

DANIEL A. SEEGER **I Have Called You Friends**



## **I Have Called You Friends:**

A Quaker Universalist's  
Understanding of Jesus

Daniel A. Seeger



ESSAY PRESENTED BY  
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### **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.

Ministry and Nurture Committee of Friends General Conference sponsored an Interest Group at their 1989 Gathering at which he was an “enabler”. There was such great response to the session that it continued for two more unprecedented evening sessions. Both his talk and guidelines for worship sharing were published by FGC in the pamphlet, *Sharing Our Faith: Christian and Universalist Aspects of Friends Spiritual Experience*.

Dan is author of three previous QUF pamphlets. We the Steering Committee, are pleased to publish this recent essay - *I Have Called You Friends: A Quaker Universalist's Understanding of Jesus*.

Carolyn N. Terrell

### **Notes**

1. I understand the millennium actually changes in 2001 C.E.
2. Paul Knitter is Professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati. He received his doctorate at the Pontifical University in Rome.

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### About The Author

Daniel A. Seeger is a member of Birmingham Meeting (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting) of the Religious Society of Friends. He presently serves as Executive Secretary (Director) of Pendle Hill, a Quaker Center for study and contemplation, Wallingford, Pennsylvania. In the recent past he has served as Regional Executive Secretary of AFSC-New York office and continues his service, as a volunteer, on the national board of AFSC. While in New York, he served as clerk of Friends Seminary's governing body. Dan has a long background in both activist and the contemplative dimensions of Quaker life. One of the aspects of his activism was, as a conscientious objector, his participation in the landmark case before the Supreme Court of the United States of America vs. Daniel A. Seeger. The result of the litigation was a greatly broadened basis for religious objections to military service.

There has been a long standing interest in communication among the branches and traditions of the Religious Society of Friends by the author of this tract. He has been active in the Friends World Committee on Consultation, having first been appointed as representative of New York Yearly Meeting and later as clerk of FWCC's Interim Committee, which provides oversight for its world headquarters in London. In 1991 he served as one of the clerk's at FWCC's Fifth World Conference held in Kenya.

Dan has also served on committees of Friends United Meeting (Pastoral Friends). In 1984 he was part of a small delegation, organized by FUM, to visit and support the pastoral ministry of Jamaican Friends.

In Guatemala in 1988 he participated in the International Conference on Friends and Evangelism which was sponsored by the yearly meetings belonging to Evangelical Friends International.

### I Have Called You Friends

As the year 2000 approaches, we will hear with increasing frequency references to the turning of the millennium.<sup>1</sup> I suspect it will be less frequently mentioned that what the turning of the millennium marks is the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. But the new millennium does provide us with a useful occasion once again to reflect upon the meaning of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth for those gathered in the Friends community of faith. This is an ongoing exercise, admittedly, and not related to any particular turning of the calendar. But the millennium does remind us that culture evolves, experience is gained, and various historical events offer new insights into the human condition. The task of assessing what all this means for our grasp of the fundamentals of our faith should never be shirked.

The theme for this reflection is "I Have Called You Friends," Jesus' statement which is recounted in the fifteenth verse of the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. Some people believe that the name of our Religious Society is derived from this verse. What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus today? What will it mean to be a friend of Jesus in the 21st Century? In discussing this theme I plan to focus on four subtopics:

1. What is the problem? Why does this subject present an issue or difficulty for us today? What is the nature of the controversy surrounding it?

2. What aspects of Christian history illuminate the difficulty in which we find ourselves? This will be a very brief historical reflection; much more material could be brought into view than it will be possible to do in one essay.

3. What general characteristics of humankind's spiritual search, of the religious quest itself, bear on our attitudes about Jesus?

4. In the light of the problem, the history, and the common spiritual experience, how can we embrace the life and ministry of Jesus with enthusiasm as an essential source of meaning for our individual lives and for our Friends spiritual community now and in the third millennium?

### **The Problem**

To illustrate the nature of the problem we face I would like to share a small anecdote. When I lived in New York City I used to belong to Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting in Manhattan. That meeting holds two gatherings for worship each First Day. The first meeting at 9:30 a.m. is for those with early-bird inclinations and for people who prefer a smaller gathering with more silence. The 11:00 a.m. meeting is the "big" meeting, at which an animated throng of about 150 people usually gathers, and in which, during worship, the Holy Spirit can usually be counted upon to inspire more frequent vocal ministry.

For all the years I was a member of this meeting, I was a faithful attender of the 9:30 a.m. gathering for worship. One First Day morning, while going to meeting, I was sitting on a bench at the DeKalb Avenue subway stop in Brooklyn, close to where I used to live, waiting for the next train to take me to Manhattan. As I was sitting waiting for the train

the capacity to apprehend the One in the many constitutes the special responsibility of those who would dwell in love. As we embrace our heritage for the new millennium, may this capacity to apprehend the One in the many, and the love it expresses, be our special gift as the friends of Jesus to people of all faiths everywhere!

the point, fascinating as it may be. For what is truly significant to us is the “myth” of Jesus the understanding that this Life, with its obscure and humble birth; its education in poverty; its temptation, mortification and solitude; its acts of compassion and service; its desolation at moments of apparent abandonment by the Divine; its painful crucifixion of the self; and its final absorption into the Source offers a figuration of the journey that every soul must make if it is to reach fulfillment. Nor, from a universalist perspective, is it disrespectful of the Jesus story to understand that the narrative of the Buddha’s life offers similar compelling themes, in many respects congruent or complementary with Christian tradition and in other respects at variance with it.

Jesus called us his friends. Let us pray that as friends of Jesus we can support within the Christian community the development of a Jesus-faith which permits us to think optimistically about the possibility of salvation in all the world’s great spiritual traditions. Let the first concern of the friends of Jesus be to cooperate with and to encourage, rather than to convert, anyone who is already promoting the Realm of God on earth. Let us look forward to a new millennium when all humankind’s great religions will collaborate full-heartedly in the mutual building up of a civilization based on love. Let us recognize that while spiritual life in its externals often presents us with a bewildering diversity, the saints of each spiritual tradition are practically indistinguishable from each other in their lives, their way of being. Though their theological concepts may be different, their feelings and conduct are amazingly similar. They dwell in love, and God dwells in them because God is love. In the beautiful prayer with which he closes his final discourse in the Gospel of John, Jesus acknowledges that he came so that “all might be One.” Increasingly in this modern age,

I was immersed in reading Matthew Fox’s book, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*.

New York City subway platforms tend to be deserted early on Sunday mornings. As I was reading, alone in my absorption, I scarcely noticed a person who sat down on the bench next to me. Yet somehow, subconsciously, I became aware that someone else was reading my book also, and so when it came time to turn the page, I looked sideways as if to check to see if it was alright to do so. I found myself looking at a young woman who quickly said, “What does that mean – cosmic Christ?” Her question was stated not in a tentative or inquisitive way, but with a slightly skeptical and assertive tone.

At that point in my reading I was, myself, beginning to get fatigued with what seemed like Father Fox’s boundless enthusiasm for every New Age trend which came into his view, and so at that moment I scarcely felt qualified to try to interpret his concept in a summary fashion to an inquiring stranger. So I said that I was not quite sure, that I had not yet finished the book. But I then went on to try to describe the idea of the Christ-Spirit permeating everything in the universe, and leading everything to a just and harmonious Second Coming.

My new acquaintance looked very doubtful, and asserted that the Bible might be a better place to read about Jesus. She then explained at some length the fallen nature of the world and the power of the Devil, and said that it was unlikely that there will be any place for Christ here until we clean up our act, so to speak.

I allowed that the power of Satan might indeed be great. But I suggested that our own consciousness is itself of the substance of God; by giving too much of our attention to the work of the Devil we are in danger of giving it additional force and power.

My brief comments sounded a little lame in contrast to her fairly lengthy ones, and being eager to get the subject off theology, I asked her if she was on her way to church also. She said no, that she was going to work, that actually the Sabbath was on Saturday, the seventh day, when the Lord said that we should rest. She gave a fairly long explanation of how this was so, and of the importance of human beings not setting up their own schedule of observance in counter-distinction to what God had commanded. She then let me know that she had been to church the previous day, the real Sabbath.

I said that I hoped that the Deity would find all people's worship acceptable, even if the timing was a bit off. The young woman was by no means a religious fanatic, but I did find myself wondering when the train would come. She asked me what church I was going to, and when I told her, she asked if she might attend sometime herself. I casually said that, of course, she would be welcome, but then was a little startled when she rummaged in her purse for a paper and pencil so that I might write down the details for her.

I took the pencil and paper and hesitated. I was uncertain how our efforts to tease mysteries out of the silence might mesh with her many words of certitude. I must admit that the idea of writing down a false address occurred to me; I am happy to be able to report that I quickly decided not to indulge in so flagrant a violation of the Friends testimony on veracity. I wrote down the correct address of the meetinghouse, and was about to write "Worship: 11 a.m. on Sunday," thinking at least to protect my favored early-bird worship, but after a brief hesitation actually wrote, "Worship: 9:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. on Sundays."

I tell this little anecdote at the beginning of this reflection because it seems to contain many of the elements with which we must be concerned in a consideration of Jesus

not truly universalist, even if one has in the past been oppressed by some form of Christian malpractice. For all the major religions have their shadow side; Christianity is hardly unique in that regard. So a true Quaker universalist will be wary of tendencies which seem bent on excising Christian vocabulary and Christian thought forms from contemporary Quaker culture, just as she or he will be wary of an intolerant Christian dogmatism which might seek to infect Quakerism.

Universalists acknowledge that almost every religion has an "incarnational" dimension. It is quite common that a spiritual movement, while acknowledging that God is an unfathomable mystery, will also find a way to bring this unfathomable mystery "down to earth," so to speak, finding a way to make the mystery of the divine graspable, accessible, and understandable in human terms.

Furthermore, universalist Friends acknowledge that almost every religion preserves and conveys its vision of human life through narrative, through story. It is a relatively small portion of humanity which engages in abstract thinking, in philosophy and theology. Most people, instead, tell stories which in some way run parallel to life as it is lived and which illuminate the significance and meaning of the great themes of human destiny in which every life participates. These stories are myths, not in the sense that they are untrue, but in the sense that they are always going on. Although many of these myths have a true historical basis, their power often stems from their location in a distant time or realm where they can be freed from the inevitable idiosyncrasies of real remembered events, where they can be idealized so as clearly to illuminate the underlying principles, which are often hidden by distracting accidentals in actual experience. From this perspective, the search for the "real" historical Jesus can be seen as somewhat beside

by conservative qualifications. There seems to be a constant mixture of legalism and antinomianism; there is an emphasis which repeatedly switches from rigor and militancy to acquiescence and the acceptance of suffering. Some of this variety reflects the genuine bewilderment of the disciples and the confusion of the evangelical editors to whom their memories descended, but some of it undoubtedly truly reflects Jesus' awareness of the insoluble dichotomies of which we spoke earlier.

According to the Gospel stories, Jesus never once described a saved person as one who believed in certain defined doctrines. In fact, in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus, when speaking to the Pharisees, seems to imply that those who claim Truth as a possession are apt to become as blind people. At another time he is reported to have said that his followers would be known by one thing only, by the way they loved one another. Thus, the godliness which Jesus embodied was concerned not with right belief or right doctrine, but with right practice or right living. It was a godliness which was humane and compassionate. Indeed, in an odd and mysterious paradox, the godliness of Jesus was realized by his living in a fully human way, by his being the ultimate human, the perfect human being.

Universalist Quakers can bring a special perspective to the Jesus story and to the dilemma posed by Christian Friends, on the one hand, and those "allergic" to Christianity, on the other. A universalist Friend is usually ready to see the wisdom and truth in a variety of religious traditions, both enjoying the uniqueness of each and savoring the many common themes which emerge even in the face of religious diversity. A universalist Friend can readily recognize that for a person to be hospitable to spiritual thought forms derived from Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, but to be hostile to Christian vocabulary and concepts, is illogical and

in modern times. The incident illustrates an abiding interest in Jesus – an interest shared by theological adventurers like Matthew Fox, by silence-oriented non-creedal universalist Friends like myself, and by persons of an athletic Christian certitude, such as the young woman whom I met. The discussion of the Sabbath illustrates how different people get different messages from the same scriptures. Finally, the woman's forceful assertions, and my temptation to avoid the prospect of having to deal with her at Fifteenth Street Meeting, also seem to illustrate the dynamics which have become typical of religious life today.

Indeed, the same difficulties presented by the question of Sabbath Day observance, particularly the difficulties of scriptural interpretation, and all the consequent tensions within the church, exist as well regarding one of the central matters of Christian faith: Who was Jesus, what was his nature, and what is the significance of his life and ministry for contemporary people?

All gradations of opinion exist within our small Religious Society of Friends about this matter. At one end of this spectrum are those Friends who believe that a person who walked the earth in Galilee two thousand years ago, one Jesus of Nazareth, is the unique and only Son of God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father, the person by or through whom all other things from the beginning of time were made. (I am deliberately using the non-inclusive language of the Nicene Creed, the ancient and original official formulation of this doctrine).

In other words, some believe that a Jewish teacher of low birth who lived among an oppressed people about two thousand years ago at the fringes of what was then thought of as the civilized world was actually co-creator and co-ruler of all the stars and galaxies in the cosmos. Moreover, in Jesus the one thing happened that needed to happen to

reconcile this universe to its God. Through his office as savior – an office which need never be exercised again in the same way – a new and permanent relationship was established between God and the entire human race. People who believe in this unique and extraordinary celestial origin of Jesus and in his special mission of atonement also accept that at the same time he was deeply and fully human, though he came into the world by means of a virgin birth or “immaculate conception.”

Some Friends are dismayed that others cannot accept all this as the most fundamental basis of their faith; other Friends, in contrast, are equally baffled to find that anyone can take such a collection of ideas, with its mixture of grandiosity and incomprehensibility, seriously. The latter group will either doubt that Jesus ever really existed or will acknowledge that, if he did exist, he was probably an extraordinary spiritual teacher who deserves our attention and respect much on a par with other great spiritual teachers. Some Friends are even unwilling to call themselves Christians.

This polarization of views plays itself out in our national life, in politics and civil affairs. In the public square the vocabulary of Christianity seems to be being monopolized by people at one end of the political spectrum. With some considerable success they have managed to associate Christianity with their particular political views. Now, this Christianity which they promote along with their political views is an unfortunate aberration, and not true Christianity at all, but it nevertheless seems to have the effect of driving everyone else into a secular corner. Masses of people become profoundly allergic to Christian ideas and Christian vocabulary.

The Religious Society of Friends suffers from this polarization which infects American culture generally. We

their failure to make neat, analytical distinctions between God, the sense of God’s presence, and the one who seemed unfailingly to make God’s presence felt in a situation. Indeed, perhaps we can recognize that such an analysis is itself an artifice.

Yet even though Jesus brought many people into a new connection with the divine origin of all things, many others were unable to hear or to respond to his message. Moreover, the evidence seems quite clear that even his most convinced and loyal followers had difficulty actually understanding him. We are told that Jesus himself was impatient with them and despaired about their failure to grasp his message. Despite his instructions, his close followers could not always remember his teachings accurately or coherently. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that they were simple, unschooled people. But even more important, the teaching Jesus had to give was itself intrinsically difficult both to understand and to convey. We must dismiss any idea that Jesus was a simple figure. His actions and motives were complex, and he taught something which was elusive and hard to grasp. Jesus had new insights to deliver, or at least, startlingly refreshing interpretations of old insights. But he apparently sought to present this as a fulfillment of the old order. He sought to include outcast elements in his mission, but seemed also eager to carry the orthodox along with him. He was a true universalist.

Given all these difficulties, what we have in the gospels regarding the teachings of Jesus is more a series of glimpses than a clear code of doctrine. There is certainly no simple set of handy rules that can be unreflectively applied in daily life. Jesus started a spiritual movement based on dialogue, exploration and experiment, a movement which invites comment, interpretation, and elaboration in a spiritual quest. The radical elements in his teachings are balanced



the experience he represents of much of its saving power, and to diminish our own divine potential as well. Jesus was a child of God; we are all in some sense children of God. Jesus was human; we are all human. Jesus was divine; we are all in some sense divine. It seems beyond doubt that Jesus was a person who can still reveal to us how God is. That there are other sources of revelation also seems beyond doubt. Arguing about which revelation is more perfect or more or less normative is futile. In the face of such debate, a sensitive person always perceives that true godliness is withdrawing.

But what about Jesus himself? Can we ever know for sure what Jesus was really like? What can be agreed is that surviving scriptural writings, whatever their merits for revealing spiritual truth may be, are completely inadequate as a source of historical data. They account for little more than a few weeks in Jesus' life. When one reads the gospels sequentially, one is mainly aware of common themes; however, if one reads them side by side, comparing accounts of the same incidents or the same teachings, one is more struck by contradictions and disagreements than by similarity.

What we can probably affirm with safety and conviction is that Jesus seemed to feel and to claim a special intimacy with God. He felt himself to be so close to, and so familiar with, the love and the energy which guides the universe, so imbued with its spirit, that he could address it as if speaking to a loving parent. Moreover, others, too, when in Jesus' presence and when listening to his teaching sensed their own intimacy with God. They became powerfully aware of the presence of God when in the presence of Jesus. Have we all not had similar experiences? Has not a person, a situation, or a place made the presence of God palpable to us? Perhaps we can forgive people in an ancient time for

find, at least in some unprogrammed meetings, that people whose Christian experience is basic to their faith and spiritual life must keep this fact in some sort of closet, lest their use of Christian vocabulary make other members of meeting – usually members who are refugees from Christian malpractice experienced in other denominations – feel that a safe space they have found is being invaded by an enemy. This “refugee” experience is quite authentic and must be honored. I consider myself to be such a refugee. But it seems to me that this overall state of affairs leaves the corporate body trying to cobble together a spiritual life bereft of any of the poetry, the metaphors and the ideas which our civilization has developed to address the profound and elusive mysteries of spiritual experience. We are left trying to explore and express spiritual experience using only such vocabulary as one might hear in a public school classroom. It seems all of us are being impoverished in a dangerous way by this state of affairs. This polarization and the resulting impoverishment is the problem I wish to identify and to reflect upon.

### Historical Reflection

It is useful to remember that the earliest days of the Christian movement were characterized by great diversity. Many alternative versions of Christianity which flourished in the period immediately following the apostolic age subsequently disappeared from view. Some would say that they were ruthlessly stamped out. But given the diversity that once existed, members of the earliest Christian communities might have been quite surprised if it had been suggested that there was only one right way to think about, feel about, and experience their faith, and only one way to understand the exact relationship of their faith to Jesus.

But eventually the set of ideas quoted earlier was made official at a Church Council held at Nicaea in the year 325 C.E. This Council was convened, and apparently presided over, by the Roman Emperor Constantine.

The idea that “immaculate conception” involving human beings and deities could result in offspring, so foreign to Jewish sensibility, was a commonplace notion in Hellenistic culture, the pantheon of which was populated with many god-men and god-women. Constantine himself had deified his own father, and might have been expecting to be deified himself one day. But he apparently converted to Christianity, although some doubt the sincerity of this conversion and the depth of his grasp of the ministry of Jesus. At any rate, seeking to consolidate a crumbling Empire by unifying and co-opting one of the most vital movements within it, the Christian movement, Constantine presided over the hammering out of the Nicene formula, which was reaffirmed in final form at a Council held at Chalcedon in 351 C.E.

Some theologians insist that there are no biblical texts which support the Nicene/Constantinian formulation. Others acknowledge that a few scriptural passages attribute divine characteristics to Jesus, that a few sentences claim that he was a totally unique sort of being. But there are relatively few such passages. Of these, the theologian Paul Knitter<sup>2</sup> writes:

All the “one and only” adjectives used to describe Jesus belong “not to the language of philosophy, science, or dogmatics, but rather to the language of confession and testimony.” In talking about Jesus, the New Testament authors use the language not of analytic philosophers but of enthusiastic believers, not of scientists but of lovers ... in describing Jesus as “the only,” Christians were not trying to elaborate a

Every person has some sort of god in her or his life. I believe that even professed atheists, if one examines their spiritual life carefully, can be seen to be oriented to some animating value or principle which profoundly colors the way they live out their own existence. It determines what they are. We encounter many of these gods, idols really, in modern times – money, power, prestige, some aspect of one’s passions or emotions, a possessive sense of freedom and independence, an unquestioning belief in the capacity of human reason, a particular political ideology, even an incoherent set of trendy ideas. Whatever god it is to which one is somehow drawn, that god gives form and shape to one’s life, for better or for worse. To place Jesus and what he stood for at the center of our beings and to exist in accordance with the way, the truth, and the life which he embodied is to acknowledge in some way his divinity for us.

Our consideration of the relative humanity or divinity of Jesus brings us back once again to all the insoluble dichotomies I described earlier as innate to humankind’s spiritual quest. To come down too hard on one side or the other of this question of humanity versus divinity is to miss the point. Relentlessly to deify Jesus distances him from us and robs him of his true greatness. After all, if Jesus knew he was divine and would rise in glory on the third day to sit at the right hand of the Father, the crucifixion is reduced from a supreme sacrifice to a kind of inconvenient surgery. Similarly, if the reason why the Sermon on the Mount speaks to us is because of its “extra-terrestrial origins,” because it is backed up by a threat of other-worldly retribution, one might as well not bother with it at all. Unless Jesus’ words resonate with something very deep in one’s own being, something with which they have a profound and mysterious kinship, they are meaningless. On the other hand, to declare Jesus to be merely another “prophet like Jefferson” is to rob

way we live, but we cannot adequately articulate it. Those who have a grasp of this are very wary of debates about spiritual matters. They know that the Truth is to be lived, not merely to be pronounced by the mouth, and they know that, by their so living, what is unutterable will be rendered visible.

It is a misconception of modern life to believe that if we know how to think rationally we will know how to live, but this is not so. The rationalist affirms, "I think, therefore I am." The spiritually aware person asks something deeper: "I am *what*?" Reason cannot supply the definition of our essential nature, of our ultimate purpose as human beings. This answer can only be supplied by a kind of intuitive certitude, a certitude we know as faith. The answer our faith supplies is extremely important. Mohandas K. Gandhi observed that people tend to become what they think they are. So clearly, the vision of human nature that we carry about with us in our minds and hearts is no inconsequential matter!

### Jesus Today

The mysterious, miraculous ministry of Jesus somehow offers us an answer to this great question: "What are we?" The movement he started, like other great religions, provides us with a vision of what we are meant to be as human beings and outlines for us ways to live which are expressive of the vision. Religions like Christianity do this not only for individuals, but aspire to orient whole cultures, and often succeed in doing so. They are comprehensive ways of life. A complex and interrelated series of values, habits and practices flows out of and gives expression to a total vision of human life which is aspired to, respected and admired – a vision of life which elicits spiritual enthusiasm.

metaphysical principle but a personal relationship  
...

Exclusivist Christological language is much like the language a husband would use to a wife (or vice versa): "You are the most beautiful woman in the world... You are the only woman for me." Such statements, in the context of the marital relationship and especially in intimate moments, are certainly true. But the husband would balk if asked to take an oath that there is absolutely no other woman in the world as beautiful as his wife or no other woman he could possibly love and marry. It would be transforming love language into scientific or philosophical language. Christian dogmatic definitions, in the way they have been understood and used, have perhaps done just that to the love language of the early church. The languages of the heart and the head are not necessarily contradictory, but they are different. And their differences must be respected.

From the very beginning of our Religious Society, Friends have sought to re-create and to re-experience the Christianity of the apostolic age. Friends have spoken of practicing primitive Christianity revived. And so, perhaps, we should not be surprised that in seeking to revive primitive Christianity – pre-Constantinian Christianity – we have revived among ourselves as well some of the diversity of attitudes about Jesus that characterized the very earliest days of the Church.

### The Spiritual Quest

I would like to step back from the matter of the trinity and the incarnation, that is, from the matter of the combined

humanity and divinity of Jesus, in order to reflect on the nature of spiritual truth itself. How is spiritual truth the same as, or different from, everyday household truth?

All sanctity, all holiness, is born of conflict. It arises out of contradictions which become resolved, finally, into union. The landscape of humankind's spiritual world, the world in which we realize our most noble accomplishments and in which we suffer our most crushing defeats, is a landscape of intellectually unresolvable dichotomies. Freedom versus order, gaining life by losing it, a Kingdom which is yet to come but which is also here within us and among us, having enemies but loving them, the simultaneous fallenness and exaltedness of human nature, the immanence and transcendence of God, stability versus change, justice versus mercy. (Saint Thomas Aquinas observed that justice without mercy is cruelty, while mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution.) We are told to be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves simultaneously. In his many wonderful paintings entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*, the Quaker artist Edward Hicks charmingly symbolized for us an ideal of sanctity which involves the reconciliation of such opposites. The logical mind is offended by these dichotomies and seeks to come down on one side or the other of them; the same dichotomies provoke and stimulate the higher human faculties, the faculties without which we are nothing but very clever animals. People of great sanctity somehow transcend these dichotomies without abandoning the truth on each side of them.

Thus, achieving spiritual realization requires a precarious balancing act. It is a balancing act which can be carried out successfully only with wisdom and love. It cannot be guided by simple, dogmatic assertions, which by their nature tend simply to prefer one side or the other of these dichotomies. The gospels have in common with the

techniques of Socrates and of Zen Masters the fact that they question us, rather than telling us things. Legalism, lawyerliness and literalism are the enemies of all true spirituality. Poetry and parable are its friends. When spiritual discourse is reduced to lawyer-like debates, everyone loses.

It is interesting that Jesus never claimed to be a philosopher or an analyst. Indeed, very few of his sermons, as they are passed down to us in the gospels, could be said even to follow an outline. It is hard to imagine these sermons being delivered without long intervals of silence interspersed, the silence of Wisdom listening. Often Jesus spoke in somewhat obscure anecdotes and parables. On several occasions he simply said, "I *am* the Truth." He did not say I have come to give you great ideas or penetrating philosophies. He simply said, "I *am* the Truth." One of these occasions occurred during an interview with Pontius Pilate. Pilate's response to this strange assertion was to ask the question, "And what is truth?" In asking the question this way, Pilate was, perhaps, revealing his background in Hellenistic culture, with its penchant for philosophizing. And as if to indicate that there was little possibility for rapprochement between one who claimed to "be" the Truth and another ready to dispute about it, Pilate, without waiting for any response from Jesus, turned away, and, ultimately, washed his hands of the entire matter.

There is a wisdom that is from the Lord, created from eternity in the beginning and remaining until eternity at the end. It is a wisdom that we are told the Lord has poured out into all his works to be with humankind forever as his gift. (*Ecclesiasticus* 1:9,10; *Jerusalem Bible*) But this eternal wisdom is not something we can know with our minds only. Rather, it is something we are; it is a quality of being. Our minds cannot contain what contains us nor comprehend what comprehends us. We can enact this Wisdom in the