

MULFORD Q. SIBLEY & RHODA R. GILMAN

**Authority and Mysticism in Quaker and Buddhist Thought**



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Mulford Q. Sibley & Rhoda R. Gilman



### **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.

- (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932.)
5. There are many biographies of George Fox. The most recent and definitive is *First Among Friends* by H. Larry Ingle (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Fox's teaching is known mainly through his Journal, a collection of writings that include reminiscences, sermons, and letters. These were copied and edited by others, working under Fox's supervision. A number of editions have been published.
  6. *The Journal of George Fox*, edited by Rufus M. Jones, p. 97 (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1983). The second quotation, from an account written by Margaret Fell, who later married Fox, is in *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 101, by William C. Braithwaite
  7. Quoted in Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, p. 336 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, second edition, 1981).
  8. *Journal of George Fox*, p. 105.
  9. A recent study, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*, by Phyllis Mack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) is devoted mainly to Quakers. In her introduction Mack notes the difficulty of postmodern scholarship in dealing with people whose "prayer and inner discipline ... were attempts to do nothing less than deconstruct the self."
  10. The best biography of Jones is Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of Life* (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1981).
  11. Quotations in Vining, *Friend of Life*, p.257, 262.
  12. This famous phrase is from a letter written by Fox in 1656 to Friends spreading the word in foreign countries. It is quoted in Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 239.

spirituality that can accept cultural difference within universality. In looking back, the lights and shadows of the Quaker experience illustrate the pitfalls and possibilities that face mystics of any kind who seek to be a force in society and at the same time maintain the integrity of their inner path.

#### Notes:

1. The first voyage of the *Phoenix* has been described by Elizabeth Jelinek Boardman in *The Phoenix Trip: Notes on a Quaker Mission to Haiphong* (Burnsville, N.C.: Celo Press, 1985). Other information is from an interview by the author with George Lakey in July, 1995.
2. Now a Buddhist nun known by her religious name, Chan Khong has told the story of this movement in *Learning True Love: How I Learned & Practiced Social Change in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993). See also the many writings of Thich Nhat Hanh. In the West, advocates of engaged Buddhism have formed the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.
3. This center, called Temenos, is in Shutesbury, Massachusetts. Teresina Rowell Havens, who received a doctorate in comparative religions from Yale and studied Buddhism in Japan was also the author of several articles and pamphlets on the parallels between Buddhist and Quaker practice. See, for example, *Mind What Stirs in your Heart* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Pamphlets, 1992).
4. The social and spiritual milieu in which Quakerism developed has been examined by several scholars, most notably Rufus Jones in *Spiritual Reformers of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1914) and *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth*

#### Editor's Introduction

The two essays in this pamphlet may at first glance seem not to have a great deal in common. They were written at different times and for widely different purposes. The piece by Mulford Sibley is a lecture given at the tenth anniversary gathering of Northern Yearly Meeting in 1985. It was therefore intended for an audience of people familiar with the Society of Friends and the tensions within Quaker history and thought. My own is an article published in the Spring, 1996, issue of *Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions* under the title "Friends of Friends." It was written for non-Quaker readers interested in mysticism, both Eastern and Western.

There is a common thread, however. It lies in the authority given by both Friends and Buddhists to personal religious experience. And this, as Sibley points out, opens the door to universalism, for mystical experience of the divine and sacred is universal, not limited to Christianity or any other religious tradition. Buddhism has little problem with the concept of religious authority, since it is nontheistic and posits no divine being or final cause. Its scriptures deal mainly with practice – the practice necessary for each individual to achieve liberation from the delusions and attachments that produce suffering and keep us chained to the wheel of life. Such liberation, of course, commonly takes the form of a sudden breakthrough or a moment when enlightenment occurs. Although Buddhists avoid the term "mysticism," the countless descriptions of such moments do in fact suggest mystical experiences. One can even call them "religious" if one believes that glimpsing the ultimate nature of reality through the veil of "maya" or the "cloud of unknowing" is in fact the same experience as touching the divine.

In practical terms, of course, more than two millennia of existence within imperfect and hierarchical human societies have produced institutional and political forms of Buddhist “authority.” The concept of karma (moral reward or retribution carried from one incarnation to the next) can – and has been – twisted into a justification for oppression and injustice. But although a Buddhist monk or lama may claim superior virtue and insight, he cannot, unlike a Christian priest or pope, exercise final religious authority. And although the words of the Buddha are at times venerated almost like those of a god, they have never been literally taken as such. As a result the history of Buddhism is blessedly free from the kind of religiously based warfare and persecution that has stained all forms of monotheism.

The first substantial contacts between Eastern and modern Western religious traditions began in the 18th century, and for more than two hundred years each has been influencing the other. This process has been little recognized, but it has produced subtle changes in both. Buddhism, as it has moved into the West in the 20th century, has pulled away from some of the authoritarian forms acquired in other cultures. There has been less deference to clergy and more emphasis upon individual practice and upon equality in the “sangha,” or community of students and meditators. This has been especially noticeable in the relationships of gender. Female teachers, almost unheard of in the East, have emerged in the West and have demanded the same respect as their male counterparts.

Since religious authority in Buddhism, as among Friends, rests with the inner experience of the individual, radical shifts in perceptions of the world may lead to controversy, but not to charges of heresy. Confronted with the modern scientific worldview, a few Buddhists have

At the same time the dynamic pull of New Age spirituality, a growing awareness of human ties to the natural world, and especially the rising tide of ideas from the East, have had a powerful influence among more mystical Friends. Buddhism holds particular appeal. Like Quakerism, it demands no specific beliefs nor blind obedience to any teacher or guru, and its precepts of peace, compassion, simplicity, right livelihood, and right speech are in striking parallel to historic Quaker testimonies. Except for Tibetan forms that have borrowed from Tantric Yoga and shamanism, Buddhist meditation involves no special psychic powers. Most schools of Zen and Vipassana teach a simple, rational awareness of the flow of consciousness. Their goal is to know reality as it is, unclouded by the filter of the busy mind and attachment to an ever-changing world.

In the long hours of “noble silence” at Buddhist retreats, Friends have once more found, like early Quakers, that “In stillness there is fullness.” In the focused discipline of the zendo they have heard within them that which “speaks to their condition” in the 20th century, even as George Fox heard the spirit of the Living Christ during his own long hours of solitary prayer. And they have returned to their meetings with new inspiration, claiming that the universality of the individual human spirit creates a common bond among all mystical traditions.

What these opposing forces will mean for the future of Quakerism is hard to predict. In a shrinking world threatened with environmental disaster, where multiculturalism and interdependence are unavoidable facts, claims to exclusive possession of The Truth can only be divisive – and perhaps fatal.

With their history of international peacemaking and social service, the heirs of George Fox may be poised to join a revitalized Buddhism in painting the way toward a

give up “notions” and to listen with open, unjudging hearts to the voice within, he spoke in the biblical language and imagery of his own time. By the beginning of this century, that language had already led most Quakers to adapt an orthodox Christianity, hire paid pastors with scriptural training, and move to a form of worship that had little to distinguish it from other Protestant denominations.

Even among traditional Friends, however, the impulse to personal meditation and prayer had weakened significantly. They stood in an ambiguous position, occupying the roles of both clergy and laity and being called upon to minister to themselves and each other while playing the part of citizens in an increasingly secular society. As early as the 18th century, John Woolman had withdrawn from his successful mercantile business and turned to the slower-paced occupation of tailor to achieve the quietness and simplicity needed for a contemplative life. As the tempo of the world accelerated even more in the 20th century, few were able to follow his example. Added to this was the prevailing scientific world view that made the traditional forms of devotional prayer seem artificial and unresponsive to the inner experience of educated Friends. Thus the communal mysticism at meetings for worship, lacking the nourishment of personal inspiration, tended to dry up.

United in opposition to war and in their dedication to social service, Quakers for a time tolerated their differences, and some earlier divisions were healed. Most of those who were more orthodox accepted a broadminded, Christian-focused universalism, recalling Fox’s admonition to “walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.”<sup>12</sup> But in the second half of the 20th century strong opposing forces have begun to appear. Like 19th-century revivalism, the worldwide wave of religious fundamentalism has swept many Friends with it and has hardened their stand against any easygoing ecumenism.

questioned fundamental beliefs like the doctrine of reincarnation and have started a movement toward what might be called Buddhist universalism. On the other hand, the equally fundamental Buddhist view that the true nature of the world is change and impermanence appears wholly compatible with the model of a dynamic and evolving universe revealed by late 20th-century cosmology.

As with Friends, the unifying element in Buddhism lies in practice rather than in the underlying belief system. Although its outward forms vary widely among different cultures, the basic rules for that practice were set forth by the Buddha himself in what is called “The Noble Eightfold Path.” He taught that moral behavior is a necessary precondition to human enlightenment, not the decree of a divine being who requires obedience. Yet, as noted in my article, the behavior he prescribed bears a striking resemblance to traditional Quaker testimonies with their roots in the Sermon on the Mount. And in Buddhism as in Quakerism, the path to transcending the power of worldly desires and delusion lies through silent meditation. There, in what remains the Great Mystery, both Quakers and Buddhists seek ultimate authority and guidance.

*Rhoda R. Gilman*

## What Canst Thou Say? – Quakerism And Religious Authority

By Mulford Q. Sibley

You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?  
- George Fox, 1652 <sup>1</sup>

A perennial problem of religious thought is that of authority. Who speaks the final word on whether a statement or act is or is not “of God?” Who distinguishes between false prophets and true prophets? What, indeed, is a prophet?

### 1.

Let us first attempt to answer these questions in terms of the history of the idea of authority and then turn to the Quaker answer and its problems. In general, we shall contend that while Friends purport to have an answer to the questions raised, their responses are not without their own difficulties, or at least their own ambiguities.

In the beginning, according to one traditional view, the problem was solved so long as the historical figure of Jesus was alive. Whatever he said, it was held, was *ipso facto* true and binding; and some held that he was God, thus making his authority even more exalted.

But Jesus was alive for only a short period, and when he died, according to many teachings, his authority passed on to the apostles, including the apostle chosen to fill the place of Judas Iscariot. The twelve apostles, then, carried with them the authority to bind and loosen, to pronounce

Dishonor” toward American Indians; and in many others, the restless mysticism of the Quaker tradition persisted down the generations. And always it remained closely associated with the challenge to social injustice.

In the early years of the 20th century, historian and philosopher Rufus Jones led an effort among Quaker scholars in England and the United States to re-examine the movement’s 17th-century roots. The result was a clearer understanding of its ties to Medieval mysticism. Jones himself had experienced profound spiritual “openings” and was well acquainted with the work of Evelyn Underhill and other contemporary Christian mystics. He had deep doubts, however, about the solitary search for enlightenment or union with God that he saw in both Eastern and Catholic mysticism.<sup>10</sup>

Among Quakers, Jones insisted, the presence of the Spirit had always been most powerfully felt as a community experience, for, in the words of one 17th-century Friend: “Each partakes not only of the light and life raised in himself but in all the rest.” It was also closely tied to work in the world. In describing John Woolman, Jones said: “Here was a mysticism ... which sought no ecstasies, no miracles ... no private raptures, but whose over-mastering passion was to turn all he possessed, including his own life, ‘into the channel of universal love.’” Sister Chan Kong might easily say the same. She might also speak of the necessity of mindfulness, while Woolman would also have emphasized constant attention to leadings of the Spirit.

Following this path, Jones himself became a primary force in creating the American Friends Service Committee to help heal a devastated Europe after World War I. Thus he laid the foundation in both philosophy and practice for those 20th-century Friends who still adhered to the essential mysticism of Fox’s teaching, along with Woolman’s keen sense of social justice. Although Fox exhorted all Friends to

Fox was himself a man of peace and refused to take up arms in any cause, but pacifism did not become a major element in Quaker life until the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. Fox was then imprisoned along with other out-spoken nonconformists as being potentially treasonous, and Quakers were jailed and attacked by mobs in many parts of the country. In response they publicly renounced any involvement with plots, violent uprisings, or wars. It was at the time a gesture of conciliation. None could then foresee the day when national patriotism and citizen armies would make this “peace testimony,” the most radical and unpopular facet of Quaker tradition. One can hardly believe, however, that Fox would have been troubled by this fact.

Within a decade of its founding Quakerism had spread to the American colonies. In 1681 William Penn received a royal grant of land for the “holy experiment” that became the colony of Pennsylvania. With growing toleration and prosperity in the century that followed, Quakers faced a turning point – and a division. Some adopted conventional manners and worldly lifestyles; others withdrew into even more emphasis on plain clothes, plain speech, and distinctive customs that identified them as “a peculiar people.” A few went on to join the Shakers or Mennonites in still greater extremes of quietism.

But the inner search remained, and although most Quakers accommodated comfortably to the world, for some the Path still led to “openings” and the searing light of conscience. In John Woolman, who persuaded Friends to give up slaveholding; in Elias Hicks, who resisted the biblical evangelism that swept many Friends into mainstream Protestantism; in Amy and Isaac Post, who presided at the birth of American Spiritualism; in Lucretia Mott, who helped launch the movement for women’s rights; in Helen Hunt Jackson who denounced “A Century of

on the question of authenticity, and, in general, to sustain a religious order in the face of those who challenged it.

To be sure, there were ambiguities from the very beginning. While there might have been widespread agreement that the apostles inherited the mantle of Jesus, what exactly did that mean? Take, for example, the experience of Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit descended and those gathered together were said to have received “power” from on high. Suppose the authority of the apostles conflicted with the spontaneous expression of the Holy Spirit in the group of believers? Which source of authority would take precedence? There seems to have been widespread agreement that general religious authority resided in the community of those who believed, in some sense at least. But there was equal reverence for the apostles, who were given particular respect because of their closeness to Jesus.

When the apostles left this vale of tears, new responsibilities were thrust on the primitive Christian communities. If three persons prophesied different things, then there might be created an embarrassed community weakened by division. So long as the apostles lived (perhaps to the end of the 1st century) many of these problems could be muted. But once the apostles were gone, there was a tendency for the early religious community to develop more closely-knit organization and formal statements of belief.

At first, for example, little attention was given to the details of ecclesiastical structure. Each community was very much “on its own.” Where officers did exist – the episcopus and the presbyter, for example – they were sometimes called by one designation and sometimes by another. There was little sense of hierarchy. One can indeed say that the early religious community was a type of anarchy.

But with the passing of the apostles this began to change. By the end of the 2nd century, or sooner,

differentiation of offices had begun, and there was a sharper division between clergy and laity. Persecution by the state stimulated more closely knit organization in the religious assembly, as would tend to be true in any similar situation. By the 2nd century heretical movements also accentuated this tendency for the church to be more tightly organized, as the orthodox drew together to defend the true faith.

As the notion of an orthodox faith expands, doctrine becomes more significant as the basis of religious authority. While ultimately God is no doubt the author of true religious belief, God's authority is mediated through increasingly close-knit organization and more and more subtle creeds. The spirit of freedom exemplified at the original Pentecost tends to give way to standards which emphasize form and which stress the particular ways in which religious belief must be cast; rigidity of verbal expression becomes a test of whether one has gained salvation. The community moves away from direct communion with God and turns to the kinds of religious authority that depend on elaborate symbolism, attachment to highly complex forms of rationality, and formal education. To be sure, various forms of mysticism never die out (they are present in every culture) but the stress on "external" sources of authority is accentuated.

Many heretical movements in the Middle Ages were seeking more immediate or direct sources of authority. This is true of the Amalrichites with their tendency to pantheism, the Wycliffites or Lollards, the Waldensians, and the Albigensians. One sees it also in the group known as the "spiritual Franciscans." In the Joachimites the goal of history appears to be the elimination of all hierarchies of authority: the visible church is abolished, as is the family. Everyone becomes a monk or a nun.

One can summarize the ebb and flow of the idea of authority in Christianity by suggesting that it moves

and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small."<sup>8</sup> Many a Quaker who refused to pay tithes to the church, bow before a judge, or take an oath in court was promptly jailed. Fox himself was not exempt, and he served several long terms in prison.

Even more disturbing to the educated was Fox's claim of mystical union with the Holy Spirit, sometimes interpreted as a statement that he himself was literally God or Christ. Insistence that God exists in every human heart did not save him. Some early Quakers even seemed to invite misunderstanding. On one famous occasion James Nayler, a gentle and visionary Friend, was tried by Parliament for blasphemy and endured brutal punishment after personally re-enacting Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

While women were normally prevented by both law and custom from being heard in public, religious enthusiasts of the time thought them to be justified when speaking in the voice of Christ rather than their own. Among Quaker women visionaries (of whom there were many) the sense of being female, along with the very sense of self, seemed at times to be wholly consumed in the passion for the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Fox and others struggled hard with the problem of creating a fellowship that could restrain its own enthusiasts yet give full reign to the power of the Spirit. Out of this situation grew a custom of community worship that was silent, except when the Spirit spoke through one of those present. Although responding deeply to such leadings, the group itself acted as a sort of reality check on excesses.

These communities, called "meetings," made decisions by what a more secular age calls consensus, but what they saw as prayerful discernment of God's will. They acknowledged that some Friends had more insight than others, but they also recognized that the Spirit might choose to speak through anyone, even the humblest. Each meeting was wholly independent but maintained close communication with a network of others.

“Now I was come up in spirit through the Flaming Sword,” he said, in a metaphor also used by Boehme. “All things were new, and all creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness and innocency and righteousness.... The creation was opened to me, and it was showed me how all things had their names given them, according to their nature and virtue.” On another occasion he demanded of his listeners: “You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a Child of Light, and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?”<sup>6</sup>

Calling themselves at first “Children of Light,” and later simply “Friends,” men and women who were touched by Fox’s words spread out through the countryside. They announced that the living God was actually to be found within the human heart and urged others to awaken to His presence. Many of the first Friends were from unorganized bands of “Seekers,” who were particularly numerous in England’s northern and western counties. Their beliefs often recalled the mystics and rebels that had sought refuge there since the days of John Wycliffe. They refused to take oaths or participate in warfare, and they worshipped in silence. “In stillness there is fullness; in fullness there is nothingness; in nothingness there are all things,” said one early Scottish Quaker.<sup>7</sup>

Fox and his burgeoning movement were regarded with profound suspicion by the Puritan authorities, who were by then consolidating their control of the nation under Oliver Cromwell. One reason was the Quaker insistence on challenging established institutions and customs in the spirit of primitive Christian equality and sincerity. “When the Lord sent me forth into the world,” wrote Fox, “He forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to Thee and Thou [the familiar form of address] all men

through three phases. In the first, authority is vested directly in a god-like figure whose deliverances are “authoritative.” In the second, authority seems to rest in the group of divine-like figures known as the apostles and later in the bishops as successors of the apostles. The apostolic succession, as the third phase, is the basis of the hierarchical church and foundation of religious authority. But there is an ambiguity, for authority also seems to rest in the whole community of believers, left to themselves after the death of Jesus.

## 2.

Early Friends were seeking to break away from the religion of law and the religion based on second-hand evidence to a religion responding to the question “What canst thou say?” It was not enough that God’s power and love be vouched for by another. Until one immediately experienced that power and love oneself, it was inadequate. Running through 17th-century Quaker comments on religious experience is the theme that until one’s own restlessness is stilled, one has not experienced God.

Saint Augustine says exactly this: one’s soul is restless until it finds rest and satisfaction in God. There is a kind of uneasiness about the soul until it finds refuge or anchorage in the Divine itself. But once the channel to God is opened, all kinds of wondrous things can happen and one can gain the authoritative guidance that one has hitherto been lacking. While others can help in the quest, it is ultimately one’s own seeking upon which one must rely. One recognizes the voice of the Lord when one hears it. And one can apparently distinguish between authentic communications from God and those that still reek of worldly authority only.

Many Friends write as if there is a kind of ladder of religious experience. In the lower stages one is still connected with the material world and the world of time and space. Progress in the mystic quest is indicated as time and space and matter recede and then disappear. In the void, God may have a chance to speak to one, sometimes about the material world and sometimes about matters that transcend it. But often it takes much patient waiting before this level is attained; waiting in silence. Quaker mysticism is very much like that analyzed by Plotinus, particularly in states of the soul's progress.

As one reads some of the "convincement" letters of 17th-century Friends, one is reminded of certain types of parapsychological phenomena in the modern world. The voices heard frequently seem to be "real" voices and religious experience appears at times to be waiting for communications from a friend who has died but is now discovered to be still very much alive. So powerful is the impact of the voice that one does not think of contradicting it. Thus, when George Fox hears a voice that commands him to go to Litchfield and preach these words: "Woe unto you, bloody Litchfield," he does not hesitate to obey it, even though he may be rather unclear as to what the words mean.

In the religious biography of James Nayler, too, one is presented with a conflict between the God whom one has presumably known through others' teaching and the Lord one has found through one's own searching. It is only the latter that gives us authoritative experience upon which we can safely act. All this is dramatized in Nayler's words as he is being examined at Appleby in 1652:

I was at the plow, meditating on the things of God, and suddenly I heard a voice saying to me "Get thee out from thy kindred and from thy

established belief systems; and new spiritual movements boiled up everywhere. Many of the 17th-century movements drew inspiration from the late Medieval mystics, and especially from the German shoemaker, Jacob Boehme, who had died in 1624. His writings, which espoused a theosophy based on his own mystical experiences, soon spread from Germany to England along with a few followers called Behmenists. Other religious cults that found freedom and fertile soil in the turmoil of Parliamentary England were Familists, Baptists, Fifth Monarchists, Muggletonians, Ranters, and Seekers. Some were in close contact with Collegiants in the Low Countries and in turn with the free-thinking Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza in Amsterdam.<sup>4</sup>

It was in 1643, at the height of the war between king and parliament, that 19-year-old George Fox (who, like Boehme, was a shoemaker by trade) left his family home in the English Midlands and started to wander about the country in search of answers. During the next four years he probably had contact with many of the upstart religious movements, but he claimed no ties with any of them. Meanwhile personal prayers, visions, and spiritual "openings" led him to a conviction of God's immanent presence, and he began to spread his own message with increasing power.<sup>5</sup>

By 1652 Fox was preaching to eager crowds of country folk. He told of personal transformation through union with Christ. Just as in the days of the apostles, he announced, God was present to those who listened in the silence of their hearts. His fiery, prophetic language sometimes echoed the tread of Puritan armies, and his charismatic influence had already earned his trembling, ecstatic followers the derisive term of "Quakers." But his message was always one of inner illumination.

the Tamil minority. As outsiders to Buddhist politics and hierarchy, Quakers have been in a position to help facilitate the formation of an International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

There is, however, another and less well known side to the growing association of Buddhists and Quakers. In the years since 1970 the discipline of Buddhist practice and its forms of meditation have exercised a strong attraction for individual Quakers, especially among those who hold to the traditional silent form of worship. Workshops on the subject have been scheduled regularly at the annual Friends General Conference in the United States and at Pendle Hill, a Quaker retreat and study center near Philadelphia. A Quaker-Buddhist meditation center was founded in Massachusetts during the 1970s by long-time Friends Teresina and Joseph Havens.<sup>3</sup>

The perennial association of Quakers with antislavery, antiwar, humanitarian, and human rights causes has left their particular brand of mysticism largely overlooked. While the esoteric traditions of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have received much study in recent years, the Quakers, like the Unitarians and Universalists, have been viewed as an almost secular movement. Lacking any tradition of monasticism or solitary contemplation, Quakers have been in the world without choice, and trying not to be of it has involved a long and not always successful struggle. This struggle, extending across 350 years, makes their story significant for Buddhists who now feel an increasing need to be engaged with community and the modern world.

Quakerism had its beginnings in England during the turbulent 1640s. It was a time not unlike the 1960s in the United States. War divided but did not destroy a strong and vibrant society. People – especially the young – were on the move; social change was in the air; proprieties were challenged; advances in science threatened long-

father's house." And I had a promise given with it, whereupon I did exceedingly rejoice that I had heard the voice of that God which I had professed from a child, but had never known him. . . . .<sup>2</sup>

In this passage from Nayler we have emphasized the distinction between a God "professed" and a God "known." Nayler, and early Friends generally, held that what was being sought in the religious quest was knowledge of God and not merely the profession of belief in words that others had formulated to indicate belief. Nayler sought, moreover, knowledge of how to live, which in the end seemed to rest on supposed knowledge of ultimate value. Both knowledge of God and knowledge of how to live were discoverable only through the "waiting" in silence, which was the core of the Friends Meeting.

But problems could arise using this approach, as the fate of James Nayler himself proved. He ceased to have unity with George Fox and indeed acted so strangely as to try Fox's patience. Very much admired by a number of his followers, Nayler rode into Bristol on the back of a horse while his supporters shouted "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Israel!" Thus, he seemed to be blaspheming the name of God, was arrested and tried, and was sentenced to be whipped, pilloried, branded, and have his tongue bored through. Insisting that there was a difference between claiming to be Christ and merely having the spirit of Christ within him, he firmly declared that his situation was the latter. Other Friends were scandalized when they learned that apparently some of the Naylerites were advocating nudism as a religious symbol.

What bearing did the doctrine of the Inner Light have for Friends under these circumstances? Who pronounced the final word, religiously speaking? Can one act according to one's convictions – one's religious authority – while others

leave in disagreement? Who spoke under the authority of God in the Naylor affair? Who spoke during the 18th-century soul-searching about slavery? Friends insisted that it was not numbers which were decisive, for that would be to substitute worldly power for divine authority.

Friends cannot be said to have provided an entirely satisfactory answer. On the business side, the Meeting for Business is supposed to decide by sense of the meeting, with dissenters, if few in number, carefully noting their critical queries. But this still leaves a partially dissatisfied minority. To be sure, this may be better than majority rule as usually defined. But it is still far from being the clear-cut distinction from majority rule it is sometimes held to be. As for decisions about spiritual matters, they are subject to some of the same observations. They may still be far preferable to decisions made according to accepted orthodoxy, but they are hardly the end-all and be-all of the problem of authority in religious bodies. These observations are particularly important when we remember that authority arises among Friends in a social context. Some mystics are noted for their individualist orientation: escape from the hurlyburly of the world is their hallmark. Not so most Friends. Friends see authority for even individual actions as arising in the context of community and of friendly silent waiting. What, then, is the exact nature of the relation between authority for individual acts and spiritual life and, on the other hand, the idea of authority in social and communal life? Friends have worked out an elaborate set of conventions or customs to act as guides for these difficult questions. And there have been variations depending on the historical period. Modern Friends rarely “disfellowship” a member for violating Friends’ precepts; 18th-century Friends sprinkled their minute books with acts of disfellowshipping.

## **Quakers And Buddhists: Mysticism In Community And In The World**

*By Rhoda R. Gilman*

Early in 1967, before crowds of Americans poured into the streets to protest the war in Southeast Asia, a small band of people from the Society of Friends, calling themselves AQUAG (A Quaker Action Group), set out to deliver medical relief to both North and South Vietnam. In a sailboat called the *Phoenix*, two expeditions reached Haiphong with supplies for the North Vietnamese Red Cross. The third, carrying supplies destined for distribution by antiwar Buddhist leaders in South Vietnam, was stopped by gunboats of the Saigon government. Heavily damaged, the *Phoenix* was taken to Cambodia for repairs, while the crew’s leader, George Lakey, flew back to Saigon.<sup>1</sup>

At An Quang Pagoda Lakey met with Thich Tri Quang of the Unified Buddhist Church. He also became acquainted with a young woman named Cao Ngoc Phuong (now Sister Chan Khong), the leader of a social-change movement among Buddhist youth. At the core of this movement was a Buddhist order founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, who in 1967 had already been exiled from Vietnam as a result of his efforts for peace.<sup>2</sup>

These meetings were the beginning of an ongoing association between activist Friends and Southeast Asian monks who are preaching the need for Buddhism to become more “engaged” with the suffering and injustice of society. Lakey conducts programs with Buddhist groups in the area each year, working especially with Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, whom Quakers nominated in 1994 for the Nobel Peace Prize. Others have worked with the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, which has sought a solution to conflict in that country between the Buddhist majority and

**Notes:**

1. As quoted in Margaret Fell Fox, 1694, and cited in London Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (1960), at paragraph 20.
2. From the examination of James Nayler, 1652, cited in London Yearly Meeting, *Christian Faith and Practice*, at paragraph 22.
3. As used here, “universalist” means to go beyond particular and confining formulations and forms and to be inclusive and applicable to all human experience. It is not to be confused with the Unitarian-Universalist tradition.
4. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York, Macmillan, paperback edition, 1961).

On the basis of Friends’ religious authority, who was right? While many modern Friends move in the direction of anarchy, this was not true of most 18th- and 19th-century Quakers.

Again, we seek some authoritative statement about Friends’ position on authority. Perhaps part of the problem lies in the fact that we do not like such words as “authority” and therefore seek to avoid them. We have a similar ambivalence about power. We hate to call a spade a spade. I would maintain, however, that despite our reluctance to talk about its problems, there is a problem of authority among Friends and that it has many of the hallmarks of authority in the realm of worldly affairs,

**3.**

The whole history of American Friends during the 19th century indicates part of the nature of the problem. But it was rooted in 17th-century ambiguities.

While George Fox reiterated that he was searching for direct religious experience, he clearly accepted the authority of scripture. To be sure, he said that we should “experience that life out of which scriptures came,” which would seem to subordinate scripture to “inner” experience; but other passages appear to put scripture on a parity.

After Fox, this ambiguity remained, although it was sometimes disguised. But periodically it would emerge. Thus, it was one of the leading matters of doctrine when the Hicksite split took place in 1827-28. Elias Hicks clearly subordinated scripture to direct experience, whereas the orthodox Friends seemed to say that scripture was at least equal to experience and perhaps superior. But the tension had existed to some degree since Fox, muted as it may have been in some circumstances. Later in the 19th century,

the scripture-versus-experience tension erupted with the Gurneyite-Wilburite division, the Wilburite group tending to stress experience and the Gurneyite the scriptures.

Hicksite and Wilburite looked back to the 17th century and tended to see Fox and others insisting on the religion of experience; whereas the orthodox and Gurneyite groups saw in the 17th-century Friends a clear emphasis on scripture: if a proposed act or belief violated scripture, this view seemed to insist, it was obviously unacceptable. The Hicksite and Wilburite stand, by contrast, saw the very genius of Quakerism in the subordination of scripture to experience. If one's Inner Light ran counter to scripture, then one must disregard scripture. The Gurneyites were obviously under the influence of Bible-centered Protestants, whereas the Hicksite-Wilburite tendency was strongly mystical.

#### 4.

What are those of us who call ourselves Quakers today to say about the problem of authority in religion, against the background of Friends' history and thought? "What can we say?" Each of us will have to formulate the answer personally, out of his or her own experience and understanding of God. What I say is grounded on my own reflections and experiences and I obviously cannot speak for others. I think of my own religious experience and search for authority very much as Gandhi did when he talked of "studies in my experiments with Truth," where "experiments" can suggest both what we mean by scientific experiment and what we signify when we think of the term as *experiences*.

Religion means, if we follow Paul Tillich, "ultimate concern." That which concerns us finally or ultimately, which acts as a standard by which other concerns are

to discover unity, they often failed to do so; and because they did not do so in some cases, schism was the result.

The history of Quakerism in the 19th century partly illustrates uncertainties about religious authority. The Gurneyite-Orthodox tendency seemed to suggest that the Bible represented ultimate religious authority and was a sacred book. Hicksite-Wilburite tendencies, by contrast, stressed the Inner Light and, at least implicitly, the subordinate rule of the Bible.

We suggest that the genius of Quakerism, from the viewpoint of the idea of religious authority, is to be found in the notion that authority arises out of the Light Within reflected in the religious consciousness of each individual soul in the Meeting of Souls. This would make the Bible and the church strictly subordinate and, because this notion of Quakerism is universalistic, would open the way to reception into Quaker literature not only of the Bible but also of the Koran, the Gita, the Torah, and, indeed, anything that helps the search for unity with God. But the emphasis should be on the "helps." Neither the Bible nor the Gita nor the Koran ought to be "sacred," lest they run the risk of becoming idols and thus cut off the quest. The same status should be recognized in such historic figures as Jesus of Nazareth, Mohammed, Zoroaster, and so on: each should be judged in terms of his or her assistance in the quest for unity with our ultimate concern.

While Quakerism was born historically in the Christian tradition, implicitly it transcends that tradition and is universalistic. But it is neither East nor West. And if the figure of the historic Jesus were to be shown never to have existed, this would have no bearing on Quaker faith, whether on the theological or the ethical side: the Christ within each individual would still exist and the Sermon on the Mount would still challenge us to test its perfectionist statements.

abdicate part of their responsibility and thus erode religious authority of a universalist nature.

It is all too easy to idolize a person, whether oneself or another. Idols could arise out of more than the idolatry associated with a book – the Bible – or a visible church – the Roman Catholic Church: wherever mere words take on a sacred character, or organizations come to be conceived as beyond criticism, or some men and women be thought of as particularly holy, there idolatry is being born.

There is the idolatry of nature and the idolatry of civilization. Quakers, as is true of others, often grow so attached to natural things – soil, flowers, rivers, and so on – that they come to worship them. Similarly, in the other direction, they grow so attached to what they have created – technology, social organization – that they come to think of it as sacred. If we worship in either direction, we abandon the source of true final religious authority.

## 5.

To summarize, George Fox and other early Friends asked “What Canst Thou Say?” with an emphasis on “Thou.” In asking this question, they were inquiring into the ultimate source of religious authority and apparently finding it in the experience of the individual and the Meeting, rather than in a book or a rigid tradition or any person.

But from the beginning there were ambiguities and soft spots in this answer, as Quaker history would suggest. In the event of a conflict between the apparent Light Within of every person and, on the other hand, a group testimony, how could both the group and the person be “authoritative”? – a problem illustrated in the Naylor case. It is illustrated, too, in the history of disfellowshipping or expulsion from the Meeting over apparently conscientious differences. While methods used in the business meeting were designed

measured or judged or evaluated, is one’s religion. In this sense, religion is concerned with the widest and deepest “circle” about which we have been speaking at this meeting. The ground of ultimate authority of religion can be discovered by human beings who genuinely desire to discover it. We have but to knock, as the Bible puts it, and it shall be opened unto us.

But we have to yearn for it. Mystics speak about experiencing a great void or uneasiness or disquietude prior to their experiences. They seek in silence to fill the void, overcome the uneasiness and quiet the restlessness. Seeing God or experiencing God as Truth (as Gandhi might put it) may be the work of a lifetime. But as human beings we have the capacity to do this, and when we have done so – or at least have gone beyond our present state – we have experienced religious authority: what we see or hear is recognized by us as authentic. It therefore authorizes. This is an astounding claim, and it is not surprising that some have doubted it.

Of course, Friends emphasize that the search and ultimate discovery take place in the context of a social body, the Meeting. While the isolation of withdrawal may have its place, it is incomplete and inadequate without the communal context. This social dimension is what distinguishes Quaker mysticism from the mysticism of withdrawal. It means that the authority of both individual and Meeting is affected by its social dimension. With all their individualism and quaintness, the spirit of Friends is thoroughly social or communal.

But the authority of direct experience supersedes other types of religious authority. Thus the authority of scripture, of the church, and of the apostles (if any) must go. To be sure, scripture, the church, and the apostles may shed important light on our own religious experience and may be highly suggestive in the realms of both belief and

practice. But this is always with the understanding that the religion of experience or of the Inner Light is central and final. Some Friends in the past seemed to wish to have it both ways – to accept both the authority of scripture and authority of the Inner Light. But this would not do and created an unfortunate ambiguity. The notion of the authority of direct experience also suggests that while Quakerism arose within a Christian social and religious tradition, it implicitly tends to become non-Christian or, perhaps, we can say, universalist.<sup>3</sup> That is, if we define Christianity as adherence to a central core of belief systems (creeds, and so on), then Quakerism explicitly divorces itself from many of them. If traditional notions of Christianity vest religious authority in the Bible or in a hierarchically organized church, then Quakerism is not Christian. This may not be a highly significant point but it is an important one for purposes of clarification. It would, for example, imply that the Quaker can make good use not only of the Bible (in a subordinate way) but also of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and other scriptures. The notion of the Buddha within is akin to the idea of the Christ within.

Toward the end of the 19th century there was a great controversy centering on Albert Schweitzer's little book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>4</sup> In it Schweitzer argued (as have many others) that the "historical Jesus" is hard to find and may not even exist. For many adhering to Christian groups, this was a disturbing thought, for much of the creedal system rested on their belief in the historical Jesus. For the universalist Quaker view of religious authority, such a statement should scarcely cause a ripple. Quakers as conceived here, if they use "Christ" at all, refer to the Christ within every person who makes for good and for God. Thus, there is a Jesus Christ (if Jesus is historical), a St. Francis of Assisi Christ, a George Fox Christ (and a James Nayler Christ), a Napoleon Christ, an Andrei Gromyko

Christ, and an Adolf Hitler Christ. There is that of God in every person.

The universalistic implications of Quakerism are among its most startling statements. They take us beyond Christianity as conventionally conceived or as traditionally defined in terms of creed. All human beings are seeking (sometimes without full consciousness of what they are doing) an ultimate concern or integrating factor or God or power beyond (whatever the designation) where their restlessness will be stilled and where they can abide in peace. But humans have a tendency to believe prematurely that they have found this center. If they mistake this premature resting place for the ultimate, they are likely to be disillusioned and their quest will be halted. For often they cease moving at the finite and the limited and grow weary in the search for the final anchorage in the widest circle.

This premature stopping of the quest based on the illusion of finality is what some call idolatry. Thus, we idolize a book and have bibliolatry; or we surrender to the national state, mistaking its limited mandate for a divine authority; or we make money our god; or we mistakenly see in a man (often a good man) a guru, a finality which is really not there. The perils of idolatry await us on every hand and tempt us to halt the quest for the Christ within.

As we look at Quaker history in the light of some such universalist notion of religious authority, Nayler on his horse accepting the "holy, holy, holy" of the crowd is a sign both of his own temptations and of the tendency of all human beings to wish that others might pursue the quest for them. The idolization of certain types of Quaker dress in the 18th century (in the name of a simplicity which seems to have flown the nest) suggests how easy it is to make our own creations our gods. The custom of "setting aside" ministers, while apparently innocuous, could easily lead Quakers to