

DOUGLAS GWYN **THE QAKER DYNAMIC**



# **The Quaker Dynamic:** Personal Faith and Corporate Vision

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I want to express my appreciation for the Quaker Universalist Fellowship. I believe that it represents an important development toward mutual understanding, appreciation and conciliation among Friends. The clarity and mutual support among Quaker universalists overcomes some of the threatened feelings one sometimes can feel in our meetings. New Foundation Fellowship and other Christ-centered Friends groups serve a similar function. Our various groups define more clearly for our times the two poles of Quakerism that are essential for a vigorous, creative Society of Friends. Therefore, I want to say as much as I can about where I agree with essential Quaker universalism. I also want to make my case for what is essential about the Christian identity of Quakerism.

For me, there are two levels to the issue among us. One is personal faith; the other is shared witness. I find few Friends, universalist or Christian, who seem to share this two-level view, so what I say here is by no means common understanding among Christ-centered Friends.

First, let me speak to the level of personal faith and share a little of my own background as a Friend. I grew up in a large pastoral meeting in Indianapolis. This particular meeting was Christ-centered, like all pastoral meetings, but it was not really evangelical. Historically, it represents the modernist-liberal trend in Gurneyite Quakerism that continues to be strong in Friends United Meeting. Incidentally, it is this stream that produced Rufus Jones and informed his concern for Quaker renewal at the turn of the century. The Quaker worship I grew up with had Bible stories, hymns, and sermons, as well as time for unprogrammed worship. Its meetings for business would be hard to differentiate from meetings for business here at Brooklyn Meeting or elsewhere. The Christian religious

education I received was not dogmatic; it simply washed over me. Thus, my early Christian experience was perhaps different from that of some Quaker universalists who felt repressed by a more dogmatic form of Christianity. In fact, I would have to say that I was not a Christian in any serious sense of the word. My early spirituality was at least as much a nature mysticism as it was Christian.

My conviction experience was rather unusual; I was first called to be a minister before I became a serious Christian. My calling came very clearly, despite the fact I had never before considered the ministry. Given my background, I began to prepare to become a Friends pastor. I took some religion courses in college, where I became very interested in the Bible. I went on to Union Theological Seminary, here in New York, where I continued to emphasize study in the Bible. Hebrew Scripture spoke first to me. It was only in my second year of seminary that my spiritual life began to form decisively around the person of Jesus Christ.

I was finally a Christian, but there was nothing particularly Quaker about my Christian faith. I was steeped in the neo-orthodoxy of Bonhoeffer and others, which still echoed in the halls of Union Seminary. It was only as I was serving in my first Friends pastorate that I read seriously in Quakerism and discovered the message of early Friends. A decisive event came in 1976 when I heard Lewis Benson speak on the message of George Fox. Here was an understanding of the gospel that was new to me one that I had never encountered in seminary, and one that spoke more clearly to my own experience of Christ. I was caught up in the writings of Fox as I went on to graduate school at Drew University. This work culminated in a doctoral dissertation on Fox, which later became my first book, *Apocalypse of the Word*.

of my Christ-centered Friends want to define the truth narrowly and exclude its movement at large in the world. If we live rooted and grounded in the truth, we can resist the temptation to be alienated and polarized by one another's lapses and extremes.

The energy and life for modern Quakerism (indeed, for modern Christianity at its best) is found in the dynamic tension between the particular and the universal. Those who are willing to live with that tension will be energized to do great things together. Christian faith helps me see that while there are many good spiritual paths in the world, I have but one life to live, and I can go the furthest when I take one of those paths all the way. And Jesus calls me to follow him in his path.

There is, and must be, room for religious diversity in the Society of Friends. But I believe that if we reclaim the unique Christian spirituality of Quakerism as the shared core of our faith, then we will reach more deeply to that of God in everyone, and speak truth more coherently to the powers of our age. God in everyone, and speak truth more coherently to the powers of our age.

attack from fundamentalists today. But we can answer those attacks more powerfully as Christian universalists who witness the gospel to mean freedom, not repression.

If Quakerism amounts to believing whatever I want to, I can do that pretty well at home on my own as a religious consumer, choosing among religious “ideas.” But to be a religious producer, growing spiritually and morally, aiding others in their growth, and making a coherent witness to the world, I need a group with better focus and purpose. I currently am leading a study of the Gospel of John at Pendle Hill. Friends have often referred to John as “the Quaker gospel.” Our class has been wrestling with the fundamental tension that John builds into the prologue, which is played out in the rest of the story: the light, the word, life in God, enlightens everyone in the world. People often refuse to acknowledge or follow this light, but it is there and available to all. So there is a strong universalist element in John. To believe that the light was expressed in a particular life male, Jewish, 2000 years ago is a leap of faith that should give us all some pause. Yet it is through that limitedness that a story unfolds, a story that can bring all our stories into sharper focus.

Jesus was a Jewish teacher who confirmed his own religious heritage. But he also affirmed the spiritual life of non-Jews he met, like the Samaritan woman. Jesus embodied a life of faith that was highly focused; he affirmed and worked creatively within his own inherited tradition. Yet he also embodied a faith that was focused without becoming narrow; he did not exclude others from the light he knew they shared with him. I will not forsake the universality of that light simply because many of my universalist Friends want to embody all things and sometimes seem rather unfocused. Neither will I give up the Christian particularity of the light simply because others

Meanwhile, I had always sensed spiritual wholeness in non-Christians, though certainly not in everyone Christian or non-Christian. That of God in everyone is no automatic pilot, and people do ignore and repress it. There is too much evil evident in the world to imagine otherwise. But the spiritual integrity of many non-Christians is too clear to deny. Thus, my Quaker universalism is based upon a discernment of people first of all, not upon theories of comparative religion. The religious life and convictions of people are a secondary question. Indeed, even Paul (in Romans) and the Book of Revelation agree that the true test of people is their actions.

Nevertheless, it does seem only reasonable to assume that a variety of religious traditions have sought to interpret the universal experience of the light, and to bring people more fully into it. Thus, on a personal level, as a Christian, I can rejoice in the light I find shining in the lives of good Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Native Americans, etc. And it seems that their religious practices do deepen their lives in God’s light. They are participating in traditions with centuries of development and depth in the discipline of spiritual life.

That brings us to the second level of the Christian-universalist question: the historical tradition of Quakerism and our shared witness as Friends. What about universalism on the corporate level of faith and practice? We agree that religious truth is out there at large in the world. The light is expressed in many shades, through historical and cultural circumstances. But should the Society of Friends be a pluralistic body? That is a different question altogether. We have just agreed (I hope) that the various religious beliefs and practices of the world’s religions do make a difference for people’s lives. Therefore, it makes a difference when people learn and practice them together.

But each religious tradition is idiomatic to its own cultural and historic circumstances. Each religious language is thus only partially translatable to another one. Any language, religious or otherwise, is enriched by a variety of idioms that can only be loosely and clumsily translated. One becomes most expressive not by knowing a lot of languages slightly, but by knowing one or two in depth, in their idiomatic richness and texture.

It is true that Christ-centered Friends too often believe that theirs is the only true language of the Spirit, distrusting all others. But it is also true that Quaker universalists too often dabble in a lot of religious and psychological concepts, systems, and traditions without taking any one of them to any real depth. When Quakerism gets too far removed from its unique Christian spirituality, it becomes shallow, relativistic, trendy. This is a problem in many meetings today. There is no longer a sufficiently defined spiritual path that meeting members practice seriously. There is no shared vision that can bring worship and ministry to depth. Messages become rationalistic or sentimental, pious or political, but they do not speak from the depth to the depth.

To identify Quakerism as Christian is not to affirm all the worst excesses and corruptions of Christian history, as Quaker universalists sometimes seem to believe. The Quaker spirituality is a unique form of Christian spirituality, which sustained Friends powerfully until this century. There is a great idiomatic richness in this spiritual tradition, which is barely suggested by the remaining traces of Quaker vocabulary still used among us today. That richness partakes of centuries of reflection upon personal experience, in the light of the Bible's teachings and history. It has been refined and sharpened by centuries of threshing and discerning which expressions fit the tradition and which expressions are extraneous. There is great uniting power in this tradition,

both for personal spiritual growth and for collective faith and action. Both pastoral and liberal Quakerisms have diluted its richness through the acceptance of extraneous cultural influences. As a result, we are not serious Quakers or serious Buddhists. We become half-baked evangelicals or cosmopolitan dilettantes in "religions of the world."

What is needed for a dynamic Quakerism of the future? Quaker universalism offers an important outlook for our life in a modern pluralistic culture. There is no way to go back to the "good old days" of Christendom. Who wants to go back there? I certainly do not! Quaker universalism is essential to our future as a basis for interfaith dialogue and collaboration in social and political witness. But Quaker universalism does not form the basis for an internally coherent Society of Friends with a clear identity and purpose of its own. It is much too vague and generalized about spirituality to offer Friends a way to grow and deepen in the Spirit.

Our identity, sense of purpose, and internal coherence must be rediscovered in our traditional identity as a Christian body that embraces truth and faithfulness wherever they may be. That was the outlook of John Woolman, who could see the light witnessed in the various religions he knew of in his day, including Native American religions. But he recognized his path as a Friend to be the Christian path. Truth may be out there everywhere, but with concrete individuals and religious bodies, it has to be somewhere in particular. There is nothing unique and transforming about a pluralistic aggregation of spiritual seekers meeting to tolerate and affirm one another in whatever truths they wish to accept. Such a loose jumble of individualists is in fact redundant and unnecessary in a society where religious freedom is already guaranteed. It is true that our secular rights of religious freedom are under