI said, ..."The workers of the world are lost to the church." ... When I returned to New York, I found Peter Maurin – Peter the French peasant, whose spirit and ideas ... will dominate the rest of my life. ³⁷

Love in Practice

Peter Maurin, born in 1877 the eldest of twenty-two children of a southern French peasant family. Highly intelligent, early influenced by radical Catholic monastic ideas and then wider socialism. Travelled to Canada and then the USA, living by manual labouring and teaching. He had a Franciscan view of poverty, leaving him time to study, pray and teach about a new Christian-inspired social order, 'in which it is easier for men to be good.' He would talk to whoever would listen; 'to reach the man on the street is to be on the street.'

The vision that Peter brought, ³⁸ which so inspired Dorothy was:

- A radical embodiment of the gospel in loving God and neighbour;
- Voluntary poverty, to be able to live and suffer with the poor;
- Engaging in committed pacifism as a witness to loving all people;
- Doing 'corporal works of mercy' in feeding, clothing and housing the needy:
- Doing 'spiritual works of mercy' in consoling the afflicted and bearing wrongs patiently.

All this had to be put into strategic action to bring about social reconstruction:

The outline of Peter's vision and the main points of the strategic action required are based on Richard Foster's helpful summary in *'Streams of Living Water'* p 161



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³⁶ See 'The Long Loneliness' p 134

³⁷ See **'The Long Loneliness'** p 158-9, 166

A radical newspaper to publicise Catholic social teaching:

Being a journalist it was the newspaper, 'The Catholic Worker' that came first; selling for a penny a copy (and still does). Named for those Pope Pius XI said were 'lost to the church.' Dorothy said it was for:

'For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain, For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work. For those who think there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight ...³⁹

In the face of war its voice would always be loud and consistently pacifist.

Hospitality houses where the affluent could serve the poor and afflicted:

These would always be the central strategy for 'works of mercy', a rented property, food and shelter for the poor, a place for the poor to talk and receive friendship and affection:

"... grey men, the color of lifeless trees and bushes and the winter soil, who had in them as yet none of the green of hope, the sap rising of faith ... What a delightful thing it is to be boldly profligate, to ignore the price of coffee and go on serving good coffee and the finest bread to the long line of destitute who come to us. 40

These houses would become the 'anchor-points' of the Catholic Worker movement as it spread across the United States and then to other countries across the world – pivotal to everything.

Communal farms where prayer, manual labour and the green revolution could flourish:

The dream of families on the land, in touch with the soil (so different from city life), sharing skills and nurturing thought and spirituality was beautiful but hard to realise. All the community farms struggled, the majority failed:

'We consoled ourselves that we might not be establishing model communities, but many a family was getting a vacation, many a sick person was nursed back to health, crowds of slum children had the run of the woods and fields for weeks, and groups of students spent happy hours discussing the green revolution. 41

But the communal farms were where the Catholic Workers shaped their philosophy of work.

Round-table discussions where those from all backgrounds could seek a common future:

Organised discussions in a public place often had little success. Nevertheless, 'an enduring Catholic Worker tradition began. Hardly a week has passed since then without a public meeting ... a practice followed by

⁴¹ See '*The Long Loneliness*' p 229-30



³⁹ Quoted in 'Streams of Living Water' p 162

⁴⁰ See **'Love is the Measure'** p 89-90

other catholic Worker communities.' ⁴² At every house of hospitality; community farm and meal table there is a buzz of debate and conversation. Dorothy closes her book 'The Long Loneliness' with the words:

'It all happened while we sat talking and it is still going on.'

• 'Agronomic universities' where the worker could become a scholar and the scholar a worker:

These were not quite the success it was hoped that they would be:

'The workers wanted to only work with their hands and produce visible results. The scholars wanted these things to, but they also had a sense of their own vocation (and according to the workers) ... weekends in the country devoted to non-stop talking. ⁴³

Whatever the frustrations and failures, the willingness to experiment and learn from human experience was unbounded.

• Spiritual retreats where solitude, silence and faith could deepen and grow:

Linking the experience of a retreat with a communal farm was a big success. A place where the Catholic Workers on the frontline of the struggle against injustice and heartbreaking human need in the great urban metropolis could come for physical and spiritual refreshment based on the classical Ignatian approach based around Jesus and the gospels. There were retreats of silence, of study and prayer, retreats for the unemployed:

'Those were beautiful days. It was as though we were listening to the gospel for the first time. We saw all things new. There was a freshness about everything as though we were in love, as indeed we were.'44

Love is the Measure

Throughout the forty-seven years between Dorothy Day's founding the Catholic Worker, until her quiet death on 29th November 1980, was about love. Her energy and passion were sourced in her love for God and for all people, especially the poor and downtrodden. She was fond of quoting the words of the Carmelite mystic St John of the Cross:

'Love is the measure by which we shall be judged'

She saw her endurance having much to do with prayer:

'With prayer, one can go on cheerfully, and even happily, while without prayer, how grim is the journey, Prayer is as necessary to life as breathing. It is drink and food. ⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Quoted in **'Love is the Measure'** p 182



⁴² Comment by Jim Forest in **'Love is the Measure'** p 85

⁴³ See D Day **'Loaves and Fishes'** Orbis 1997 p 46

See 'The Long Loneliness' p 250-1

For Dorothy the principle of Theresa of Lisieux's 'Little Way' was also very important, which emphasised:

'The significance of our smallest acts! ... The significance of the little things we leave undone! The protests we do not make, the stands we do not take, we who are living in the world."46

The phrase, 'the long loneliness' poignantly captures the essence of Dorothy's spiritual journey; the struggle, the joy and the identification with Christ that were found within it:

'I think, dear child, the trouble and the long loneliness you hear me speak of is not far from me, which whensoever it is, happy success will follow ... The pain is great, but very endurable, because He who lays on the burden also carries

In 1985, five years after Dorothy's death, Jim Forest concludes his biography of her in a paragraph that contains these words:

'Many regard her as a saint, and not all as a way of putting her at a safe distance. There are historians who now describe her as the most influential American Catholic of the last hundred years. Perhaps it is true. In any event, she set an example which has influenced many and helped to bring about a reformation that reaches well beyond the Catholic church. It is not a reformation that emphasises abstract theological doctrine but one that centres on the presence of God, the sacredness of life, and the divinity that is hidden in the poor.^{'48}

Questions:

- 1. What impression does the story of Dorothy Day make on you?
- 2. How would you describe her spirituality?
- 3. What appear to have been her greatest spiritual influences?
- 4. What do you think is her greatest spiritual legacy?
- 5. What do you think it is important to learn from Dorothy's story?
- 6. What does her story teach us about the relationship between spirituality and activism?

⁴⁸ See **'Love is the Measure'** p 212



 $^{^{46}}$ Quoted in 'Love is the Measure' p 207

⁴⁷ The words of an English Nun, Mary Ward (1585-1645), the key phrase being the title of Dorothy's autobiography 'The Long Loneliness', these words are quoted on the flyleaf of the Harper Collins 1997 edition

THE CHALLENGE⁴⁹

The strengths

The strengths of activism with a developed spirituality are:

- It brings justice into communities and society
- It brings a true understanding to the nature of 'church'
- It integrates personal and social ethics
- It gives tangible reality to the word 'love'
- It embraces all creation, the whole ecological environment
- It works with a vision of bringing in the new heaven and earth

The weaknesses

The weaknesses of activism without a developed spirituality are:

- It becomes an end in itself, activism sidelines spiritual realities
- It develops a legalistic, rigid and judgmental attitude
- It tends to identify with particular political agendas rather than values

The practice

The practice of activism with a developed spirituality requires:

- Opening ourselves up to unexpected possibilities
- Keeping up with the facts, being informed
- Becoming advocates for the poor and the powerless
- Support other activists (irrespective of their background) in their work
- Become involved politically
- Take creative direct action
- Nurture your spirituality, give yourself to prayer
- Discover the wisdom of what to give your time and energy to

Questions

- **1.** How would you answer someone who said that activism played no part in a true understanding and expression Christian spirituality?
- **2.** How can we do more to nurture and deepen spirituality within the Christian activist community?
- 3. What can Christians learn from the spirituality of activists from other faiths and beliefs? What will they probably have in common and where are the

 $^{^{49}}$ The reflections set out in this final section are based loosely on ideas presented in 'Streams of Living Water' p 176-182



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differences most likely to be found? Why are Christians often afraid of such a dialogue? How can we help to dispel this fear?

Reading & Resources

D Day 'The Long Loneliness: the Autobiography of Dorothy Day' Harper Collins 1997

D Day 'Loaves and Fishes' Orbis 1997

J Forest 'Love is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day' Marshall Pickering 1986

R Foster 'Streams of Living Water' Harper Collins 1998

P Moulton (Ed) 'John Woolman's Journal' Oxford University Press1971

G Mursell (Ed) 'The Story of Christian Spirituality' Lion 2001

J Punshon 'Portrait in Grey' Quaker Home Service 1984

DV Steere 'Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings' The Classics of Western Spirituality SPCK 1984

DE Trueblood 'The People called Quakers' Friends United Press 1971