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Review Of "John Woolman And The Government Of Christ: A Colonial Quaker's Vision For The British Atlantic World" By J. R. Kershner

Jordan Landes

Friends Historical Library, jlandes1@swarthmore.edu

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Jon R. Kershner, *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A Colonial Quaker's Vision for the British Atlantic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. xiv + 266. ISBN 9780190868079. Hardcover, £59.00.

Jon R. Kershner's *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: a colonial Quaker's vision for the British Atlantic World* is a compelling monograph on minister and abolitionist, John Woolman. The book lays out a persuasive argument about Woolman's theology, and particularly its embrace of apocalypticism, in an orderly and understandable way. Furthermore, his argument is accessible to those without prior knowledge of Woolman's theology, such as this reviewer. Kershner describes Woolman's beliefs as 'lay theology in the way of popular religious movements', which 'answered his concerns about the social events and religious anxieties of his day' (p. 175). Kershner uses seven chapters to explore and describe Woolman's theology and place it in its historical context.

The introduction begins with Woolman's 1758 call for Quakers to reject enslavement and makes it clear that Woolman's antislavery was just one part of his vision of colonial America. Kershner then advances to his definition of Woolman's apocalypticism and spells out its five themes, starting with God's intervention in world affairs and ending with His overcoming of evil on earth. The introduction ends with a useful chronology of Woolman's life, allowing the subsequent chapters to focus on Woolman's theology and vision.

The first chapter looks at Quaker theology and its transatlantic context, with background on the earliest Quakers to 1756, drawing on work by historians Frederick Tolles and Jack Marietta. Tolles and Marietta both pointed to the mid-eighteenth century as a turning point for American Quakers; the end of the 'Holy Experiment' in Pennsylvania according to Tolles and the Quaker withdrawal from mainstream American life in Marietta's view.¹ The context is further fleshed out by mentions of enslavement, the Seven Years' War (1756–63), the Crisis of 1756, the transatlantic marketplace, and quietism.

With the context described in the prior chapter, chapter two examines revelation as a starting point for understanding Woolman. For Kershner, revelation is a key part of Woolman's vision, leading not only to religious purity, but also of Woolman's 'social and spiritual vision' for a reformed society in the British Atlantic world (p. 51). This vision was developed in its colonial context and shaped by what was happening in the world. Moreover, for Woolman, God's message was revealed to all, not just Quakers. Woolman believed that the society seen through revelation was different from the world in which he lived, a contrast evident in his arguments and activism.

1 Tolles, F. B., *Meeting House and Counting House: the Quaker merchants of colonial Philadelphia, 1682–1763*, Chapel Hill: Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg/University of North Carolina Press, 1948; Marietta, J. D., *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748–1783*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.

Woolman as a prophet is the focus of the third chapter. Through his renunciation of luxury, Woolman became a prophetic figure. Kershner examines the tension between Woolman's obedience to his revealed vision and his pragmatism: the 'maintenance of unity' among Quakers versus Woolman's 'true unity' through obedience to God's Truth (p. 64). Woolman described his 'anguish' as a result of being part of the Quaker community, but did not leave it. His thoughts and writings on politics and Quaker politicians, the evils of the silver-mining industry, and the 'greed-based economy' are all addressed in this chapter, building effectively on Kershner's placement of Woolman in his context and how he responded to it.

The fourth chapter focusses on Woolman's eschatology, described by Kershner as a combination of Quaker tradition and Woolman's own sense of urgency. Kershner is especially strong here, his definitions and explanations as he works through Woolman's eschatology making his study clear and understandable to readers without backgrounds in theology. Kershner's reminder that Woolman was not trained in classical theology helped this reader, as a historian of transatlantic Quakers, understand the composite nature of Woolman's theology.

Chapter 5 examines Woolman's perfectionism, moving from conversion to submission to God's will. Woolman believed that it was possible to live 'perfectly'. Furthermore, Woolman's perfectionism, an important part of his apocalyptic theology, drove his activism. Drawing from early Quaker writings by Barclay, Nayler and others, as well as the belief that Jesus was the ideal of submission to God's will, Woolman created a new standard for people in an increasingly commodified and market-based world.

Judgment and God's treatment of people are addressed in chapter six. Kershner discusses 'chastisements', Woolman's word for 'corrective interventions meant to guide the world toward faithfulness' (p. 129). Woolman believed that these 'chastisements' manifested in his contraction of smallpox in 1772 and read the condition as a message to limit his travel. He also believed the Seven Years' War was a message that Pennsylvanians were not listening to God as they should. Within this philosophy, 'Woolman believed that the universally atoning work of Christ carried ominous warnings for the slave economy and spoke to the historical moment' (p. 135).

Chapter 7 looks at Woolman's influences, such as his reading of diverse collections of spiritual writings, not all of them Quaker. Woolman adopted pieces to create his own theology. This chapter leads into Kershner's conclusion, in which he emphasises the complexity of Woolman's theology and incorporates his identification with the prophetic tradition and his focus on apocalypticism.

Each chapter builds toward understanding Woolman's theology, with reminders of his colonial/imperial world and of the Quaker and non-Quaker influences in each chapter. Kershner's work places Woolman in an Atlantic world that was key to the development and spread of Quakerism, but for which Woolman held little respect. This tension can be seen clearly, for example, in chapter seven's discussion

of Woolman's reading, an activity enabled by the transatlantic exchange of print. Nonetheless, Woolman's place in this world contributed to the development of his theology as a way to examine the impact of the culture and imperialism he witnessed. 'Woolman adopted a prophetic identity to address the social dislocation and secularization he witnessed in the British Atlantic world' (p. 5).

Kershner is kind to the non-theologian, defining terms like eschatology and apocalypticism, and building his argument gradually. In short, Kershner's work is fascinating and useful. Read as a companion volume to Geoffrey Plank's *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*,² Kershner's book generates a fuller picture and understanding of Woolman as a man of his time and place.

Jordan Landes
Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, USA

Andrew R. Murphy, *William Penn: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. xiv + 460. ISBN 9780190234249. Hardback, £25.00.

Andrew R. Murphy's *William Penn: A Life* (2019) serves as a sequel of sorts to his *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn* (2016) and, ideally, the two should be read together. In his earlier work, Murphy cites the 'widespread scholarly neglect' of Penn, a situation he resolutely remedies with these two ambitious and comprehensive volumes. The first monograph focusses mainly on the theory and practice of liberty of conscience; however, he opens this biography by asserting, 'Penn's life is too complex to be viewed through only one lens' and emphasises the need to 'look anew at the totality of his life in all its complexity' (p. 5). Murphy succeeds admirably in this regard, re-introducing readers to a man we thought we knew well and placing him within the broader context of 'a world racked by religious and political discord, civil war, and social unrest' (p. 13).

As Murphy notes ruefully in his acknowledgements, he has lived with Penn for many years, yet it is precisely because of the length and depth of this relationship that he is able to offer such a full and fair portrait of a flawed man. Murphy is strongest when evaluating Penn's character and his careful, judicious analysis is most incisive when illuminating Penn's weaknesses. In Murphy's deft telling, the man who emerges from the shadows of the luminary is wholly imperfect, often falling short of the monumental tasks at hand. After all, Murphy reminds us, Penn-as-colonial-proprietor was 'an absentee landlord with no understanding of American political realities' (p. 202). Murphy dismisses one of Penn's more desperate schemes to get out from underneath his ever-mounting debt as 'yet

2 Plank, G., *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.