

THE
QUAKER UNIVERSALIST
READER
NUMBER 2

UNIVERSALISM
AND
RELIGIONS

Edited by Patricia A. Williams

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*This volume is dedicated to all those who seek to have an understanding of
Quaker Universalism*

**UNIVERSALISM
AND
RELIGIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

Universalism has been an integral aspect of Quakerism since the seventeenth century. From its beginning, Quakerism challenged both Protestantism and Catholicism by proclaiming the universality of a Divine Light. The Light shown in every person, Quakerism declared, regardless of religion, race, sex, nationality, or moral behavior. The ubiquity of the Light constituted Quakerism's universalism.

Today, the common definition of universalism is different. Today universalism implies eventual salvation for every person. The early Quakers rejected this kind of universalism, for they saw many reject the Light within them. A secondary meaning of universalism today is that all religions have valuable insights to offer, an idea the early Quakers accepted. Another understanding is that the major religions have much in common, especially a universal ethic. Still another is the hope that one universal religion will develop. Both these latter ideas arose too recently to have been addressed by the early Quakers.

The late twentieth century saw the rise of a distinct universalist movement within Quakerism—the Religious Society of Friends. It started in 1977 with a speech by John Linton, “Quakerism as Forerunner,” now available in the first volume of the *Quaker Universalist Reader*. That speech prompted the formation of the Quaker Universalist Group (QUG) in Britain. Then in the autumn of 1982, Linton traveled across the United States from Boston to Los Angeles lecturing on universalism and the QUG. His tour sparked the founding of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship (QUF) in North America. The purposes of both organizations are similar. The British group says,

The Quaker Universalist Group is based on our understanding that spiritual awareness is accessible to everyone of any religion or none, and that no one person and no one faith can claim to have the final revelation or monopoly of truth. We acknowledge that such awareness may be expressed in many different ways. We delight in this diversity and warmly welcome both Quakers and non-Quakers to join with us.

More information on the QUG is available at <www.qug.org.uk>.

The most recent statement from North America is

The mission of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship is to foster the understanding that within everyone is a directly accessible spiritual light that can lead people to equality, simplicity, justice, compassion and peace.

The QUF Web site is <www.universalistfriends.org>.

Both associations began fulfilling their common mission by publishing separate newsletters which expanded into journals. The QUG has produced 77 to date (three per year); the QUF, 43 (two per year). Each has also published separate pamphlets, still available in print and/or online. Seven early pamphlets of the QUG were collected in book form as the Quaker *Universalist Reader #1*, which remains in print. Now the two organizations working together have produced two more volumes of Quaker universalist writings. These have been collected from the newsletter-journals, thereby making many hard-to-find essays accessible.

As editor of both volumes, I have read all but one of the 120 newsletter-journals—one seems to have vanished from Earth. I have concentrated on the articles, leaving aside editorials, book reviews, letters, poems, general news, and pieces specific to a particular occasion or association. Where many articles were similar, I tried to choose representative ones. I also looked for clarity, creativity, insight, and honest, if not necessarily successful, wrestling with a difficult subject.

Due to the ambiguity of the term universalism and its unusual place in Quakerism, today's Quakers have spent much thought and ink considering what form(s) of universalism Quakers do, or should, accept. All the articles collected in the current volume address some aspect of universalism and its connection with various religions. A separate volume, *Universalism and Spirituality: Quaker Universalist Reader #3*, contains articles that focus on spirituality.

In academic work in North America after about the mid 1970s, editors insisted on inclusive language—no more “mankind” or “sons of God,” or God as “he.” Much to my surprise, many of the articles I

reviewed failed to use inclusive language, despite Quakers' primacy in proclaiming women's equality. Nonetheless, because these are reprinted articles, I decided to leave the exclusive sons and men to speak for themselves, whatever they may say to the reader. Thus, the articles are only lightly edited, mostly for spelling errors, occasionally for factual ones. Universalism is lower case except when it refers to the church that is currently the Unitarian Universalist Church in the article by Chris Buice. British and American spelling peculiarities remain. Because this is so, after the author's name I have designated the publication of the Americans, Universalist Friends, "A" followed by the issue, date, and page and the British Universalist "B" also followed by the issue, date, and page.

The first chapter, *What Is Universalism?* is about the concept of universalism—is it about universal salvation, a universal Light, or what? The second, *What Is Universal?* is about the quest for human universals: do we have a common spirituality, say, or a common set of morals, or common basis of religion? The last three chapters look at universalism and religion, specifically Quakerism (a strange sect of Christianity), a more orthodox Christianity, and finally non-Christian religions. Topics in some articles overlap these distinctions, so I tried to follow the main thrust of each article. Another editor might have made somewhat different choices.

In the chapter on non-Christian religions, after the two introductory pieces, I arranged the articles alphabetically by religion. The other chapters—and the chapters themselves—have some thematic movement and order, in hope that readers will be enriched by approaching them consecutively. Nonetheless, each article stands on its own, so the collection permits browsing.

Many thanks to Jo Teagle and Hazel Nelson of the QUG for their hard work of gathering material and seeking copyright permissions for the British articles. Several members of the Steering Committee of the QUF in North America spent hours reading and making suggestions about the text. My thanks to all of them—George Amoss, Rhoda Gilman, Jim Rose, and Susan Rose. Special gratitude goes to Jim Rose, who scanned almost all the material for both volumes into his computer and sent it to me by E-mail, article by article.

I close with some thoughts by John Linton, who started it all. In an article whose tenor I embrace, he asks, "Should Doubting Thomas Be Our Guide?"

. . . When I was a boy in the 1920s, I was expected to believe that not only was Christianity the one true religion, but one's own particular branch of it, in my case the Church of England. . . . I was of course baptised soon after birth and confirmed in the school chapel when in my teens. When I came up to Oxford I was expected to attend chapel four times a week. . . .

[Nonetheless, after Oxford and] for the next twenty years I abandoned all religious belief. I married a Jewish wife, and our son was a proclaimed humanist. However I still felt the need for religion, and in the fifties I joined the Quakers. But I still could not accept any specific religious belief. I have always been sceptical of credal religion. I have argued that if there was one true religion, why did not the 'good Lord' make it available to everyone instead of splitting the world up into all these different religions? So I have come to the conclusion that doubt is a better guide to the truth than certainty. . . .

I'm afraid it will take a long time for this message to get across to the world at large. Meanwhile the purveyors of certainties will continue to cause the deaths of innocent people. . .

.(*Universalist*, February 2003, 67/12)

Does universalism in religion also imply universal doubt? Probably not, but it thrives on a healthy skepticism about the truth of one's own beliefs and insists dialogue replace violence. If this volume is any indication, Quaker universalism also rejoices in debate and self-expression. Everyone has a point of view. Quaker universalists welcome the diversity.

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CHAPTER 1
WHAT IS UNIVERSALISM?

Quaker Universalism in a World Religious Setting
(*Universalist Friends*—Spring 2005, v. 42, p.9)

Paul Alan Laughlin

The central theme of Universalism is that spiritual enlightenment *may* be achieved by everyone everywhere. It may be experienced in the teachings of all the great religious systems or in the personal and private experiences of the individual seeker who may have no religion at all. [Ralph Hetherington (1)]

One of the primary benefits of studying the world's religions is that the unfamiliar and sometimes strange phenomena encountered in them can help us clarify our own religious experiences and beliefs and lead us to new insights about them. For example, in the course of teaching religious studies, I have had many Catholic and Protestant students tell me they had never noticed, much less appreciated, the dynamics of their own faith until they had seriously engaged Hinduism and Buddhism. I believe the same beneficial results can accrue to entire religious movements and groups: by examining themselves against the larger backdrop of the world's religious traditions, they will attain a sharper focus on their own spirituality and thereby arrive at a deeper self-understanding.

My specific intention here is to clarify the notion of Quaker universalism by discussing the concept of universalism in the larger context of the world's religions. I undertake this task as an outsider with respect to the worldwide community of Friends, but also as a Christian mystic long at odds with all types of orthodoxy,

and therefore a very sympathetic observer. When I peruse the various postings on the Universalist Friends Web site (2) from that perspective, I notice the term *universalism* often being used equivocally. Such equivocation is surely unintentional and probably unconscious; and it is certainly understandable, for the word *universalism* is used in three distinct ways within the context of the world's religions [salvational-doctrinal, wherein everyone will be saved or enlightened; experiential-salvational, wherein everyone has the same potential for enlightenment; and religious-attitudinal, wherein all religions share a core and offer valid paths to the Real—ed.]. Each of these meanings is discrete, so it is entirely possible to be a universalist in only one or two ways. It is difficult to imagine, however, that anyone well informed about the diverse religions of the world could be a universalist in all three senses of the word.

Universalism as a Doctrine about Salvation

The original meaning of the English word *universalism*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* says dates back almost exactly two centuries, is the theological or doctrinal one. In that historical context, it was naturally framed in Christian terms and denoted the conviction that everyone will obtain salvation and redemption from sin and damnation eventually. (3) The idea behind this salvation-oriented doctrine is much older than that, however.

Indeed, some see this sort of universalism in the writings of Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (New American Standard Version). It can also be seen in Ephesians, a New Testament epistle attributed probably incorrectly to Paul, in which verses 7-10 of the first chapter affirm God's grace and redemption as leading to "the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth." (1:10b, NASV) The same idea appears nearly two centuries later in the notion of *apokatastasis* (Greek, *restitution*) promoted by Egyptian Christian theologian Origen and others. That was their term for their doctrine never widely held, much less made a part of Catholic orthodoxy, that eventually all sentient beings would be redeemed, including even

lost souls and devils. This was the sense upon which the Universalist movement was founded in England in the mid-eighteenth century, most of whose American followers merged some two centuries later with the Unitarians.

Universalism of this sort is found not only in Christianity, but also in many of the world's religions, and it is always rooted in the idea of divine (or quasi-divine) grace, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Pure Land Buddhism, for example, is a very popular devotional sect that contradicts the historical Buddha's commendation of self-reliance in spiritual matters by counseling its adherents to trust in an eternal, celestial Buddha named Amida, whose compassion will carry them when they die to paradise in the western sky where he abides. Formally speaking, such a teaching is identical to that of evangelical Christianity: faith in a powerful but gracious redeemer resulting in an eternal heavenly reward. The difference is that Pure Land Buddhists tend to believe that the compassion of Amida is infinite, and therefore all people including non-Buddhists and even the non-religious will eventually be received into his celestial abode. Accordingly, they would consider utterly foolish those Christians who affirm a God whose very nature their own scripture defines as love (1 John 4:8), but who nevertheless is responsible for a system of eternal damnation and punishment. After all, if love or compassion is truly infinite, sooner or later it must touch everyone. A minority of Christians in mainstream denominations would agree.

Universalism as a Belief about Spirituality

In a different but not unrelated sense, universalism is the belief that everyone equally shares the same capability of attaining the highest spiritual experience, awareness, or level regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, or religion. This shared potential may be the result of a divine gift bestowed upon everyone by a transcendent God—a kind of supernatural add-on to human nature. This is a monotheistic view held by a minority of Christians, who may or may not believe that this boon will finally and inevitably come to fruition for all who possess it. (If they do, of course, they are

universalists in the salvational sense.) But this sort of universalism is much more common in religions (mostly Eastern) that teach that all human beings have an innate, inherent, and indelible spiritual essence that serves as their true identity and that differs from the Christian soul in that it is non-personal and truly eternal (rather than merely immortal into the future).

In Hinduism, for example, everyone (and, finally, everything) has *atman* (a kind of spiritual energy-essence) as his or her most genuine inner identity or self, and this *atman* happens to be both eternal and identical with *Brahman*, the Supreme Spirit or Ultimate Reality that is immanent-but-hidden in the cosmos, and therefore in all the natural world, including each individual human. This essential identity is one's true self, concealed only by our ego-bound ignorance. Because *atman* is eternal, its return to the Source—the One with which it has always been one—is inevitable. Buddhism complicated the picture with the philosophy of Nagarjuna in the second century CE and its identification of the human spiritual essence as *anatman* or the “no-self” (and Ultimate Reality as *Shunyata*, “Emptiness”), and a few centuries later with the rise of the ever-practical Zen tradition, which virtually ignored references to essences and focused on the cultivation of a particular kind of awareness. Still, even this radical brand of Buddhism, no less than its Pure Land counterpart, maintained a continuity of process from lifetime to lifetime.

Indeed, both Hinduism and Buddhism assume reincarnation or spiritual transmigration as well as the importance of *karma* (deeds and their inevitable spiritual consequences) in that process. Such beliefs allow an eternity for the inner essence—or, in the case of Zen, inner awareness—to be realized. What keeps folks from that goal and stuck in *samsara* (that is, the everyday world as well as recycling in and out of it) is a combination of *karma* and ignorance of one's true nature; and the debilitating effects are so severe that a single lifetime is hardly enough for anyone to, as it were, see the Light.

Universalism as an Attitude about Religions

As if life and religion were not complicated enough, the word

universalism can also be used to indicate a particular opinion about the various religions of the world within a spectrum ranging from exclusivism at one end to relativism at the other.

At issue is whether any religious Truth or truths exist, and if so, where and how It or they are to be found. The range of views could hardly be greater.

At one extreme of this continuum (call it the right wing) is *exclusivism*, an attitude that says, "There is only one religious truth, true religion, or truth about religion mine." (I have never run across an exclusivist who says, "There is one right religion, and rats! it's hers, not mine.") Christian exclusivists, for example, herald their "straight and narrow path" that leads to eternal salvation, and contrast it to the numerous "broad and crooked" ones that lead to everlasting damnation. They typically try to instill fear with a panoply of threats and quote scriptural verses that seem to support their position, such as Jesus' alleged "no one cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6 KJV). The exclusivist attitude is typical of fundamentalists, both Christian and Islamic. And oddly enough, although it is typical of monotheistic faiths, doctrinaire atheists also fall into this extreme category because of their certainty that religion is groundless. Clearly, exclusivism produces strange bedfellows!

Only slightly to the left of exclusivism on this spectrum (although it sounds as if it should be at the other extreme) is *inclusivism*. This is the notion that while one (mine!) is the purest, truest, or only really effectual religion, others may contain some truth and perhaps even some useful tidbits of spiritual belief and practice. A little further to the left stands *pluralism*, the idea that some, many, or even most religions contain religious truth and are vehicles to the ultimate spiritual reward. The position of universalism as a religious attitude is, then, a little to the left of pluralism, for it declares all religions to be well-founded and valid. Just to the left of religious-attitudinal universalism, at the far left extreme of our attitudinal spectrum, is *relativism*, which in this context holds that within or behind any religion is to be found not truth, but only opinion. This, of course, is the stance of skeptics and cynics, and the reason why some Quaker

universalists have wisely identified that extreme option as a clear and present danger to their own stance. (4)

Universalism in Quakerism

Given the three ways of understanding universalism just described—the salvational-doctrinal, the spiritual-experiential, and the religious-attitudinal—the clear impression one gets from reading Quaker universalists is that their understanding of universalism reflects primarily and sometimes exclusively the second. They are universalists because they believe all people everywhere can attain the most profound spiritual experience.

Yet, an interesting difference of opinion arises among these Quaker universalists. One camp holds that people possess an Inner Light either as natural part of human nature (nontheistic view) or a supernatural addition to it (a theistic view). (5) These and especially the nontheists are the Quakers inclined to equate their Light with the Hindu *atman* (inner spiritual energy-essence). The other camp prefers to think about the Inner Light in a non-metaphysical and non-substantialist (and thus a more existentialist or Zen) way that is, not as a component that people have by nature or as a supernatural gift, but more as a capacity that everyone possesses either for a certain kind of spiritual experience or awareness. Either camp may see this Light as a power for moral transformation. (6)

Whichever spiritual-experiential position is taken, whether or not all people will actually discover their Inner Light or achieve their potential spiritual awareness is a point of disagreement. The quotation from Ralph Hetherington cited at the beginning of this article, for example, emphasizes the word *may* when it comes to the achievement of spiritual enlightenment. Those who express a more Eastern understanding of the Inner Light as *atman*, Buddha-mind, or the Tao, (7) however, thereby raise the question of whether It, like Its Eastern counterparts, must eventually be realized precisely because it

is none other than everyone's spiritual core and essential identity. If it is that, then at some very deep level everyone is already enlightened and merely awaiting the inevitable total awareness of that fact what Zen calls *satori*.

This latter group of Eastward-leaning Quaker universalists would probably have to entertain or even embrace some notion of reincarnation as their Hindu counterparts do, for the very idea that the Hitlers, Stalins, bin Ladens, child molesters, and serial murderers of the world either did or inevitably will realize their spiritual potential in a single lifetime despite their heinous crimes against humanity is perhaps absurd and certainly repugnant. The possibility that such dim Lights might repeatedly return to work off their enormous karmic debt and realize the brightness of their divine Inner Luminescence would seem to be both just and palatable.

In any case, a Quaker who affirms both the universality of the Inner Light in all people and the inevitability that this Light will bear fruit in everyone embraces a distinct version of our first, salvational-doctrinal meaning of universalism along with the spiritual one. It would not, of course, be framed in such traditional Christian terms as *salvation* or *redemption*, which presuppose a much more negative view of human nature, focused on sin and depravity, than Quakers today are inclined to hold. For a Quaker universalist so inclined, universalism of salvation would be understood instead as a *self-realization* or *self-awareness* that all people must eventually achieve. Other Quaker universalists, however, might consider the question of inevitability a moot point, especially if they regard spiritual experience as being strictly about embracing and expressing the Inner Light or coming to full spiritual awareness as quickly and fully as possible in the here and now of a single lifetime. From that perspective, those who persistently hide their Light under a bushel of depravity would simply lose their single chance to realize their potential illumination.

The Limits of Quaker Universalism

Both Quakers who are universalists in the root, spiritual sense alone and those who might incorporate some salvational

sense as well might find themselves something less than universalist in the third sense discussed above, that is, when it comes to the question of whether all religions have at their core the experience of the Inner Light. This is a common claim in Quaker universalist literature and is reflected in Katherine Wilson's rhetorical question: "Would it be true to say that Quakerism is not so much one specific sect of Christianity, or one specific religion, as (it is) the core that makes the centre of every religion?" (8) She clearly believes it is. But to substantiate such a sweeping assertion, one would need to study all religions or at least a fair enough sampling (a hundred, perhaps?) to discover an invariable pattern. Some Quaker universalist writers (like Ralph Hetherington in the opening quotation) prove a bit more circumspect in specifying that the experience of the Inner Light is the heart or core of the "great" or "major" world religions, but thereby beg the question of what qualifies them for that lofty status. (9)

As a scholar of the world's religions, I am suspicious of sweeping generalizations about them. Are Shinto, Baha'i, and Confucianism major world religions? Most knowledgeable people would say so. Is the Inner Light at their core, despite the fact that they have never exhibited any sense of a mystical dynamic? I have my doubts. Is the Inner Light the heart of Islam, a faith tradition that teaches no such thing? Its *Qur'an*, in fact, claims to have been dictated by an external angel rather than inspired by Muhammad's Inner Light; and it aims to instill submission (the meaning of the Arabic word *islam*) to a profoundly other and outer God. On top of that, most Muslims treat the mystical Sufi minority of their faith, who come closer than any other adherents of Islam to experiencing and expressing an Inner Light, as deviants and heretics.

Conclusion

In summary, then, I suspect the common ground for all Quaker universalists lies in the spiritual sense that everyone everywhere possesses the Inner Light or the capacity for spiritual awareness, although there might well be some disagreement about whether all were destined to realize their full spiritual potential. But I truly doubt that many of them would embrace universalism as an attitude toward religions, for they would find themselves having to reconcile the Inner Light with animal and human sacrifices, Satanic worship, necromancy, ritual prostitution, *jihad*, *hara-kiri*, and other religious beliefs and practices that seem to have no spiritual illumination behind them. In the face of such phenomena, pluralism would seem closer to the genuinely universalist spirit of Quakerism: that is, the affirmation that some, many, or maybe even most (but not all) of the world's religions are grounded in the Light, particularly those with a clear mystical inclination. That, of course, opens another can of worms: What is mysticism? But that question must be addressed another time.

For now, Quaker universalists might do well to clarify in precisely what sense or senses and to what extent they are universalists. This would be advantageous not only for their own self-understanding as individuals (which is important enough), but also for conversation among themselves and with those outsiders who express interest in their movement. Some Quakers will undoubtedly dismiss such theorizing as useless and distracting, but it is that only if it draws attention away from the primary or root phenomenon of both Quakerism and all genuine religion: spiritual experience.

[Two charts in the original article were omitted—ed.]

Notes

1. Ralph Hetherington, ed., "Readings for Universalists" on the QUF website at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/readings.html> (emphasis his).
2. I am grateful to Patricia Williams, a friend of a friend and now a

fellow Fellow of the Westar Institute, for bringing to my attention Quaker universalism and the Quaker Universalist Fellowship website (www.universalistfriends.org).

3. The on-line version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://dictionary.oed.com/>), s.v. “universalism.”
4. For example, see Larry Spears, “Quakers and Universalism,” in *The Journal of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship* (no. 40, Spring/Summer 2004), under the heading “Dangers of Relativism and Civil Religion,” accessible on-line at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/ufo40.html>.
5. Patricia Williams, in the draft book manuscript she graciously shared with me, asserts that “the Light is not natural” (p. 31), but rather “the face God turns toward humanity” (p. 33). Such language, of course, evokes traditional theism and its supernaturalism. Yet she also appears to lean in the direction of a more Eastern, immanent (indwelling) Ultimate as well, for she immediately equates that “face” with the terms *Tao* and *Atman*, which are not faces at all, but non-personal (and in the case of *Atman*, neuter) names for none other than the pure, undifferentiated, intra-natural Absolute One in Taoism and Hinduism, respectively.
6. I am most grateful to David Boulton of the British Quaker Universalist Group (and to my friend, Tom Hall, for putting me in touch with him) for critiquing a draft of this paper, and for alerting me to an apparent difference of opinion among Quaker universalists on this score. He points out (in an email to me dated June 17, 2005) that the mission statement of his group speaks only in terms of a “spiritual awareness” that “is accessible to everyone of any religion or none,” with no mention of an Inner Light or anything like it that can be possessed. Patricia Williams, by contrast, states, “Quaker universalists believe that everyone has the Light.” (p. 135) In a June 18, 2005 email to me, Mr. Boulton suggested that the reason for this apparent difference of opinion may be “that QU in Britain is less wedded to Quaker language, less

specifically theistic, and more diverse (in welcoming non-Quakers and humanists, for example).” He added that such theoretical differences seem to matter little among Quaker universalists when it comes to actual spiritual practice.

7. An example of a Quaker universalist who does this is Jim Pym, cited in Williams’s manuscript, p. 135. For an example of a Quaker universalist who sees clear connections with Eastern religion, see Rhoda Gilman, “Thoughts from a Quaker-Buddhist,” in *The Journal of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship* (no. 40, Spring/Summer 2004), accessible on-line at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/ufo40.html>.
8. Katherine Wilson, cited in Hetherington, *op. cit.*, section “V: Universalism in Its Historic Quaker Setting.”
9. The fullest explication of the notion that an important common denominator in the world’s religions is the experience of and belief in some sort of a Divine Within that is identical or very similar to the human soul is Aldous Huxley’s classic, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York, et al.: Harper & Row, 1944/5). Huxley who, by the way, includes George Fox as an exemplar of his theory wisely restricts his purview to “primitive” (i.e., tribal-animistic) religions and “every one of the *higher* religions” (vii, emphasis mine). One suspects, of course, that what makes them “higher” in his view is the presence of his focal notion, and the mystical spirituality and practice that yields it.

A Theology of Quaker Universalism
(Universalist Friends—Fall 1985, v 5, p.15)

Ralph Hetherington

Introduction

In attempting to frame a theology of Quaker universalism, there is no suggestion that all Quakers should hold universalist views; far

from it. What is being suggested is that there is a perfectly respectable theological basis for a universalist view within the Society of Friends. The standard definition of universalism is to be found in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, where it is defined as “the doctrine of universal salvation or redemption.” This doctrine is advanced by William Penn in his pamphlet *The Christian Quaker* published in 1669. He does not, of course, use the term “universalism,” but his term “Gentile Divinity” is the equivalent. By this he meant that the Eternal Light of Christ was present in all men and women everywhere. It was the Light that led to enlightenment, redemption and salvation. If this doctrine is true, it would be hard to argue that the Eternal Light was not equivalent to the Buddha nature of Buddhism, or the Brahman of Hinduism. Moreover, it is directly in line with the teaching of the Fourth Gospel which refers to “the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”

A second, more modern definition of universalism refers to the view that no one religion can be expected to have a monopoly of Truth and that no one revelation of Truth, however sublime, can be the final, exclusive and unalterable expression of it. The second meaning, of course, is a corollary of the first and a logical extension of it.

The Inward Light and Scripture

A universalist theology has to be based on a doctrine of personal revelation which has always been available to all men and women everywhere. The Quaker doctrine of the Inward Light could therefore be the basis for such a universalist view. For this to be so, the primacy of the Inward Light over Scripture has to be established. Both Isaac Pennington and George Fox were clear that the Inward Light was preeminent.

Isaac Pennington wrote:

And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So, learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their right place, and prizing that above them which is above them.

George Fox wrote:

Now the Lord hath opened to me by His invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the divine Light of Christ, and I saw it shine through all, and they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came to the Light of life, and became children of it; but they that hated it, and did not believe in it, were condemned by it, though they made profession of Christ. Then I saw in the pure openings of the Light, without help of any man, neither did I know where to find it in the Scriptures, though afterwards, searching the Scriptures, I found it. For I saw in that Light and Spirit, which was before Scripture was given forth, and which led the holy men of God to give them forth, that all must come to that Spirit, if they would know God or Christ, or the Scriptures aright, which they that gave them forth were led and taught by. . . .

It is interesting that George Fox in the passage quoted above, while claiming the primacy of the Inward Light, also claimed that his revelations were always confirmed by reference to the scriptures. However, this did not mean that revelations were invalid, if they were not confirmed by scripture, nor that the Inward Light and scripture were fully equivalent. Many of George Fox's quarrels with ministers and priests were about this very point. The Inward Light helped men and women to interpret the scriptures aright; the scriptures, on the other hand, could not be used to validate the Inward Light, although they could be a help in discerning false leading.

Quietist Period

As we have seen, it would be a small step for Quakers to change Fox's assertion, that all his openings were later confirmed by reference to scripture, to the assertion that any openings not so confirmed must be false. To take this step, of course, would be to deny the primacy of the Inward Light and to leave the way open to fundamentalism. Like early Quakers, Friends during the Quietist period of the 18th century seemed to have stopped short of this, asserting only that the Inward Light helped men and women to interpret the scriptures aright. Robert

Barclay made two assumptions in his *Apology*. The first was that the Inward Light was the principal leader to Truth. The second was that there is an indissoluble link between the Inward Light and the Jesus of history. During the Quietist period, the first assumption was emphasized, while the second was underplayed. This may have been because the Jesus of history could only be known through the study of scripture, and too much preoccupation with the scriptures might impede the operation of “pure openings” of the Light within. For the Quietists the scriptures were secondary.

Evangelical Period

Towards the end of the Quietist period some evangelical rumblings were heard, probably as a result of Methodist influences. In 1805 Henry Tuke published his *Principles of Religion*, which set out a more evangelical form of belief, and in the following year the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting revised its Discipline to make it a matter of disownment for anyone to deny the divinity of Christ, the immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit or the authenticity of scripture. These moves were seen by some Friends as leading away from the doctrine of the primacy of the Inward Light and towards the absolute authority of scripture. Things came to a head in 1827 in America when Elias Hicks led a sizable body of Friends to a separation from the main body. Blessedly, London Yearly Meeting never divided British Friends. It stoutly resisted extremism from the fundamentalist side as well as from any attempt to return to Quietism. This determination to resist extremes was shown when one Isaac Crewdson in 1835 condemned the doctrine of the Inward Light in quite immoderate terms, declaring it to be a delusion and urging Friends to take the Bible as the one sure basis of faith. London Yearly Meeting refused to budge, and Crewdson and his followers left the Society.

Nevertheless, the underlying trend all through the major part of the 19th century was away from Quietism and the primacy of the Inward Light and towards the primacy of scripture. This can be nicely traced by comparing London Yearly Meeting epistles over this period. In 1827 the epistle contained the following passage:

Vital Christianity consisteth not in words but in power; and however important it is that we have a right apprehension of the doctrine of the gospel, this availeth not, unless we are regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But by 1836, the epistle had changed its views, as the following passage shows:

It has ever been, and still is, the belief of the Society of Friends that the Holy Scriptures . . . were given by the inspiration of God . . . and there can be no appeal from them to any authority whatsoever . . . and whatsoever man says or does, which is contrary to the Scriptures, though under profession of the immediate guidance of the Spirit, must be reckoned and accounted a mere delusion.

Meanwhile other pressures were developing. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and in 1860 seven distinguished Anglicans supported intelligent, informed and scholarly criticism of biblical texts. The tensions and ferment in religious thinking now built up, and the Society of Friends also began to feel the pressures. A Friend, David Duncan, was disowned in 1871 for applying contemporary criticism in the Bible. By 1884 the tide of new opinions could not be held back any longer. Three anonymous Friends published a document called *A Reasonable Faith*, which offered a lucid, forward-looking alternative to evangelicalism, yet with a strong commitment to biblical reference, but to a Bible subject to intelligent and informed historical and textual criticism. This finally cracked the evangelical position, especially when the three anonymous Friends were later revealed as well-known and "weighty" members of the Society.

The Richmond Declaration

However, the evangelical Friends in America were by no means put off by these developments in Britain. Two prominent British evangelical Friends, Joseph Bevan Braithwaite and Joseph John Gurney, had visited America in order to take part in the ferment there which had already led to the Hicksite separation of 1827, and to

the controversy between Joseph John Gurney and John Wilbur over the period 1837-40 while Gurney was doing an evangelical tour of America. John Wilbur had visited England in 1831-33 and had become alarmed at Joseph John Gurney's views on the infallibility of scripture, which alarm would certainly have been shared by George Fox.

But American Friends were now chiefly concerned with the new liberal thinking represented by the publication of *A Reasonable Faith* in Britain. Things came to a head in 1887 when a great conference was held at Richmond, Indiana, attended by Joseph Bevan Braithwaite as the representative of London Yearly Meeting. It could hardly be called a representative conference, since Wilburite Friends [whose position was more or less between that of the Hicksites and Gurneyites—ed.] held aloof and Hicksite Friends were not even invited. At the end of the conference a declaration was drawn up largely drafted by Joseph Bevan Braithwaite himself, which was essentially a statement of belief of the evangelical Friends who had been influenced by Joseph John Gurney. The Declaration made it clear, among other less contentious statements, that the main basis of Quaker belief had to be scriptural.

Joseph Bevan Braithwaite brought the Declaration back to London Yearly Meeting in high hopes that it would be accepted. London Yearly Meeting, however, had other ideas. It declined to endorse the Richmond Declaration because it was too nearly a credal statement, and because it left insufficient room for the “primacy of the Inward Light of Christ in the experience of Friends.” This led to the end of the domination of evangelical Friends in Britain and paved the way for the exciting Manchester Conference of 1895, which led to the liberal revival and to a rational and informed criticism of the biblical texts.

Nevertheless, the Richmond Declaration was, and still is, accepted by a majority of Friends worldwide, the major exceptions having been the Hicksite and Wilburite Friends in America and London Yearly Meeting. Generally speaking, programmed Meetings in America favor the Richmond Declaration, while the silent Meetings do not.

Towards a Universalist Theology for Quakers

It seems therefore that Friends are divided over an issue central to a universalist theology, namely, the primacy of the Inward Light.

Robert Barclay's *first* assumption is therefore essential for any universalist theology. His *second* assumption, concerning the link between the Inward Light and the Jesus of history, needs further consideration. Howard Brinton deplors the confusion between the historical Jesus as described in the first three gospels and the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Eternal Christ as described in the fourth gospel. Indeed, John 1:9 is often called "the Quaker text." If we are to take seriously the suggestion that the Inward Light helps to interpret the scriptures aright, then the historical Jesus as recorded in the scriptures must also come under that scrutiny. Since British Friends and the silent Friends of America have accepted the validity of biblical criticism, the Jesus of history becomes a more problematical figure. The gospel story is valuable not because it appears in scripture, but because it speaks to our condition. Some features of the story appeal; others do not.

The Eternal Light has many names—the Logos, the Eternal Christ, the Christ Reality, the

Buddha nature, the Brahman, the Tao. For Quakers it is the Inward Light. The *second* assumption of Robert Barclay might be rephrased to assert that there is an indissoluble link between the Inward Light and the Eternal Christ, this being one of the many names for the Eternal Light. Quakers speak of "that of God" in everyone. Most of us would agree that the Eternal Light is available to everyone everywhere and always has been. There are no barriers of time, space or religion. This is the basic theology of universalist Quakers.

There need be no divisions between Christocentric Quakers and the universalist Quakers. Both believe in the primacy of the Inward Light and its universality. Christocentric Friends associate the Light Within with the Eternal Christ. Universalist Friends may prefer to use other names. Friends of both orientations may benefit very greatly from a close study of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the New Testament and both are committed to "seeking new light from whatever quarter it may arise."

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The Need for Universalism
(*Universalist*, January 1982, 7/29)

Phillip Hills

[Here] I highlight certain trends or themes in the world today which seem to me to suggest that universalism in religion is becoming increasingly appropriate. It is very much a personal analysis and, as such, is intended not to provide answers but as a basis for further thought. Its starting point is implicitly Christian because, although I do not now call myself a Christian, I was brought up in that tradition.

One of the most striking developments of the last couple of centuries or so has been the growth of democracy. In narrow political terms there are ebbs and flows as coups and counter-coups occur here and there. Yet, even in states that we tend to label ‘totalitarian,’ government cannot proceed without the consent of the governed to an extent undreamed of before, say, the American Declaration of Independence. There are many reasons for this: one is that the rate of economic and technical advance now necessary to maintain a quiescent populace requires a high level of skill and, therefore, universal education. Educated people learn to think for themselves and question authority. And once the genie is out of *that* bottle it is virtually impossible to put the stopper back on it.

So we see in all sorts of spheres the weakening of previously unquestioned authority. In religion, look for example at the Catholic Church. Wherever the real experience of its flock has conflicted with its doctrines—whether over birth control in the affluent industrialised countries or over political activism among the poverty-stricken masses of South America, authority has been forced into retreat. Similarly, children no longer accept that adults are necessarily right and increasingly assume their own right to be heard. Not long ago my 14-year-old, after listening to Lord Carrington on television, remarked “What does an old man like that know about what children think?”—thus simultaneously questioning the authority of age and asserting, however oddly, the existence of a specifically children’s view on (in this case) disarmament.

Religion, if it is to survive in organised form, must take account of this independence of spirit. It must be less authoritarian. It will, therefore, be unable to be monolithic but will have to flower in blessedly varying ways to suit the needs of blessedly varying people.

My second theme is summarised in the phrase ‘scientific method’. The assumption is that knowledge springs from painstaking research and the carefully constructed hypothesis, rigorously tested and rejected if even a sliver of doubt remains—such method is almost universally accepted even by those who know little or nothing of what is conventionally called science. The insights of sociology, economics, psychology—even literary criticism and the study of language itself—rest upon this attitude. Religion has not been exempt and has been buffeted by the storm. The reaction of orthodox religious apologists has been understandable but, I think, profoundly mistaken: they have faced to the front and manned the ramparts.

Some years ago one of my daughters asked me whether the Genesis story of the Creation was really true. Three hundred years ago a European father would probably have had no hesitation in answering ‘yes’. In doing so he would then have been supported by all accepted knowledge and reason.

Science and religion were, effectively, one. The church was the source of all knowledge; its language was that of scripture. Unfortunately, however, when its dogma came under attack it followed the trend and pursued the argument in the language of scientific method. It failed, in the main, to see that its truths were mythic, not scientific. Defending them on the wrong ground, it not only lost the argument but allowed the real mythological significance of its message to be lost to millions. This is, of course, a specifically Christian example and I recognise that increasingly theologians are shifting their ground. But the damage is done. The lesson remains: Forget the old battles. Don’t fight science. Illuminate the myths. And remember, that different people of different types, from different cultures and backgrounds, need different myths. Let the voice be universal but not the words uniform.

The application of scientific method gave rise, among other things, to the subject of my third theme, modern technology. The machine was pre-eminent in nineteenth-century technology and provided the popular model for the universe, complete with divine operator. This reinforced the materialist or realist, as opposed to mythological, attitude to religion which I have already criticised. Apparently inevitable technical advance also generated the feeling that every problem has its 'technological fix'—rather as sick children seem often to find the lack of an immediate cure incomprehensible and cannot accept that one just has, sometimes, to be patient and 'sit it out'. In this sort of way it seems to me that nineteenth-century technology reduced our capacity to face personal difficulties realistically, courageously and philosophically.

Late twentieth-century technology no doubt has the same defect, but it also has interesting possibilities. While machinery replaced or enhanced men's muscles, microelectronics increasingly does this for their brains. The social, psychological and intellectual consequences are uncertain. They will certainly be far-reaching, but whether for good or ill will depend on two things: first, our willingness to abandon familiar ways when strange new ones will help us develop our humanity and, second, our ability to see beyond superficial or immediate benefits to longer-term and deeper implications. And when these seem to belittle our personalities we must have the strength to choose a different road. If we are open-minded and clear-sighted, realistic and courageous, within a few years we can spread leisure, culture, intellectual achievement and content more widely than ever before.

Another branch of twentieth-century technology is concerning itself with the very spring of life; progress in genetics and biotechnology seems likely to invest us with God-like powers—almost limitless for good or ill—both for ourselves and for other species. Thinking along well-worn lines will be useless, and our responsibility to open our minds to new approaches will be great.

This brings me to my fourth theme. For centuries we have dreamed of the brotherhood of man. Now it is reality—yet we find

(surprise!) that brothers do not always love one another. If you doubt our new-found unity—consider. I can speak at will, virtually instantaneously and with perfect clarity to my relatives in New Zealand. On my television I may watch a test match in Australia with the same ease that I can view one at the Oval. When I meet Canadian friends I find that we have read the same books, even both watched ‘Yes, Minister’ on the ‘box.’ We all have common experiences of work, sport, knowledge and discovery. There is the universal language of science. In an increasing number of cases it is no longer meaningful to speak of the products we use as ‘Made in Britain.’ They may, for example, have been designed in the U.S.A., the major components assembled in Hong Kong and the product completed in this country. The stroke of a pen in Japan can employ hundreds of men in South Wales. While politicians have talked, businessmen and technologists have created the world-state behind their backs.

We are on the verge, then, of creating a single culture—not uniform but with many interpenetrating sub-cultures—yet, in essence, universal. Within this newly united world life is complex and fast-changing, and the well-tried guides have lost their authority. On all sides siren voices offer conflicting advice. Materialism says “Eat, drink and put that religious rubbish behind you”—but the neglected dark forces within us erupt in violence and destroy society and economy together. At the opposite extreme the fundamentalists call “back to the Bible (or the Koran, or George Fox)—and a plague on reason”. This, too, gives rise to the excesses of unreason—Ayatollah Khomeini and the persecution of Darwinism in America. And the synthesisers, like Fritjof Capra, author of *The Tao of Physics*, try to show that science and religion are really dealing with the same thing—but not surprisingly (in my view) fail to convince.

I said I would provide no answers, but I hope the foregoing analysis may suggest a framework in which we can proceed. The decline of authority in religion, as elsewhere, means we must abandon dogma and be universalist in our acceptance of insights

in many different forms, from many traditions appealing to different kinds of personality. Universalist but not uniform—indeed religious organisation may give way to some form of do-it-yourself religious societies of which the Society of Friends is, perhaps, an early version. Each will need to be willing to draw on any or all of the religious sources. Religion, having been tricked into playing away to Science and losing, must now return to myth, its home ground. Where the old religion provided a refuge from the world, the new forms will provide inner strength within the world.

We need universalism not as a new religion but as a framework within which all can freely pursue the myths that speak most tellingly to them.

What Universalism Is Not

(Universalist, September 1985, 15/14)

Richard Allen

When talking to a group of Friends about universalism, I decided to clear the ground by listing the things that universalism, in the sense in which members of the QUG would use the word, is not. When I came to jot these things down I found that there were no fewer than eight of them, namely:

1. Universalism is not the theological doctrine that all souls will ultimately be saved. That is a beautiful thought, and it seems to have been part of the faith of Mother Julian of Norwich—though she expressed it very cautiously. It is a ‘heretical’ view, and may have explained why she has so far not even been beatified. Anyway, it is not universalism in the QUG sense.
2. Universalism is not the view that all religions are as good as one another, and that it doesn’t make any difference what you believe. In fact, all religions are not as good as one another: they are all imperfect in different ways because they have been

developed by imperfect people. They are all no more than the truth seen through a glass darkly. Moreover, most people, usually for good reasons, adhere to the religion in which they are brought up.

3. Universalism is not an attempt to build up a sort of compromise or composite religion from bits of the others—a sort of lowest common multiple.
4. It is also not the search for an irreducible set of common doctrines—a sort of greatest common measure. The mere difficulty of framing such doctrines in words would make that a wild goose chase.
5. It is not the ‘triumphalist’ view that Christianity—or more usually some sect’s view of it—is absolutely true; and that it is therefore God’s will that all people should ultimately be converted to Christianity.
6. It is not (emphatically not) the offensive suggestion, sometimes made even by Friends, that people of other faiths may be “Christians without knowing it”. When he heard this, a mild Hindu was goaded into saying that he thought perhaps Christians were Hindus without knowing it!
7. It is also not the purely rationalist-humanist view that universal truth can be discovered by rational thought and scientific investigation. This is an important ‘not’ because a good many people do seem to believe that nowadays, below the surface of their minds.
8. Finally—a more subtle not—universalism is not just being tolerant of other religious views, or even showing a loving acceptance of differences from one’s own views. These are fruits of the universalist outlook, but they are not universalism itself.

Having got that off my chest, I somehow found it easier to explain to my hearers that universalism was a deeply held attitude of mind and spirit and, for me at least, an essential part of the Quaker faith; that, nevertheless, it was not confined to particular beliefs or to people of some particular temperament; and that, although it could not be

defined in words or imparted by rhetoric, there were utterances which can reveal its presence.

The Quaker/Unitarian Universalist Connection

(Universalist Friends, Spring 2001, 36/6)

Chris Buice

There is a story told about Martin Luther when he was a young preacher. Luther used to write out the text of his sermon before delivering it to the congregation. One day, a man approached Luther and said, "You shouldn't preach from a prepared text. Instead you should simply go up into the pulpit and let the Spirit speak through you." Martin Luther replied to the man by saying, "I did that once. I went up to the pulpit, and I heard the Spirit say, 'Martin Luther, you should have prepared a sermon.'"

Today I just want to let you know I came with a prepared talk. It might seem odd to begin a talk about Quakers and Universalists with a story about Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church. But I think the story helps to illustrate one of the differences between [Unitarian] Universalists and Quakers. The early Quakers were like the man who challenged Luther. They wanted their sermons to be spirit-filled, straight from the heart and without a prepared text. Early Universalists (and certainly modern ones) would have more sympathy with Luther's approach to sermonizing. And one of the ways you can tell I'm a Universalist is that I stand before you with a prepared text for this talk. Today my shuffling of papers will reveal my denominational loyalties. However, it is my hope that the spirit can speak also through a prepared presentation. And that this talk on Quaker and Universalist connections will in some sense help to deepen your spiritual as well as your intellectual lives.

One of the things that drew me into the Unitarian Universalist Church was the power of the gospel of universalism. Therefore,

whenever I give a presentation about Unitarian Universalist history to a church or college class, I like to tell the story of John Murray and how he traveled around spreading the Universalist message. He would tell the people to “Go out on the highways and the byways of this new land. Give the people something of your vision. You may have only a small light but uncover it and let it shine. Use it to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women everywhere. Do not preach so as to deepen their despair. Give them not hell but hope and courage. Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” And whenever I tell that story someone usually connects with it. I once had a Lutheran minister tell me that he thought he was a Lutheran Universalist. And many Quakers have told me the same thing. This gospel has a way of helping to build bridges with other faith traditions.

I am a Unitarian Universalist, but I prepared for ministry by studying at a Quaker theology school, the Earlham School of Religion (ESR) in Richmond, Indiana. And I have gained a lot of wisdom from associating with members Earlham School of Religion. I was not the first Unitarian Universalist to study at Earlham. ESR was founded in 1960, and the Reverend Justin Lapoint has that honor by being admitted in 1969. Justin Lapoint’s application caused some discussion and debate. However, eventually ESR did the right thing and admitted its first Universalist. And many more have followed. Justin paved the way for the rest of us. When I studied at ESR, there were usually five to six Unitarian Universalists enrolled at any given time. . . .

One of the reasons I decided to study at Earlham was because of the Quaker universalist tradition. And what I want to do today is talk some about that Quaker universalist tradition and how it overlaps with our Unitarian Universalist tradition. I want to outline some of the common ground that is shared by these two traditions and some of the differences which make them distinct and separate movements. Also I want to explore some possibilities for connections in the future.

So let’s begin by looking at the Quaker universalist tradition. Probably the best way to describe how the Quaker universalists fit into the larger Society of Friends is to say, “They are a small part of

a small movement.” The Quakers are a broad and diverse religious association. For the sake of simplicity I will divide this diversity into three categories. The first group is the evangelical Quakers, who are very Bible-centered and Christ-centered; their views range from fundamentalist to conservative. The second group is more moderate. This group tends to belong to Friends United Meeting. They value the Bible but are also open to historical critical research of the scriptures. This group has produced scholars like D. Elton Trueblood. They are a lot like mainline Protestants or, as my friend Michael Crumley-Effinger once said, “We are like Methodists that don’t sing well.” The third group is the more liberal group that associates itself with Friends General Conference. This group includes liberal Christians and Quaker universalists. A Quaker universalist might be Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, humanist. A Quaker universalist values the Bible and the teachings of Christ but also remains open to the truths that can be found in all the great world religions. This group tries to remain open to truth from whatever quarter it may arise.

The divisions among Quakers are actually more complicated than I have outlined here. Quakers are in the habit of splitting off and forming splinter movements. John Punshon, the Quaker studies professor at ESR has said that a good title for a book on Quaker history might be *Splits Happen*.

For the sake of brevity, most of my comments will be confined to the group associated with Friends General Conference: liberal Friends, “Hicksites” and Quaker universalists, who are by no means the majority within the Quaker movement. However, they are a group that shares many common values with Unitarian Universalists.

There are definitely Quaker and Universalist connections. But in order to understand these we need to know a little bit more about Friends General Conference (FGC) and the Quaker universalists. Let’s begin by talking about the Quaker approach to worship, and then develop some of its theological implications. What I’m about to say is not true of all Quakers but is generally true among members of FGC.

Quakers worship in silence. There are no hymns, no music or ritual, no prepared sermon. Quakers believe in the ministry of all believers; there is no paid clergy. But as my professor Bill Ratliff used to say, "Quakers haven't abolished the ministry. We've abolished the laity." The implication of this is that during the worship service any member of the Meeting may stand and speak if he or she feels an inward leading of the spirit. However, it is quite possible to sit through an entire service in which no one says anything at all.

Silent worship does not appeal to everyone. Many modern people become uncomfortable with anything more than a couple of minutes of silence. They begin to squirm in their seats. One of my ESR professors, Tom Mullen, has said that a popular prayer for a newcomer to a Quaker Meeting is ". . . 101, 102, 103, 104."

But at its best, silence can be a powerful experience. Through the silent worship, the gathered Meeting gains a sense of communion with each other and with God. The members of the Meeting feel that they move beyond their private isolated selves and become part and parcel with the larger life of the Spirit.

A number of years ago, I went to a Unitarian Universalist ministers' meeting led by the Quaker author, Parker Palmer. During the course of the week, I heard him describe his own experience of Quaker worship. I also heard him remark that Quaker worship was so powerful he was tempted to put together and sell a cassette tape called "Great Quaker Silences."

I enjoyed the conference with Parker Palmer, and this may have had some effect on my choosing to go to a Quaker theology school. There I had the opportunity to participate in silent worship every day of the week. And yet the Meetings are not always totally silent. In the silence of the Meeting, the worshiper may feel the leading and prompting of the Spirit, the still small voice within, which speaks with authority. The life of faith means obedience to that inward guide. The Inner Teacher gives one a measure of the truth to live by; not the whole truth, simply a measure of the truth. A Spirit-filled life does not make one infallible or a spiritual know-it-all. It makes one more

humble. In the words of the 19th-century Quaker, Caroline Fox, all that is required is to “Live up to the light thou hast, and more will be granted thee.” The challenge is to be obedient to the truth as you see it and understand it, but also to be open to all the new truth that may yet be revealed to you.

This idea of the inward teacher is central to Quakerism and is foundational for the tradition of Quaker universalism. In the 17th century, George Fox said there is “that of God in every person.” There is something of the divine that dwells in the center of everyone, regardless of race, creed, color, religion or sex. In the 18th century John Woolman described this concept by saying,

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is however, pure, and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

For the Quaker universalist, salvation does not come from giving intellectual assent to an outward creed or through participation in outward rituals and ceremonies such as baptism, communion or confirmation. Salvation comes through obedience to the Inward Teacher. In the 1600’s, Robert Barclay wrote that you could find people obedient to the holy light in their hearts in all religions. You could find them among the heathens, Muslims, Jews, and the various denominations of Christians: people of integrity and simplicity of heart who had never heard of Jesus, never encountered a Bible, and yet had equal access to the light of God in their hearts.

William Penn, the Quaker founder of the state of Pennsylvania, once wrote that salvation was not confined to one religion or sect. “The humble, meek, merciful, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers.” When I was a student at Earlham School of Religion, I worshiped in silence in a community which included Christians, Jews, Buddhists, nontheists, Earth-centered pagans, and people

who didn't know what they were. By far, the majority of students at ESR were Christian. And ESR sees itself as a Christian school, not a Quaker universalist school. But it is a Christian school that is inclusive of people of other faiths, a school that acknowledges that there is something of God in every person. The theological diversity at ESR sometimes led to tension and heart-felt disagreements. These were not always handled in an amicable manner. Quakers believe and try to practice the ethic of nonviolence. Of course, this is not an easy ideal to live up to. I have said on more than one occasion that I had to go to a Quaker school in order to learn that there are many nonviolent ways to hurt people. ESR endeavors to serve the whole spectrum of Friends as well as many other denominations including Episcopalians, Methodists, Assembly of God, Church of the Brethren, an occasional Jewish student or Buddhist. These differences were not always harmonious.

Liberal and conservative Friends were not always nice to each other. Sometimes the first year at ESR is the first time liberal and conservative Friends have mingled with each other for any extended length of time. Some liberal Friends did not even know anything about evangelical Friends before coming to ESR. My friend Tony once told a neighbor about the tradition of evangelical Friends and the neighbor responded, "Evangelical Friends? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? What do they do, stand on the street corners and not say anything?"

Well, evangelical Friends are not a contradiction in terms. They are alive and well, and some are even brave enough to go to ESR despite its reputation as a liberal school. Of course, among liberal Friends ESR is known as a conservative school. So you get the idea: ESR has a delicate balancing act to play in the Society of Friends. But in many ways that is why I felt it was a good school. If you were a liberal, you had to learn how to convey your beliefs to those who did not necessarily understand or agree with you. The same was true of a conservative. You had to learn how to talk to people who are different from you. And so ESR did not always please everyone, but I do think it educated everyone.

There was a lot of theological diversity at that school, but there were also moments in silent worship in which I sensed a Unity which underlies all diversity and which bound us together as one community. I believe there is a power and validity to this experience which can be felt by people of all faiths through silent worship. Theological disagreement need not disturb the spirit of unity and the bonds of peace.

The Quakers believe in direct, first-hand experience of the life of the Spirit. George Fox, whom most consider to be the founder of the Society of Friends, lived in England during the 17th century. He was a man who struggled with the traditional religion of his time. He attended worship services in the Church of England and the Puritan churches, but his spiritual hunger was not fed by these experiences. His soul was in torment because the preachers in these churches did not speak to his condition. His soul rebelled against empty and repetitive ritual and uninspired preaching. His resistance to the traditional church sometimes led him to take dramatic action. He would sometime interrupt services in order to make his point.

One day George Fox walked into Ulverston “steeple-house” during a worship service, stood on top of his seat, interrupted the service and asked for permission to speak. The minister granted him permission. George Fox told the people that what they were doing in church was not enough. It was not enough to know the scriptures: one needed to know the Spirit which gave them forth. He declared, “You will say, ‘Christ saith this, and the apostles say this;’ but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it not inwardly of God?” For Quakers, the Spirit is the primary guide in the life of faith. The Bible is important, but one cannot understand or interpret scriptures without first knowing the Spirit which gave them forth. Robert Barclay said the scriptures are a declaration of the fountain, not the fountain itself. It is through the inward testimony of the Spirit that one is led into all truth. It is not enough to memorize and repeat the words of Jesus or the apostles. The important question is “What canst thou say?”

This emphasis on the Spirit and personal experience has helped to create much of the diversity among Friends. What other movement includes both fundamentalists and evangelicals as well as humanists and students of Eastern mysticism? Thus there is a debate in the larger Quaker community about whether one has to be a Christian and believe in the Bible in order to be a Quaker. The Quaker universalists take the position that you do not have to be a Christian in order to be a Quaker, but they still find power in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. My experience has been that almost all members of the grand spectrum of the Society of Friends have honored Jesus even as they disagree about the exact role Jesus plays in the life of faith. There is some respect for the fact that Jesus has come to mean different things to different people.

There is a passage in the *Journal* of John Woolman where he wrote about a dream that helped him to understand the position of those who rejected the Christian religion. He wrote that he was carried by the Spirit to the mines, where oppressed people were digging treasures for the benefit of those who called themselves Christians. He heard the miners blaspheme the name of Christ, which troubled him because he had great reverence for the name of Christ. Then he was informed that the miners had been told that those who oppressed them were followers of Christ, and so the miners said among themselves, "If Christ directed them to use us in this sort, then Christ is a cruel tyrant."

John Woolman was a Christian, and he experienced Christ as his savior. But he was humbled to learn that some people had experienced Christ as their oppressor. Similarly, in my work as a Unitarian Universalist minister and in my encounters with liberal Quakers, I have met people who have experienced Jesus as a liberator and those who have experienced him as a tyrant. The *Journal* of John Woolman reminds us that there is a certain validity to both experiences. The challenge is learning to speak to all conditions. Among Friends, it is a continuing challenge for those who have had a positive experience of Jesus and those who have had negative experiences of Jesus to learn how to talk and worship together. At ESR, Quakers wrestled with this

issue, as do many people in Unitarian Universalist churches. Perhaps the liberal Quaker attitude toward Jesus can be summed up in the words of William Penn when he said, “it is time for Christians to be judged more by their likeness to Christ than their notions of Christ.” Our ideas about Jesus are not as important as our appreciation of his example of how to live a life of simplicity, equality, justice-seeking, and peace.

Of course, the bottom line for the Quaker universalist is that salvation is possible for members of other faith traditions. The inner light shines in the Muslim and the Jew. Salvation comes through obedience to the inward light in the heart of every person. So membership in a Christian church is not necessary for salvation. The inward light creates the possibility for universal salvation.

Quakers believe that obedience to the inward light will lead one to work for greater justice in the world. George Fox said he felt called to be faithful in two ways, “Inwardly toward God and outwardly toward (hu)man(ity).” This is why early Friends were pioneers in the movement to abolish slavery and in work for equality for both men and women. Since there is that of God in every person, then it becomes mandatory to work to eliminate all practices which degrade and dehumanize our fellow human beings. In 1924, Friends consolidated their efforts toward social service by forming the Friends Service Committee. The service committee was amazingly successful at mobilizing people and resources to attack the problems of poverty, race relations, reconstruction after the wars in Europe, so successful that in 1947 the Friends Service Committee received the Nobel Peace Prize, the only denominational service committee ever to be so honored.

The link between spirituality and social action is powerfully demonstrated in the life of Susan B. Anthony, who was raised a Quaker, later joined a Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York, and worked together with Universalist leaders like Olympia Brown and Phebe Hanaford for women’s rights. Once a reporter asked Susan B. Anthony if she ever prayed. She replied, “I pray every single second of my life; not on my knees but with my work. My prayer is to lift

women to equality with men. Work and worship are one with me.” Susan B. Anthony considered her work for women’s rights to be a kind of prayer. And she could justifiably claim to follow Saint Paul’s advice to pray without ceasing. Once Susan B. Anthony was asked about her religion. She said, “I don’t know what religion is. I only know what work is, and that is all I can speak on, this side of Jordan. Work is my gospel.” She travelled all over the country, advocating for women’s right to the ballot. She travelled on trains, stagecoaches, ships, ferryboats, horses, mules, streetcars, and sleighs. She travelled to almost every state in the union. She organized suffrage conventions, wrote columns, gave speeches, published a newspaper, lobbied congressmen, engaged in civil disobedience, published pamphlets: in other words, she did everything in her power to give women the right to vote. Studying the life of Susan B. Anthony, you get a window view into the Quaker ethic of equality and social justice. You also see how her life was enhanced by partnerships with people from both the Unitarian and Universalist traditions.

In more recent times, Quakers and Unitarian Universalists have been able to cooperate for social justice. Dick Scobie, a Quaker, served as director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) for 27 years. UUSC and the Friends Service Committee have cooperated on some projects together, including the fairly recent effort to provide relief to refugees in Bosnia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Open Letter
from the Religious Society of Friends, Quakers, in Norway
(Universalist—February 2005, 73/7)

Hans Eirik Aarek (sign.), Clerk, Norway Yearly Meeting:
 Erik Cleven (N), Karin Ern (S), Mogens Clausen (DK),
 Universalism Conference Epistle Committee

Oslo, the 26th day of the 9th month, 2004

To Friends Everywhere!

During a few days in September 2004 about 35 Friends from the Nordic countries gathered in Oslo, Norway, for a conference on Quaker universalism. Two challenges formed the basis of the conference. The first is the reality of globalisation, which increasingly brings us into contact with persons of other faiths, and we need to learn how best to meet them. The other challenge is the increasing tension we perceive between different understandings of our own Quaker faith leading to a need for dialogue between Friends. An attempt to meet these challenges may entail both risk and opportunity. How shall we express the truth in which we live? Are there problems in handling our own Quaker plurality and the ways Friends use different vocabularies when we talk about our own faith? Are we able to live together without wanting to ‘convert’ one another? With this conference we want to start a process to enter deeper into dialogue about these concerns.

The conference heard about the concept of universalism from several angles, and we have seen that there is more than one definition of universalism. Some of these definitions are based on the idea that “our faith is universal, suitable or relevant for everyone”. Other definitions indicate that universalism seeks to be as inclusive as possible, and at times this is done by avoiding certain vocabulary such as the Christian. At other times we see that truth and insight may emerge from many sources. Even within the major Nordic churches there are differences in the understanding of universalism.

We have seen that the faith of early Friends had universalist features while at the same time it was solidly anchored in a profound

understanding of the Bible and expressed in Christian terms.

Each person has their own way of understanding and describing universalism. This does not simply refer to abstract definitions, but is a feature of the individual narrative, such as when Friends tell about their ways into membership in the Society or about where they find inspiration. We need to listen to the individual narratives with devotion and respect. They express the faith experiences of others and may form a common ground for dialogue.

We had also invited lecturers from outside the Society. Kajsa Ahlstrand shared with us recent developments in Lutheran and Anglican churches in Nordic countries, in the Baltic countries, Great Britain and Ireland (in the Porvoo Communion). She let us see their basis for dialogue. Lutheran and Anglican churches can show no other way to salvation than Jesus Christ, but neither are they able to define limits to the grace of God. At the same time these churches see that there is spirituality outside of the churches, at times without an explicit religious language. There is a wish for dialogue and for learning from others. The churches of the Porvoo Communion are aware that there is much they may have to change, and the way ahead may be long and difficult. We are glad that other churches increasingly look outward with openness and willingness to dialogue.

Halvor Moxness talked about contemporary research into the historical Jesus and its consequences for faith today. Theology resulting from this research points to aspects of Jesus which come into conflict with customary ideas of power relations regarding race, nationality, wealth and poverty, and gender. Through this research we may also clearly see that it is not western white men who are 'the universal humans.' We may think the historical Jesus research gives undue emphasis to details, identifying Jesus with particular groups—the poor, Galileans, women—but it may be that only when we fully understand these particular traits, a real universalism may emerge! It may become easier for new groups to identify with Jesus on their own terms, and then Jesus may become truly universal.

We shape our faith in words, but the words also give shape to our faith. The language we choose will influence and direct how the faith

is interpreted. Language may help us understand one another, but may also hinder true understanding. At times we find that language fails us. We see that we need to be very explicit in explaining ourselves and where we stand; we need to talk together about our faith, our assumptions and our choice of terms.

This conference opened to us a clearer understanding of the possibilities and challenges contained in Quaker plurality. We see that we are at the start of a dialogue which we want to embark upon. We need to have this dialogue with our own selves, within the Society of Friends, and outwards.

CHAPTER 2
WHAT IS UNIVERSAL?

Is The God of the Bible Ever Universal?
(*Universalist Friends*—February 2006, 43/7)

Eric M. Thompson

When I was ten years old, I drew a picture of God. I depicted a face only, filling the sky and gazing down upon a world of people. My God singularly lacked condemnation, was both female and male, and included a patchwork of every human skin color I knew. I was expressing that God did not belong to a tribe, or race, or creed or gender, but embraced all humanity in love. I thought it was a good idea, the artistic merit of the piece aside, and showed it to my mother who could not hide her chagrin. I thought I was in alignment with her liberal, inclusive values, so I was surprised that she disapproved of my God. I realized later that I had violated a household taboo. My parents were militantly secular. They protected us as far as possible from any exposure to any religion whatsoever. That I was showing a penchant for theology at age 10 was cause for great alarm.

Later, at 17, I became a “born again” fundamentalist. (My father would tell me he had rather I had become a heroin addict.) I thought I had found a relationship with a universal God, adumbrated in my childhood reflections but now realized in fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. After a few zealous years as a Pentecostal, I embarked on a career in biblical scholarship, which gradually withered my fundamentalist faith. During the course of my studies I shifted my academic focus from the New Testament and Christian theology to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). In hindsight I realize that my choices were governed by a quest for a truly universal God, one who, like my childhood drawing, transcended chauvinistic particularity.

I would discover that the Hebrew Bible contains diverse theological ideas. It was composed over several centuries, through a long process of selection, editing, and transmission.

Critical analysis of the Bible reveals not only a variety of God-beliefs, but perhaps an evolution of those beliefs through time. Tracing this history is a favorite pastime these days (note many recent books with titles like *A History of God*, *God: A Biography*, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, etc.). Some are more popular, some more academic, but most seem to agree on some broad conclusions, like the fact of theological diversity and the historical moment of the emergence of monotheism, though they have differing personal responses to these conclusions. Assuming that my readers are not necessarily intimately familiar with the Hebrew Bible or biblical scholarship, I will give a brief introduction to these as they relate to the quest for a universal God. I will focus on a recent article by Andre Lemaire in *Biblical Archaeology Review* because it concisely states the case of where in history scholars locate the origins of monotheism and thus universality in the biblical tradition. Its title, “The Universal God: How the God of Israel Became a God for All” is aptly stated as a thesis to test: Is the God identified in analyses like these universal in a sense that is useful for us?

As edited, the Bible tells a more or less coherent story. God creates the world, people disobeyed him, and he drowns everyone except Noah and family. The survivors repopulate the Earth (Genesis 1-11). God chooses one family, promises them land not their own (Canaan) and progeny. They multiply and end up in Egypt (Genesis 12-50). 400 years later they are a nation of slaves. God chooses Moses to lead them out, revealing to him God’s proper name: Yahweh. They leave after 10 plagues, wander in the desert for 40 years receiving commandments, developing a special contractual relationship with God (a “covenant”), and experiencing many miracles (both blessings and punishments). Yahweh kills lots of people in this part of the Bible, usually for 1) failing to obey him; and 2) for challenging Moses’s absolute authority. The “covenant” between Israel and Yahweh stipulates that Israel will worship no other God and in turn Yahweh will bless, enrich, empower,

and protect them (see Deut. 28). They end up on the brink of the “promised land” (Exodus-Deuteronomy). Moses dies. His successor, Joshua, leads the people into the “promised” land, where they had been commanded to consign the indigenous populations to absolute genocide (Joshua). Canaanites must not be permitted to live because they will tempt the Israelites to serve “foreign gods” (Deut. 7).

The occupation of the land turns out to be messy because they didn’t have a king (Judges). So they appoint a king and are a unified, powerful nation for a short time (I & II Samuel). Then they split into two nations. The one, Israel in the north, lasts about 200 years, then is destroyed by the Assyrian empire because they worshipped other gods (II Kings 18:11,12). The other, Judah to the south, lasts for about 340 years before Babylon destroys them and their Temple (II Kings 22-24). The political and religious leadership of Judah is taken into exile in Babylon. The “Babylonian Exile” lasted not quite 50 years, 586-539 BCE. The story continues in Ezra-Nehemiah, and in the prophetic literature, telling about the return of the exiles to reestablish life and religion in Judah (now the Persian province of Yehud). These survivors of Judah give us the term “Jew.”

Through most of this story the deity seems confined to, and only interested in, Israel. During the exile, however, prophets claim to have communications from this God in a foreign place (Babylonia) and universal themes emerge: God uses other nations as tools in dealing with his chosen people. All nations will come to Jerusalem to learn torah, Yahweh is the only God, others don’t *exist*. This prophetic monotheism is read back into the pre-exilic situation by biblical editors and by centuries of Jewish, Christian and Islamic interpretation. The scholarly story, on the other hand, from the data of archaeology and finer methods of analysis, tells of polytheistic “debris” in the Bible and of monolatry rather than monotheism as the religious situation before the exile. Monolatry is the demand to *worship* one God exclusively though others exist. So a true monotheism seems to emerge for the first time during and as a result of the exilic experience. But is this monotheism a step down the road to universalism? Are they the same thing? I think it’s important for understanding

biblical monotheism to understand a bit about biblical polytheism and monolatry. I'll give a couple examples of each of these before discussing monotheism. Note: all biblical references are my own translation from the Hebrew text, but should correspond recognizably to published English translations.

At many points the divine world envisioned in the Bible is very similar to the divine family of the Canaanite pantheon, the culture that forms the matrix of biblical Israel. At the head of a divine council was a couple, El and Asherah. Their numerous children were collectively the "sons (children) of El," the chief of whom was the storm god Baal, known to Bible readers as Yahweh's principle rival in Israel (I Kings 18). Variations of phrases that refer to this polytheistic divine world are abundant in the Bible: the council of El, the council of the gods, the sons of the gods, the sons of El and so on (Job 1:6, 2:1; Gen. 6:1-4; Psalm 29:1-2, etc.). Deuteronomy 32:8-9 in the traditional Hebrew text reads:

When Elyon ("Most High" an epithet of El) divided their inheritance to the nations, when he divided the sons of humanity, he established the boundaries of the peoples by the number of the sons of Israel. For Yahweh's portion is his people; Jacob his allotted share.

What does that "*number* of the sons of Israel" mean? Israel/Jacob had 12 sons (tribes). There are a lot more than twelve nations. The Dead Sea Scrolls (ancient manuscripts containing the earliest copies of the Bible yet found) contain fragments from this section of Deuteronomy 1000 years older than the standard text. One DSS fragment reads "according to the number of the sons of El" (instead of "sons of Israel"). Another fragment has, "according to the number of the sons of the gods." This reading corresponds to ancient Greek translations as well. This older reading suggests a picture of the divine world like the Canaanite one. It appears that the Hebrew text was changed by scribes to avoid the polytheistic implication, which is that Elyon (El), as head of the council, divides peoples into nations corresponding to the number of his divine sons, like an emperor divvying up the provinces to relatives and cronies. Yahweh is one of

the sons of El, whose portion, i.e. jurisdiction, is Israel.

Elsewhere in the Bible Yahweh stands at the head of the pantheon of “sons of *elohim*.” (*Elohim* is the most frequent Hebrew word translated “God.” It is plural in form, literally “gods,” but it is frequently singular in meaning.) One Psalm seems to depict his hostile takeover of the divine council:

Elohim stations himself in the council of *El*; In the midst of the *elohim* he judges . . . I say, you all gods (*elohim*), sons of *Elyon* all of you; surely like a human you all will die, and like one of the chiefs you all will fall. —*Psalm* 82:1, 6, 7

One of many artifacts found in Israel is worthy of mention in this connection. A pot, dating from the late Judean monarchy, found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, bears a drawing of two half-human/half-animal figures (some see lions, some bulls) and a woman playing a harp in the background. Both lions and bulls were common symbols of deity in the ancient near east. The inscription in Hebrew reads in part, “I blessed you to Yahweh of Samaria and to his Asherah” (Zevit 390-392). Clearly in the minds of some ancient Yahweh worshippers, including some who contributed material that found its way into the Bible, Yahweh was one member of the divine council and had a wife.

Now, a couple examples illustrating monolatry.
Yahweh is a man of battle! Yahweh is his name.
Who is like you, Yahweh, among the gods?
—Ex. 15:3, 11

I am Yahweh your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . you shall have no other gods beside me . . . for I Yahweh your god am a jealous god . . . —Deut. 5:6-9; Ex. 20:2-5

The first pair of quotes comes from a context in which Yahweh has defeated the Egyptian gods (Ex. 7-14). The second illustrates that the nature of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel is like a marriage contract (a metaphor repeatedly invoked by the prophets): exclusive sexuality (worship) but not *ontological* exclusivity. Biblical monolatry perhaps finds its quintessential expression in the religious reforms of Josiah

(640-609 BCE) in which, on pain of death, Yahweh was not only to be worshipped exclusively, but worshiped only in one single place: the Temple in Jerusalem (II Kings 22-23; Deuteronomy 12). If Yahweh was to survive as Israel's God, something had to change in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction.

Clear monotheistic statements find superlative expression in "Second Isaiah." The book of Isaiah consists of 66 chapters. Because of differences in style, themes, and, most especially, historical references, scholars divide the book into three distinct works from three different contexts. Isaiah 1-39 belongs to the pre-exilic situation, Isaiah 40-55 ("Second Isaiah") to the end of the exilic period, and Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66, to the post-exilic period.

Thus says Yahweh, king of Israel and his redeemer, Yahweh of armies:

I am the first and the last, and apart from me there are no gods.

Is there a god besides me?

There is no rock (= god), none I know.

—Is. 44:6,8

So how did the exiled Judeans, at least the prophets among them, develop the concept that Yahweh was the only God, a God Universal? As Lemaire explains, many other kingdoms, for example the Philistines, were also exiled by Babylon, and were assimilated. Typically in that historical and religious context, a defeated people, especially if they were forced to live in the conquering culture, would consider their deities defeated by the stronger ones of the victors. They would likely shift their worship to those stronger deities. Judah survived as a people, whereas the Philistines did not, precisely because of its theological innovation. Yahweh had been tied to the land and the Temple. All that was now destroyed. But among the Judean prophets and religious leaders, Yahweh reveals himself in visions and continues to communicate. "Yahweh is active everywhere his people reside. He is in the process of becoming a universal God" (Lemaire 59).

In addition to the belief that Yahweh was active outside his

holy land, the prophets allege that Judah's ill fate was not the result of Yahweh's impotence, nor of the superior strength of Babylon's gods, but is the result of Yahweh's punishment of Israel for (mostly theological) sins. Yahweh's tools are other nations, so he controls them. Another factor is that monotheistic statements are almost always in a context of polemic against idols. Divine statues were everywhere; moreover they symbolized Babylonian dominance and Judean defeat. Prophetic arguments against the *reality* of gods made of wood and metal, with heavy doses of satire and ridicule (Is. 44:9-20) were rhetorically powerful and provided an ironic reversal: those boastful Babylonians foolishly believe their gods helped them defeat an insignificant nation like us; in reality, our God is the only God who is using them like pawns. The evidence? Their gods are made of sticks and stones! Ha! They can't even walk, but have to be carried. (Lemaire 58; Smith 179-194).

Some scholars add to these factors the production of scripture: a *written* word of God, also a significant religious innovation: ". . . the rise of written prophecy and written Scripture more broadly, aided various exilic and post-exilic Judeans in their religious quest to understand the God of Israel. (Accordingly we might even say that the text substitutes for land)" (Smith, 194). So, "Yahweh is no longer connected to the territories of Israel and Judah and to his Jerusalem Temple, but is now a God living among his people even if they are in exile. Soon, he will no longer be exclusively God of Israel, but a universal God for all the peoples. In this way Yahwism adapted to the conditions of the Judahites exiled in Babylonia" (Lemaire 59).

The sky is my throne and the earth is my footstool; where is the house you will build for me? —Is. 66:1

But is Yahweh, in this scenario, becoming a God for all? I am uncomfortable with this conclusion. For one thing, Yahweh retains his jealousy and penchant for slaughter of non-conformists. From III Isaiah:

I have trampled the peoples in my anger and made them drunk in my rage. —Is. 63:6

But you are those who reject Yahweh, who forget my holy mountain; who prepare for Gad (a deity) a table; and fill up for Meni (a deity) a libation.

Therefore I will number you for the sword and you shall all bow down to the slaughter; because when I spoke you did not answer...—Is 65:11,12

and the book happily closes with

. . . it shall happen . . . that all flesh will come to prostrate themselves before me, says Yahweh. And they will go out and look upon the corpses of the people who have transgressed against me; for their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

—Is. 66:23,24

The difference between monotheism and monolatry seems to be that Yahweh's demand for exclusive worship, on pain of death, now extends to all nations whereas before he only cared about Israel's faithfulness and only punished its failure.

Furthermore, this move to monotheism, it seems to me, creates a thoroughgoing supersessionism. The immediate consequence of Yahweh going universal is that his religion supersedes, and nullifies, everyone else's. A truly universal God would be the source of, and celebrate, human diversity rather than violently demand conformity.

Many in the western traditions assume that monotheism is a good thing. This religious innovation in Babylonian exile is the foundation of the "Abrahamic" faiths, which are uniquely "Peoples of the Book." The trajectory of this monotheism proceeds to Jewish supersessionism of Samaritans, Christianity of Judaism, Islam of Christianity and Judaism and so on. Universalism or successive religious imperialisms?

These observations lead me to wonder if the former polytheistic situation wasn't actually better from a universalist point of view. At least it seems more conducive to tolerance of diversity. This brings me back to my childhood drawing in which I tried to comprehend unity and diversity together. And it brings me to the Quaker tradition of locating God's revelation "not in the letter [scripture] which kills,

but in the Spirit which makes alive.” It also brings me to a scriptural statement from a different tradition that ends all scriptural statements:

Just as a reservoir is of little use when the whole countryside is flooded, scriptures are of little use to the illumined man or woman, who sees the Lord everywhere.

Bhagavad Gita 2:46, (trans. Eknath Easwaran)

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The Spiritual Reach of the Human Mind
(*Universalist*, January 1986, 16/12)

James Hemming

Kipling, you will remember, said:

There are nine and sixty ways
Of constructing tribal lays
And every single one of them is right.

There are something like the same number of ways of talking about mind, brain, personality, spirituality, and the nature of human experience, and many of the various proponents—not universalists need I add—are inclined to claim that their particular interpretation is ‘right’, to the exclusion of all others.

My task, as I see it, is to try to bring the disparate spectrum of views into some sort of focus within the context of contemporary thought.

For a start, we must, I think, seek to dispel that hoary old confusion that the spiritual and the nonspiritual are two worlds that are as unmixable as oil and water. This view represented the mundane as ignoble, gross and base whereas the spiritual was supposed to be noble, refined and holy. Newton gave this false dichotomy its first jolt when he showed that motion—formerly regarded as of divine origin—was the outcome of natural forces. Einstein finished off the job with his famous $E = mc^2$ which linked energy and matter as aspects of one another. Traditionally, energy had been thought of as a spiritual essence while matter was regarded as an altogether inferior entity. This erstwhile tendency to make absolute distinctions between different aspects of reality now has to give way to concepts of interaction, interflow and holism.

That by way of background. To get closer to our theme we must start by taking on board definitions to work from. For a definition of ‘spiritual’ I will turn to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, selecting two of the range of definitions on offer. One reads, “Of, pertaining to, affecting, or concerning, the spirit or higher moral qualities, especially

as regarded in a religious aspect”; another, “Of, or pertaining to, or emanating from the intellect or higher faculties of mind”.

We might expand and unify these two definitions by saying that ‘spiritual’ entails a special sort of relationship between the individual and the universe often characterized as religious in the broad sense of the word. In considering the spiritual, we are concerned with the clarification of vision. A spadeful of wet soil can be seen as just dirt or as the basis of all life. So with everything: we must try, as Blake said, to see not only with, but through, the eye.

As for what we mean by ‘the human mind’, I suggest we may well follow John Searle in his recent Reith Lectures. He defined mind as: “The sequence of thoughts, feelings and experiences that go to make up our mental life”.

If we are to review the range of the human mind, we must also take into account the capacities of the brain because all modes of experiencing and doing are marked by appropriate neural activity. Thus, the brain is the instrument of life in all its aspects: apprehending, relating, evaluating, choosing, doing.

This brings us to the need to clarify what we mean by ‘mind’ and ‘brain’ in the context of the spiritual mode of awareness and action. Intention, purpose, decision, will, creativity, and the other manifestations of mind are spiritual functions, but they themselves depend on a well-nourished, developed and grown neural infrastructure, which is what the mature brain is. This mind/brain relationship has not yet been fully worked out. Suppose I am occupied with a problem; an idea comes into my head; I reach for a book to make a check on something, consult the index, find the relevant pages, feel a bound of delight if my hunch seems to be confirmed; put the book back disconsolately if it isn’t, reach for another. . . . If we could explain in full what is going on in that simple series of happenings we should have the nature of mind open to our understanding. But, of course, we can’t. Inevitably, then, a study of the spiritual reach of the human mind takes us into areas where there are many gaps in our knowledge. We shall, here, be able to make only a short journey into what is still, largely, unknown territory.

Right on the threshold of our exploration we stumble upon a mystery in the way the brain carries its messages. As I am sure you know, all experience is conveyed by electric/chemical impulses passing along nerve fibres and across synaptic junctions. If impulses are set off through the eye, they are carried to the visual cortex at the back of our heads and we see. If impulses—identical impulses—are set off through the ear, they are carried to the auditory cortex at the sides of our heads and we hear. Similarly for the other neural messages that produce consciousness: touch, pain, temperature, and the rest. This neural activity is basically a single set of impulses. What makes the difference in experience is how the brain interprets the messages that reach it from the environment. All the wonder and beauty of existence is encoded in these neural patterns. Thus, our picture of the world, made up of what we see, hear, smell, touch and the rest, is created within the brain. ‘Out there’ are only forces, masses, shapes and surfaces.

Let us take a specific instance of this remarkable phenomenon. On that table over there we see a bowl of daffodils. What exactly does that mean? Light from the sun travels 93 million miles and reaches the surface of those flowers. Most of the light is absorbed but certain wavelengths are reflected and picked up by our eyes and we are aware not only of green, and shades of yellow, but—beauty. And, since all our brains operate to the same principles, we not only apprehend beauty in our own subjective worlds but can also share it. And in that sharing we find a unity of spiritual experiences.

I am putting emphasis on brain function because that has, in the past, been too much disregarded in the consideration of spiritual experience. The brain is now considered to be the most amazing piece of matter in the entire universe. Furthermore, and herein lies much hope for the future, the human brain as the organ of our lives is commonly undereducated and misused. Thus, there is a great potential in reserve. Julian Huxley once wrote:

We are beginning to realize that even the most fortunate of people are living far below capacity and that most human beings develop not more than a small fraction of their potential and spiritual efficiency.

Incidentally, when we talk of the brain as the organ of spiritual, as of all other, experience, we are not speaking of the mechanical stimulus-response system, as described by the behaviourists, but of an organ in constant creative activity, energized biologically, and steered by its subjective aspect—the mind. The whole system is engaged in striving to move from a minus situation to a plus situation; striving to get beyond what is into what might be. That is to say, each mind/brain is a dynamic part of a dynamic universe with spiritual awareness as the accolade on significant experiences.

At this point we must take a further look at the unexplained phenomenon of surplus capacity. We used to be told that all behaviour boiled down to the struggle for survival. But human powers carry within them a potential that far exceeds what is necessary for mere survival. That humankind—along with other animals—should have developed limbs, movement and balance is explicable enough in terms of raw survival. Walking, running, climbing, carrying, even fighting sometimes, have obvious survival values. But how are we to explain such an exquisite phenomenon as the dancing of Torvil and Dean? Utilitarian explanations collapse before such enchanting beauty. And so it is with all the arts.

This overplus of potential also appears when a new opportunity for human creativity occurs, as with the invention of the aeroplane. In no time at all we are hearing of ‘born pilots’ and ‘born computer operators’. Such potent skills seem to lie dormant within the psyche until the opportunity for expression comes; then they burst out. No one has yet explained how this comes about. Innovation is, in evolutionary terms, liable to be dangerous, but we find ourselves, as a species, driven towards innovation. We ‘are our genes’ but the genes required to respond to the new seem always on hand.

What has this to do with spirituality? The experience of successful innovation has been described as ecstasy. To carry the evolution of human knowledge forward a little, to extend the range of human experience, so as to make that human knowledge effective in action is, in essence, of the spirit. The insects, in species terms, are perfect survivors but not notably spiritual; we are vulnerable

because of our perpetual hunger to transcend. Our surplus powers make transcendence possible. Spirituality is not something beyond ourselves; it is an enduring potential with us.

Not only humanity as a species but individuals, too, strive to move 'from a minus to a plus'. 'We rise', as Tennyson put it, 'on the stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things'. The time has come in this brief survey of mind and spirit to ask 'What higher things?'

I suggest that by 'higher experience' we mean a more complete apprehension of what is, a more involved responsibility for what should be. Jung said that, as we live and grow, we should become ever more indissolubly united with the world of living things and objects around us. This means ever more concerned with what the world should become. Through living with such involvement we begin to participate in creation itself. And that brings us towards ultimate unity with what is, a state in which we both find personal fulfilment and lose ourselves in the whole. That is the spiritual maturity of which the mystics have spoken and written throughout history. We may, perhaps, describe this awareness—following Eastern thought—as personal perception of the ground state of no-thing-ness from which all events and objects emerge. At this point in experience, brain, mind and spirit are at one.

The journey towards this apprehension of the whole—from which spring both a knowing and a call to action—is threefold. One journey is the journey into truth. This is the journey of science, philosophy and religion. The 'passion to understand', as Sir Bernard Lovell has called it, is a spiritual passion.

So, too, is the quest for beauty. Beauty, as we have already noted, eludes simplistic explanations. Why is the nature around us not only useful but also beautiful in a non-utilitarian way? Why does the fantastic display of flowers around the globe which was evolved to attract insects and ensure fertilization also attract us? Why are a peacock's tail, the leap of a panther, the markings on a butterfly's wing beautiful in our eyes? What do we share with the apprehensions of the honey bee?

Again, when we uncovered the sub-microscopic world, there, too, was beauty in the simple elegance of crystals and the delicate structure of a minute spore. The telescope, for its part, took us further into the grandeur of the night sky. So beauty is an aspect of the entire universe and our brains are its organ of expression. We can enter into this universe of beauty because our senses are attuned to perceive it.

We may note, at this point, that our sense of beauty may be blinded by an excess of purely utilitarian purpose, or by an excess of anxiety. But, if those obstructions are cleared, and our perceptions educated by experience, beauty blazes out at us with breath-taking impact. We should also note that, if the brain is not educated to enjoy beauty, it may be relatively insensitive to it. “Discovery comes to the prepared mind,” said Pasteur. So does transforming experience.

We have followed Truth and Beauty from the word to the experience, from the idea to the illumination. Let us now try to do this for Goodness also.

I suggest that goodness towards others is the very root of spirituality. The person too much boxed into his, or her, egocentricity is a person with a seriously curtailed spiritual range. Isolation is limitation. The movement towards the spiritual dimension is through love, and love, in its turn, is the acme of feeling for others—social feeling as Adler called it.

I think it is relevant to note, at this point, that social feeling is specifically catered for in the structure of the brain. It would be odd if this were not so, as we are a social species. Three streams of research have combined to show that the frontal lobes of the cortex are the seat of social intelligence. The major source of information has come from accidents—and war. A second source has been the study of the effects of brain lesions. In addition, information has been drawn from brain surgery undertaken to alleviate epilepsy, depression, or some other malfunctioning. Graham Powell in *Brain and Personality* sums up the effects of lesions in the frontal lobes: “less concern for others, selfishness, diminished regard for appearance, irritability”. Incidentally, these frontal lobe injuries may have no, or little, influence on Intelligence Quotient while having a devastating effect on what we

might call the Social Quotient or even—for they are closely linked—the Spiritual Quotient.

Throughout history there has been a slow expansion of social awareness and responsibility until today we reach something approaching the position of Thomas Paine: “My country is the world and my religion is to do good”.

The brain is powerfully equipped to attain this level of apprehension and involvement, but it needs appropriate nourishment and experience from education, and life, if it is to reach maturity as the instrument for generating and sustaining social intelligence, which underpins our capacity to perceive the needs of others.

So those time-honoured signposts of the human spirit—Truth, Beauty and Goodness—together lead us to high order consciousness or ‘spirituality’.

We should notice how this level of consciousness fits into the hierarchy of consciousness, in terms of which we all have our being. Consciousness may be considered as operating at five levels. At the rudimentary level comes sensory response to physical stimuli: a pin prick, the warmth of sunshine, the taste of food. At the next stage, we have awareness of the environment, including awareness of other creatures. These first two levels of consciousness we share with our fellow animals. At the next higher level comes self-consciousness, the perception of oneself as a living being. Only human beings and a few other animals attain this in a developed form.

At the fourth stage comes the consciousness of time as past and future as well as now. This stage finds the human species on its own so far as we know. Curiosity about what has happened and what will happen brings with it such functions as evaluation and planning. Finally, we reach higher consciousness: intention, imagination, moral principles, sensitivity, compassion and the other aspects of high order functioning. At this level comes the awareness of involvement in the whole: cosmic consciousness, manifest as finely tuned awareness; an aesthetic joy in all things lovely; a caring that embraces all life; an acceptance of responsibility for the future.

This higher consciousness, which is the core and partner of spirituality, is not a continuous state in human experience. It comes and goes. The ultimate seems transformingly clear for a short time, then the good moment slips away and confusion intervenes again. The ecstasy of beauty, fully and sensitively apprehended, shines and fades. Egocentricity, hopefully outgrown, may come roaring back. Matthew Arnold summed all this up:

We cannot kindle when we will
 The fire which in the heart resides;
 The spirit bloweth and is still,
 In mystery our soul abides;
 But tasks in hours of insight will'd
 Can be through hours of gloom fulfill'd.

I suggest that as, and when, we experience higher consciousness we are experiencing the actual point of the evolution of consciousness as it moves from the limited and mundane to the universal and transcendent. To quote Ruth Nanda Anshen: "Today we stand on the threshold of a new consciousness".

What then, we may ask, is the ultimate range of the human mind? We cannot tell. Neurologically speaking, the brain contains a considerable mass of tissue the role of which has so far eluded investigation. There is plenty in reserve, as we have already noted.

Just as the apprehension and consciousness of modern man vastly exceeds the apprehension and consciousness of early man, so there must still be great advances to achieve. What we now consider exceptional spiritual experience may lead on to a more generalized enhancement of sensitivity and awareness.

If our species avoids self-destruction, there is no telling what new revelations and possibilities lie ahead. After all, is not the entire incredible array of organized energy in the universe moving towards the release of more life, more mind, more advances of the spirit? Fred Hoyle, and other leading scientists, are, at any rate, beginning to talk in these terms.

May we not, perhaps, regard the spiritual dimension as the guide

and goal of human evolution: the passion to know; the passion to appreciate; the passion to relate; the passion to release the creative powers of ourselves and one another; the passion to love and be loved.

All this is well within the powers of the human mind—as long as we bring ourselves close to one another by cooperation instead of shattering our humanity and spirituality by confrontation and competition.

The choice facing us is, I suggest, clear. We have to choose truth, beauty and goodness so firmly that the lies, squalor and greed that corrupt the world—and threaten the future—shed away.

Whether or not we succeed in that as a species is the ultimate test of the spiritual reach of the human mind.

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The Interior Life and the Universal
 (*Universalist* January 1984, 11/6)

Marsden, Lorna M.

The standpoint that I take in this [article] is that of finding quite inauthentic any idea that it is possible to separate the experience of the interior life from the experience of the universal. If the suggestion has anywhere arisen among universalists that the aspiration towards universalism *in itself* makes more accessible to them their own interiority I hope to show this, from my point of view, to be mistaken. Nor can a superficial eclecticism evoke insight at the level of the universal. These questions are more complex than may at first appear.

In his editorial in the January 1983 issue of *The Universalist*, Arthur Peacock gives an important warning. He says, "it is not our mind alone that is to attain the summit, but our whole being". (I assume he means the words "the summit" to apply to spiritual awareness). He also says, "There is a constant danger of our . . . assuming that to *understand* a spiritual truth is the same as to *possess* it".

With those two statements I agree. *But*, in between them, Arthur Peacock says, "the mind may race ahead of the will and the feelings, and may have to turn back to help them". Again, that sentence, "the mind" etc. does not for me carry conviction. If we possess a truth, we are surely suffused by it, we live it and the elucidation of it by our mental faculties is to me something supportive, perhaps, but quite ancillary.

This has been understood by Buddhism. In the philosophy of Madhyamika Buddhism in particular it is stated categorically that the Real is not accessible to reason. The Real is identical with *prajna*, which we can translate as intuition. (Incidentally, the realisation of this links with Heidegger's contention that we have come to the end of the usefulness of traditional western metaphysics.)

So that it is not, to me, a question of the mind "racing ahead of the will and the feelings", but the contrary. The mind works on the

prior divinations of the human spirit. Out of these prior divinations the mind produces the working forms of its abstractions. It builds a skeletal framework that will hold together the edifice of an interpretation of the world that has first shaken the imagination.

Stand at the east end of the nave of York Minster and look towards the west doorway. The heart-lifting beauty of what you see is constructed of great pillars and soaring arches precisely measured to sustain weight and height. But it is also the visible achievement of a vision beyond measure, a vision which informed the work of its embodiment at every stage as the breath informs the living body. The glory is primal, here made visible by the following action of the calculating, painstaking mind. Structures like York Minister celebrate and embody the dynamic power of the human imagination. It is this power which directs the hand of the mason so that he builds to the glory of God.

In Genesis 1 God said first “Let there be light”. Afterwards he saw that the light was good and separated it from the darkness. This is not superstition, to be dismissed as belonging to the mental childhood of the human world. It is an image of timeless truth.

In his article Arthur Peacock then goes on to say, in my opinion truly, that “the object of religion is the transformation of consciousness”.

What bearing have these distinctions on the subject—The Interior Life and the Universal? The deepest bearing—for the interior life in my understanding of it is not concerned with the fascinations of cerebral activity but with that region of our existence which has been named the life of the spirit—which to William Blake (a prophet for *our* time) was the Poetic Genius, or Jesus the Imagination, or Fourfold Vision.

Then let us consider what is really meant by the interior life. The achievements of psychology, of anthropology, sometimes of archaeology, have opened doors for us on an expanded understanding of those processes within the soul of humanity which have evoked within all civilisations the symbols and rituals of worship, of legend, of poetry, of all art. All these things were activated by, and filled with, a

felt meaning for thousands of years before our contemporary analysis of them.

We now know that the wells from which these activities spring—the activities of art and religion—lie deep within the human psyche. The individual human being draws on those mysterious intimations which may be evoked within his personal responses to the world. But he also draws on an imagery which has belonged through many cultures to the history of the whole human race. In their changing outward forms these two reservoirs of wisdom, which have been named the personal and the collective unconscious, repeat and repeat the essential stages of the journey of the human spirit from the intuitive visions of childhood, through the Waste Land of dereliction (which Blake called ‘experience’) towards the surrendered self.

This is the perennial direction of the inward journey, and it is of its nature universal—found in its varied forms and figures throughout the history of mankind.

The founding of a Universalist Group, if deliberately so named in an attempt to repudiate the symbolic forms which orient this human journey, will lack reality—it will become as sterile as that modern form of so-called humanism which imagines a complete foundation for human living can be established by ethics and reason. But if the forming of a Universalist Group is an effort to make articulate the profound unity of mankind’s spiritual search, in the light of the past as well as of the present—and covering the whole spectrum of human insights—then that is a quite different matter. (Rightly or wrongly, I have imagined that both these attitudes exist in the Universalist Group.)

The symbol, the image, expresses a correspondence that is real. The myth presents truth in terms inaccessible to the logic of the discursive mind, but accessible always to the imagination. (Allegory, incidentally, is not the same.) These symbols, these images, well up from the depths of the interior life. Ultimately they are authenticated by the experience, not simply of this culture or of that, but of all cultures.

To reject the basic symbols of Christianity (or any other religion) because of the failures of religious institutions is an act of blindness. It is also to experience a kind of deprivation which I believe to be dangerous to the future of mankind, perhaps as dangerous as the threat of nuclear disaster; indeed, if one looks deeply enough, *related* to the threat of nuclear disaster.

As illustration in the field of imagery, let us take the central Christian image—the Cross.

Today, the lives of most western people have been extended horizontally beyond anything known to our forebears. Yet at the same time western life as a whole has lost the heights and depths of what might be called its vertical dimension. It is in the interaction of these two planes that human life acquires meaning and purpose in terms that reach beyond the sensational or the exercise of the analytical reason. The intimations aroused by the interaction of the horizontal and the vertical planes of human living are found in what the early Quakers called ‘the heart.’ They are found also in the origins of cult and liturgy, in art and poetry, in legend, and in visionary ecstasy. The point of intersection of the two planes of human living—the horizontal and the vertical—is expressed in the image of the Cross, which in its horizontal plane receives the impact of the world and in its vertical plane is rooted in suffering and aspires to heavenly joy.

The impasse into which our technological society has moved arises from the prevailing conviction that the horizontal plane is all and the vertical plane illusory. In recent years, at last, an awareness of the inner realities of our situation is beginning to be articulated among scattered groups of people everywhere. But—for the most part, and with a frightening blindness—our western society still thinks human need can be adequately fulfilled by amelioration of external circumstance or remedial so-called therapies concerned with superficial psychologising.

The loss of that dimension of meaning which is contained and expressed in imagery and symbol leads to a trivialisation of life where the achievement of ‘happiness’ is seen as quantifiable and equated with what is called ‘success.’ Here, in this way of life, the cathartic

experience of deep joy and deep sorrow is evaded. Here, the road to the creativity of an inner illumination is closed and we enter a Waste Land without egress.

So that we find the philosopher Heidegger writing prophetically in his work, *The End of Philosophy*, of the terrible forcing upon the Earth of the ravages of a technology blind to the true calling of humanity. He says—"It almost seems as if the being of pain were cut off from man under the dominance of the will, similarly the being of joy. Can the extreme measure of suffering bring a transformation here?"

That is the voice of a philosophy which in its revolutionary insights continually touches the level of poetry. In this work there is felt, though unnamed as such, a new search for God. Such work meets, though it does not overtly acknowledge this, the symbolic truths that are shaped out of the unconscious.

Indeed, that short passage from Heidegger relates implicitly to the symbolism of the Cross. Written out of the dilemma of these times it contributes to that transformation of consciousness which may arouse again in the contemporary community an awareness of the Spirit. Though it makes no direct reference to these things, it evokes for me, and presumably for others, the unconscious wisdom of humanity which has emerged in legend and imagery. The roots of the endeavour that summons us do not lie in ethical decisions to remedy the ills of the world. They lie much deeper—where the ground of human aspiration is a response from that primal abyss whence the *direction* of life emerges. These roots lie in the mystery of creation, of being, of good and evil, of the darkness and the light, of the gods we form in the image of ourselves. In short, of that interior life which goes on within us at a level that is hidden and more primal than that of analytical enquiry.

If the passage from Heidegger relates essentially to the Cross, this is not surprising, for the truth of the Cross is universal. The sacred tree is not found only in Christianity where we find also its counterpart in the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is found in the stories of a whole series of hanged or destroyed gods who were instruments of renewal and resurrection—Attis, Mani, Odin, Osiris, and so on.

Thus we find Goethe saying, “In a true symbol the particular represents the universal, not as a dream or shadow, but as the living and instantaneous revelation of the unfathomable”, and the symbol is defined by Nietzsche as “the language of the universal”. I have tried to present it, also, and ineluctably, as the language of the interior life of all mankind.

It is for all these reasons that I find the attempt to demythologise Christianity mistaken.

Ancient legends and stories play out on the screen of the mind the journey of the human spirit towards God—and they speak with the same voice at every time and in every place. It is only the modulations that change.

Buddhism looks consciously beyond speculative metaphysics, finding the ultimate secrets of human enlightenment in the inner world of man. For Buddhism, the Real is transcendent to thought, is experienced on the plane of intuitive vision. Here, we begin to move from the unconscious and its archetypal symbols into the world of mysticism. This is a world where in the end the symbol largely, though not entirely, dissolves and we enter an experience whose universality is unquestioned by all who have experienced it. The mystic of East or West reaches the same place—where he finds in the resolution of his identity its affirmation—the supreme paradox of our existence.

The mystic seeks not nothingness, not annihilation, but *awareness*. At the height of this awareness he becomes both his true self and more than himself. He becomes the Whole, the All, God.

To turn from the traditional in the conviction that one is thereby turning towards the universal is to step into illusion. To seek to tear away the foundations of the specific culture into which we have been born in the name of aspiring to a world culture is to enter a cul-de-sac. On the contrary, it is deep within our own culture that we shall find the world. This is what the Platonic philosophers called the *memoria*. This ‘memory’ moves, not here or there more than elsewhere, but within the whole human race. It is within this ‘memory’ that is the memory of nature, of the movement of life, that truth is disclosed to

us. It is the fount of that kind of illumination which can see the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour.

In this connection I should like to mention, very tentatively, the ideas illustrated in holography. These ideas exemplify the perception of the whole as contained in each part. Scientifically, holography is new. The perceptions of which it is a kind of analogue are old. They have been found not only in the intuitions of poetic vision, but in religious or mystical insight and in philosophy, e.g. Leibniz, or long before him, Nicholas of Cusa. It is now being suggested scientifically, apparently, that the containment of the whole in the parts may be a property of nature.

These thoughts emphasise the subtlety, the infinite complexity of the mutual involvement of mind and matter which may be seen in the end as indivisible. Here the ancient awareness of the particular and the universal as one extends into the realm of scientific knowledge. Already the idea of the supernatural is vanishing.

Listen to this from a Hindu Sutra, Universalist Friends, "In the heaven of Indra there is said to be a network of pearls so arranged that if you look at one you see all the others reflected in it. In the same way, each object in the world is not merely itself but involves every other object, in fact *is* in every other object".

All great art is a celebration of what we have called God. The Quakers are surely right when they say that all life is sacramental—and the idea of a secular society of human beings is a contradiction in terms. A completely secular society will move inevitably towards death. It will do so because it has lost the Whole, the universal, and it will not find it again by trying to synthesise on a discursive level the moral aims of the categories of thought of a number of different religions. The religious vision is not morality. It is an impassioned response to the mystery of existence at the level of anguish and joy.

The truths of religion are not to be confined in its institutions which have been corrupted by their association with temporal power, or by their assimilation to such 'doctrines' as the Protestant work ethic, or worldly success, or an immutable social order, or an equally

immutable hierarchy. Official religions have succumbed to these things. But this does not destroy the pristine vision, or the truth of those images which endure precisely because they contain perennial human truths and are fashioned from the depths of human experience. To this the body of doctrine erected by, and confined within, the distortions and limitations (and even the truths) of theology are totally subordinate.

Blake said of his poems that their authors were “in eternity”—meaning that in his act of composing he was a vessel for something that was at once himself and not himself—the visitation of the god, if you like. The world of spiritual vision, of the inner life, is a multiplicity. It is through multiplicity that we discover unity, the Whole. There is no other way.

In his book, *General Introduction for My Work*, Yeats said—“My Christ, a legitimate deduction from the creed of St Patrick as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake’s Imagination, what the Upanishads have named ‘Self’: nor is this unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable but immanent, differing from man to man and age to age. . . .”

We may not any longer need a particular religious cult—but what we do need is an awareness of the living source from which a particular cult derives, a consciousness of that primal inspiration which created the gods as a dynamic and continuing movement of the human spirit. In the coming to an expanded consciousness of the contemporary community this inspiration may take forms which we can’t yet perceive. But what will create these forms will be a recognition that whatever the transformation, the springs of the interior life are fed from ancient wells. They are so fed because in mankind’s search for truth these wells provide a single source from which arise the streams and rivers of changing cultural history.

The Indian Rig Veda tells us that truth is one, though the different sages call it by many names. The Pure Consciousness Sect in China (the Wei Shih Tsung), the Mahayana Buddhists, the Taoists, all see the individual and the universal as one. The Upanishads tell us that we

should worship with the idea that God is one's Self (atman). "This—the Self—is the footprint of the All. . . . But whoever worships another divinity than his Self, supposing 'He is one, I am another' knows not".

And William Blake said—"He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God". In this context should we not also remember that Jesus said "The Father is in me and I in the Father"? He, Jesus, is ourselves, the divine humanity.

At this historical moment we are witnessing a dangerous disintegration—a process of destruction which can only be halted if we turn to those sources of wisdom which lie deep within the nature of our humanity and which belong to our species as a timeless inheritance—our memoria. Our future will be barren if we do not understand that the Whole and the part are inseparable, that the shared secrets of our existence, our search for truth, lie deep within us and grow from one root, that every moment of time is the mirror of eternity.

We don't need to travel the world over to encounter the world. At the single point where we are, the world is there. The universal is more than a destination. It is there already at the point of our setting out. Not only in the ineffable experience of the visionary, but also within the changing historical forms of its expression, the true interior life is the universal. It cannot be otherwise.

A View of Quaker Universalism

(Universalist Friends, Spring 1996, 26/10) [title added—ed.]

Rhoda Gilman

The core belief of Quakerism as preached by George Fox is that God is not found in scriptures or sermons or churches but in the silence of the individual human heart. The divine Spirit exists in all of us, and if we look inward with enough earnestness and humility and persistence *It* will find *us*.

This belief places Quakers squarely in the mystical tradition that is common to all of the world's religions, and this "perennial philosophy"—as Aldous Huxley called it—is, in my definition, universalism. Quite simply, there can be nothing more universal than the individual. If this seems paradoxical, then I would answer that all spiritual truth rests on paradox.

So, if in the end Quakerism *is* universal, isn't the term Quaker universalism a redundancy? I would answer yes. Its meaning and usage have come from the fact that over the generations there have been many who would deny Quakerism its essential universality. Because it originated within the Christian tradition and within a society where biblical language and images were the common (and the only allowed) currency of religious discussion, Evangelical and some so-called "Christocentric" Friends would confine the ineffable, inexpressibly real experience of that which is outside the bounds of both time and space within the fence of Christian doctrine and metaphor.

If the direct experience of the divine is fundamental to Quakerism, then is not that manifestation just as well called the "Buddha nature" as the "Living Christ" or the "Inner Light"? That which distinguishes different religions is their language, their cultural setting, their structure, symbols, rituals, and history. All of these things are powerful, and they have helped humankind in various degrees and ways to reach toward that ultimate personal experience of the divine—to awaken people, that is, to their own true nature and the sacredness of all created things. Only if these religious and cultural distinctions impede our understanding is there a need to discard them. (In my own case, for example, the personalization of the All as a deity with male or female attributes is such a barrier.)

Personally I wish we could find another term than "Quaker universalism" and stop defending our right to exist within the Society of Friends. *We are* Quakerism. The question of whether Quakerism is to be walled within the historical boundaries of the Christian tradition will be decided in the end by the vitality and true spirituality of those on both sides—that is to say, it will be decided by the Spirit itself.

Therefore, let's turn instead to the desperate needs of our suffering

planet and our own floundering, terrified species, seeking guidance toward God in fellowship, in compassion for all life, and in whatever inner practices we feel drawn to.

A Unifying Theology, Ihsan Rasmay
(*Universalist*, June 2004, 71/5)

Frank Parkinson says in the last paragraph of his interesting article *Light from Light: New Science and the Vision of God* that “the world will find no permanent peace until there exists a theology capable of unifying it”. The question is whether humanity is ready and willing to be unified in one theology. This theology exists today but humanity is divided. If we take all the Prophets and consider the essence of their pristine messages we can find unity there, but their religions have become adulterated by man and his whim and inclination. The Sufis have a saying which makes this point, “Religion is like a chameleon, it is coloured by the ground on which it runs”.

The history of religion is full of such colouring. We know that Jesus came to point out to the Jews the corruption of their religion and that the beautiful essence of his pristine religion suffered in time from the same malady of being corrupted by man. Muhammad came six centuries later to feed the Arabs with the pure principles of both religions and in time his religion also acquired man-made rules which have nothing to do with his religion. Muhammad originally and boldly said:

I am the nearest of kin to Jesus, Son of Mary in this world and the next. The Prophets are brothers, sons of one Father by co-wives, and their religion is one. (1)

Their religion is one because they all advocate the worship of that Invisible Supreme Power we call God, or the Spirit. The Sufis of Islam concentrate on this point and worship this Power behind creation which is benevolent and loving. They follow the message that in our lives we should imitate that Power by deeds of affection, compassion

and love. Rumi explains to us the error of worshipping the messenger and forgetting that Supreme Invisible Power when he said:

The lamps are many but the Light is the same. If you keep looking at the lamp, thou art lost, for thence arises the appearance of number and plurality. Fix thy gaze upon the Light, and thou art delivered from the dualism inherent in the finite body. (2)

Ibn El-Arabi, that other great Sufi sage, said:

Do not attach yourself to a particular creed or religion exclusively so that you disbelieve in all the rest, otherwise you will lose much good; nay, you will fail to recognise the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent, the omnipotent, is not limited by any one creed; wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God.

Another Sufi master said:

There is only one religion. Whatever road I take joins the highway that leads to Thee.

And Ralph Waldo Trine wrote:

The great fundamental principles of all religions are the same. They differ only in their minor details according to the various degrees of unfoldment of different people. I am sometimes asked "To what religion do you belong?" What religion? Why bless you, there is only one religion, the religion of the living God. (3)

The above are but a few of the sayings of seers and spiritual giants that indicate that the unity of all religions already exists. There is now a nucleus of persons, the universalists, who believe in that premise and who, by their efforts to break down the barriers of religion, are helping men and women to wash their inner self and become good and loving, thereby enlarging the circle of peace-loving people. (4)

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Universal Salvation?

(*Universalist*, October 2003, 69/17)

Anne Ashworth

A member of the QUG committee received a question, and asked me to reply to the questioner. I did so. What follows is a slightly expanded version of the letter I wrote.

The question was about salvation: whether in the world's scriptures, particularly the Bible, there are references to the belief that all will be saved. This belief has been known as 'universalism'—and regarded as a Christian heresy—but should not be confused with Quaker 'universalism' as the QUG uses the word. Quaker universalists would not normally be speaking the language of 'salvation' at all, nor would they regard any scriptures as more than useful spiritual guides, all inevitably limited by the cultures and periods in which they were written.

My answer would be, briefly, no, not as far as I know.

Saved from What?

Before we tackle the question we need to have some idea of what 'salvation' or 'being saved' might mean. One theological dictionary defines it as deliverance from evil or spiritual bondage. Another suggests rescue or release from a state which is evil or impermanent. The roots of the words are in Latin, *salus*, *salvus*, words which referred to health and wholeness as well as safety. There can therefore be views of salvation in this life, or in some imagined hereafter.

For different religions (and therefore, for different scriptures) salvation—if it is relevant to the faith in question—will have different meanings. In each case, it depends what is regarded as to be feared: from what do people want to be rescued? In Hinduism and other religions deriving from Indian sources, such as Jainism and Buddhism, the fear is of the unending cycle of death and rebirth, *samsara*. Deliverance from this would be their idea of 'being saved'. The hope would be to be delivered from the individual personality and to become merged in the blissful Oneness of all things. The means of obtaining this might, according to one's school of thought,

depend on right ascetic practices, or on spiritual enlightenment, or on selfless moral living, or on the grace of some Enlightened One who will be a saviour. It is a goal hard of achievement and likely to take countless lifetimes.

Meanwhile, the Buddha saw our most pressing need as salvation from the unsatisfactoriness of this present life, and laid out ways of right living which could free people from the desires and clinging which caused their misery. Life-changing teachings, but so far as I know there is no suggestion that everyone would achieve this.

It could be argued that the Hindu *Upanishads* present a world view in which our everyday experience is illusion, that the true reality is the divine unity of *sat-chit-ananda*, Being-Consciousness-Bliss. There would therefore be little point in arguing about who is or is not 'saved.' I do not think we can regard that as an instance of a scripture promising universal salvation; the question would hardly make sense in the context of Vedanta thought. However, this Perennial Philosophy, as it has often been called, of ultimate unity, has appeared in many cultures from the ancient Greek mystery religions to the present day, and is of considerable appeal to many Quaker universalists.

The world views of the Semitic traditions, of the West and perhaps of China are on the whole different from that of India. They do not see history as recurrent cycles, but as a linear process towards some sort of end point. This naturally alters the perspective on salvation. There are teachings in the Daoist tradition, for instance, which emphasise pure living so as to procure longevity in this life and (some have said) immortality beyond it, and some Chinese developments of Buddhism look for a blissful Beyond, a Pure Land. Confucianist teaching would not use the language of salvation but would certainly look to improving life as we have it here. In these Far Eastern philosophies I know of nothing suggesting universal salvation, but I am not well versed in their scriptures and open to correction.

The Old Testament

Our western traditions go back to their Middle Eastern origins in Hebrew and Persian thought. The Old Testament is not concerned with life after death. It has a good deal to say about salvation, but

usually in the corporate sphere, the Hebrew nation being saved from its enemies. In the Judaic tradition, hope centres upon the ‘last days’, the ‘end time’; but it is a collective hope, usually for the triumph of the Hebrew nation and its God and the discomfiture of its enemies. In the Psalms there are individual pleas for salvation from the poet’s own troubles, and a lot of rejoicing in ‘the God of salvation’, whatever that rather vague poetic phrase might mean. But the Old Testament has hardly any suggestion of universal salvation. Second Isaiah’s soaring imagination took him a little beyond the tribalism of Judaic religion, to a surprisingly global vision. “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other”. (Isaiah 45:22) Splendid!—but that still requires that all nations turn from their faiths, which the Hebrews saw as idolatry, to acknowledge Yahweh, the Jewish God; and there is certainly no belief that they all will. He does also have a wonderful poetic vision of the cosmic end-time when there will be universal salvation, but this he describes as occurring when the Earth is worn out and its inhabitants dead, so it is less than clear who would benefit! (Isaiah 51:6)

Later Judaism made room for some to believe in a life after death; you can glimpse the controversies about this in the Gospels. Where did they get the idea? Very probably from the Persian Zoroastrian teaching about a Last Judgment followed by heaven or hell. This was taken up, later again, by Islam, and to this day every Muslim is required to assent to belief in the Last Judgment. These teachings clearly rule out the idea of universal salvation, as some are condemned to eternal punishment, or at best to extinction.

The New Testament

So what about Christianity? Judgment, heaven and hell were carried over into orthodox Christian teaching, so that most Christian ideas of salvation have centred upon the afterlife rather than being rescued from the unsatisfactoriness of this life. Certainly there has been plenty of teaching about being saved from sin, and lives have undoubtedly been changed. But everyone?

Let us look at the New Testament. My concordance offers about

85 references to texts about salvation or being saved, in the theological sense (that is, setting aside such everyday uses as the disciples shouting “Lord, save us!” when they feared shipwreck). It has to be said that they are all decidedly exclusive. There is no other name guaranteeing salvation but that of Jesus. (Acts 4:12) We can trace in the New Testament writings the huge difficulty encountered by those, like Paul, who were willing to include Gentiles in the new faith; but over and over again the need for an exclusive faith in Jesus is stated as necessary for converts. Examples (among many) might be Romans 1:16 and Philippians 1:28. At one point an Epistle writer verges on a universalist hope: I Timothy 2:4 suggests that God wants everyone to be saved and know the truth (he may want it, but that is no guarantee!).

And Jesus himself? He does not appear to have talked salvation language, or not often. And we have to remember that the great ‘set speeches’ in the gospels are write-ups by early Christians promulgating their own views. Matthew’s Gospel has Jesus saying that those who endure to the end will be saved—but what happens to those who do not endure? No universalism there. Even that favourite passage of so many Christians, “God so loved the world” (John 3:16-17) restricts salvation to believers only.

Later Christianity has treated theological universalism as a heresy. For the Roman Catholic Church, there was no salvation outside that church. For orthodox Protestants, faith in Jesus (however interpreted) and in the Bible was a pre-requisite for salvation. Neither would allow of others being saved. No wonder that in today’s multi-cultural world such exclusivist claims seem untenable. Even in previous ages compassionate Christians found it hard to stomach the notion of enjoying eternal bliss while others suffer eternal torment, and so was born the ‘universalist’ hope.

As for me, I’m content to get on with this life, and hope to make tiny improvements to the lives of others as I go.

Autonomy and the Teaching of Jesus
(*Universalist*, May 1987, 20/9)

John R. Lickorish

It is a curious fact that at the heart of Christianity there is a fundamental contradiction between the message of the church and the teaching of Jesus. In its simplest terms, this contradiction lies in the fact that whilst the church speaks mainly about pious individuals getting to heaven, Jesus spoke primarily about how everyone might live in a new society on Earth. He did not outline a scheme of 'personal salvation' as did his subsequent followers, but instead, he was concerned with the satisfaction of basic human needs and the development of satisfying interpersonal relationships. Since all human beings belong to the same species, those needs and relationships are basically the same for all people, everywhere. So in spite of the differences due to culture, race and language, the teaching of Jesus has a universal appeal. That appeal is reinforced by the fact that his teaching is expressed in myth, metaphor and simile and presented in the form of stories, poems, arguments and conversations. Those are the age-old and worldwide forms of communication in which knowledge has been transmitted since the dawn of history.

Such universal forms of communication are found in the Homeric and other sagas, in Platonic dialogues, Rabbinic disputations, Amerindian folklore, Russian fairy tales and similar material all over the world. Originally of course, this store of information was transmitted orally from generation to generation within particular cultures. But since it has become consolidated into a body of literature, it is universally available and may be read with profit by anyone, anywhere. The significance of these universal stories does not depend upon their authorship, or origin, but upon the extent to which they stimulate our thinking about human behaviour, thereby enabling us to gain a better understanding of ourselves and to develop more satisfying human relationships. But to be of practical value, this ancient wisdom must be tested-out in our own experience and thereby validated, or refuted. It therefore carries its credentials within

itself and its truth cannot be established by appealing to any *ex cathedra* authority. Hence, such a body of wisdom may be regarded as autonomous, its validity being independent of its origin, or its authorship. So, the teaching attributed to Jesus may be detached from its author and its subsequent editors and interpreters and regarded as an autonomous body of wisdom, free from the constraints of theological presuppositions, dogmatic exegesis, or divine revelation.

This suggestion that the teaching of Jesus should be considered as an autonomous body of wisdom, existing in its own right, free from theological embroidery, is partly inspired by the modern, literary movement of Structuralism (Sturrock 1986). That approach to literature emphasises the importance of studying a text without being concerned about either its author or its origin. Although as Sturrock says, "We like texts to have authors" (*ibid* p. 154), yet we do not know the authors of many world-famous texts and as far as Jesus is concerned, he is certainly not the author of everything attributed to him. So if we were restricted to studying only those texts whose authors are known, we should gain no benefit from much of the world's greatest literature. Moreover, Sturrock points out that, "... efforts to authenticate texts by reference to some supposed ultimate authority . . . are a sign of the common nostalgia for the ultimate lawgiver" (*ibid* p. 156). In developmental terms that means that we have not yet grown up and are still looking for someone to tell us what to do. But we must grow up, and that involves becoming autonomous individuals with the ability to assess our own needs. Once we recognise what those needs are, we can make use of any autonomous text to assist our further development. So, we may regard the teaching of Jesus as a body of autonomous knowledge that can interact with our own autonomous state and so lead to a continuing enhancement of our personal, social and political life.

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A Universalist Ethic?
 (*Universalist*, January 1983, 9/21)

Ben Vincent

In his lecture at our Fircroft conference in 1982 John Hick made the point that all religions have a soteriological [related to salvation—ed.] element: they all respond to a human need for salvation from the *Angst* and *Sorge*, the worries, griefs and frustrations of life and particularly the dread of death. He might have gone on to say that this salvation is almost always conditional on moral conduct: if you obey the moral code it will rescue you from the miseries of life either (as in Judaism) in this existence and that of your kindred hereafter, or for your own self in a reincarnation or a paradise. (At least this is the popular belief of the faithful of every religion.) My granddaughter illustrated this with her account of a pious Hindu woman who explained that she practised a life of asceticism so that in her next incarnation she might be born as a man and one of a higher caste.

Throughout the whole world these beliefs have been eroded by scepticism springing from materialist and rationalist criticism and also, no doubt, the canceling-out effect of religious comparison: when simple people learn that clever and kindly people of different traditions hold mutually exclusive beliefs about salvation and what earns it, this undermines their own faith. The result has been a decline in religious convictions all over the world and a corresponding development of a naive materialism, 'vulgar Marxism' and just plain cynicism. An effect of this is a steep increase in crime and specially crimes about possessions. We don't need to cite the situation in the West but accounts of the East illustrate it too. Ann Wetherall at Fircroft was telling us that whereas Indian women for centuries have worn all their jewelry as they went about the great cities, nowadays they daren't. Other travelers assure us

that the extent and pervasiveness of bribery and corruption in India is almost unimaginable, affecting universities, medicine, the law and even religious centres. Less and less do people throughout the world accept poverty and 'humble estate' as their own fault, the fault of themselves in a previous incarnation, or as part of karma, God's mysterious design or his punishment for original sin or lack of faith in Christ. More and more do they attribute it to the rapacity of the rich or to the economic system or just bad luck, which they can mitigate by their own rapacity or 'clout'. Death they increasingly regard as final and old age as disastrous unless you feather your nest while you are young and tough. If they knew any Latin they would go about saying *carpe diem* (seize the day). (How well I remember the horror which struck me when, as a young Friend, this Ode of Horace was quoted to me by a girl I was very sweet on! She had experienced the disillusionment of an adolescence in Germany immediately after the Great War, when *Gott* had turned out to be no longer *mit uns!*)

We universalists don't, I hope, want to restore the fear of God in people, nor a morality stemming from a fear of a bad karma or of hell, but I suggest we do need to think about how a universalist approach to religion can evolve a universal ethic. It was Herbert G. Wood who first introduced me to the concept of religion as the vehicle of the cosmic significance of ethics. What are the elements in all religions which help modern peoples to recognise the good and the bad in behaviour? Was Kant right, or pointing towards the right, when he proclaimed as a self-evident fact that each person should always behave in such a way that we would wish everyone else to behave in exactly the same circumstances? This would be a cosmic, universalist ethic. Can it become the norm in every religion, transcending both the controversial doctrines and notions of separate religions about punishment and reward, and also their arbitrary commandments devised in ancient days and largely irrelevant to modern conditions? Can it be shown to be also a natural corollary of the Marxist religion

and of Neo-Darwinism, being conducive to the survival of our human species?

I believe it can. I believe it would be another step towards religious universalism, both as objective inspection of existing religions and as an aspiration. I don't believe the ethic really derives from the soteriology; I believe it is the other way round: realising how essential it is to have a morality, philosophers devised concepts of other-worldly sanctions for it.

I need hardly say that I am not calling for a universal code, a sort of cosmic Ten (or Thousand) Commandments. In fact, it should be enough to put it in the form of a query: Are you acting as you think the rest of us should act in the same circumstances?

CHAPTER 3:
UNIVERSALISM AND QUAKERISM

Universal WHAT?
(*Universalist Friends*, Spring 2005, 42/6)

Lynne Phillips

When I first saw “Universalist Quakers” in the Marketplace of Ideas, I thought: Here’s another contender for the Oxymoron of the Year contest! Universalist seemed so pretentious, like the Americans and their World Series as if no one else on the planet played baseball. Quaker seemed so specific and, well, ambitious, to be described as universal, given that Quakers are a nanospeck in the eyes of our planet. Nevertheless, I was intrigued, so I stuck it on my mental shelf for recreational contemplation.

Gradually the concept came alive for me as I read more widely in the field of theology and religious scholarship. Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Sallie McFague—to name a few—echo in one way or another the insight of William Penn (1693):

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers. The world is a form; our bodies are forms; and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit. . . .

It’s ironic that, although more words have been spilled about God than almost any concept that our minds are capable of, we can say nothing about the true nature of God beyond an echo of the words from Meister Eckhart: “God is.” That’s it, folks. So why have uncounted numbers of wise and devout thinkers wasted pounds of clay tablets, tons of rocks, thousands of papyrus reeds, and millions

of trees making images and words about God? William Penn implies the answer: we have bodies made of flesh which have been shaped by a world of rocks and trees and animals. We can experience God but we can't express our experiences except through words and images from our world.

When I surface from the deep mystical experience of the divine, I need a talisman, something to sustain me in this world. So do many others, which is why we search for models, that is, powerful metaphors that endure over time (Sallie McFague: *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*). Jesus is such a talisman: that wise Jew who was a sage, a healer, a wisdom teacher, a lover, a social revolutionary. Buddha, Mohammed, Lao Tzu, Caridwen, Creator, Isis, Mary, George Fox—all of them have become metaphors of earthly guidance and wisdom to help us express and put into service that ineffable experience of the numinous. Penn got it partly right: "The more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit." But I think Penn overlooked the clamour of our earthly inheritance. Humans have feelings about God. We need to talk about God. We need answers to the perennial questions. Where did we/the universe come from? How will we/the universe end? Why are we here? What is the right way to live?

A universalist Quaker seeks to experience God in the particular tradition of Quakers. I practice our manner of worship because it is a powerful source of energy that opens me to the divine. I value the Quaker way of doing business and giving service because it is a spiritual laboratory for building and sustaining communities. As universalists, we are sometimes accused of being spiritual tourists because we honour not only our own Christian metaphors, but also those of other faith traditions. We learn from other religions, unite with them in common causes, and join in their rituals if invited. As Quakers we follow the practices of our own wisdom teachers because their centuries of experience with rituals for worship, devotion, and service teach us how to practice active compassion.

My journey in Spaceship Quaker 350 gives me protection, companionship, and direction while allowing me to float freely within the limits of its tradition. Karen Armstrong: “If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving kindness, this was good theology.” Quakers have given me good theology. I can say from experience not only “God is,” but “God is Love.”

Robert Barclay, Theologian of Quaker Universalism
(Universalist Friends, Fall 1985, 5/10)

Chuck Fager

Is universalism an immigrant into Quakerism, and an illegal alien at that, or is it an indigenous product, a part of the central religious vision of the early Friends? Many of its critics argue that it is an alien invader which we would be better off without. Here, however, we will look at evidence that a strong, even radical universalist strain can be found prominently in the work of the premier early Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay.

It is no accident that Barclay’s magnum opus, his *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, remains the principal Quaker theological manifesto, even 300 years after it was published in English in 1678. Barclay’s vast learning, his fine writing style and the depth of his Quaker experience combined to produce an unquestioned masterpiece. The *Apology* lays out the Society’s basic views with such clarity, and answers its critics so cogently, that most Friends since have rightly considered it all but impossible, or at any rate unnecessary, to go over that same ground again. New Friends should make a reading of the *Apology* a priority when becoming familiar with the Society. (Fortunately this task has been made much easier and more enjoyable by Friend Dean Freiday’s 1967 book, *The Apology in Modern English*.)

Barclay's universalism shows up primarily in his discussion of what he calls "universal redemption" in Propositions Five and Six of the Apology. In these he attempts to show how early Friends believed people can overcome their alienation from God; that is, how they can be saved or redeemed. Barclay's answer is a paradox. As a Christian, he believes firmly that it was only through the life and death of Jesus Christ that salvation has been made possible for all people; yet, as a universalist, he also insists that one need not know of or believe in Jesus in order to partake of this salvation.

This position seemed contradictory to its numerous critics. How does Barclay handle this apparent contradiction? First, he argues that the effects of Christ's work extend to all people; quoting Hebrews 2:9, he says, "Christ has tasted death for everyone . . . everyone of every kind." The universal effect of this redemption is the basis of the Quaker conviction of the Light within all people. This "Light" is not a pantheistic bit of God, but rather the effect in every person of this universal redemption, namely the capacity to respond to the grace of God working in the heart of the individual.

Unlike many other Christian groups both then and now, Barclay and early Friends insisted that this capacity or Inner Light was, because of Christ's work, available to all people, as the Light which enlightens everyone mentioned in the Gospel of John. All people who chose to "mind the Light" and respond to the divine work were thereby "saved," that is, brought into an ongoing and authentic relationship with God. Such a relationship for Barclay constituted membership in the "true church," which was invisible, its membership list known only to God. As Barclay says later in a startling passage:

There may be members of this catholic [i.e., universal] Church not only among the several sorts of Christians, but also among pagans, Turks [i.e., Moslems], and Jews. They are men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart. They may be blind in their understanding of some things . . . yet they are upright in their hearts before the Lord, aiming and endeavoring to be delivered from iniquity, and loving to follow righteousness.

Why was outward profession of Christianity not necessary for salvation? Barclay argues that “salvation does not lie in the literal knowledge of [Christ’s] name, but in the experience of what it signifies. Those who merely know the name without any real experience of its meaning are not saved by it. But those who know the meaning and have experienced his power can be saved without knowing his name.”

In this position are contained the seeds of the current Christocentric-universalist debate among Friends. And while he was an astute and erudite thinker, I wonder if Barclay understood just how far-reaching the full implications of his position were. The radicalism of his vision is revealed, however, when he includes “Turks,” or Moslems, as well as Jews, in his list of those eligible for membership in the “true church.” That is because these groups were not simply ignorant of Christian doctrines and history, as were the heathen in the distant jungles; no, these religious groups were quite familiar with their Christian rival, at least in its institutional manifestation, and wanted to have nothing to do with it.

Why did Barclay make such a daring assertion? According to the distinguished Quaker writer Elton Trueblood in his book *Robert Barclay*, “He took this position firmly because he could not deny the evidence of new life among all the varied groups which he had met. If the facts were in conflict with dogma, it was too bad for the dogma.” In other words, his theology was based, in proper Quaker fashion, on his experience.

Barclay also argued that an outward, visible Christian Church was a gathering of people who did accept Christian doctrine and who had also experienced its meaning in their lives. Yet, based on his premises, one could also assert, as today’s universalists do, that an equally authentic religious fellowship could include people who are felt to belong to the “true, invisible church,” because of the evidence in their lives of responsiveness to the Light’s work in them, even if they could not, for whatever reason, accept formal Christian doctrines. Many universalist Quakers, including some who consider themselves as much Christians as did Barclay, have come to see in their mixed Meetings just such authentic, if formally unorthodox, bodies of “believers.”

It is easy to see, as critics of universalist Quakers do, the pitfalls of legitimizing any detachment from its Christian substrata: woolly-mindedness, superficiality, vulnerability to religious fads and spiritual charlatanism of all sorts. These are real enough risks. Nevertheless, if universalism is imbedded not only in the best writings of early Quakerism but in the basic Christian texts as well, this suggests that, whatever the risks, it is an issue which will not go away, and which has a legitimate place in the Quaker theological mix. The dilemma, which Barclay's *Apology* expresses, is one that all Christians who take their sources (and their source) seriously are faced with, and have been from the beginning. How can the Society of Friends be both authentically Christian and meaningfully universalist? I am not sure of the answer, beyond the conviction that this is the right question to be grappling with.

(Reprinted originally from *A Friendly Letter*; reprinted here with permission)

The Quakers and the Christian Myth
(*Universalist*, January 1982, 7/17)

Lorna M. Marsden

Fox founded a Society whose strength lies in its openness. It is this openness which has been important in the emergence of the group known as the universalists within the Society. But it is also related directly to the question of Christ.

It is possible to see Fox's ministry as bringing into being a movement towards the internalisation of Christ. In this Fox was ahead of his own time and close to the possibilities latent in our time. It was as though, while accepting the historical event of Jesus Christ the Son of God, Fox at the same time, and almost unconsciously, bypassed this. This creative paradox was his heresy, and it is why the Society of Friends today needs to turn to him with an awakened understanding.

It was during the last century that the philosopher Schopenhauer said that “religions never dare to confess their allegorical character”. In modern times avoidance of the truth of that remark has led in the end to dilution of the meaning of religious experience.

There is a gap between the legendary, half-historical story of Jesus as presented in the synoptic gospels, and the Christ of St. John’s gospel or of St. Paul. The closing of this gap has never been achieved. The churches have chosen to ignore it. This is the axis upon which the wheel of contemporary doubt turns. Biblical scholarship, far from closing the gap, has widened it, and in consequence the churches face a dilemma. For the institutions of mainstream Christianity have failed to face the consequence of their own intellectual and doctrinal obscurantism.

Disingenuously, they have ignored the primal mythological origins of their faith. In the end, this has not only lost them credibility, but has also deprived them of a lifeline which might have made them better able to meet some of the effects of decline.

This is a situation in which our own Society is not enmeshed. We have no obscurantism to get rid of, since we have bypassed dogma and ritual. We offer to the world a credibility which stands on other foundations and we owe this to the genius of Fox.

In their allegiance to a unique, once-for-all revelation the churches have not acknowledged that the roots of Christianity go back far into pagan times. Contemporary search after the ‘truth’ of Christ hurries from ‘demythologising’, to intense efforts to see Jesus as a revolutionary whose attitudes are appropriate to ‘secular’ liberation in political and economic terms (Liberation Theology). Also we have Don Cupitt saying—“ . . . Jesus himself, whom I see as the supreme prophet of man’s relation to God. So I envisage a Christianity that is Jewish, prophetic, and existentialist, having been purged of the mythology and dogmatism superimposed upon it in the Christendom period”. (1)

That heretical but plausible solution to the problem of Jesus is a perfectly possible one for our time, and will content many. But before we sweep away the mythology I think we need to take a look

at it. Attempts to 'update' Christianity may appear to have a workable validity for the contemporary mind, as far as they go.

What they neglect to realise is that the image of Jesus as the Christ cannot have held its numinous power, its evocation of adoration over 2000 years, on *unreal* grounds. These grounds may no longer be acceptable to us now, in that particular form, but they reflect a vision whose truth is charged by many centuries of human aspiration. The idea of a Saviour God was not only floating around in the period immediately before the birth of Christ, but is very ancient. The doctrine of the Trinity has echoes in both Plotinus and Buddhism. The Eros of Plato's *Symposium* bears a striking correspondence with Christ. The doctrine of Christ as Redeemer, enshrined in the ceremony of the Eucharist and the celebration of Good Friday, has its parallels in the Mithraic and Eleusinian mysteries, in the tales of Mani, Odin, Agni, Attis, Tammuz, and so on. These correspondences the churches have chosen to cover up.

But—if the origins of Christianity in the primal movement of the soul towards God are once acknowledged as moving in a direct line through many periods of human history, sheltered within the numinous power of legends which repeat and repeat the themes of the dying and the risen god, the god who sacrifices himself, it becomes evident surely that they are an externalised expression in varied form of some deep-laid and enduring necessity in the human psyche. Of this necessity the Christ figure is perhaps the last *unconscious* form. This form, which can be seen as an externalisation of inner truth, no longer meets the necessities of the expanded consciousness of modern man. Individuals within the churches are already in the throes of relinquishing it with anguish, precisely because they have denied the universal roots of their own myth, their own ritual.

It is at this point that the Quaker way displays its strength. In these directions it has nothing to relinquish.

Fox turned the movement of the spirit inward. Bound by the thought forms of his day, he used the only imagery that he knew, the vivid language of the Bible and the Christian vision. But he used it newly. Fox and the early Quakers had no need of the dramatically

evocative externalised figure of the Son of Man. With an instinct ahead of their time, they placed the recognition of the meaning of this figure as essentially within the heart. This recognition moved intuitively in Fox, not fully elucidated but powerful. To use a psychological term he could not then know, he had already emerged from the need of what is called 'projection'. This is the source of his relevance for today.

Our heritage as Quakers throws us into the needs of the western world today at that point where the secular world is already turning its blinded eyes towards the Light. It is here where Fox's thought moves just behind our own.

Who is the Jesus of history? Who is Christ? We do not know: and here, in the not-knowing, is the secret of his power. We may see him as the Christ in the heart, or we may see him still as the only-begotten of the Father. As the profound level of humanity's longing he is both, and both are true. He is at once the image, and that which is held in the image.

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Universalism in Search of a Dynamic

(*Universalist*, January 1982, 7/17)

Ralph Hetherington

Universalism seeks to demonstrate that no one religion has the monopoly of Truth, and, moreover, that no one religion can claim to be superior to any other. Every religion worthy of the name has developed within a culture, influencing and being influenced by it. Thus each religion is particularly appropriate to, and an integral part of, the culture in which it developed.

It is in light of this realization that theologians like John Hick advocate a pluralism in which each religion recognises the worth and

validity of the others, and does not claim a special validity for those outside the culture that gave it birth. Those holding this view have suggested that everyone should strive to be a better adherent of his or her own religion. Mahatma Gandhi said that a Hindu should strive to be a good Hindu, a Christian a good Christian. However, cultures are no longer separated and we are all being increasingly exposed to the claims and teachings of other religions. We may no longer feel at ease with a pluralism that confines us to the religion of our own culture and we may feel drawn to much that is taught in other religions.

These considerations have led some universalists to hope that a universal religion that would incorporate the best in all the existing ones would emerge, or at least incorporate that which is common to them all. This is, I suppose, what is meant by true ecumenism—a coming together of all faiths. It is in this exercise that I foresee dangers. In seeking a rapprochement with other faiths we may find ourselves avoiding any suggestion that we possess the truth, since any claim to know might suggest that others, who think differently, may be wrong. Or if we do make statements, they are of such a generality that all well-intentioned people are bound to concur; such statements as that we should be loving, compassionate, caring, or that we should share the good things of life and so on. This is not much of a clarion call.

Laurence Lerner in his Swarthmoor lecture to London Yearly Meeting this year had the following to say:

I went to a Unitarian service. We were handed an order of service with five emblems at the top—cross, crescent, Star of David, Yin-Yang and a Hindu symbol. All religions, this was saying, are present in the worship of this Unitarian universalist group. The sermon dealt with ethical issues reasonably and tolerantly and should have spoken to the condition of Muslim, Jew or Hindu. The only symbolic action, the lighting of a candle in a chalice, was not so much a ritual as an attempt to capture the simple essence of all ritual. We try to penetrate, said the speaker, below all religions to religion.

This service did not satisfy Laurence Lerner and it would not satisfy me. It lacks poetry and it lacks passion. It seems to me that unless universalism contains a message that takes one by the throat, as it were, then it cannot hope to appeal to those who are dissatisfied with what is presently on offer and are looking for something else.

This is why I think that universalism, if it is to survive and prosper, has to be part of something that already has a thoroughgoing and well proved dynamic. To me, Quakerism is the answer. Universalist ideas are entirely consonant with it, and the truth Quakers proclaim, namely that there is something of God in everyone and that everyone can experience the Light within, has both passion and poetry.

As long as Friends remain fully aware of their mystical roots there will be dynamic enough for any universalists to find their home with the Quakers.

Response to *Letter to a Universalist*
(*Universalist Friends*, Spring 1990, 14/16)

Alex Gero

“If you may believe anything, you will believe nothing.”

How often have Quakers of a universalist bent heard this reproach? It sounds striking and impressive, and its brevity seems to hide a deeper meaning. Nevertheless, it is nonsense. If I firmly believe that Jesus of Nazareth was a divine being who taught us a religion of love, and you believe just as firmly that Jesus was a human being who taught us a religion of love, then how does it follow that both you and I believe nothing just because the Society of Friends allows both of us to hold on to our beliefs?

John Punshon, in his *Letter to a Universalist*, (1) makes the same accusation in a more serious and thoughtful way, which deserves equally serious and thoughtful consideration. He asserts that “The impact of universalism on the unprogrammed tradition has led to

an almost total amnesia on the subject of Quaker doctrine,” that it is “customary to say in some quarters that the Society of Friends has never made any unalterable statements of belief,” and that “many people deduce from this that no gathering or body may make any authoritative statement about what Quakerism is, so no subsequent generations can be bound by any such statement. Nor can there be authoritative teaching about matters of faith which members of the Society of Friends are under a duty to accept.”

Just what is, in Punshon’s view, this “unalterable statement of belief . . . which members of the Society of Friends are under a duty to accept”? Although he does not formulate it he does present his personal religion, one which does “not accept . . . the entirety of Roman Catholic teaching” but still “involves faith in the Trinity, the incarnation, resurrection and atonement of Christ.” Since he calls himself a Quaker and calls on all Quakers to follow his lead, we may presume that these points are essential to the authoritative teaching about matters of faith that we are “under a duty to accept.”

Many Friends will dispute Punshon’s postulates. They are likely to agree with the words of the Austrian Friend Margarethe Scherer in her Richard Cary lecture of 1981; “Early Friends based their faith entirely on inner experience. They dared to reject much that other Christians of that day thought essential and indispensable. I think we are poor stewards of their legacy if we now simply accept what they said and look on it as obligatory articles of faith. Our religion will carry us forward only if it rests on our own religious experience, not on tradition.”

Whatever may have changed in the Society of Friends since the seventeenth century, we still base our faith on inner experience. That experience may take many forms: it may be a voice showing a way, as it was for George Fox on Pendle Hill; it may be intellectual insight, as it was for the Quaker scientists Arthur Eddington and Kathleen Lonsdale; it may be the magic beauty of a gathered Meeting; it may be many other things. But it is always inner experience that makes a Quaker, not obedience to tradition or the mouthing of a creed. Yes,

I said creed, for what is an “unalterable statement of belief” if not a creed?

Several conclusions follow from this premise. First, as each person is unique, so is each person’s religious experience. That is why the Society of Friends can never make a blanket statement of belief that would fit every Quaker; that our faith is based on each person’s inner experience is our “unalterable statement of belief.” The various colorful ways in which we describe the origin of this experience—the Source, the Inner Light, the Christ Within, and so on—only serve to emphasize the sovereignty of inner experience. If we had a creed, it might at best express the religious experience of some Quakers but not of all, and how can we decide that one religious experience is more valid than another?

What is the role of tradition in such a religion? John Punshon charges that for universalists “no argument about the substance of Quaker belief can be derived from the tradition because the tradition denies the authority of tradition.” Is he right? I think not. Whether universalists or not, we remember that “the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life.” Therefore we hold fast to the spiritual tradition which defines us, the tradition of basing our faith on experience, but we reject the literalist tradition which requires blind acceptance of everything written into official doctrines since the earliest days of Christianity. Because we value the tradition of an experiential religion, we accept all its consequences, including respect for each other’s diverse religious experiences and a willingness to learn from them.

Another consequence of the primacy of experience is continuing revelation. The seminal experience may be a single event in your life, but very often it is not, and each new experience enriches our understanding with further insights. This is another reason why for us creeds are impossible: they would ossify our religion and thus deny the possibility of continuing revelation. Quakerism is a dynamic religion that has change built into it because it never stops seeking new revelation. Our faith is not pride in having found God but the humble realization that we must forever search for God. We can never fully find God, if only because we are finite and God is infinite. The search

for God must be its own reward. But we are not conceited enough to think that only our search is valid. We are Quakers because the Quaker way of seeking for God seems right for us. We realize that others may prefer other ways, and we respect their choice. As John Punshon puts it, universalists do believe that “no religion has a monopoly of truth and there is truth to be found in all religions.” He is right, as shown by the following quotes:

“God, who made all, pours out of his spirit upon all men and women . . . upon whites and blacks, Moors and Turks, and Indians, Christians, Jews and Gentiles.” (George Fox)

“The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion.” (William Penn)

We are the followers of these two universalists.

[(1) The letter was from John Punshon in Pendle Hill Pamphlet 285. Wallingford PA. 1989.]

Thoughts Stimulated by Alex Gero
(Universalist Friends, Spring 1991, 16/13)

Marti Matthews

It must have been parenthood that led me to realize that religion cannot magically be passed on generation after generation like brown or blue eyes are passed to our children. Nor can we force the next generation to believe or practice what we believe and practice. All we can do to the next or future generations is to share what has been valuable to us. All people who come into the world must encounter God for themselves. Any religion must be born anew in each person, chosen or rejected; and each tradition, practice, or value will be chosen again or allowed to die. This is not the way it “should” be; it seems to me the way the world is set up. We cannot force those who come after

us to follow our own path, though we try and try. We can only share.

I honor George Fox above all for his respect for everyone in the world. Whatever his personal religious practices, he above all believed and respected the living, guiding Presence of God inside of everyone. I would be the last to try to force others to believe or practice anything just because he did it. He would be the last to want us to make him into an idol and avoid our own living experience with God. I do not feel called to follow George Fox's Light; I have my own Inner Light. I believe that what George Fox wanted was for everyone in the world to obey the Light as it calls them.

CHAPTER 4:

UNIVERSALISM AND CHRISTIANITY

A Talk Given at Yearly Meeting in London on 25 May 1987

(Universalist, September 1987, 21/11)

Ralph Hetherington

Universalist Quakers believe that spiritual awareness is accessible to all men and women everywhere and always has been, and that no one faith can claim to be a final revelation or to have a monopoly of truth. We believe that London Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, with its absence of creeds and its belief in the primacy of the Inward Light over scripture, has a unique opportunity to provide a spiritual community which all sincere seekers can join, whatever their religious background or lack of it. We believe that this welcome to all sincere seekers should be clearly stated in the revised Book of Discipline.

There has, in my view, been a mistaken tendency amongst some Friends over the past few years to regard the universalist view as being opposed to the Christocentric view, as if the former somehow excluded the latter. But when you come to think of it, the term 'universalist' must surely imply an all-embracing viewpoint which is bound to include rather than exclude the Christocentric view. It should not be a matter of 'either-or' but rather of 'both-and'.

Yet the view that universalism is divisive, producing unwelcome tensions, still prevails amongst some Quakers. A prominent American Friend (1) asserts that the universalist-Christocentric issue is "nothing less than crucial to the very survival of Quakerism", and this in the sense that Quakerism would not survive if universalist view were generally supported. A recent issue of a Quaker newsletter

(2) that has been in existence for very many years, writes of the “Universalist and Christian divide” as “tearing the Society apart”. We need to be sympathetic and tender to those Friends with such anxieties and re-assure them.

Two worries have been clearly expressed in this connection. The first is that universalists are trying to change the Society in some fundamental way, and the second is that they are trying to remove all Christocentric references from the Society’s Book of Discipline. To meet the first of these worries, it is only necessary to refer to the writings of early Friends, and especially to those of Penn, Penington, Barclay and Woolman, all of whom used the Christocentric language of their day and all of whom expressed universalist ideas. We have gathered some of these quotations together in our pamphlet No. 6 which make the point that modern universalist Quakers are only continuing a tradition that has existed within the Society from its earliest days.

The second worry, that universalists are trying to have all Christocentric references removed from the revised Book of Discipline of London Yearly Meeting, was expressed explicitly by Arthur Roberts in a recent article in the Friends Quarterly. (3) The short answer to this is that we are not, and never have sought to do any such thing. Indeed, it would be absurd to attempt to bring about such a change in the Book of Discipline of a religious society whose origins are so firmly in the Christian tradition and whose religious language and imagery have always been, still are, and are likely to remain, predominantly Christian in character.

There is also a significant group of Friends within London Yearly Meeting who would feel unhappy at any suggestion of exclusiveness in the term ‘Christian Universalism’ implying that those from other religious backgrounds or no background at all could not expect to be welcomed into the Society. This exclusiveness, if it exists at all, may arise from the view that somehow Jesus of Nazareth was preeminent

among religious leaders and that his followers, in some sense, have the edge on those from other religious backgrounds.

A phrase beloved by members of the Society of Friends is that we are all 'humble learners in the School of Christ'. (4) It would be a pity if this were taken as a requirement for membership of the Society, since it might have credal implications. Now Richard Rowntree's term, 'Christian Universalism' (5) could be taken to mean universalism which has developed from Christian roots, and this, for me, would be an acceptable use of the term. Equally the phrase 'a humble learner in the School of Christ' might mean 'a humble learner in the same school that Christ learned in', which again I should find acceptable. However, in both cases, I should be imposing a special meaning which is neither immediately apparent, nor generally held.

To sum up then, London Yearly Meeting seems to have at least three groups within it: the exclusively Christ-centred group, the Christian Universalists in Richard Rowntree's sense, and the universalists who think there is a need for a completely open approach in which the Society offers a welcome to all sincere seekers of whatever background. This situation will not disappear, and I entirely agree with Richard Rowntree when he says that we need to develop a common ground of Quakerism which will need fresh thinking of a kind that will challenge old securities and new enthusiasms.

Since writing my notes for this talk, Ormerod Greenwood's splendid article on 'Quakerism: Christian and Universal' has appeared in *The Friend*. (6) I share his impatience with the argument that Quakerism is either Christian or universalist. As he rightly says, our base is Christian our reach universal. While our Christian base is a matter of past history and present practice, our universalist reach should make it easy for us to welcome into membership those from other religious backgrounds or no religious background at all.

I should like to conclude by returning to my statement of the beliefs of the Quaker Universalist Group, namely that spiritual awareness is accessible to all men and women everywhere, and always has been, and that the Society of Friends is uniquely placed to give a welcome to all sincere seekers of any religion or none. In this lies the

unifying influence of Quaker universalism. We share the evangel and dynamic of all Quakers: an evangel that declares our experience of an Inward Light that can guide, instruct and admonish all of us and our experience that there is something of God in all men and women to which we can speak. It is this experience that provides us with our dynamic. We do not feel it right that any sincere seeker who shares this dynamic and this evangel should be excluded from membership.

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The Authenticity of Liberal Quakerism (*Universalist Friends*, Fall 1998, 31/21)

Chuck Fager

In a Quaker theology discussion in which I took part, the following question was posed:

“How, in light of the divergence in practice and belief between liberal and evangelical Quakers, can we both rightfully claim to be Friends?”

Here I will consider the liberal side of that query.

In my observation, thoughtful and reasonably well-informed liberal Friends stake their claim to Quaker authenticity on four grounds:

1. their understanding of the Quaker view of the church;
2. their understanding of the Bible;
3. their understanding of Jesus;

4. their understanding of the last two centuries of Quaker history.

Let me address each of these points briefly.

The Liberal Understanding of the Quaker View of the Church

It was Robert Barclay, in the Apology, who best laid out the distinctive Quaker view of the true church: that it is invisible and universal, not limited to any worldly institution, creed or culture. Further, he asserted that “There may be members of this catholic [that is, universal] Church not only among the several sorts of Christians, but also among pagans, Turks [that is, Muslims] and Jews.” (Freiday edition, p. 173) I think it important to point out that “Turks” and “Jews” were not at all ignorant of Christianity; in fact, they had a special knowledge and intimacy with it, and rejected it. Nevertheless, according to Barclay, they were still fully eligible for membership in the true church.

This was a very controversial understanding of the church in 1678; it remains controversial, even (or perhaps particularly) among Friends more than 300 years later. Yet it was a conviction often repeated by some of the most revered of founding Friends, as well as later luminaries including John Woolman, and contemporary Friends such as Jim Corbett, our own desert prophet. I could fill several pages with quotes of such restatements, which are far more eloquent than I will ever be.

Theologically, I define Liberal Quakerism as:

An ongoing effort to make visible a particular portion of the true Church, by means of the specific traditions and disciplines of the Religious Society of Friends. This very idea of manifesting the true Church is, we believe, rooted in the early Quakers’ unique and inclusive understanding of the Society’s Christian background and origins. The key Quaker disciplines by which this part of the Church is constituted are: silence-based, unprogrammed worship; a free ministry led by the spirit; decision-making by the worshipful sense of the meeting; church structures kept to a spartan, decentralized minimum;

cultivation of the inward life of both individual and the group; a preference for unfolding experience of truth, or “continuing revelation,” over creeds and doctrinal systems; and devotion to the historic but evolving Quaker testimonies, especially peace, *simplicity and equality*.

In tune with this definition, many liberal Meetings now express their understanding of the church’s universality by not requiring an explicit Christian profession as a requirement for membership. That is, we no longer consider such profession to be a defining characteristic of authentic religion in the Quaker mode. Instead, when dealing, say, with an applicant for membership, we attempt to delve beneath outward verbal or doctrinal statements to discern a newcomer’s status in this invisible, universal fellowship, as well as their readiness to uphold our distinctive Quaker practices and testimonies.

To be sure, this approach is fallible, and not beyond criticism. I will address below one common complaint: that as a result of not requiring a Christian commitment liberal Quakerism lacks identity and limits. This approach certainly does result in faith communities which are theologically mixed, with some members Christian and some not. But this is not seen among us as a drawback; at its base is an idea that we believe is neither new to, nor subversive of, foundational Quakerism. Thus, acting on its implications in this way does not appear strange to us, as it evidently does to some.

The Liberal Understanding of Scripture

Barclay quoted many scriptural passages in support of this inclusive Quaker view of the true church, such as the famous “Quaker text” in John 1:9 which describes Christ as the “true light that enlightens every one who comes into the world” and Titus 2:11, which declares that “the grace of God which bringeth salvation hath appeared to all.” He cited numerous other similar passages which I will not take time to repeat here. If there is any truth in these passages, as many Friends and I agree with Barclay that there is, can we really justify shutting our doors against those who do not use the same words as we to express what we discern to be their saving experience

of this universally available grace? Some would say yes, we can and must shut our doors. But Barclay, numerous passages of scripture, and most liberal Friends say otherwise, and I agree.

The Liberal Understanding of Jesus

Again and again in the gospels, Jesus lifts up as models people who, like the Good Samaritan, held theological notions that were totally incorrect in the biblical framework, and mistaken according to Jesus' own declared conviction in John 4:22 that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). I believe this pattern of focusing on "heretics" is not an accident. My conclusion is strengthened by a reading of Jesus' own scenario of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. In this crucial passage, where "all the nations" are assembled before him, and the "sheep" are separated out from the "goats," Jesus is very specific in explaining why some will fall into one group and some the other: "I was hungry . . . thirsty . . . homeless . . . you did it to the least of these . . . you did it to me" (25:35-40).

But wait. Read the passage again: Nowhere in it does Jesus say to the "sheep" that they are saved because they accepted him as their "personal savior" or affirmed any other doctrinal particular. Nor are the "goats" condemned because they failed to make such declarations. Did the requirement of doctrinal correctness, so important to many today, somehow slip Jesus' mind here, in what is undeniably a foundational discourse? I don't think so. Indeed, earlier in Matthew (7:21-23), Jesus sharply challenged such requirements in another comment on the judgment:

Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many wonders?" and then I will declare to them, "I never knew you: Depart from me, you who practice wickedness."

This is, incidentally, the same passage where Jesus warns his followers to "judge a tree by its fruits," that is, not by their words and affirmations of some doctrinal orthodoxy (7:15-19). The clear thrust

of these and other passages seems to me to relativize theology and denomination in just the same way Barclay does.

But how can this be?

For some Friends, accepting Christ is the *sine qua non*, the acid test, the issue above all issues. And of course there are other New Testament passages which do make exclusivist claims. I have considered this issue in two Bible study texts, *A Respondent Spark and Wisdom and Your Spiritual Journey*. I explore it further in my book on recent liberal Quaker theology and history, *Without Apology*. My argument, in sum, is that scripture contains many and often sharply diverse views, and no theology I have seen has been able to reconcile them all. Moreover, all Christian-based communities known to me have used scriptural texts selectively to serve as their touchstones, or “hermeneutical keys.” Those who claim not to be scripturally selective are, I believe, deceiving themselves, or being deceived. In light of this history, those who argue for doctrinal Christian exclusivity can indeed make a plausible case from their selected scriptures, employing their hermeneutical keys. But Barclay and inclusive liberals can make a plausible case from theirs as well; and I side with them.

The Liberal Understanding of the Last Two Centuries of Quaker History

Finally, the current mixed theological character of liberal Quakerism is the outcome of a long process of communal reflection and evolution on the shape and place of the Religious Society of Friends in the world and among the world’s religions. The history of this evolution has not yet been told in a detailed, scholarly way. I understand that Earlham’s Thomas Hamm is soon to turn his formidable talents to a major portion of it, the history of the Hicksite movement after the 1827 separation, and I look forward to the results of his work. In the meantime, other students such as myself are left to make the best impressionistic sense of this rich history that we can.

We know, for instance, from George Fox’s empathetic treatment of Islam and the Koran, which he evidently knew quite well, that a

distinctive openness to other faiths was part of Quakerism even at the beginning. To this one could add such classic anecdotes as those about John Woolman's visits among Native Americans. More recently, many Friends have worked, studied, worshipped with, and learned much from other religious groups, such as devotees of Zen Buddhism.

These and other similar experiences clearly have had an important impact on the faith of many liberal Quakers. Some decry this impact as a dilution or adulteration. I can understand this concern, but in my experience, it seems in most cases to be rather an enrichment.

I would like to add to these examples a few which have loomed large in my own studies. The first comes, not from a strange far country, nor for that matter the even more trackless wilderness of postmodern academia. It is rather from our own good grey Quaker bard, John Greenleaf Whittier. Re-reading Whittier's religious and Quaker-oriented poems, as I have been doing recently, it has seemed obvious to me that they serve as the imaginative previsioning of the path liberal Quakerism has trod since.

To see what I mean, let's consider a few stanzas, first from his long poem, "The Meeting":

I know how well the fathers taught,
 What work the later schoolmen wrought;
 I reverence old-time faith and men,
 But God is near us now as then . . .
 And still the measure of our needs
 Outgrows the cramping bounds of creeds;
 The manna gathered yesterday
 Already savors of decay . . .

Or from "Miriam":

And I made answer: "Truth is one;
 And in all lands beneath fire sun,
 Whoso hath eyes to see may see
 The tokens of its unity.
 No scroll of creed its fulness wraps,

We trace it not by school-boy maps,
Free as the sun and air it is
Of latitudes and boundaries.
In Vedic verse, in dull Koran,
Are messages of good to man . . .

There are many similar passages.

Of course, Whittier was about as loyally Christian in his basic outlook as one could hope for; he was much impressed by the preaching of Joseph John Gurney, the godfather of evangelical Quakerism. Yet his mature faith, as glimpsed in these lines, is simultaneously at one with the inclusive view of the church which Barclay expounded and which I am describing here.

Some have said such a combination is impossible or self-contradictory. I believe they are mistaken, and call Friend Whittier as Exhibit A. In their survey volume, *The Quakers*, Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, two leading Quaker historians, rightly conclude that “Whittier’s influence paved the way for the emergence of liberalism among Gurneyite Quakers” (p. 376).

Evidence for this conclusion can easily be found in sources beyond his poetry. Whittier was a great personal hero to three other central figures in this history. One was Rufus Jones, a longtime favorite target of Orthodox and Evangelical Quaker critics. Rufus is about due for a revival, I think, especially as the notion of Quakerism as Puritanism in a broadbrim comes to be increasingly shown up as the partisan myth which it is. The other two figures, who were arguably even more important than Rufus, were Joel and Hannah Bean. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, the Beans were internationally-known ministers and leading figures in pre-revival Iowa Yearly Meeting. They ultimately settled in California. Their names remind me of the unsuitability of the term “universalist” to describe modern liberal Quakerism. The much more accurate, if uneuphonious appellation is Geoffrey Kaiser’s term, “Beanite” Quakers. A “Beanite,” and not a “universalist” Quaker is what I consider myself to be.

The story of the Beans' disgraceful treatment by the revivalist insurgents who took over Iowa Yearly Meeting in the 1880s is a modern Quaker epic. It molded history, with consequences that are by no means played out. (Indeed, it now looks as if that revival's heirs may be about to repeat this exercise by driving from their fold the demons of Friends United Meeting and the various councils of churches. What was it Marx said about the way in which history repeats itself?)

The Beans' story is also richly ironic, because they began as solidly Orthodox, and even welcomed the early revivals. It was only with reluctance, and against their will, that they ended up as the founders of a vital new liberal Quaker stream. The best existing account of the Beans is by the evangelical scholar David Le Shana, in his very valuable book, *Quakers in California*. Le Shana's rendition is necessarily sketchy, however; and every time I walk into Swarthmoor's Friends Historical Library, knowing that nine boxes stuffed with Bean papers are sitting mostly unexplored on its shelves, my fingers itch to dig into them and have a go at helping fill out this crucial saga. I hope our best scholars will take up that task soon.

The evolution of modern liberal Quakerism can also be traced in the experience of some leading figures of the Quaker missionary movement. One such was Henry Hodgkin, the founding director of Pendle Hill. Hodgkin spent twenty years at the turn of the century as a missionary in China on behalf of London Yearly Meeting. Not long before his death in 1933, Henry Hodgkin wrote to his brother about how his once strongly exclusivist and evangelical convictions had been changed by his engagement with the best of Asian religions. A striking passage from this letter shows where this evolution was headed. It is very apropos of our inquiry, and so affecting that it was incorporated into London's book of *Christian Faith and Practice*, from which I am citing it (Section 102, 1960 edition). It is worth our time to hear a bit of Hodgkin's testimony:

I suppose it is almost inevitable that during such a [youthful] period one should be so sure of the genuineness and value

of one's own experience as to undervalue other types of experience. It is this which makes people eager missionaries or propagandists and it was as such that I went to China, still very sure of the "greatness of the revelation" and but dimly aware that God, in His many-sided nature and activity, was not one whit less manifest in ways and persons with which or with whom I could have little sympathy. Of course in theory I believed that God used many methods and that all truth was not with me. [But] down deep I wanted all to be "such as I," because I could not help feeling that, broadly speaking, what meant so much to me must be equally good for others. By processes too numerous and diverse even to summarize, I have reached a position which may be stated in a general way somewhat like this: "I believe that God's best for another may be so different from my experience and way of living as to be actually impossible to me. I recognize a change to have taken place in myself, from a certain assumption that mine was really the better way, to a very complete recognition that there is no one better way, and that God needs all kinds of people and ways of living through which to manifest Himself in the world.

What a pregnant phrase that is: "By processes too numerous and diverse to summarize." Thereby hangs a very important tale, I believe, one that can only be hinted at here.

In these Whittier verses, in the lives of Rufus Jones, the Beans, Henry Hodgkin and others, I believe we can see the wheel of liberal Quakerism pivoting in the direction of its present course. Some continue to deplore this as a wrong turn onto a slippery slope that is headed straight for perdition. As you might expect, I do not share this view. Instead, I find in this evolution a logical, coherent, entirely authentic and vital development of Quaker faith. I look forward to seeing its development explored in its full richness and depth by our best scholars, and hope to take a small part in that work as way opens. Based on this history and my own experience, I welcome the fact that some liberal Friends Meetings now include

members who are active homosexuals, or who also identify themselves as atheists, Zen practitioners, or modern witches. All such persons can (not must, but can) be good, authentic Quakers, and many are.

Further, those who insist that this doctrinally mixed state means a liberal Quaker can “believe anything,” or that “anything goes” among us, or that our movement has no identity or boundaries, are in my experience simply mistaken. Liberal Quakerism gets along without a creed, yet it also maintains a definite character and limits, which have been frequently applied in practice. For instance, during nearly twenty years as part of Baltimore Yearly Meeting, I have seen various persons try to reshape that body into such things as a strict vegetarian sect, a fulltime peace lobby, an evangelical enclave, or various types of pagan or New Age ashrams. Eventually, though, I have also seen such persons either learn to accept us as we are, or move on in search of more congenial groups. That is, it is simply not the case that “anything goes” in this liberal group, at least. In my view, this experience is testimony to the reality of identity and limits in this liberal Quaker body, which is a not untypical one.

To stand up for “Beanite” Quakerism as I have tried to do here is not, of course, to suggest that it is flawless. Liberal Quakers are as prone to sin as any other fallen humans; in particular, we too often live down to some of the stereotypes and caricatures others entertain about us. In *Without Apology* I list a catalog of what I see as some of its numerous shortcomings. We surely stand in need of grace and mercy every day, in many ways. Nevertheless, I will close by repeating my conviction that the claim of liberal Quakerism to authenticity in the Religious Society of Friends is well-grounded, coherent, and productive of the fruits of the spirit in sufficient measure that I am proud—humbly so, of course—to be part of it, and to have the chance to bear witness on its behalf.

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Quaker Universalism and Anti-Universalism
(*Universalist Friends*, Spring 1992, 18/3)

Alex Gero

I am troubled by the widespread acceptance among Friends of the notion that Christocentrism is the opposite of Quaker universalism. The error in maintaining this dichotomy was brought home to me when I had occasion in a workshop at Friends General Conference to ask the Christocentrics among the participants (one-third of the group) to define their faith. Of course the answers differed, but there was a large area of agreement: Jesus is their Teacher, their role model, and whatever they do, the thought at the back of their minds is, "What would Jesus think of this?"

The dogmas of main-line Christianity, which I had thought to be essential for Christocentric faith, were conspicuously absent and even heatedly denied by one person, with the obvious approval of the others. When I asked the remaining two-thirds of the group, who thought of themselves as universalists, whether they found anything unacceptable in the faith of the Christocentrics, the answer was a resounding "No." So where is the dichotomy? Not between universalism and Christocentrism, as the answers in the workshop demonstrated.

But if the opposite of universalism is not Christocentrism, what is? In order to answer this question we must first define universalism and also see clearly how other Friends are as wrong about universalism as I had been about Christocentrics until set right in my workshop. Many critics of universalism think of it as a syncretistic religion which, in the words of one such critic, aims for "a combination of the best and richest features of the great world faiths."

In fact, universalism is not a religion but the view that all religions deserve respect. You might say that in that case all of America is universalist because equal regard for all religions is embedded in our laws and mores. But civil respect for all religions is very largely just indifference, while our respect is a religious view which holds that

there are many different ways leading toward God. We prefer the way of Quakerism because we find it right for us; we are aware that others prefer other ways more suitable for them, and we respect their choice.

If you consider this to be relativism, please remember that relativism is closer to the spirit of Jesus Christ than absolutism. It was not relativism that invented the Inquisition. In the present instance we are merely facing facts; and we have the choice of lamenting the obtuseness of those who cannot see that only we are right, or of rejoicing at the rich variety of ways in which God is manifested.

It is often asserted that the price of our universalist tolerance is that our Quakerism is wishy-washy, lacking fire and conviction; otherwise, we could not be so ready to accept the validity of all religions. Such criticism does not understand that universalism means a refusal to look down on others for being different from us. We accept the great differences among human beings that may result in equally great differences among their religious choices. It is precisely because we see clearly the many ways leading toward God that the choice of our religion is so important to us; that is why the convinced Friends among us chose to become, and the birthright Friends chose to remain, Quakers. We grant those whose religion differs from ours the same respect for their faith that we demand for ours. That is universalism.

What, then, is the opposite of universalism? Perhaps absolutism is the right word to express an intolerant, often fanatical insistence that there is only one right religion, namely your own, and that all who disagree are damned. I recall an incident many years ago, when a neighbor called on us to ask why we wanted our young children to go to Hell—why we sent them to the Quakers for religious instruction and not to our neighbor's church, which alone could insure their eternal salvation. What is the origin of such an attitude? Is it just self-centeredness, an incapacity to understand that you are not the sole standard for everyone and everything? Or is it insecurity, a lurking doubt about your own beliefs? Is it a drive for uniformity and regimentation, with yourself in the driver's seat, lording it over others and imposing your ego on them? Any or all of these, I suppose.

Christian absolutists are usually Christocentric, but Christocentrics are not necessarily absolutists. We all know Christocentric Friends and non-Friends who sincerely and generously welcome universalists. The ecumenical movement is a step toward universalism in which even the Roman Church participates.

On the other hand, when we call ourselves universalist, we had better watch our step. I know Friends who have experienced rejection and hostility from their Meetings because of their Christocentric beliefs. Surely that is not universalism. And I must confess that sometimes I feel impatience toward a faith that to me appears more like superstition than religion. That is not universalism either.

Universalist Quakerism, like all religion, is a task for a lifetime, to be worked on incessantly. We must always be aware of the danger of absolutism, in our midst as well as elsewhere.

Universalism and Me

(*Universalist Friends*, Spring 1994, 22/17)

H.Otto Dahlke

When I experience universalist writing, I get an at-odds-with-myself feeling. There seems to be a projection of the thought of how open/broad-minded and tolerant we are. There seems at times a hyperbole of expression. "I am a christian, a jew, a muslim, a hindu, a buddhist, everywoman, and everyman" (*Universalist*, May 1987). This declaration could be an expression of liberal exuberance. On the other hand, if this is meant literally, then my reaction is: "Nonsense." Each of these represents a complex, religious style of life. To presume that a person can fully incorporate all these styles is simply preposterous.

How many universalists have lit joss sticks and, bowing several times, put them in the sand tray before the icon of Kuan Yin, also known as Kannon? How many universalists have pulled a temple bell, clapped their hands, bowed, and thrown money into a coin box before

they make their petition? How many universalists have tied a prayer to a prayer tree after a purification of the hands with water poured from a bamboo dipper? How many universalists have knelt towards Mecca and bowed five times? These are elements in a religious style of life, and unless we can engage in these, really feel them in our muscle, bone, and heart, we know nothing of these religions. Of course, it can be argued that these rituals are not as important as the Truths in these religions. That's the equivalent of saying that we can understand the unprogrammed Meeting without the silence. What the universalist is left with is simply what is written, scriptures which somehow are esteemed highly while the Bible is viewed with scepticism.

Supposing I understand the four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The latter has a certain puritanical quality to it. Do we knock out what is incompatible with our humanistic ideas, reducing it to a fivefold path? Does knowing the Eightfold Path make a difference in my life? I don't think so, and not because I have not studied Buddhism. Reliance on the word, which is what most universalists do, contravenes a basic Zen principle, expressed in these words:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;
Without dependence on words and letters;
Direct pointing to the essence of mind;
Seeing one's true nature and attaining buddhahood.

So the verbiage is unimportant. All the sayings and "Truths" are unimportant. So what is left for the word-minded universalist is an empty balloon.

As with many others on their spiritual journey, I have had a Taoist-Buddhist period. I acquired a ten foot shelf of literature. I took workshops in Tai Chi and Schiatsu. I participated in a Shinran ekoji, chanted the Namu-Amida-Butsu. I concluded that this is not me. I am not sure what great Truths I got. I suspect, to use a term of Fox's, that what we get, if we get anything, are "notions," that its all in the head and not in the heart.

Perhaps I do not know what I incorporated or what has become operational in my life. In retrospect there are three impacts of which I am aware. None of them comes from the standard literature.

The first is a phrase from a Chinese detective story written in the T'ang dynasty. A magistrate encounters a Taoist hermit who says: "Why shouldn't Magistrate Lo maintain a fox shrine, foxes are an integral part of universal life. Their world is as important or unimportant as ours. And just as there exist special affinities between two humans, so some human beings are linked to a special animal." The phrase "their world is as important or unimportant as ours" has become a general working principle for me, and it has made my life easier and more comfortable.

The second is a Zen parable. An older and younger monk are on a trip to an abbey for further instruction. On the way they encounter a slough in front of which a young woman is hesitating. Without much ado the older monk picks her up, carries her across, and releases her. Then he and the young monk continue their way. After some time the young monk berates the older for his actions. When he has finished, the older monk says: "Oh I see you are still carrying that woman. I put her down more than an hour ago." A great parable, very liberating, and again, a working principle for me and for others too.

The third has nothing to do with books, parables, rituals, or the usual basic paraphernalia of religions. It was an experience at the Buddhist temple of Borobudur in central Java. I understood what a spiritual journey is all about, from living in the phenomenal world to the satori at the end of the pilgrimage. After our return from Indonesia I meditated on this experience every night for several months. None of this means that I am a Taoist, Zen disciple, or Buddhist.

I once tested in Friends Meeting a suggestion that visualizing Buddha would be a good way of centering during meditation. I imagined bright-colored scenes, trying images of Buddha seated and recumbent. Suddenly, like a railroad semaphore, there fell into view an image of Christ crucified, a sort of primitive suffering Christ of the kind I had seen in Mexico. Startled, I mentally blotted it out. Just as I got Buddha back in focus, the Christ image descended again. After several more attempts, with the same results, I gave up.

The moral of this experience seemed to me quite clear. I realized that basically I never would be a Buddhist. The main thrust of the

message was that I could not repudiate my heritage. It would not go away. I had to come to terms with it, not by trying to obliterate it, but by resurrecting it. This I have proceeded to do in a search for a new Christ who, as in Fox's case, will speak to my condition.

Christ and Christianity will not go away. Stressing one's open mindedness and acceptance of other world religions does not resolve the issue. I recall with what gusto Friends sing the old time hymns at Friends General Conference. It does not go away. I have come to the conclusion that so-called non-Christian Friends are a chimera. If they want a label to characterize themselves, it should be other than Friends. Without its Christian base and tradition, the Religious Society of Friends simply is not its original self. We can acknowledge the existence, significance, and worth of other religions, but unless one gives oneself to one of them with a complete, whole-hearted and whole-souled commitment, they cannot be us.

***A Unifying Influence in the Society of Friends:
Quakers and Christ***

(Universalist, February 2002, 64/13)

Alec Davison

Early Friends sought to rediscover primitive Christianity. From their own spiritual experiences they struggled to lay aside as many of the accretions of the orthodox church as they were inspired to and then start again with the bare texts of the gospels. They rejected all dogma, creed, liturgy and sacraments—for they saw that the whole of life was sacramental. Silence was the threshold through which they now approached the Light. This was the Light of God that Jesus himself experienced—the eternal Light; they saw it as the ever-present, universal Christ that lives beyond the historic Jesus and is a power for all people throughout all time.

Early Friends intuited what the findings of the last forty years of extensive biblical research are confirming. The Jesus of history is very different from the Christ of the church. The quest *of* Friends today is for the religion of Jesus not the religion in Jesus. Quakers have always been people of the Jesus movement, not the Christian church. They recognised Jesus as a supreme aspect of the ‘face’ of God but saw that each of us can also reflect the face of God, for that Christ spirit—the universal Light of God—is within us all.

Today there are many who are becoming Quakers, as well as those who have long been with Friends, who are rejecting the whole of the Bible as too great a stumbling block for credible belief. Yet Friends have always, with discernment, accepted the truth from wherever it may come and the new understandings of modern biblical scholarship can open breathtaking new vistas on the Source and Impulse of our Quaker/Christian origins. There is a wind of change.

Jesus Saw the Kingdom of God as a Round Table

For the story of beginnings is new minted. First there were the people of Jesus, followers of a charismatic Jew, preacher, healer and prophet, an illiterate Galilean peasant with a vision to universalise Judaism. He saw the Kingdom of God as a round table, as it were, where all humanity were to feast together as the children of God—women and men, the sick and the healthy, the poor and the rich, gentile and outcast, oppressor Roman and oppressed Jew. His ethical and moral teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are unequalled. But his impolitic disturbance amongst the temple money-changers at a time of Passover seemed to threaten rebellion; it united secular and religious authorities to kill him. In life Jesus had taught through memorable but paradoxical parables and aphorisms. Never being able to write any of them down himself, some of these Sayings of Jesus were collected by others, to sustain the momentum between Jews keen on reform, and circulated during the years immediately following his death. It is this gospel of Jesus in the context of his ‘unchurched’ life which can most speak today.

The New Testament Writers: Men of Imagination

Paul's profound conversion experience, and his later mission to proclaim Jesus beyond Judaea to the gentiles, impelled him to construct a theology of the Jesus movement. As he had never known Jesus nor had access to any of the Sayings documents, what he created was from his own imagination and creativity. His first letters, about 55 CE, are the earliest remaining texts. Following political uprisings, the destruction of the temple and the collapse of Judaism, about 70 CE, the future of the Jesus movement could only be within the gentile world. So the story needed new forms of communication.

Mark was now also to draw upon his own creativity and write an imaginative narrative; it has neither nativity story nor resurrection. He might have known the historic Jesus; Matthew and Luke did not. But with Mark's story before them and each with a copy of the Sayings of Jesus to hand they independently invented their own narrative stories, each from a different perspective—Matthew about 90 CE and Luke about 115 CE. Literal historic truth was not as important to them as it might be to us; they were concerned with spirit and symbol and faith, being keen to speak to the fresh developments of the new movement. Nativity and resurrection, ascension and atonement, miracle and sacrifice are all part of the archetypal heroic quest, whose psychological pattern is buried deep within us all, and as true or false as Hamlet, Bilbo Baggins or King Arthur are true or false. But not more so. John's gospel, about 95 CE, is a metaphysical meditation on the meaning of the life of Jesus, and mostly in his own words. The book of Acts and the letters of the apostles continued to be written well into the second century.

The Ultimate Blasphemy—and Our Task Today

Each embellishment has stepped further from the spirit of the historic Jesus, culminating in the adoption of Christianity as the faith of the Roman Empire, and its ultimate blasphemy of crucifying the spirit with the nails of dogma, creed, patriarchy and power. Our task today, as was that of early Friends, is to return again to the Source.

Are You A Yeshuan?
(*Universalist Friends*, Spring 1995, 24/15)

Kingdon W. Swayne

In discussions about religion with people who hold other viewpoints, we Quaker universalists too often find ourselves in the position of saying, "But my conception of God differs from yours in that . . ." or "When I use the word 'Christian' I mean . . ." Neither party is willing to give up the word. In more disputatious times that deadlock led to dreadful wars.

I gave up the word "God" some years ago, in favor of a concept of the life of the spirit rooted in the great nineteenth-century discoveries about the nature of human beings. We are the tool-using, abstraction-manipulating, super-territorial great apes. Our attachment to territory requires of us a hostility to alien clans, and a self-sacrificial love for members of our own clan.

Religious leaders have always understood that the way to the good life is to sublimate the hostility and strengthen the love. This is such a hard lesson that unseen powers have to be called on as persuaders or enforcers. The successful clans are those that have selectively bred into succeeding generations a willingness to obey unseen powers. The universality of belief in unseen, spiritual powers testifies to its key role in survival. The unbelievers have died out.

I believe in spiritual power because I feel it at work in myself. But I believe modern anthropology provides quite adequate bases for accepting that spiritual power as something innately human, without any need to treat it as superhuman.

There was a time when I thought of myself as a post-Christian, a child of a western culture so intertwined with Christianity that to be western meant in some sense to be Christian. That thought may be valid when one considers the arts, for example. Serious western art and music are simply unintelligible if one doesn't know the Bible and the Mass. But I have come to believe that calling myself a post-Christian is a cop-out when the subject is theology.

Some light came to me when I recently read a description of an ideal Australian Quakerism written in the 1970's by David Hodgkin, presiding clerk and later senior staff person of Australia Yearly Meeting. The Quakerism he described was impeccably universalist, except for the part where he declared that Friends should call ourselves Christian because we draw our understanding from the life, teaching, and person of Jesus "above all others."

I believe universalists should insist on detaching Jesus the person from the idea of Christ, and therefore from Christianity, the ism of Christ. Christ the Messiah is a Jewish idea. The Jews believe the Messiah hasn't come yet. It is their concept, and we are wrong to steal it from them. I accept their view that Jesus of Nazareth should not be associated with the word "Christ."

Surely Friends should leave the word "Christian" to those who believe Jesus was the Christ, those who have built a Trinitarian religion around Jesus the Christ and the only begotten Son of God.

Perhaps Friends for whom Jesus of Nazareth is the role model (and I hope that is most of us) need another word to describe themselves. I began the search with the thought that we might give to the word "Jesus" the same ending others give to "Christ." But "Jesusian" sounds awful. I turned to Aramaic. "Yeshuan" sounds a lot better. Is there magic in ethnic authenticity?

For me there is enough magic to make me willing to declare myself the first nontheistic Yeshuan. I would welcome into my "clan" people of a similar view, as well as theistic Yeshuans who accept the God of Yeshua but not the Christian distortions proclaimed by the traditional church.

Is There an “Alternative Christianity”?
(*Universalist Friends*, Spring 1992, 18/11)

William Kriebel

I feel that someone needs to be saying that there is an “alternative Christianity.” I was surprised at the idea that I might not be considered Christian, since I was brought up in that tradition. I accept a broader interpretation of Christian belief than do orthodox Christian Quakers, for whom authority comes from the Bible, and for whom Jesus as Christ is the divine Guide. Orthodox Christians don’t appear to acknowledge the difference between the religion of Jesus and the religions about Jesus. I believe there are many others like me. I don’t see why anyone believing in the religion of Jesus can properly be excluded from the Christian community—any more than orthodox Christian Quakers who do not observe the outward sacrament of communion should be excluded from the Christian community by the churches that do.

Some might say I have ill-defined grounds for certainty because I profess to accept the leadings of God’s spirit and the teachings of Jesus, but honestly do not experience the Spirit as “Jesus Christ.” While I honor Jesus’ teachings and seek their meaning for me, I feel that the Spirit in our midst is God—his God.

As to the Bible’s authority, I believe we can find Truth in scripture under the guidance of God’s Spirit, as did early Friends. The Bible is a witness, written by many different persons, but is not the Source.

Friends who seek God but don’t claim “Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior” are sometimes assumed to be both humanist and/or universalist. Am I humanist? I don’t think so. The universe requires a creator. The Light is in all of us human beings, but who has put it there? I see myself as a universalist in a special sense of the word, believing, as did early Friends, that God’s “universal and saving light” is at work within human beings all over the world—and according to Quaker doctrine was there before the so-called “Christ Event.” I am not “universalist” in the sense that I seek or accept an eclectic

blend of the tenets of other world faiths. Like many others, I grew up in the Christian tradition and was taught the religion of Jesus—his experience and teaching of God’s will—as part of our culture. I can’t make myself feel at home in culturally alien faiths.

I believe that we can discern what the “kernel” religion of Jesus was. The early Christians told the Christ story and the religion was named Christianity. The concept of Jesus as the divine Christ (meaning the Anointed, the Messiah) found in scripture was promulgated as the theologically correct thinking of the early church. How fervently the writer of I John insists on this! This interpretation was later enforced by third- and fourth-century councils, which exiled as heretics respected scholars who thought differently.

Christians also had to accept as the meaning of the cross the belief that God was the kind of God who demanded the agonizing, bloody sacrifice of a human being as a condition for saving the human race. God so loved the world that he needed to do that? Whatever Jesus may have meant about the sacrifice of the one for the many, need it have meant that? Henry Cadbury said that whenever he saw the Christian cross he thought of it as a plus sign—going beyond what is required. Again, the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus.

The teachings of Jesus are themselves the Good News. They speak to the world, not just to Christians. Need they be linked with the dogma about him? As Janet Scott, an English Friend, asked, “Is this connection necessarily permanent?” Powerful insights are expressed throughout the Bible, and some of them feel so authentic they raise the hair on the back of the neck. Christianity has given rise to wonderful art and music which lift our spirits. Throughout history, God’s spirit has been unmistakably present among human beings. I have experienced in some silence-based Meetings for Worship, especially in memorial Meetings, the overwhelming, loving presence of the Spirit in a silence which is almost physically heavy, as though a great chord has just been played. Beyond doubt the whole Meeting feels it together. Once we have experienced this, we know the existence of the living God, and nothing that ever happens can take this certainty away from us.

Christian or Not?
(*Universalist*, July 1979, 2/25)

Caroline Series

“Yes, I am a Christian”. Visions of Sunday School and pious little boys refusing to join the peeing contest behind the fence. Feeling safe, singing hymns to Jesus. Crusades and pogroms. The shocking particularity:

And what also disciples of heresy and of the heretics or schismatics . . . have taught or compiled, we acknowledge is to be not merely rejected but excluded from the whole Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church and with its authors and the adherents of its authors to be damned in the inextricable shackles of anathema for ever. (1)

So if I say I am not Christian, do I thereby deny all that is right and good? Am I selfish and indolent, damning the traditions of the past, undermining society, upsetting the status quo? Why not let things be and stop asking questions? Why not say you are one of us, because they are wicked and if you're not one of them and not one of us, then who are you, anyway?

Last time I was in church I read through the creed. There's really only one line I'm sure about: “And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life”. However you turn it around, can one line make you Christian?

Well, you say, give or take a few lines, I suppose I agree with you, that is a stumbling block for me also. But at least you agree that Christ was a great teacher, greater than all the others?

Listen to a story. It's a story about the Buddha, but perhaps Jesus would have liked it. Sariputta, one of Buddha's disciples, came to Buddha and said:

“Such faith have I, Lord, that methinks there never has been nor will be nor is now any other greater or wiser than the Blessed One”. “Of course, Sariputta,” is the reply, “you have known all the Buddha's of the past?” “No, Lord”. “Well then,

you know those of the future?" "No, Lord". "Then at least you know me and have penetrated my mind thoroughly?" "Not even that, Lord". "Then why, Sariputta, are your words so grand and bold?" (2)

Jesus' teachings weren't all new, either. Five hundred years earlier, Buddha had taught like this: "If robbers should attack you and cut you in pieces with a two-handed saw, limb by limb, and one of you should feel hate, such a one is not a follower of my gospel".

And yet—What is that strange attraction in Jesus' teachings? Sometimes I think I can't call myself Christian because of their impossibly high standards. I know I shall fail before I begin. But again I am caught, because in the very act of bothering to reject them, I admit that I am bound. "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God". (3)

Recently I came across the Gospel of Thomas. I don't know how widely known this document is; the only version I have been able to find now in print is in an appendix to a book on the Apocryphal Gospels by Hennecke. (4) The Gospel is a manuscript, written in Coptic, found in Egypt in 1945. It is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus, some very similar to sayings and parables in the Synoptic Gospels, and some quite new. Scholars may have their doubts about the origins of these sayings, but to me they summarize the heart of Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God. Listen to this:

Jesus said: "If those who lead you say to you, 'Lo, the Kingdom is in heaven', then the birds of the air will precede you. If they say to you: 'It is in the sea', then the fish will precede you.

But the Kingdom is within you and without you. If you know yourselves, then you will be known and you will know that you are the sons of the Living Father." (5)

And it almost answers my question for me. You remember in the Gospels, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" (6) And they answer, "John the Baptist, a prophet, Elijah". "But who say ye that I am?" And Peter answers, "Thou art the Christ", and then in Matthew follows the passage where Jesus gives Peter the keys of heaven and

hell, and establishes the rock which is the foundation of the Catholic Church. But in Thomas we have another version:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Make a comparison to me and tell me who I am like." Simon Peter said to him: "Thou art like a righteous angel." Matthew said to him: "Thou art like a wise man of understanding." Thomas said to Him: "Master, my mouth will not at all be capable of saying whom Thou art like." Jesus said, "I am not thy Master, because thou hast become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out."
(7)

In the end, I believe, the name you call it doesn't matter very much.

The Church . . . is nothing other than the company of those whom God has called out of the world and the worldly spirit, to walk in his light and life. . . . Aside from this Church there can be no salvation, because this Church comprehends all, regardless of what nation, kindred, tongue or people they may be, who have become obedient to the holy light and testimony of God in their hearts. Although they may be outwardly unknown to and distant from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words, . . . yet they have become sanctified by their obedience and cleansed from the evil of their ways. (8)

So follow your path, Christian or Quaker, Jew or Hindu, Sufi or Bahai, according to your light. But don't get tied up in names; be ready to let go or to accept what comes. As the Buddhists say, you need a raft to cross the ocean of life, but the man who goes on carrying his raft when he gets to the other side is foolish.

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1. From the *Decretum Gelasianum*, a 6th century catalogue of the accepted canon of the Gospels. See 4 p. 49.
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4. Hennecke. *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. 1, SCM Press. 1973.
5. Thomas. Logion 3.

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A Quaker Universalist Looks at Christmas
(Universalist, June 1999, 56/14)

Elizabeth Béguin

The annual celebration of Christmas has increasingly become a problem for me. How am I to meet the exuberant spirits of all around me, based, so often upon a vague confidence that something unusual and of benefit to this world happened around 2000 years ago? I did not realise that through the past 60 years of my own life, while turning so much over in my mind, something has been forming, culminating in a sort of breakthrough—that is, for me.

Years ago. I read the biography of Florence Nightingale, known for her efforts while nursing British troops during the Crimean war. I was, at the time, myself a budding nurse, full of enterprise and enthusiasm. But reflecting on her impact upon the authorities under whom she had to work, I concluded that this impact and its resulting influence on the career of nursing in general, was not on account of her individual initiative alone but also because the impressed were themselves ready to receive her proposals.

I have applied this idea to many leaders and reformers, including the person and conduct of Jesus. I find that his teaching and outlook were reflected in the thinking of his contemporaries who gathered round him. His impact was in the nature of a match setting fire to dry kindling. This influence could be described as the action of the Holy Spirit. which I have always understood as 'breathing' in mankind throughout the world and throughout its history—and so, also *through the person of Jesus of Nazareth*.

For me, this man was an expression of that spirit whose influence

draws all life along the path of evolution which, in time, will overflow the limits of technical achievement, dear to so-called 'civilisation'. It has to do with something larger, more mature than inventions, labour-saving devices or interplanetary travel. Nor can I explain it. But 'It' is present in every nook and cranny of existence, surviving the troubles, inequalities or disasters of each individual and every age.

Clearly, there was a man living in the region of Palestine around 30 CE who left an impact of uplifting goodness, confidence and direction on his immediate contemporaries and, through them, on a great part of our world of the twentieth century. But I don't think it should be called 'Christianity'. It is something much wider, described by John Woolman as that "principle . . . placed in the human mind which, in different places and ages hath had different names".

So, concerning Christmas, I can no longer accept as historically true those brief accounts contained in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The poetic, beautiful stories of Bethlehem with its stable, shepherds, angels and wise men are somehow necessary, or at least meaningful, to millions of people. That is another subject. I, however, can no longer believe that it ever happened like that. If at all. But if legend has produced the nativity stories of Jesus, I receive them as symbols of mankind's need to embellish the extraordinary person that was Jesus with a miraculous birth, offering a fitting start to a life that has left an indelible mark on the history of mankind. Far more meaningful, to me, is the ever-repeated term 'Spirit of Christmas', more universally accepted, carrying with it Santa, sleigh bells and coloured lights while pervading even the turmoil of gift-giving, the glittering tinsel and those cards with their pre-printed messages of good will—but certainly not limited to the miraculous birth of a middle-eastern baby laid to rest in a manger some 2000 years ago.

For the whole story of Jesus is an episode in the unfolding evolutionary drama of creation and belongs not just to Christendom but to the whole universe of which we are a part.

CHAPTER 5:
UNIVERSALISM AND NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

Universalism and Inter-Faith
(*Universalist*, May 1986, 17/2)

Norman Richardson

What is 'Religion'? The many definitions include binding together, belief in God or in the supernatural, a system of faith, conversion, worship, ritual, creed, but the core of religion might be seen as the search for relationships. This search is not only intellectual and rational; it includes the intuitive faculties, commitment, the act of loving and believing. It may use science, theology, mysticism, poetry, drama, myth, music, art, dance, symbol and sacrament in the effort to find truth and experience reality. Religion is an activity particular to the human species, and the classifications and symbols of speech and writing which have been the stepping stones of the evolution of thought are the marks of humanity.

The need for us to relate extends beyond interperson communion to embrace the whole of the phenomenal world and its underlying causes. Religious search may lead to dualism, to a split between the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the sacred. We may interpret this world as but a stepping stone to the hereafter, and our everyday experiences as illusion which will one day be swept away to see clearly, face to face rather than as through a glass, darkly. Alternatively a conviction may grow that there is a unity behind a diversity, and that the created phenomena are expressions of pure energy, or love, or are the handiwork of God. This esoteric conviction is present in mysticism, and the direct experience of the 'eternal now' moment overcomes the strength of our habitual belief in the absolute

reality of time and space, past and future, for there is a recognition that the one is part of the whole, of the world as a unity.

The religious search is universal, and the universalist knows that no one religion can claim a monopoly of the truth. Truth is not a possession—it is an understanding of what is, and ‘what is’ is always in a state of change. Relationship is dynamic interplay, never frozen or static. Through fear, however, we are guilty of trying to encapsulate and fixate life in a code of words, but life can never be trapped for objective study. As has been discovered in physics, the observer and the observed are in direct relationship and affect each other. The wave and the particle are different, and yet the same, depending on the observer’s frame of reference. The universalist does not expect a final revelation within a world of dynamic change. There are unique perceptions and moments of enlightenment within the historical framework but such revelations are not exclusive if they are in the truth. The many religious approaches, arising from varying environments, may each contain some validity, and each facet might, by communication and communion, serve to mutually enrich the other.

There is, however, great danger in religion when the adherent uses it to bolster egotism, selfishness or the need for security. The fundamental spirituality within a faith can be obscured by the superficial ramifications of the outward trappings, and overcome by the lust for power or the demands for security resulting from negative and fearful mental processes. So in the name of religion we see the pure and holy rubbing shoulders with exclusivity, intolerance, cruelty, power, lust and monstrous evil.

From the belief that no faith can rightly claim a monopoly of truth it follows that a universalist shows certain characteristics in the approach to other people:

1. Non-exclusive.
2. Respectful of the faiths of others.
3. Ready to communicate in the hope of mutual enrichment.
4. Not defensive or superior. (There is no need to see other ways

as an attack, or to insist that other ways are really the same as our right way but dressed up differently.)

5. Ready to listen, humble, open to new light from other sources.
6. Free to reinterpret, develop and grow beyond the superficialities of word and dogma.

In experience of ecumenical activity and inter-faith links we recognise other seekers, like ourselves, are growing and changing, busy reinterpreting the outward to arrive at the underlying meaning of the faith to which the environment has accustomed them. Superficial understanding will move towards a more spiritual understanding, the outward will be drawn towards the inward, the objective and the subjective will synthesize. For many the light and the darkness will remain opposed, good and evil will be objectified, and the world will remain divided between right and wrong. So often there are barriers to communication and understanding. A firm belief in final revelation, as held by many Christians and Muslims, causes a universalist to be seen as a betrayer of truth, as with so many other rigidly held beliefs whether it be salvation, Unitarianism, Trinitarians, the physical resurrection, and a multitude of doctrinal statements. But in all faiths there are many depths to be plumbed and meanings to be worked through, and in the process reconciliation can come.

There are two levels of interfaith activity and a universalist is likely to wish to explore both. It is relatively easy to explore intellectually into a faith, to learn about its history, evolution, belief structure, rituals, size, geographical distribution, etc. There may be aspects uncovered by such study which speak to one's needs, and comparisons between different faiths can help in understanding. Such search inevitably extends into meeting with adherents of other faiths, participating in discussion groups, interchanging ideas, and even being an onlooker at services for worship. There is a big difference, however, between being in the audience and actually participating in worship in the manner of another faith. Blocks to such joint worship can be considerable and too difficult to overcome. The ceremonies, ritual and traditions of another faith may be too strange for the heart to resonate to a spiritual

language to which one is unaccustomed. Some would say that without full participation one will never be able to fully comprehend the inner meanings and values of any faith.

It is understandable that the universalist will wonder whether shared interfaith is possible on neutral ground. It is, but it requires careful selection of the programme and the resultant worship may, for some, appear as watered down and innocuous and lacking in full-blooded quality and charisma. So shared worship may flourish best on the basis of silence, listening and the exercise of great sensitivity.

Interfaith can be challenging and uncomfortable. One's own preconceptions are inevitably questioned and one can be fearful of undermining the faith of others. Religious conviction lies at the centre of motivation and to open up matters of such importance to the psyche can cause serious difficulties. But by venturing into matters of such concern we and others can come out of the experience with greater strength, perhaps having discarded some of the non-essentials and the dross, and having experienced what it is to die to some of our own egotistical leanings.

The Universal Nature of Jesus' Teaching
(*Universalist*, October 1996, 48/19)

Jim McDowell

The whole thrust of Jesus' teaching was, clearly, directed towards the objective of bringing about a dramatic transformation in human behaviour and the generation of a new social ethos. He held out the vision of a new social order in which people would live in convivial harmony with each other and with their creator and all of creation. He was, it seems, heralding no less than the quantum leap in human evolution which would occur when people, liberated from the bondage of ancient atavistic egoistic instincts, would come of age as the sentient, mature, caring custodians of creation on this planet.

Although speaking to his fellow Jews in the idiom of their religious heritage, his message obviously transcended prescriptive sectarian barriers, and was of vital significance for every human being, whether Jew or Gentile. It was a simple message which urged people to reject the dominance of self-seeking attitudes and desires and, in accordance with the divine will, let their lives be ruled by their inherent God-given capacity for altruism—he, however, took that principle of selflessness to the ultimate degree, urging his listeners to go the difficult extra mile and show love and tolerance also to those whom they regarded as enemies.

Parallels

Intriguingly, however, that message, which had its origins in Jesus' enlightened perception of the essential spirit of the teachings of the Torah, can be seen to have striking parallels in the enlightenment which led to the flowering of the great eastern religions, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, some five centuries earlier. Although differing in many respects in their manner of expression, each of these religions was centred upon, and illumined by, the ethos of self-abnegating altruism.

The Buddha taught that all the suffering and trials which beset humankind had their origin in subservience to the endless and insatiable demands of 'self', and that lasting happiness and fulfilment can only be achieved when self-centred and self-indulgent desires are overcome.

About the same time as the Buddha was teaching his unique message to his fellow Hindus in northern India, two new religious movements were coming into being in China. Taoism, based on the teaching of the philosopher Lao Tzu, and Confucianism, taught by K'ung Ch'ui (Confucius), were to become the main religions of that country.

Taoism was centred on the concept of Tao, 'The Way', a concept which is beyond description in human language, and which is also referred to as 'The One'—the entity or principle which created and which sustains the universe. Although in many respects very different from Buddhism, Taoism similarly taught self-effacement and

achievement of freedom from self-centred and covetous desires. The following passage from the Tao Te Ching, the recorded teachings of Lao Tzu, perhaps provides some insight into the essential principles of The Way:

He who has little will receive.

He who has much will be embarrassed.

Therefore the wise man becomes the example for the world.

He does not display himself; therefore he shines.

He does not praise himself; therefore he has merit.

He does not glory in himself; therefore he excels.

And because he does not compete, therefore no one in the world can compete with him:

Be humble and you will remain whole.

The similarity with Jesus' teachings is quite remarkable.

Confucianism, although perhaps involving subtly different emphases, is also centred upon Tao, and places primary emphasis on benevolence, and on morality which must be pursued for its own sake and not because of hope of reward. Self-interest is regarded as the most persistent and most insidious enemy of moral purpose. In the Confucian sense, the word 'benevolence' means much more than kindly behaviour. Confucius summed it up in the dictum "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire". So once again, half a world away and half a millennium distant from first century Palestine, we find an essential principle which also lay at the heart of Jesus' message.

We also find Confucius's definition of 'benevolence' echoed almost verbatim in the words of the great Rabbi Hillel (50 BCE—20 CE). When asked to summarise the teachings of the Torah as briefly as possible, he is said to have replied: "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary".

The same principle is also found in Hindu scripture. In the Bhagavad-Gita it is written that: "One who is free of desires, who has

given up all sense of proprietorship and is devoid of false ego—he alone can attain real peace”.

The *Adi Granth*, the scripture of the Sikh religion, which was brought into being five centuries ago by Guru Nanak in an effort to break down barriers between Hinduism and Islam, puts it succinctly: “Where self exists, God is not. Where God is, there is no self”.

Islam itself, of course, had come into being in the 7th century CE in the newly rich trading centre of Mecca, as a reaction against the rampant materialism and self-seeking greed which (not unlike our own situation today) was destroying the social fabric of the community.

A Universal Source

It seems, therefore, that there is that within the human makeup which is able intuitively to comprehend and respond to a universal source of all that is good and true. Throughout the world’s religions, that response has sought to awaken and liberate the inherent human potential for altruism. Regrettably, however, some of those religions have become prescriptively exclusive. That initial spark of enlightenment which brought them into being has been all but extinguished under a man-made accretion of theological conjecture, and by the clamour of ideological claims to a self-arrogated monopoly of ‘truth.’ ‘Self’, expressed in the form of sectarian self-centredness, has apparently prevailed.

It is perhaps ironic, and possibly somewhat embarrassing for some Christians, that the most effective practical exemplar of Jesus’ teachings in modern times should have been the Mahatma, Gandhi, a Hindu. . . . On the other hand, we can perhaps take heart from that example of the universality of the quintessential principle which John Woolman described:

There is a principle placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion, nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

Quaker Spirit and Buddhist Practice
(Universalist Friends, Winter 1993, 21/10)

Rhoda R. Gilman

“Why does a Quaker practice Buddhist meditation?” Few Friends ask the question directly, but it often hovers in the polite silences that punctuate a discussion.

Historically most Quakers have not denied that the Light can shine through the lens of another culture. As the past century has brought increasing interchange between East and West, general respect and understanding for Eastern religious philosophy has grown among westerners, and Quakers have not lagged behind. In fact, two women once active in my own Meeting (Twin Cities Friends) have been among those strongly drawn to Buddhism. One is Beverly White, who played a part in founding the Minnesota Zen Center, and another was Teresina Havens, who more than once offered workshops on Buddhism and Quakerism at Friends General Conference.

Through my many years of association with Friends, I have heard no instruction on how to meditate. Silent worship practiced in a group setting is somewhat different from individual meditation. But accounts of early Friends point clearly to the many hours of personal prayer that underlay the inspiration blossoming in Meeting for Worship. Somewhere along the road to a modern, secular society we have lost that habit—to our immense cost. And with it are gone whatever common practices or disciplines accompanied it.

One cannot hear the voice within over a constant stream of mental chatter. To listen, one must suspend the internal dialogue. Simple to say, but immensely hard to do! Friends sometimes discuss this, but what I find among Buddhists is the willingness to spend long hours working at it. Buddhist teachers of different paths have explored a wide range of techniques. Taken for granted is stillness of body as a preliminary to stillness of mind. Silence and inward looking are observed for days at a time. A lifetime of persistence is not considered too much.

It is easy to believe that early Friends found the path more direct and the process less difficult than we. Their pace of life was slower; their world was quieter. Moreover, we have been taught to prize intellect above all things. To shut off thought seems threatening—a rejection of everything we value most. Leaving ourselves open to the voice of the Other calls for a kind of humility that we have great difficulty with.

To begin returning regularly, in profound awareness, to the present moment with its opening on Inner Light may cost years of patient trial. Nevertheless, the rewards along the way are in proportion—gifts of tranquility, concentration, attraction to silence and simplicity, often improved health. In this strange, anxious time, when each of us dwells half in and half outside a nightmare of world destruction, those qualities can keep one sane. So it is not surprising that methods of meditation have mushroomed and that their devotees persist in ever-growing numbers.

The methods are rooted in all religions. Christianity itself has a long tradition of meditation. It was handed down from ancient gnostic sects and flowered again in the late Middle Ages. Mystics like Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Jacob Boehm, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* were among those who practiced it. In the late 17th century the tradition was picked up by George Fox and other early Friends. So the question still hovers: Why Buddhism?

The answer lies in parallels between Quaker and Buddhist attitudes. Historically, Buddhism grew out of the Yogic tradition of India. It was a method, a way of opening to the mystery of life—not a “religion” in the sense of set beliefs or dogmas. In the course of 2,500 years Buddhism has developed as many variations as Christianity has. Today in some of its forms it is little different from any organized religious sect. There are elaborate temples, venerated clergy, and thousands of followers who live in faith that the performance of rituals will bring them earthly pleasures or take them to the “Pure Land.”

But other Buddhist groups remain close to the simplicity of the original teachings. Starting from the premise that all life is subject to

time and therefore to impermanence, they call for nonattachment—to goods, to comfort, to honors, to rank, to power. They call for “right livelihood,” that is, making a living in a fashion that does not harm others.

Unlike most Hindu forms of Yoga, Buddhism discounts the personal transmission of enlightenment. There are no gurus. As one Buddhist aphorism puts it: When the teacher points to the moon, the student must look at the moon, not at the teacher’s finger. The Buddha’s deathbed message to his followers was, “Be lamps unto yourselves.” There could be no clearer statement of individual responsibility for seeking the Inward Light.

Having no jealous god to defend nor any creed to propagate, Buddhists have launched no religious wars or persecutions. Moreover, their teachings of peace and brotherhood extend beyond the human race. The instruction to compassion embraces all sentient beings, known and unknown. In theory at least, this fact puts Buddhists several steps ahead of Judeo-Christians in facing up to our need for honoring and preserving the environment.

The 20th century has not been kind to Buddhism. In country after country authoritarian regimes have tried to stamp out its influence. The world tide of western industrialism has carried eastward the corrosive forces of skepticism and materialism. War and revolution have created tensions that backfired against non-participants. In Vietnam, where Buddhists actively sought reconciliation among their countrymen, they were scorned by both sides. Many died, and their leaders are still imprisoned or exiled. In secluded Tibet, where the influence of Hinduism and ancient tribal beliefs had produced an ornate Buddhist theocracy, Chinese conquerors engaged in savage suppression.

These events have decimated Buddhism in its long-time homelands. Fleeing for their lives, Buddhist leaders have dispersed around the world. With them has come the spread of Buddhist practice in the West. Measured in numbers, it seems only a trickle, but the spiritual and intellectual current is strong.

Throughout its history, Buddhism has adapted readily to new

surroundings. Stimulated by western seekers who find it a path toward experiencing the sacred in day-to-day life, it has already begun to drop the roadblocks of cultural parochialism. In westernized groups like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the Insight Meditation Society, such customs as robes, shaved heads, and countless prostrations have disappeared. Leadership has been opened to women. While respected, the authority of the teacher is always subject to question, and lay membership, which holds no status in the East, has become an important element in western Buddhism. It is not without significance that one of the leading publications of American Buddhism is called *Inquiring Mind*.

There have been failures and setbacks. Sometimes authenticity is equated with strict tradition; sometimes the search for the sacred is confused with peace of mind or psychotherapy. But there is a terrible hunger in the world today for a sense of meaning that reaches beyond the cold calculations of science. On a shrinking planet threatened with destruction, dogmas that claim absolute and exclusive truth can only lead to division and conflict. Never has the need been so great for bold expression of the universal principals voiced by the mystics of every religion—what Aldous Huxley called “the perennial philosophy.”

But we must have more than intellectual expression. Only through direct personal experience can the Mystery assume reality. Only through actually touching the Spirit, however fleetingly, can we truly believe it enough to live by it. Both Quakers and Buddhists have much to offer humankind at this crossroad. Both are desperately needed—Friends for their reliance on love and community and their firm commitment to conscience, and Buddhists for the compassion that includes all nature, as well as for their disciplined struggle toward a clearer view of the Inner Light.

Light from the East

(*Universalist*, February 2005, 73/10)

Jim McDowell

Amongst the many philosophies which have provided guidance as to how life should be lived, one which might be of unique interest to universalists is the teaching of the Chinese philosopher K'ung Ch'iu (552-479 BCE), known in the West as Confucius. His teachings, recorded in *The Analects* (1) provided a philosophy for living which became the state religion of China and for over two thousand years shaped the political government, social organisation, educational system and individual conduct in a nation which comprised almost one quarter of the world's population.

That situation was disrupted in 1912 when a nationalist revolt in China overthrew the ruling dynasty and established a republic in which the rise of a Communist government resulted in determined, but never fully successful, attempts to eliminate the practice of all religions. However, in the closing decades of the 20th century, the complexion of the government changed, resulting in more tolerant attitudes towards religion. As a result, it seems that Confucianism, which had continued to flourish in the island territories of Taiwan and Hong Kong, is now making a come-back on the Chinese mainland.

Confucius

Born in 552 or 551 BCE in the dukedom of Lu in North East China (now Shandong province), the son of a noble family which had fallen upon hard times and was relatively poor, Confucius was keen on learning and received a good education. He is recorded as saying: "I was of humble station when young. That is why I am skilled in many menial things". Like other young men of the ruling class, he became a junior government official, but soon took up his true calling as a teacher.

The social order in Confucius's China was clearly defined. The ruling classes, referred to as 'gentlemen', formed the framework of all aspects of the government executive. Below this came the 'small man',

not of the ruling class but possibly either skilled artisans or involved in some aspects of routine administration. The mass of the population, mainly farm workers, were referred to as the 'common people'. The basis of government was 'The Decree of Heaven' and it was recognised that Heaven sought continuously to promote the welfare of the common people. This objective became the central principle of Confucianism. As Confucius put it:

Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments and the common people will stay out of trouble, but will have no sense of shame.

Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.

The Teachings

Confucius's philosophy was clear and unequivocal. His teaching was concerned solely with the way life should be lived in the here and now. The primary and only aim in life should be to strive continuously to be as good a person as possible. His message centred upon three basic concepts: *tao*—the Way, *te*—virtue and *jen*—benevolence. The 'Way' is a difficult concept to define clearly—it deals with an awareness of, and response to, that which we automatically realise to be true. The Way is the continuous pursuit of that which is true—it is the pathway of recognised truth.

Virtue is the capacity for moral goodness—Confucius saw it is a gift from Heaven. As he put it: "Heaven is the author of the virtue that is in me". It is a gift possessed by everyone but, regrettably, rarely fully exercised.

Benevolence, as Confucius made clear, is not an inbuilt human quality but is one which one must adopt and strive continuously to cultivate. Confucius's definition of benevolence was, like all of his teachings, simple and straightforward: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire". However, he pointed out that, in following this approach, one must also make sure that one is clear as to exactly what others want, or do not want, done to them. This approach requires the other component of benevolence—*chung*, which

means 'doing one's best'. When asked about benevolence, Confucius said, simply, "Love your fellow men; employ the labour of the common people in the right seasons" i.e., at appropriate times in the year when they were not busy with work on the farm.

Benevolence—essentially based on overcoming the self—lay at the centre of his teachings. He said; "If, for a single day, a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider benevolence to be his". The rites were a set of rules for behaviour which had been handed down over past centuries. The exercise of benevolence, as Confucius pointed out, also required the exercise of courage, not the aggressive courage of the warrior but the courage to pursue morality. As he put it, "Faced with what is right, to leave it undone shows a lack of courage".

The primary basis of Confucius's teaching rested on the Chinese belief, held for many centuries before his time, in the Decree of Heaven, which enjoined everyone to be moral. Heaven was the agency which controlled human destiny and since no one could, by their own effort, change their allotted destiny, he taught that they should, instead, concentrate their effort on those aspects of their life which were within their control. Confucius's message centred on the pursuit of morality because simply making such an effort was in itself a moral action and in accord with the Decree of Heaven, whether or not the effort was fully successful.

When asked about death, he said: "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" It is plain that his teachings were unequivocally centred upon this life in the here and now and that he took an agnostic attitude as to the possibility of survival after death. He made it plain that since one cannot be guaranteed any reward, either in this life or in any imagined afterlife, morality and benevolence towards all of one's fellow human beings, especially towards those in greatest need, must be pursued *solely for its own sake*, rather than because of hope of some ultimate reward.

In contrast to those of other religions, Confucius's teachings are free from any speculation as to the nature of the Supreme Entity which he referred to as Heaven. He simply accepted that Heaven existed and

was the all-powerful ultimate authority which lay far beyond the scope of human comprehension. He accepted that Heaven was the source of a Decree for living which embodied all that he recognised as being good and true, and which centred primarily upon the requirement to treat all others as one would wish to be treated.

In contrast to other religions, Confucius's teaching relates only to this life in the here and now and is unique in the simplicity and profundity of its message. It makes no attempt to define the nature of the Supreme Entity and, unlike other religions, it neither envisages reincarnation in a series of future lives nor reward or punishment in an afterlife.

Confucian thought thus differs profoundly from that of the other main religions. It has its sole basis in recognition of the Decree of Heaven, which enjoined that morality and benevolence must be pursued in all aspects of one's life *purely for their own sake* and not because of any essentially self-concerned desire to escape punishment or achieve reward in some imagined afterlife

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Pacifism in World Religions: A Hindu-Quaker Link (*Universalist*, February 2001, 61/21)

Edward Owen

One traditional value which has a pervading influence on the way in which Hindus look at life is *ahimsa*. This is usually translated as non-violence. Its implications are far wider and more positive than this. Hindus have respect for all living creatures and this probably derives from another Indian religious group, the Jains.

In the Jain tradition *ahimsa* is the real expression of the whole way of life and attitude to life. It finds its way into the

modern expression of Hinduism through associated practices like vegetarianism. Not all Hindus are vegetarian although there is a high regard for it and vegetarian food is thought of as being more pure.

Gandhi certainly made *ahimsa* one of the pillars of his outlook. He went so far as to reinterpret any aspects of Hindu life which conflicted with this principle or even dismissed them as being unauthentic. In using the term in this sense, not merely as a negative, quietist sentiment of not doing harm, but as a positive virtue informing all relationships, he extended this view into the political sphere.

As Quakers we are able to unite with the action of Gandhi. Isaac Penington [quoting Isaiah—ed.] spoke of “nation not lifting up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”. Like Gandhi, Friends have sought to give practical expression to their faith. Action has taken many forms and has included the relief of suffering, public protest and the building up of institutions of peace.

So within our universalism we can see firm links between our Peace Testimony and the Hindu concept of *ahimsa*, the principles that unite both the Eastern religions and western ideal of peace.

Our Universal Religions

(*Universalist*, February 2005, 73/14)

Ihsan Rasmy

In the present climate of division and fear, Jews and Muslims in Israel and Palestine, and Christians and Muslims elsewhere, are eyeing one another with suspicion and hate. Some from both sides are arguing that Muslims and Christians need not be enemies but the fanatics and extremists on both sides are keen to place a wedge between the two religions, thus highlighting the exclusiveness in their man-made structures. The Christian exclusivists say that Jesus Christ is the only saviour of humanity, because God was incarnated in

him, and the Muslim extremists say that Islam is the only acceptable religion to God. Both sayings embody an exclusive belief, but both religions in their original form do not sanction exclusivity.

Against these arguments I remember how in the past I started my education at a Quaker school in Sidon, Lebanon, and I was raised in a Muslim family with a Sufi spirit. My father prayed and fasted Ramadan, but he did not hesitate to leave his children to the charge of a Christian nanny, a girl whose parents lived on the mountains of Lebanon. This had a far reaching effect on our upbringing as it planted in us the seed of universalism and destroyed the religious walls between us and others. Muslims and Christians became our brothers and sisters, and the absence of barriers manifested very poignantly when we had our scholastic summer vacation and, with our mother, elected to be the guests of our Christian hosts, the family of our nanny, in their orchard at Jezzine.

Jezzine was an enchanting large Christian village high up on the Lebanese mountains east of Sidon, where the air was refreshingly cool and dry during the summer months, which made it an ideal place to spend a summer vacation. It was well known for its 'Shalouf' or waterfall, which poured down into a basin around which the local inhabitants and summer visitors gathered to enjoy a picnic in idyllic surroundings. I remember roaming the terraced orchard along the slopes of the mountain with the son of our hosts, and also his habit of crossing himself before jumping from one terrace down to the other. But what remained strongly in my memory is how, at nightfall, all of us gathered around a small fire over which water was being boiled for a cup of tea or coffee to drink after a simple meal. After the meal we sat chatting under a limitless sky so crowded with innumerable stars, sometimes surrounding the moon, which made one feel, in the stillness of the evening, a sense of heaven. It was a scene that inspired love in one's heart and with our Christian hosts, who always made us feel very welcome, we felt united by the thread of God as one family, unaware of any religious divide, unified in the stillness of the evening by a feeling of harmony and love. We were Muslims and they were Christians but in the palm of nature we were not conscious of this fact

because it made no difference at all. After all, didn't Muhammad say that he was the next of kin to Jesus, that they were sons of one Father by co-wives? And doesn't the Qur'an require me to believe in the former prophetic revelations?

Throughout my life I have never felt that my religion divides me from other human beings. Other human characteristics may do so, but never religion, and if I was excluded by some because of my religion, I felt sorry for the one who excluded me, because he was applying a bad factor which does not exist in his religion. If he felt superior because of his Christianity he would be giving Christianity a bad facet, of which it is exempt. Islam is also exempt, because it is free from the various characteristics which are wrongly applied by the extremists. Islam requires of me to worship God and to endeavour to unite with him in my soul which, as Ralph Waldo Trine said, renders my religion, or any religion, a religion of the living God. If Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other religions concentrate on this central point, the worship of God and his main attributes, and forget the branches which are there to suit the human environment and the soil in which religions were planted, then a vital source of friction could be lessened within the human family. The Baha'i faith reminds us of the unity of religious ideals, so let us give back to religions the true substance and the aura they deserve, and let us desist from using them as tools for divisiveness to satisfy our lower selves.

Why Not Join the Unitarians?

(Universalist Friends, Spring 1997, 8/23)

Robin Alpern

That is one of the questions most frequently asked when I tell people about being a nontheist Friend.

The answer that comes to mind first has nothing to do with being of a nontheist bent. I grew up in the Religious Society of Friends,

literally and figuratively. My parents joined the Society when I was about two. Although there was no Monthly Meeting in Watertown, New York, where I spent my childhood, my parents organized Meetings for Worship with other folks. We attended Quarterly Meeting, never missed a session of Yearly Meeting, and went to Quaker conferences regularly. My parents lived and spoke as Friends. From the time of my earliest memories, I identified myself as a Quaker. As a teen, I began testing Quaker principles. For instance, one year I used plain speech to see what it was like. I gave up eating meat, to witness to the sanctity of animal life. Somewhere in my twenties I began attending Meetings for Business and accepting committee responsibilities. Through all these years, I have felt great love and respect for Quakers themselves and for the Society's practices, testimonies, and purpose. I'm satisfied among Friends, and I'm not looking for another religious community.

However, does it make sense to continue in the Society of Friends when my thinking seems to differ from, perhaps even oppose, the thinking of the majority of Friends, past and present? I've been accused of trying to impose a new religion on folks who already have a perfectly good one. I've been suspected of being a parasite, stealing the religious vitality and activity of a God-centered people to feed my own godless (possibly empty) life. My mother hinted I could be a visionary, avoiding responsibility for founding a new religious order by hiding behind the familiar skirts of the Religious Society of Friends. Or am I simply misguided, a round peg in a square hole who would be happier if I would only join a like-minded group?

So far, I think none of the above. I am a Quaker, living a Quaker life. Interestingly enough, it is the very commitment to being the best Quaker I can be that leads me at this time to reject belief in God.

Quakers taught me to use plain speech, and to tell the truth, always. In my view, it is neither plain nor necessarily truthful to say such things as "I felt God's presence" or "It's in God's hands." What does that mean? Behind that hackneyed, confusing word/concept "God" lies a specific experience: a feeling, a thought, a vision. Tell me plainly what you experience! And "just the facts, ma'am." I don't see how you can say truthfully "I know God exists," since in order to know

God experimentally you would have to *be* God. And if you are going to assert—as some would—that in a sense you are God, we're back to the problem of plain speech, because I don't know what you mean.

Quakers taught me to have the courage and creativity to think for myself. To question everything, especially authority. Quakerism itself impels me to question the Religious Society of Friends, God, and even George Fox. Fox believed in God, but does that mean it's the truth?

Friends convinced me to shun empty forms, to dedicate myself to living as close as possible to the quick of life. That directs me to strip away the ritual of talking about, imaging, and believing in God. I aim for the spirit of life.

Among Friends I learned to accept, even expect, revelation. Years ago, I used to banish my doubts about God with the thought that so many believers, over so many millennia, could not be wrong. Now I see that, in fact, the beliefs could be mistaken. There could be new light. Faithfulness demands I do not allow millennia of beliefs to stand in the way of seeking truth.

Quakers taught me not to seek truth alone. The corporate search of the past four and one-half years has supported my leading to explore nontheism. Many Friends are broken, because traditional beliefs don't speak to their hearts, and they feel alienated from the Society. God (at least as we currently constitute God) may not be the answer. The Friends for whom God is the answer are sometimes rigid, even defensive, about their beliefs. It appears to me that unstated fear and need may be constricting their religious experience and expression. Again, corporate seeking suggests that permitting a nontheist attitude might free believers to examine and share their fears, and to deepen their faith as a result. Finally, I think we can claim to be engaged in corporate search only if we keep the doors open, including those we dislike. One of the finest characteristics of Friends is that we are on a religious quest, not a religious path.

To some extent, I am more deeply Quaker now than I ever was before. I love the quest. I love the discoveries, the risks, the mysteries. I've learned from Friends that the only mistake is to

avoid life, to draw back from our leadings. I trust absolutely that the exploration of life without belief in God will bear fruit. Either the fruits will benefit the Society, or they will prove false. In that case, Friends will help me see and correct my error.

Someone might ask, “Why not carry on your search in some other group, where people share your doubts?”

That would be to succumb to the myth. The myth is that what we say about our religious experience matters more than our experience. To some extent, language informs our experience. But the essence of humanity and of life lie beyond the reach of words. The difference between the person who says “I’m building the city of God” and the one who says “I’m building a world that works for everyone” is no more significant than the difference between brown skin and red.

Edward Hoare says in his article “The Heart of It” that “agnostics and humanists have weakened the religious basis of the yearly Meeting.” How? Such folks (to say nothing of nontheists!) have, he says, “no understanding of becoming gathered.” (1) The ignorance of human nature displayed in this statement is staggering. Yet it is a common view, and commonly walls up human beings alive.

It is native to humans to seek company, to seek aliveness, to seek to be gathered. True enough, we are capable of straying far from that impulse. Still, our yearning for belonging is an essential element of humanity. Whether you call it seeking God or searching for “friendliness and tolerance” (as Hoare’s agnostics and humanists apparently said they were) is ultimately of no consequence. To deny the religious nature and possibility of another person, on the basis of the language that person uses, is to deny that person’s humanity. Grasping my humanity firmly in hand, I say I belong just as much in a Quaker community as I do among Unitarians. We are the same people, going in the same direction.

Of course, by the same token, I *could* go join the Unitarians, or the Ethical Society, or the Buddhists. But the Religious Society of Friends has given me immeasurable wealth of purpose, practices, and

principles. What kind of sense of satisfaction would it make, now that I've finally matured enough to develop an original religious life, to tuck all those goods under my arm and turn my back on the Quakers? That might in fact qualify me as a parasite. Instead, you don't have to look hard to see that I'm sharing gifts with the Religious Society of Friends. It is transparent that my purpose is to participate in realizing the vision of Friends. The myth is that people who believe in God *have* something, while those who doubt are have-nots. Quakers, of all people, ought to be able to spot and keep out of such a vicious trap.

I might suggest that parasites are people who believe in God because everyone else does and because it feels good and because then they don't have to be responsible for their own lives. People who have doubts that they don't contribute to the Society, while they feed off the good feelings and good name of the Society, are also being parasites.

I am not condemning, however. All of us probably are parasitic at times. Part of the genius of Fox was the recognition that the spirit is indwelling, so we don't need to live off others.

This brings me to one more reason for committing myself to the Religious Society of Friends: its genius. In my view, Quakers are on a track that works. We have resources for laying new track toward creating the Peaceable Realm. I'm interested in making the biggest difference I can with my life, so I'm dedicating my life to people I think will make good use of it.

Now I have a question. Should we allow people who believe in God to join the Religious Society of Friends?

Of course, traditionally we have. But as I've said above, what is tradition compared to truth? The Religious Society of Friends is a body of seekers. Belief is the end of seeking, the decision that "Now I know the truth." It's not that our seeking should never lead to finding. But there is a vital difference between, on the one hand, noticing and celebrating a discovery, which one might then observe to see how it continues or changes throughout life; and, on the other hand, casting our discoveries in concrete and worshipping them. The latter attitude, which I would call belief, stops life in its tracks. The former, which

could lead to faith, can dance with life.

Many Friends hold a set of beliefs about God. They are encouraged to do so by most religious traditions, in the erroneous conviction that religion has to do with beliefs. That opens a whole new topic, to pursue some other time. Suffice it to say that believing blocks at least as much as it opens. And it would be trite, if it weren't tragic, to point out that examples such as the mother who murdered Elisa to exorcise the devil, and the man who killed Rabin because God told him to, and so on and so on and so on, all demonstrate that believing in God is no guarantee of godliness.

However, a revelation that came to me at the 1996 Friends General Conference Gathering was that nontheism does not immunize me against holding beliefs, nor against misconstruing the universe. I recognize my full partnership with, and love for, those who choose to believe. Several of my best Friends are unequivocally, outspokenly God-centered. They sometimes seem to me too insistent on certain concepts and images. But, like the Native American listening to John Woolman, I love to feel the spirit behind their words. That spirit belongs to no particular religion; it is simply ours. We are all, thankfully, in this together!

Reference

1. *Friends Journal*, July 1995, p. 13

A Great People To Be Gathered (*Universalist*, July 1982, 8/27)

Robinson Jones

Should Christian Quakers seek to exclude from membership attenders who are non-Christian because they are non-Christian? If not, should theistic Quakers (whether Christian or not) seek to exclude from membership attenders who are nontheists because they are nontheists? Or, should Quaker Meetings try to promote pluralistic

communities of believers and publicly announce that Christians and non-Christians, Jews and Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists, Taoists and Confucians, theists and nontheists, agnostics, atheists and religious humanists are *all* invited to participate in Friends Meetings for Worship?

Perhaps it is useful, as a basis for such weighty deliberations, to distinguish at the outset between religion on the one hand and nihilism on the other, then between theistic religions and nontheistic religions, and finally between theistic religious humanism and nontheistic religious humanism.

First, as to religion versus nihilism. Obviously, there are vast differences to be noted between various religious traditions, scriptures, organizations, creeds and rituals. Nevertheless, I believe it is fair to say that every religion functions for the believer so as to *affirm* the rightness and goodness of life-facing-death. Each religion offers one or more explanations of what reality is, of how that reality came to be, and each religion asserts a hierarchy of values so as to focus on a supreme value, and affirms life-facing-death in terms of that value. In most popular religions, the supreme value is identified as that which is other than, and superior to, that which is the mortal human—that which is eternal and therefore immortal—that which is God.

I believe it is fair to say that *all* religions assert that each human life, however painful and brief, is or can become both right and good—either in terms of itself, or in terms of its sacred origins, or its potential destiny, or as a testing ground for one or more lives or conditions of being to come. In brief, religion is that which performs the life-affirming function for the believer. If you affirm the rightness and goodness of your life-facing-death, you are, by this definition, therefore “religious”.

Nihilism, on the other hand, in its several guises, is life-denying, anti-religious, anti-value, arguing that each person’s time alive is at best absurd, meaningless, making no sense in any rational context, having no value in place, space, or time. The nihilist points out that those who do evil frequently prosper, that those who try to be mindful of the needs and desires of others are usually ignored, stepped upon,

or even persecuted and killed; while the weak are exploited by the strong, and the strong are manipulated by the smart and clever; that there is *no* justice to be achieved; that no matter how well lived, each life is ultimately useless, quickly forgotten, and, with death of the body, each personality rapidly proceeds to dissipate into eternal and infinite nothingness. Thus, it is fair to say that, if all religions function to affirm the value of each life-facing-death, nihilism argues that *no* human life has any lasting value. In these terms, it follows that if the vast majority of persons do affirm the value of life, they can therefore be understood to be religious, while very few are, in fact, nihilistic.

Although many persons may be quick to say that they are *not* religious, they do not mean that they negate the value of human life, but rather that they have simply ceased to practice or believe the particular religion in which they were raised. It is not that they are, in fact, non-religious. It is only that in the observance of a particular faith, they are no longer, or never were *pious*. There have been opinion polls in North America in which 97% of the respondents answer yes to the question: "Do you believe in God?" Therefore it would appear that the vast majority perceives both reality and value in theistic terms. In attempting to serve the religious needs of the vast majority, it is understandable that four of the seven major religions have tried to remain exclusively theistic. So much so that, in the popular American mind, religion is most frequently defined as "belief in one, or more gods"; while the over-riding life-affirming function of religious faith is largely ignored. Historical Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and many other faiths have attempted to be exclusively theistic, labeling those who might question the existence of the gods as heretics, and as proper subjects for expulsion, even extermination. These four major faiths designate that which is God, that which is of supreme value, as that which is other-than-human and superior to all mortals; while regarding any discussion of nontheistic religion, or Godless religion, as a blasphemous contradiction in terms.

Yet students of Comparative Religion soon discover that the founders of at least three of the seven major religions (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) were themselves nontheists, perceiving

reality and value, and affirming the value of life-facing-death, in nontheistic terms. It is of course true that, as Buddhism expanded, adherents were quick to deify the Prince Gautama, replacing with his deified image that which he had deliberately left out. To a lesser degree, the same is true of the followers of Lao Tse, the founding teacher of Taoism, and Kung Fu Tse, the founding teacher of Confucianism. It can be said very briefly that Buddhism offers a self-negating release from suffering on Earth to those who try to attain on Earth enlightenment and moral purity. Taoism encourages mystical disciplines, simple living, and non-violent reciprocity in personal relations, as the Way to a long and happy life on Earth. Confucianism teaches ethical precepts, not as commandments of any unearthly god, but rather explicitly as inventions of human wisdom made by ancestors long dead but eminently worthy of respectful religious veneration by descendents yet living. Thus, in summary, we have all religions functioning to affirm the rightness and goodness of the adherent's life-facing-death. And among the seven major faiths, four attempt to be exclusively theistic, while the remaining three do not, and teach no necessity for any adherent to believe in the existence of one or more gods.

To these several distinctions, to which scholars may very well find objection, I would like to add my layman's understanding of what appear to be at least four different kinds of humanism: anti-religious humanism, non-religious secular humanism, theistic humanism, and finally nontheistic religious humanism, all of which appear to be the announced target of some elements on the political right, the Creation Scientists, and the Moral Majority. As to the first, the anti-religious humanists, there are among us many who are angry with religion because, as children, we were taught to accept religious truths which later in adolescence, or as young adults, we came to believe were in fact false. In such a state of anger, one may find oneself attracted to those who are anti-religious, such as the Atheist Association of America. Next we can distinguish the so-called non-religious secular humanists, such as would be found among those who signed the Humanists Manifestos in 1933 and in 1973 and the more recent

Secular Humanist Declaration. The signers are prominent scholars in a number of fields: philosophy, anthropology, sociology *and* theology. Although most secular humanists deny the religious nature of their beliefs, not all do, and the U.S. Supreme Court has determined that secular humanism *is* a religion. I am inclined to agree.

After the anti-religious and the so-called non-religious secular humanists, there are those I would call theistic humanists. They don't refer to themselves as such, but I believe such a designation is useful to distinguish them from other types of theists, and from other types of humanists. Those I would call theistic humanists perceive reality, as do all theists, as identified with that which is *eternal* in the timeless scheme of things. That which is eternal reality and eternal value, is believed to be that which is God, and that which is God is believed to be that which is always other-than and superior to the human person. But the theistic humanists differ from other theists in that they most often report experiencing the theistic aspect of reality as they find it manifest in *humans*. The theistic humanist perceives each person as having worth, or value, because some spark of the Eternal Reality, the Supreme Value—God—is believed to exist within each person. “Christ in every man”, etc. Thus: theistic humanism. It is in these terms that I try to grasp the theology of the early Quakers: George Fox, Naylor, Barclay, Penn, Woolman, Penington, and more recently, that of Rufus Jones, Howard Brinton, Kenneth Boulding, and their Transcendental predecessors.

Finally, there is what I choose to call nontheistic religious humanism. It is a clumsy phrase, which some might say is either redundant or inherently contradictory. Whatever, I am interested in those affirmations which recognize the *developmental* nature of religious traditions, and the observable parallel developmental stages in an individual's changing religious perceptions. This nontheist religious humanist is no longer angry at what was felt to be the deceptions and falsehoods of parental, or popular religious teachings, and so is able to regard each observable change which any individual may come to experience, no longer as rational error, nor as religious heresy, but rather as natural, desirable stages of religious growth and

personal development. And each such change in perception of the nature of reality and value, I believe produces, or is accompanied by, a concomitant change in the individual's perception of the nature and value of human beings.

For example, those who view the world as does the animist (the point at which each of us as a child begins the religious saga) see persons as simply hapless victims of a capricious, uncontrollable, and frequently malevolent world of spirits. Whereas, at a later stage of religious development, as a monotheist, one sees each person as a dependent child of a divine, all-powerful, all-loving God. If one's world-view is such that one must perceive adults as but children, then it is clear that such children must strive to differentiate the insignificant individual human will from the divine will of God and manifest a readiness to *obey* only that which is perceived to be the divine will of the infinitely superior God. At what I believe is a still more advanced stage of religious growth, the nontheistic religious humanist finds no basis upon which to distinguish the divine from the human and comes to see *all* persons, no longer as dependent *children* of a benevolent deity—of a creator God, or of a purposeful Cosmic mind—but rather as extremely and supremely complex, fascinatingly unique, highly individuated, *self-creating*, inter-dependent *citizens*—citizens of the family, the Meeting, the community, the nation, planet Earth, and the Cosmos. Although we are mortal yet, while briefly alive, we marvelously perform the function traditionally ascribed to imaginary deities, that is, the function of bringing order out of chaos: out of the chaos of daily experience, of social and sexual intercourse, while creating the most complex form of reality known, that of the integrating, growing, caring, loving, empathizing, individuating, human personality.

Thus, while the theistic humanist sees the supremely sacred as that which is eternal and therefore immortal, but somehow most clearly evidenced in the personality of mortals, the nontheistic religious humanist sees nothing that is immortal, and sees the supremely sacred as that which is but *temporal*, that which is the unique, individuated,

self-creating human personality briefly alive. I think it is important to note that, among Quakers, both theistic and nontheistic humanists find that the appropriate focus for worship is part, or all, of that which is human. In the silent Quaker Meeting, these theists and nontheists find that they do worship in harmony, person-to-person, face-to-face, with no assigned sex rolls, and with no symbols evident other than the unique, mortal—but self-creating—personalities present, with each willfully contributing to the general silence, creating a corporate reverence for religious perceptions and religious affirmations of the supreme value seen in each person present.

Should not theistic religions now take cognizance of nontheistic religions? Should not the introductory study of comparative religion be made a part of the curriculum of elementary public schools? Is it not time for some of us to make a conscious effort to develop and practice a religion open to *all*? One which will recognize the *developmental* nature of religious experience and include the animistic child, the theistic youth, as well as the occasional nontheistic religious adult? Is it not time—while we may still have time—to try to promote a *pluralistic* community of believers? Finally, should today's Quakers welcome into membership those who are able to worship only that which *is* each person, briefly alive?

William Barclay translates Paul's Letter to the Romans 1:12 to read—"That you and I may both be cheered when we meet, I by your faith, and you by mine".

In England, on Pendle Hill in the 1600s, George Fox experienced a vision of "a great people to be gathered". Today may we not also experience that vision? A great people which on planet Earth includes Christians and non-Christians, theists and nontheists? A great people which could include all who believe that the divine and supremely sacred is located and evident somehow in each person briefly alive? A great people to be gathered which could include all who wish to worship in silence together in the holy glow of the Inner Light? A great people which could and should include all who witness in peaceful ways for peace on planet Earth? Surely, today, is there not a great people to be gathered?

Godless for God's Sake: Demystifying Mysticism
(*Universalist*, July 1982, 8/27)

David Boulton

... I gladly accepted the invitation to participate in this conference, even before a subject had been agreed. When I learned that the themes revolved around truth, experience and mysticism I asked our committee whether they would not prefer to switch to someone better qualified to offer wisdom on these mystifying matters, but they declined to release me. They must have been desperate. I could talk about the new book I was editing, they said, or report on my recent tours of Quaker Meetings and Sea of Faith groups in the United States and Australia, provided I used the words 'experience' and 'mysticism' from time to time. How could I refuse?

So this talk will be a bit of a ramble: a bit here about 'my truth', a bit there about my experience of editing the book and sharing a nontheist Quaker perspective with Friends abroad, something about 'religious' or 'spiritual' experience, and (if there is world enough and time) something about the importance of demystifying mysticism.

My truth. I don't much care for the way 'my truth' is widely used today. To be sure, I am clear that there is no one Truth, no absolute or transcendent source of Truth with a capital T. But if you were to tell me that it is your truth that the sun goes round the Earth, that the universe was created in six days, that white races are superior to blacks, that women are inferior to men, that torture is fun, I would say your truth is false. I have spent much of my working life as an investigative journalist. My wife Anthea has spent much of hers as a magistrate. Some of us here are historians, some scientists. The investigative journalist, the magistrate, the historian, the scientist is in the business of sifting truth from falsehood. There may be no such thing as Truth, but there are truths and there are falsehoods, things that are the case and things that are not. The relativisation of truth implied in 'my truth' can too easily suggest that truth is no more than a matter of opinion. That's foolish, and dangerous.

So if, in deference to our theme, I talk about ‘my truth’, I do so to refer to my story, not to my opinions. My story begins with an epiphany. At the age of four, when my mother was teaching me what letters of the alphabet looked like, and what sound they represented, I looked out of my bedroom window one morning to see a van pull up at our gate. I noticed the large letters painted on its side, and I voiced the sounds—M-I-L-K. Then I saw the milkman and made the magic connection! Letters, sounds, words, language! So I began to understand that all our experience, knowledge, understanding and reflection is encoded in symbols, in words. In the beginning were the words.

For me, words were to become my bread and butter. Except for short spasms when I thought it might be fun to be a missionary in darkest Africa, or maybe just king of England, I always wanted to be a writer. I knew experimentally (more of that later) that language not merely describes but creates our world. What is ‘beyond words’ is beyond reflective thought, and what is beyond thought passeth all understanding. We assemble the symbols we call words, not only to communicate with each other but to order our thoughts, make sense of our experience, and render the world intelligible. Yes, words can be inadequate, slippery, elusive. Yes, we are sometimes lost for words. Yes, we have to work at making them serviceable. But we cannot step outside or beyond language. No mystic ever did so without telling us all about it—in words.

I won’t say that is ‘my truth’. But it is my story.

My experience. Over the last two years, since the publication of my book *The Trouble with God*, I have had the privilege of visiting Quaker Meetings and other religious groups in California and Oregon, Australia and New Zealand, where I have run workshops on Quaker history and on Quaker nontheism. Quakerism is changing. Its roots remain embedded in a particular radical Christian tradition, and the language of that tradition is still our vernacular, but the ways in which Friends envision ‘God’, ‘the Spirit’, ‘the divine’ are shifting. In a survey of British Friends in 2003, 26.5% said they ‘do not believe in God’ or are not sure. A similar survey of ten Meetings in Philadelphia Yearly

Meeting in 2002 asked Friends if they believed in a God who answered prayers. 37% said no and 19% said they had no definite belief either way. In both cases, that's a higher percentage saying 'don't believe' or 'don't know' in our Religious Society than national surveys find in the population as a whole!

These figures were made public for the first time in a book published this March by my company, Dales Historical Monographs. It is called *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism*, and it is written by 27 Quaker nontheists from 13 Yearly Meetings across the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. The contributors—and I am one—do not deny the reality of religious and spiritual experience, 'visionary gleams', those moments of heightened awareness when we are "surprised by joy". They may come as we stand in awe before *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, or are transported by a chord or a single note in a Mozart serenade, or look down from Pendle Hill on a magic carpet broken by a maze of dry-stone walls. But we feel no need to invoke holy spirits or misty mysticism to validate these 'peak experiences'. They are intrinsic to our human nature, aspects of the wholly human spirit.

When I hear these experiences described as 'spiritual', 'mystical' or 'divine' I take such language as metaphorical rather than literal, a mode of expression derived from the visionary and the poet in all of us. In this realm of the imagination we may conjure up a world animated by spirit forces and mystic energies which "body forth the forms of things unknown". But I understand this as poetry and mythology, not empirical fact. We do not have far to look to see the terrible dangers in humanity's current headlong retreat from reason and experimental knowledge.

Experience as experiment. Friends have always privileged experience, but early Friends meant by it something rather different from what we usually mean today. In late medieval times, and well into the seventeenth century, the words experience and experiment were interchangeable. Some editions of the fourteenth century Wycliffe translation of the Bible used 'experience', some 'experiment'. Find the word experience in Chaucer, Caxton or Marlowe and it always means

‘experiment’: to try, prove, put to the test. When George Fox says in 1647 that what he knew he knew ‘experimentally’, this is not the passive experience of being zapped from on high with a gratuitous revelation. His truth was discovered by active trial and experiment. That was what experience meant.

And he was not alone. As he learned to gain knowledge experimentally, a group of “diverse worthy persons” began meeting in 1645 to promote ‘Experimental Learning’. In 1660 they formed the Royal Society and changed ‘experimental learning’ to ‘science’. Henceforth, knowledge was to be gathered and truth explored by experience, or experiment. Friends and scientists together opened a way into the modern world, where mysticism is demystified and truth is known experimentally.

Don Cupitt, in a wonderful little book called *Mysticism and Modernity*, suggests that the modern and more passive sense of ‘experience’, and particularly ‘religious experience’, derives from the accelerating drive towards individualism and the habit of looking inwards. The early-modern period saw the collapse of church authority and the rise, first of fissile Protestantism with its competing claims to biblical interpretation and possession of Truth, and then of secularism and its denial of supernatural authority. All that was left was a sense of inner certainty, an intuition. Thus ‘religious experience’ was something you had, something you received: not, as it still was in Fox’s day (though it was in transition then), something you did but something which came to you unbidden.

If we choose to continue the Quaker tradition of privileging experience, I would urge that we do so by privileging experiment: that is, by putting our intuitions, our notions, our ‘openings’, our spiritual insights, to the test, so that we too can say that what we know we know experimentally.

Mystery and mysticism. Where does that leave mysticism? I think it leaves it somewhat demystified, a literary genre in which what we know experimentally, or perhaps what we don’t know experimentally, is translated into a heightened mode of poetical expression. In this

sense, most poets are mystics, and all mystics who commit their experience to paper are poets. We should give up the old idea that mysticism involves some sort of wordless way of experiencing the things of another and higher world, a revived gnosticism whereby we gain access to a higher wisdom and a deeper understanding. We might embrace, instead, as Cupitt puts it, a “mysticism minus metaphysics, mysticism minus any claim to special or privileged knowledge, and mysticism without any other world than this one”.

Are we then to banish mystery? Of course not. Mystery is something we don't yet know and perhaps never will know. But as the American Friend James Riemermann writes in *Godless for God's Sake*,

Why would that which is beyond the veil of mystery be any more ‘divine’ or ‘ultimate’ or ‘spiritual’ than that which we already know? The veil of mystery is simply the limits of our knowledge. There is the stuff we know about and the stuff we don't know about. There is no particular reason to believe that the stuff we don't know about is any more divine than, say, a rock, or a chicken, or a Ford Fiesta. So the distinction between that which we understand or have direct experience of, and that which is forever beyond our knowledge, is by no means the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material. It certainly provides no evidence of a transcendent realm. It is good and interesting and sometimes fruitful to humbly reflect on the depth and breadth of our ignorance, but to take what we don't know and mystify it as divine is not likely to be fruitful.

I have suggested a different perspective from that offered by Isabel Clarke. But I heartily endorse her concluding remark: “There is no authentic spirituality without a justice dimension”. If our experience, our trying, testing, proving, did nothing to empower us to help build the republic of heaven on Earth, whether we labelled that experience religious, spiritual or mystical would matter not one jot. Our words would be empty, and would best be replaced by silence.

***Theological Diversity within Twin Cities Meeting,
Nontheists in the Meeting***

(Universalist Friends, February 2006, 43/23)

Friends have traditionally rejected the use of creeds, largely from a conviction that no statement of belief can accurately describe or reflect divine reality. There is another compelling reason for us to reject creeds. Over time the spiritual and theological diversity among Friends has become far broader and deeper than early Friends could possibly have imagined. Twin Cities Friends Meeting has fully and joyfully embraced Friends from a great constellation of religious beliefs and traditions. Our community includes Christians, Jews, Buddhists, pagans, atheists, agnostics, and others, along with an even greater diversity of Friends who neither claim nor desire a label to describe their distinctive individual views of whatever is within and beyond us.

Such is the diverse reality of our community. The purpose of this document is to express our gratitude for that diversity and to affirm explicitly that differences along the full range of theological belief, including unbelief, are no barrier to membership, nor to full participation in our beloved religious community.

This is not to say that beliefs, theological or otherwise, are irrelevant to our community, or to the process of becoming a member. On the contrary, one of the great blessings of serving on a clearness committee for membership is the opportunity to understand better the deepest beliefs and spiritual passions of a potential member. What's more, a discussion of such beliefs might in some cases reveal that an applicant does not feel sufficiently drawn to the ways of Friends to become a member. The barrier in such cases is not belief per se, but affinity with our way of being together in religious community, while seeking along our own spiritual paths.

In our discussions of spiritual and theological diversity, we are perhaps too quick to search for commonalities, for that which transcends the differences between us. This is a worthy effort, but it should not get in the way of our understanding what those differences are. To love genuinely is not to care for people despite their individual

peculiarities, nor to ignore those peculiarities, but to care for the person wholly, in full light of those blessed peculiarities. The beauty and richness of human community derives from difference as much as it does from similarity. What could we possibly learn from each other in a world where everyone had the same religious beliefs, political persuasions, family background, or ethnicity?

Similarly, it is not enough to be tolerant of our differences; we need to bring those differences to the surface, rising above our fear of offending or being offended. Speaking in Meeting for Worship requires discernment, to be sure, but this does not mean that we should withhold a message for fear that others might be made uncomfortable by our theology. We do not rightly discern a leading to speak by reflecting on how friends might receive that message, but reflecting on the quality and power of the impulse to speak, and remaining faithful to spirit as we experience it. There are messages and ways of speaking that may be inappropriate in Meeting for Worship, but again, we do not make this distinction according to our agreement or disagreement with the message. It is one thing to deliver a message that expresses the light of our faith that we might kindle such a flame in others; it is quite another thing to proclaim ours as the only true light, or to berate others for being faithful to their own light. This means there is a place in our midst for evangelism in the best sense of that word, an evangelism that might be rooted in Jesus, Buddha, God or Goddess, nature, the hunger for scientific knowledge, or simple human love and compassion.

Walk Cheerfully—in Japan
(*Universalist*, February 1995, 43/6)

Anne Ashworth

When the looked-for and the unlikely coincide, there is a fizz of fireworks in the brain and a frisson of delight runs to the heart. This

happened to me as I was reading the other day.

Quakers expect to recognise the Spirit, and to recognise others recognising it. But in the most ritualistic and unspiritual religion in the world?—at least, as I had thought. That is why I was so jolted, or illumined, by an account of Japanese Shinto. (1) Yes, it too knows the Spirit.

A fifteenth century text describes a mythical being, but surely a human experience, like this: “She worships her own Self within as spirit, endeavouring to cultivate divine virtue in her own person by means of inner purity, and thus becoming one with that spirit.”

This is near to the teaching of the Upanishads, to the universal message of Seed or Light or Spirit that is the truer Self. If this is not Quakerism, what is? Yet the external formalities of Shinto are as alien as one could imagine from our low-profile style.

Shinto is art. It is gardens, it is architecture, it is music and dance. Joseph Campbell tells how a knowledgeable westerner had visited several Shinto shrines yet remained puzzled. Where was the theology or ideology underpinning all this? A smiling Shinto priest answered him: “We do not have ideology. We do not have theology. We dance”.

It is a dance of the heart, promoting the divine nature in the hearts of the worshippers: Shinto shapes what it calls the bright heart, pure heart, straight heart, a heart grateful and cheerful. These arts of Shinto combine to reinforce a sense of the numinous, to create awe at the mystery of things, to induce gratitude. It is not a religion of words, but it may perhaps speak to us, in our environmental perplexities, of our connectedness with Earth, of the privilege of being here. Annie Dillard, the American naturalist and nature mystic, has a suggestion: “I think that the dying pray at the last not ‘please’ but ‘thank you,’ as a guest thanks his host at the door”. (2)

I hope, when my turn comes, I can do that. Joseph Campbell describes the ending of a Shinto ritual: “When the dancers have retired and the music has stopped, the ritual is done. One turns and looks again at the rocks, the pines, the air and sea, and they are as silent as before. Only now they are inhabited, and one is aware anew of the

wonder of the universe.”

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Out of a Single Fire: Sikhs and Quakers (*Universalist Friends*, Fall 1987, 9/15)

Dharam Singh

The Sikh and Quaker movements were born at different times in different milieus. The Sikh movement is earlier by nearly two centuries; its founder, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), lived at a period of close interaction in India between the Hindu and Islamic faiths; Quakerism was shaped in Christian Britain under the leadership of George Fox (1624-1691). Outwardly, Sikh and Quaker make a striking contrast. Sikhs are known as “trustworthy warriors,” and the wearing of the *kirpan* (sword) is a symbol of their faith; Quakers discarded the sword which every English gentleman wore, and are known as “trustworthy peacemakers.” Yet beneath the surface these two religious minorities have some interesting similarities in doctrine and ethics.

A central religious principle of Quakerism is that a measure of God’s Spirit is given to all mankind. This principle results in a church order based on the faith that every individual is potentially able to seek and attain unity with the Supreme Light; therefore there is “the priesthood of all believers,” a rejection of outward rituals, and the practice of a human equality which, like the Sikhs, includes women. Quaker tradition unites personal piety and social righteousness in one whole.

The emphasis on the Divine Light in every individual leads Sikhs, like Quakers, to treat women on an equal footing with men in both

sacred and secular spheres. So Guru Nanak declared that woman is to be venerated. Both Sikhs and Quakers arose in societies that discriminated against woman as a temptress, a source of evil, at best a lovely weakling whom man must protect and possess. But out of 59 British Quakers who braved hardship to preach their message in America between 1656 and 1663, as many as 27 were women. Margaret Fell, the widow who married George Fox in 1669, gave outstanding service to the Quaker movement.

Both Sikhs and Quakers think of the spark of Divine Light in humanity as an inward guide, and the divine incarnation, and everyone is inherently capable of assimilating it. Neither Sikhs nor Quakers therefore have any special priestly class; anyone among the Sikhs may read the scriptures and address the congregation; any Quaker may speak in the Meeting or offer prayer. Both Sikhs and Quakers regard external symbols as futile without the inward experience of divine presence and love. "Religion," declared Guru Nanak, "does not consist of a patched coat or yogi's staff, of a body shaven or smeared with ashes, of earrings or the blowing of horns." For Quakers baptism and communion are essentially spiritual experiences; the outward symbols of water, bread and wine are not necessary. The inward experience of the One God, for both Sikhs and Quakers, leaves no room for pride; it calls for humility and sincerity.

For both Sikhs and Quakers, true religion must be lived, daily. "Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living," said Guru Nanak. So Quakers are watchful against "disloyalty to truth," and an alert conscience made them pioneers against slavery, and for a righteous state government in Pennsylvania, and in struggles for social justice today. The three cardinal virtues which every Sikh should imbibe are Kirt Karni: to earn by the sweat of one's brow; nam japna: to meditate on the Name of God; and wand chhakna: to share the fruits of one's labour with the needy.

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The Quaker Universalist Fellowship (QUF) is a network of people around the globe who recognize the spirit of universality as part of the Quaker tradition of faith and practice. QUF embraces the human diversity of spiritual experience and communication and the important insights of the testimonies in Quaker tradition. QUF explores technology for providing resources and engagement to the world in this spirit.

QUF draws inspiration for its work from such traditional and respected statements of Quaker faith as the following:

[B]e patterns, be examples ... wherever you come; that your life and conduct may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you...

— George Fox

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion, and when death takes off the mask, they will know one another though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers.

— William Penn

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names: it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no form of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity.

— John Woolman

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