

Varieties of Religious Experience

An Adventure in Listening



THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

...is composed of seekers, mainly, but not exclusively members of the Religious Society of Friends. QUF seeks to promote open dialogue on its issues of interest. It writes in its statement of purpose:

While being convinced of the validity of our own religious paths, we not only accept but rejoice that others find validity in their spiritual traditions, whatever they may be. Each of us must find his or her own path, and each of us can benefit for the search of others.

In the selection of both its speakers and manuscripts, QUF tries to implement those ideas.

FOREWORD

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is organized around a fundamental insight: that differences in religious language, though often radical, ought not to obscure the fact that the religious impulse is universal, a part of all persons.

That fundamental insight has a major corollary: that access to that of God in our fellow humans requires that we free ourselves of mental obstacles that may make it difficult to hear that of God in the words other people use.

A Quaker Universalist Gathering at Abington Meeting, Pennsylvania, on November 10, 1990, was designed to test and educate participants in the arts of listening. The main address of the day, by Herb Walters, described a listening project that had been carried on for some years in southern states under his leadership. His talk is available as a separate QUF pamphlet.

This pamphlet is devoted to the four talks that were given by participants chosen especially for the diversity of their ways of being religious. The diversity of their approaches was deliberately designed to test hearers' ability to listen with hearts and minds open. The reader may wish to read this pamphlet in the same spirit.

Several of the participants have informed us that their spiritual journeys have led them since 1990 to new and different formulations of their religious beliefs. They have nevertheless been willing for us to publish their talks as delivered, as long as readers are aware that they have moved on.

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST

Renée Crauder

Many of us may well be put off by the name Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we think of all the barbarities perpetuated under that name.

Perhaps we think of those who say they've been saved by coming to Jesus Christ, whatever that may mean to them, and yet we don't see that their lives have been changed.

Perhaps as children we were made to feel guilty under the name of Jesus Christ.

And perhaps you can add to these negative visions of that name.

And yet, Friends, and yet...There is that which is nearer to me than my very self...which lifts me out of myself in gratefulness at my life and its gifts...which gently insists on becoming a greater part of myself as I grow big enough, strong enough, free enough, to let it enter...which enables me to reach for the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control.

There is that which enables me to read and reread the Bible the way George Fox exhorted us to read it: with the same openness and readiness and willingness to let its message enter our lives as those who wrote it.

The name I give this truth is Jesus Christ.

How did this come about in my life? Through prayer.

Prayer for me is looking at myself without excuses, without blinking. Prayer means accepting my weaknesses, my negativities (patience, for instance, is not one of my virtues), looking at my turnings away from God. It also means accepting my gifts, my positives, and not having false

modesty. (Do you have trouble accepting a compliment?)

Now, how does Jesus Christ enter into all this?

I am convinced that God acts in the world. That means that God acts in my life, as I have just shared, and in your life. My present concept of God looks this way: The One I call the Great God is the One who made me and everything in the universe and is part of everything created and asks me – us – to co-create the world in God's image. That Great God is utterly transcendent – unknowable, distant – yet is. Because it is so difficult for a very finite human being like myself to relate to God, this God graciously sent us Jesus.

Now for me, Jesus is much more accessible than the Great God. Jesus is immanent – knowable – for me. Because Jesus lived in this world, I feel he understands what it is to be human; and so I can share with him my fears and joys, pains, failures, and successes.

Jesus hears, encourages and stimulates me to live my own life as authentically as he lived his. Not to emulate his life, for I can only live my own, but to live my own in authentic freedom. And he helps me to do this.

How? By encouraging me to let *him* be the senior partner in prayer, by encouraging me to look at *his* life situations, and how he handled them, for help in handling my own. Paradoxically, by encouraging me to invite him into the house of my soul where he can guide my responses.

Curiously and paradoxically, as I laboriously and resistingly learn to let Jesus guide me, my responses to the situations in my life become freer. By that I mean they are less laid over with baggage like anxiety, fear of failure – Are they going to like me? Will I do a good job? – and all that. Somehow Jesus' presence in me and with me enables me to be a more honest, more free, more whole self.

One last point. Despite his faithfulness to his God, Jesus' mission on this earth seemed doomed to failure with

his execution. Yet he was faithful. And I am learning from him not to worry about success in my ventures. Success is very nice, of course, especially for us Westerners, but I am learning that it's enough to be faithful.

HUMANIST PHILOSOPHY AS A RELIGIOUS RESOURCE

Kingdon W. Swayne

I wasn't sure what to make of the assignment of being the house humanist. I have sometimes thought of myself as being a religious humanist, religious in the sense that meaning and purpose are important to me, a humanist in the sense that I reject Descartes' dualism and seek holistic conceptions of the life of the spirit. And thus I see being religious as part and parcel of being human.

The substantive content of religion to me is ideas: ideas about the nature of humans and the universe, ideas about human relations, ideas about the impalpable. Perhaps even more fundamentally, religion is ideas about how and where to find the source of truth that will validate the other ideas.

I like the terms the Greeks used when thinking about the spiritual complement of their lives: goodness, truth and beauty. Now a search for goodness is for me the essence of the religious quest. But goodness is shaped by one's perception of truth, so let me begin by talking a little bit about truth.

Truth may be sought either in authority or in experience. I confess to an envy of the mental state of people whose lives radiate a joy and power derived from submission to religious authority. But I am suspicious of religious authority for the crimes committed in its name, and for its demand that my free will be surrendered.

I feel much more comfortable with experience as a guide, though it also has its difficulties. Those of us who reject

authority bring some order out of the resulting chaos in several ways. First, we place great reliance on the replicable experiment as a dependable source of knowledge. Second, we accept – at least as a point of departure – the experience of our forebears in such matters as the common law and common sense. Third, we believe in continuing revelation. Fourth, we accept a good deal of ambiguity and relativism as inherent in the human condition.

There are two major difficulties with the acceptance of experience over authority as a guide to truth. First is that authority provides moral absolutes, while recognition that experiences differ means that the truth is different for different persons. And the moral standards they base on their own vision of truth may be different.

Authority also defines the rules for connectedness. Knowledge that one's own experience and therefore one's own truth is unique makes one's philosophical starting point a sense of aloneness. One can revel in the sense of uniqueness or one can be overwhelmed by the sense of aloneness. The spiritual search is in many respects the search for a satisfying form or forms of escape from aloneness into connectedness. Everyday activities – work, play, service, family life, friendship – can also serve as forms of escape into connectedness, but they soon pall unless there is a spiritual underpinning.

My own religious life is best understood as an effort to build moral stability and connectedness by creating a web of motivation and behavior that is internally consistent and emotionally satisfying. I have described myself at times as a Post-Christian because my best behavior and its motivations owe much to Christian thinking, though I reject most of traditional Christian theology.

My world is shaped by the ideas of Plato, Copernicus, Newton, Locke, Marx, Darwin, Freud, Einstein. There are many others. It is so different from the world of Jesus of

Nazareth that I find tedious and unfulfilling the task of fighting my way back through the rank of reporters, commentators and translators to whatever kernel of universal meaning may be revealed in his words. That task can only be justified by a belief in his special authority, a belief I do not hold. I am interested in Jesus as an historical figure who was the starting point for an immensely significant movement, but there are other people and other ideas that better speak to my condition.

If one rejects the authority of most of the Christian tradition, where does one begin to build a belief system? I think I begin with the existential proposition that life without meaning or purpose is intolerable. Therefore, one must define the meaning and purpose of one's own life. I believe this task is within my power and is my sole responsibility. I prefer to see myself not as finding and doing God's will, but as striving for goodness on the basis of general principles that are derived from my own sense of the nature of the universe.

THE ESSENCE OF UNIVERSALISM

Stanley Zarowin

Let me begin with a confession: I talk to god. If you haven't written me off already, I will make a second confession: God talks to me. I don't call god "God," and I don't think god calls me "Stanley," because in none of my conversations have we named each other. What does that mean? If I were to name god, he would have a shape, form, face, and mentality. I am unable to envision that. So when god talks to me and I talk to god, we talk to each other, one on one, and sometimes we don't use words.

The reason I'm telling you all this is I'd like to disavow the notion that I call myself a Universalist. And even though

I am a member of the Society of Friends, I don't truly call myself a Quaker. That's naming it. The only name I give myself is a human being, a birthright human being.

I was born in Palestine. My parents were Americans, with no interest in religion. We came to the United States just before the Second World War, and I was raised in a very tough neighborhood in the Bronx. It didn't make any difference what you were; it was what you were called. I was called a Jew. I didn't tell them that I didn't know what the Jewish holidays meant. We never observed them when I was a child.

I recognized something there, and what I recognized is something that is as true in our emotional humanity as it is in our biological humanity. If you don't have diversity, you don't have life. Inbreeding kills; it has killed every society, and every rank. It kills unless you mix. Unless you bring in new genes, or fresh ideas, we die.

What has this got to do with anything? One of the speakers spoke of Jesus Christ. My experience of Jesus Christ as a child was that he was probably my worst enemy. Names again. I've learned since then. And, by the way, the people who said I killed him often used his name in ways that to me were curses. I couldn't understand. If I killed Christ, how could these people say, "Jesus Christ!" It didn't make any sense to me.

But I've since figured it out. His name wasn't Jesus Christ; it was Yeshua. That was his real name; he was a Jew. He never called himself a Christian; he always called himself a Jew.

What we call Christianity is elite Judaism. What does that have to do with diversity? What Yeshua did was to bring diversity into the Hebrews' religion. The fact that it wasn't accepted is another matter. The Christians didn't accept it either. Most still don't.

What Yeshua was promoting was something rather fresh, something rather exciting. He was looking at a god who was not a distant sort of god. He was a god who was embracing; he was not a jealous god, because a jealous god is our perception, not god's perception. We invented the god of the Bible, created a god who was jealous because we're jealous.

What does that have to do with diversity? One of the things that Yeshua said was "Love thy neighbor." I think we have mistranslated the word "love." I cannot love my neighbor. I confess that; I can't do it. What I can do is listen to my neighbor, hear my neighbor, understand my neighbor, empathize with my neighbor. No more. Do I love him? I don't have that kind of enormous humanity.

Someone has said that the greatest step is that we learn to love Hitler. Well I tell you, it's not on my agenda.

The biggest disease the world faces isn't cancer or heart disease; it is fear. It is fear that prohibits us from hearing. When we hear a view, an opinion, that is different from ours, we build up this incredible barrier. We stop listening. We are so afraid. We have such a need to defend where we are. The second biggest disease is the denial that we are afraid. And once we get to denial, not only do we not hear, but we object to the person who is telling us what we don't want to hear, telling us that there is another truth. We assume that if I'm right, he's wrong. It could be we are both wrong. It could also be we are both right.

So I don't call myself a Universalist. I don't call myself a Quaker. I call myself a human being, which means I believe in the Koran, the Bible, the Upanishads, you name it. They all say the same thing. None says anything different; it is our interpretation that is different.

Finally, we have an interesting tendency to make things black and white, right and wrong, up and down, this and

that. We took a wonderful word out of the Bible and mistranslated it. I don't know what the original word was in Aramaic. But in Aramaic there is no word for "evil." The Aramaic word that was translated as "evil" meant "unripe fruit," fruit that is waiting for nurturance, light, love, knowledge, understanding. If you eat it unripe, you get a bellyache; it's not nutritious. Wait for it to mature, and you get something out of it.

Yet we call it "evil." "If I'm right, you're wrong." It comes back to that. It's dualism.

I don't think the role of the Universalist should be to say, "We believe in this, and therefore you should believe in this." And yet there are those Universalists who do.

I think the role of the Universalist is very simple First, we must understand that one must honor someone else's point of view, not just put up with it - tolerate it. Toleration is as negative as saying 'You're wrong.' It's more polite, it's more courteous, it's the Quaker way of being courteous. What if, instead of tolerating, we joined them? You may find it an awful lot of fun - and enlightening - to have a Shinto rite. It could be exciting to go to a Catholic mass. Because they are all saying the same thing, they are all honoring one thing, this ineffable thing we are calling god, who happens to be right here, and not up there.

WE TOO ARE CREATORS THE CO-CREATIONIST IDEA

John Gerding-Oresic

I was introduced as a co-creationalist. I am still working on the idea, so please regard this as a work in progress.

I see a need for a new belief system, based on the idea that we are co-creators, both creators and created, in a world in which everything is ever moving - loving, being born,

growing and dying – but always changing. And everything is together in relationship with all else in that process, sharing the reality of the now moment.

I believe religion and organized belief systems are attempts to explain the mysteries of life and death. They give us a code to live by. Folklore, legend and mythologies are all past attempts at the same thing. And I also believe that we get our religion through our family, essentially. It is a training process, something we inherit. So that I see religion and religious practices as being social and cultural conditioning.

Tradition, however, by its very nature, is always changing and growing in an evolutionary process. I also believe that people make up their religions and belief systems, and that they create their own god, not the other way around. I don't believe in the story about God setting up the system for us to follow. The systems of religion that we know – the nature worship, the various goddesses that preceded the paternalistic gods by some 40,000 years, the Egyptian sun deities, the so-called pagan gods of Greece and Rome, Mayans and Aztecs – these were all religions, trying to explain the mysteries of life and death.

The Jews also created their religion, and they also claimed to be a chosen people. They introduced the ideas of the one true god, the invisible god, the abstract god, the isolated god. And as we know, Christianity came from Judaism. Jesus – the rabbi, the reformer in his own house – proclaimed to fulfill the promises of Judaism, “I come to fulfill the law, not to destroy it.” And he also claimed to be the son of God.

His followers, as we know, became Christians, and over the centuries formalized their religious beliefs. Protestantism came along, took exception to the formalization, created its own perception of Christianity, and split from Catholicism.

As we know, Quakerism shortly afterwards defined its own religious perspective, created its own community of followers. And in typical Quaker fashion, it spun off various branches. Without exception the leaders of these religious movements were attacked and their movements persecuted. And the more virile they were, the more they were discredited, attacked and persecuted.

But any time a new religion or a new religious concept is introduced, or changes to the old are called for, you really shouldn't be surprised. These innovations represent natural evolutionary processes in the advance of civilization. They are attempts to redefine reality according to the knowledge of the times and to adjust the codes by which we can best live our lives.

At this point I want to review some of the basic tenets of the Judeo-Christian belief system and show how these shape our behavior. I contend that these beliefs have caused the adherents to them to cause harm to other persons and other living things on earth. And I contend also that we need to change.

Lets' look at some of these and how I think they shape our behavior. May I emphasize that these comments do not weave a complete and coherent new theology. These are simply a number of observations, I hope they will cause you to question your own belief systems and determine their relevancy in your lives and their right applications to others as well.

Here are some observations and hypotheses for change. In the Judeo-Christian belief system, God is depicted as the creator and we the created. I do not believe that. I believe that in creating all creation, god itself is also created. I don't know one act of creation in which the creator can separate itself from that which is created. I believe there is no superior or inferior, no top-to-bottom hierarchy relationship. There

is rather a ying and yang, an alternating vibrancy of the creator and the created, in which the creator becomes the created, and the created the creator.

I disbelieve in the concept of the absolute, but I do believe in the relational aspect of all living things. The only absolute I see is the absolute of constant change. There isn't anything that defines itself by itself alone, god included, us included. Everything receives its identity by its relationship to all others it influences, or by whom it is influenced.

A correlative of this belief says all things are interdependent, inexorably end continuously changing one another, and that everything is in this process. I believe in the now and the now moment. I believe, as I said in the beginning, that we are co-creators, independently becoming one another, god and us, and all living things.

We are not asked to build from scratch, but as we are led in the light, according to our measure, to transform and reorder actualities and lives in our world as they come into becoming.

To be better able to respond to this challenge, maybe we should assume the person of the androgynous Jesus at his trial before Caiaphus. How would we answer if Caiaphus were to have asked, "Art thou the co-creationist of the living god?"

