

Universalist Friends

The Journal Of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship

In This Issue

3 From The Clerk
By Daniel A. Seeger

From Northern Yearly Meeting, 2003

6 Introduction
By Rich van Dellen

7 The Living Spirit Of Christ, Historically And Today
By Kathryn S. White

12 Thoughts From A Quaker-Buddhist
By Rhoda Gilman

16 Universalism And Quakers
By Larry Spears



Quaker Universalist Fellowship



Quaker Universalist Fellowship

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our conversation with all who search sincerely. Our mission includes publishing and providing speakers and opportunities for fellowship at regional and national Quaker gatherings.

Universalist Friends and a QUF pamphlet are published twice a year and are available free to on-line subscribers. These publications are available as web pages (HTML) for browsing, ebooks (PDF) for on-line reading, and pamphlets (booked PDF) for printing. Visit our website at <http://www.universalistfriends.org> to enter a free on-line subscription.

If you wish to receive printed copies of these publications by regular mail, send an annual subscription fee of \$12.00 to QUF at our mailing address below. Selected past QUF publications are available free to our on-line subscribers. We will send available printed copies of past publications upon request and on payment of a fee.

We trust that all of our subscribers will support our work by sending a tax-deductible contribution to QUF. You can also contribute by sharing your reflections on our publications and on your own experiences. To make a contribution, subscribe to printed versions of our publications, or ask questions, contact:

Richard Barnes, Treasurer
Quaker Universalist Fellowship
Route 1, Box 28-3
Millboro, VA 24460
email: QUF@sylvania.net
website: www.universalistfriends.org

ISSN 1072-5024

From The Clerk

Dear Friends,

It would be a mistake to claim that all religions are essentially alike. Different religious communities have cohered around faith perspectives of extraordinary diversity. Appreciation for this diversity is what makes a universalist approach challenging and productive. It is useful to appreciate just how a particular faith other than one's own makes sense to those holding it, and to understand how different religious traditions have supported civilizations which have endured for centuries. This can greatly deepen our engagement with reality, although it does not necessarily follow that a wise spiritual life will become a patchwork of borrowed ideas and practices.

But amid all this diversity, there are also some common themes which one can detect. One of these which exists in many religious traditions is the tension between orthodoxy and prophecy. One of the main functions of all religions is to preserve, to perfect and to pass along the gathered spiritual wisdom of the community. As Friends we struggle to run First Day schools, and frequently testify to such things as how the peace testimony has endured among Friends since Quakerism's beginning. In doing this we are acknowledging the preserving tasks of our own faith and practice. In reality, the conserving function is an essential element of any sensible religious life.

But times change, inevitably, and needs change, and happily, even without a compelling need for adjustment, the Spirit often leads us to an enlargement of spiritual vision. The religious history of all faith communities provides much evidence that, whether gradually or in cataclysmic, telling moments, prophecy has broken forth and significant, perhaps even radical, adjustments have occurred in spiritual vision and in practical living.

It is really not unnatural that the conservative function should be in the ascendancy in most religious practice; after all, a religious tradition which remade itself in a major way in every generation would scarcely seem coherent enough or reliable enough to attract people to follow it as a fundamental orienting principle for their lives. Prophetic utterances usually meet with substantial resistance and must overcome many hurdles before prevailing. Indeed, one of the most sensitive of discernment processes in all religious life is the need to winnow authentic prophecy from mere fashion, from “the bad idea whose time has come.” Indeed, while we may lament how long it took for a prophetic voice to be accepted in times past, we might also be grateful that many voices announcing themselves as prophetic did indeed not prevail.

We see this tension between conservatism and innovation in religious life coming to play in present controversies about extending the concept of marriage to embrace the relationships of lesbian and gay people. Some advocates for change struggle with the religious establishment patiently, expecting that the discernment process is of necessity difficult, and exercising loyalty and patience while setting forth with vigor their claims that a new vision is called for. But others simply regard the struggle as another aspect of oppression and give up on religious institutions.

Defenders of what they perceive to be timeless orthodoxy regarding marriage, on the other hand, seem oblivious of two things. First, it seems not to occur to them that part of their religious tradition requires them to search prayerfully for the truth, and not automatically to assume that every idea which seems unwelcome at first blush should be dismissed. Second, they seem quite unaware that marriage has undergone many transformations in Judeo-Christian religious history, and that the sort of “Ozzie and Harriet” image of marriage which they seem to regard as a timeless and eternal truth is itself a relatively recent innovation. After all, the prophets of Israel had many wives and concubines, apparently with divine sanction. Later, for many centuries,

References

1. George Fox, **Journal** (Cambridge, 1952).
2. Robert Barclay, **Apology for the True Christian Divinity** (Prop. 10) (1678).
3. William Penn, **Some Fruits of Solitude**, p. 519 (1693).
4. John Woolman, “On Keeping Negroes (Part II),” in Phillips P. Moulton, ed., **The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman** (1971).
5. Isaac Pennington, **Letters** (1828)

This view is a problem because it does matter what you believe and what you do. The circumcision of young girls is wrong, whether it has a religious basis or not. Any parent understands this dilemma in interpreting the world to young people. Sincerity is not a sufficient justification for false ideas and wrong behavior.

It does matter what you believe and do. We are all struggling to understand what are the universal standards of behavior to which we can hold ourselves and others. We all recognize that this requires reflection on our beliefs and better articulation of those beliefs as guides for our actions.

The second danger is a new universalized civil religion, beginning in America, but spreading worldwide, which homogenizes all religion and distills it into the lowest common denominator. The effect is to abandon historic, distinctive Quaker testimonies and to silence the sustained moral criticism within and between religious communities and, outwardly, toward governments.

No view is without distortions or pitfalls as we stumble together through the fog in pointing out to one another where the bread of life is to be found.

Summary

Universalism is a way of seeing part of our spiritual reality and a way of dealing with our experience in seeking to hold our faith and practice together in our individual Quaker lives and within our Quaker meetings. Universalism has a home in American experience. The influence of universalist views is expanding in the application of tolerance and inclusiveness. The ideas among universalists are diverse as are the responses to these ideas from other Quakers. Universalists particularly face the dangers of relativism and a diluted civil religion in their journeys.

marriage contracts were matters for the elite, made for the purpose of conserving their dynastic interests of power and wealth, while common people were allowed more or less to shift for themselves. At other times adultery could elicit a death penalty, and divorce was impermissible. For many centuries marriage arrangements were such that women were treated as commodities or chattel, and had no rights of their own within the arrangement. Moves toward equality between the genders within marriage is a very recent phenomenon, indeed, and is very incompletely realized. Until very recently inter-racial marriage was considered taboo. So while the family may be a cornerstone of civilization, as is so often said, marriage practices have neither been absolute nor eternal.

Fortunately, it is no longer possible to burn people at the stake for advancing ideas regarded as unwelcome by the religious defenders of orthodoxy, but an attempt to pass an amendment to the United States Constitution banning same-sex marriage would seem to be motivated by a desire for closure to the discussion with a similar degree of finality.

As universalist Friends let us hold all people in the Light as they address the paradoxical tension between orthodoxy and prophecy in the practice of their faiths.

Daniel A. Seeger, Clerk

Quaker Universalist Fellowship Steering Committee

From Northern Yearly Meeting, 2003

Introduction

By Rich van Dellen

Have you ever been asked, “What do Quakers believe?” — and struggled for a concise answer? Have you ever heard someone say, “Quakers can believe anything they want”? We do not have creeds, yet we have strongly held beliefs. Throughout our history Friends have suffered, gone to jail or even died from living the consequences of our beliefs. Can one draft a concise statement summarizing the beliefs of unprogrammed Friends? Northern Yearly Meeting is attempting to do that.

Northern was formally established in 1975. We are a young yearly meeting, and we are in the process of writing our first book of Faith and Practice. Seven chapters have been approved. The Faith and Practice Committee plans to have a chapter early in the book summarizing what we have called “The Spiritual Beliefs of Friends of Northern Yearly Meeting.”

The process of writing this chapter began by gathering ideas in a workshop held at a yearly meeting session. The first draft was written, reviewed by the Faith and Practice Committee, and then sent to all constituent meetings and worship groups within our yearly meeting for feedback. We received many comments and revised the chapter. We were ready to present it to the yearly meeting for approval when we received some strong objections to the chapter as written. Thus we decided to request a plenary session at the yearly meeting session of 2003 to be focused on differences in beliefs within Northern Yearly Meeting. The three talks that follow were presented at this plenary.

We hope you will find them thought-provoking, stimulating and challenging.

There is a comparable diversity, in actual practice, among those who do not explicitly identify with universalism.

Expanding Universalist Influence

From my observation, universalism is growing as an aspect of the truth of continuing revelation among Quakers. It is also growing in other faith traditions and in world culture generally in response to diverse individual intercultural experiences and the realities of world history. Travel, vocational connections and the media are all contributing to awareness of the diversity and permanency of the world’s religious traditions. Universalist ideas are a natural response to this enlarging experience and closer communication. Within the Christian community, watch the bellwether role of the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary in California and the new discussions being undertaken by Christian denominations with Islam. At the least, it calls us to some level of humility in the face of the experience of others.

In my view, we are all universalist when we include more than ourselves in the community of faith. How broad our inclusiveness is receives diverse answers among Quakers. The differences are in the scope of that inclusion and the emotional vehemence with which the line of exclusion is drawn. In my experience and observation, fear of the “other” is the source of the difference in views and determines where the lines are drawn.

Dangers Of Relativism And Civil Religion

No theme of our spiritual lives can be extended without facing distortion of its core insights. Universalists run two particular distortion risks. The first is the danger of embracing relativism in values and behavior. Attitudes like “It does not matter what you believe and do as long as you are sincere,” is a particular and persistent problem for universalists, as it can be generally for all of us.

lives. This points to how we treat others, what initiatives we take in our communities and what is important to stress in developing public policy.

Universalism is a limited, important element in our theological thinking. Despite the name, universalism is not a comprehensive viewpoint and it does not address all theological issues within the Christian tradition. For example, universalism is not related to the doctrine of the nature of God. It is not related to the doctrine of the trinity. Despite the American connection between universalism and unitarianism in the Unitarian/Universalist Fellowship, there is no intrinsic connection between these ideas. They are united in this unique American organization by history and accident. Universalism is also not related to Christology and the nature of the relationship between Jesus and the Christ.

Diversity Among Universalists

For purposes of this discussion, I have been outlining the main approach of all universalists. But, universalists, like exclusivists, are humans with a wide variety of views. In the main, what I have said here, I believe, holds true. The important note that I hope you will take away from this discussion is that the issue of the scope of openness of God's present and future love and care does matter in how we treat others in our family, community and public policy. This is a big issue. Your answers will have major consequences for your life and, in aggregation with the views of others, for the future of our world.

As I have mentioned before, there is a spectrum of views represented among universalists relative to these issues of Christian theology. For example, the Quaker Universalist Fellowship focuses on respect for the diverse spiritual experience within meetings and the human family worldwide, enriched by dialogue with all persons who search sincerely in the unity of God's creation. Some universalists are broader in their embrace. Others are narrower.

The Living Spirit Of Christ, Historically And Today

By Kathryn S. White

So, this Light that lights every man that comes into the world, this is the true Light that shines in the dark heart, and this is the true Day, that dawns in the heart, and Christ Jesus is the Day-Star that ariseth in the heart.

Margaret Fell Fox¹

For, he that hath the Son hath Life, and he that hath not the Son, hath not Life. So to the measure of God's Grace in every one of you I speak, that with it you may search and try where you are, and what you can really and truly, in the presence of God, witness born up in you; . . . that you do not deceive your Souls and worship the Works of your own Hands; for God is not worshiped, but in that which is spirit and Truth.

Margaret Fell Fox²

My dear Hearts, God is Light, and in him is no Darkness at all. . . . Therefore if you love your Souls . . . abide in the Light, and love the Light, and walk in the Light, where the Fellowship and the unity is. . . . And the Light which comes from Jesus Christ, which is the Messenger of the Living God, sent from God, may bring your Souls out of Egypt.

Margaret Fell Fox³

Christ Jesus, who is the Light which John bears witness to, which is come a Light into the world and lighteth every Man that cometh into the World.

Margaret Fell Fox⁴

My heritage is Quaker; more relevant is that my faith community continues to be the Society of Friends. One and a half years ago, the First Day School teachers of our meeting asked me to be Margaret Fell for a day. That began an immersion into her life and her writings that still brings meaning to me.

I think I would have had some difficulty with that very forthright person, George Fox. But Margaret feels like a mentor from the past for me. She was a capable parent, manager of home and servants, and the wife of a judge. When she encountered the Living Spirit of the words so many around her were preaching and studying, she was initially in great turmoil.

She was counseled only to return to the Light and she would receive guidance for her own life. Thus the ordinary life of an English lady of the manor became a most extraordinary life, so that we still know of her 350 years later.

She was the first one to write that Quakers are a peaceable people. It was in a letter she wrote in 1660. George Fox was in prison at the time. He was one of the signers; Margaret was the writer. She carried the letter directly to the king and waited many months to deliver it in person.

It may be that today we would not find ourselves in unity with some of her words. But what I want you to remember is the illumination she received for her ordinary tasks and the many others she was called to do. What she models is daily turning to the Living Spirit; what she models is Spirit-led action.

Now, 350 years later, we are struggling to put a few words on paper to clearly state our spiritual beliefs. When we look at them they seem to cover it, and yet to be simplistic and inadequate. What will fill our words with the depths of our passion and our discipline?

This quotation, from our own time, begins to answer that: "For Quakers, becoming a child of God is a lifelong project. . . . Being a child of God requires an ongoing series of breakthroughs that come from continuous living in the Light of Christ."⁵

I hear a lot of sensitivity to the words of Christianity in our yearly meeting. I think sometimes we are like the ancient Jewish

course, these quotations do not prove anything about the truth of these sentiments or of universalism. But, they do document that the theme of universalism is one that has engaged Quakers from the beginning of our Quaker tradition. This engagement reflects the importance of this theme for serious lives and commends it to our reflection on our tradition and experience.

Universalist Perception Of The Human Condition

The basic human question is: "How do we understand others in the fold of God's care?" Universalists, within the Christian tradition, address the question: "Is salvation universal to all people?" Their answer is yes. Universalists stress the positive in the value of the spiritual journeys of people both within and outside the Christian tradition. Universalists recognize the value of all other humans who have walked a spiritual journey.

Universalists embrace the insight of life experience that God's love and promise extend to all people as an objective underlying universal truth that may be poorly perceived by seekers at any given moment, but is nevertheless real and present. As a result, Universalists recognize the importance of the search to identify the universal standards of practice underlying all religions.

This is another way of affirming and refining the natural law tradition. There are truths and standards for living that are universal and apply to all people, precisely because God's love and concern applies equally to all people in all traditions.

On this theme, the testimony of universalists is to value, not just to tolerate, other religious traditions. Universalists emphasize that all religions have God's recognition and favor, have value and, therefore, are to be respected.

Among Quakers, those in the universalist tradition see important linkages of universalism with the distinctive Quaker ideas regarding the universality of the inner light and continuing revelation as a reality in our lives. Quakers with universalist insight see important implications in universalism for how we live our

and as many of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue or people they be, though outwardly strangers and remote from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words . . . as become obedient to the holy light and testimony of God in their hearts. There may be members therefore of this catholic church both among heathens, Turks, Jews and all the several sorts of Christians, men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart. . .

Robert Barclay²

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion. And when death has taken off the mask, they will know one another, though the several costumes they wear here makes them strangers.

William Penn³

There is a principle that is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages has had different names. That principle is pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined by no forms of religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this principle takes root and grows, of whatever nation, they become brothers and sisters.

John Woolman⁴

The sum and substance of true religions does not stand in getting a notion of Christ's righteousness, but in feeling the power of endless life, receiving the power, and being changed by the power. And where Christ is, there is his righteousness.

Isaac Pennington⁵

These words show a clear engagement and general endorsement of the importance of the universalist theme. Of

people of the Old Testament, who were afraid to actually say the name of God. It may not really be fear for us so much as the idea that if we label the Divine with the name God, Jesus Christ or Goddess, we thereby have contained the holiness in something less than it really is. Certainly, that is part of our reaction to fundamentalist phrasing — a sense that Christ and his rule of divine love have been boxed in to words and patterns of exclusion that shut out the Spirit and experience of God for us.

I was very grateful to hear Rich van Dellen and others say that we should not let the fundamentalists take words away from us. If we never read the good words in the Bible, if we never offer them to our children, the fundamentalists will not know or care. It will be our loss. There are good words there. When illuminated by the Living Spirit, they can become pathways; they can become nurture; they can become solace; they are a gift.

It is interesting to me that even though some do not want to use these words, we can still sing them with great vigor. The first song we sang at this gathering last night was "Amazing Grace." When my Mother died two years ago, the phone call came in the wee hours of the night. My first thought was, "She shall go out with joy. . ." Those words are part of a hymn we sing often in Madison meeting — "The Trees of the Field". They come originally from the book of Isaiah. They are words of nurture, solace and illumination.

My understanding/idea of the Divine is this remarkable Life Force that is in all, over all, that has been and that will be. My experience of Quakerism tells me that it is possible to experience the Divine presence steadily as I go through my life — that I do not have to be in a place labeled as holy by others, or have to receive a special wafer in my physical body to experience this presence. I simply have to remove the distractions of my day and open myself to the possibility. There are times, such as when we are on retreat, or with others who seek as we do, that this experience seems to happen more readily, or possibly, in a deeper, richer manner.

Another strong component of our faith is continuing revelation. One encounter with God in a lifetime, through a ceremony of baptism or conversion, does not do it. Nor does one time of responding to a strong leading to a particular service. We don't get done! Every day is new; Spirit is now; ours is a faith of this time. No matter what we did yesterday — how good or how awful — we are called to be present, to be faithful, and in tune with God's will for us now. Ours is a faith of the steady turning to that Living Spirit of Christ, so that we move beyond the adolescent stages of giving warm fuzzies and into extraordinary discipline, depth, peace and energy.

This continual opening to the Living Spirit as we experience it each day seems like the pattern of those who isolate themselves in religious communities. A very strong component of my understanding of Friends is that we are called to seek and to find the Living Presence of God in the very midst of the world, to seek the nurture and loving direction of the Divine as we immerse ourselves in the daily, worldly whirl. We are called to have the simplicity and the discipline to live as we find God calls us every day, every hour. Many other faith communities seem to require one to withdraw from the world in order to worship and live more fully the life of the Spirit. We find that times of retreat can indeed be times of great nurture, sanctuary and blessing, but that always we are called to return and to live fully in the world. The Living Spirit of the Divine can illuminate even the most mundane tasks.

Our late friend, Jim Greenley, was a wonderful mentor on ways to deepen our sense of the Living Spirit even in the midst of our day. He would nudge us to consider our pauses, our times of waiting or maybe of anxiety. He would say, "Mind the Light while you wait for the stoplight to turn green or the elevator to come or over the warm dish water or . . ." When I was growing up in a rural Friends community, one of my earliest understandings of the spiritual beliefs of Friends was this steady seeking and then acting in the Living Spirit in everything that occurred. Worship, play, work, joy, grief, response to the wider world were all a part of the

Other elements of 18th-century universalist views included the fatherhood of God for all people, the spiritual authority and leadership of the example of Jesus, God's son, the trustworthiness of the Bible as containing God's sufficient, but non-exclusive, revelation, the certainty of just retribution for sin in the future and the final harmony of all souls with God. There can be much discussion of this summary among historians, but I believe it points to the complex seeking of people, new in the American experience, to bring together deeply held understandings of their world and lives.

Quaker Universalist Tradition

Like other religious groups in our Christian tradition (as well as the Jewish and Muslim traditions), Quakers are challenged by universalism and exclusivism. However, there has been a particularly constant and prominent theme of inclusiveness in our Quaker tradition. This tradition is reflected in the thinking and words of Fox, Barclay, Penn, Woolman and Pennington. This universalist theme cannot be ignored by Quakers today as we try to engage our tradition, with our experience, in pointing out to one another where the bread of life is to be found within our tradition. Here are some examples of the importance attributed to universalism among recognized Friends:

Now the Lord hath opened to me by His invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the divine Light of Christ, and I saw it shine through all, and they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came to the Light of life, and became children of it. . . .

George Fox¹

The church is no other thing but a society, gathering or company of such as God has called out of that world and worldly spirit to walk in his light and life. . . . Under this church . . . are comprehended all,

persons. There is also a diversity of views among individual Quakers on this question of relationship to God at the end of a lifetime. For some, the exceptional group is larger. For others, it is smaller.

The doctrine of the last judgment is another way of pointing to the same issue of personal salvation, but extending it to the end of all time. The question to be answered is: "Who is protected at the end of all time and given eternal life when Christ comes to judge the quick and the dead?" In the same way, the answer of universalists is, "Everyone, without exception," with a diversity of views among individuals of this persuasion. Everyone wants an exception for his hated ones.

Universalism is often contrasted with exclusivism. The desire of some other Christian groups to insist on acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal lord and savior is a way to affirm the exclusion of those who do not make this particular affirmation from access to God's current and future love. The assertions by religious leaders that God does not listen to the prayers of Jews or Muslims have a similar purpose. They assert, with some power, that people like Hitler, Stalin, Saddam, Milosovich, the Rwandan leaders or the Unibomber are, or should be, excluded from the scope of God's salvation. In this, they appeal effectively to deep human antipathies. They insert their painful preferences of the moment into their understanding of the gospel message.

Recent History Of Universalism

Universalism has many streams in its theological ancestry, just like the multiform spiritual ancestors of Quakerism itself. For our purposes here, the American development of universalism in the 18th century arose in the early American democratic belief that it is God's purpose to save every person from sin through divine grace revealed in Jesus Christ. This was part of what people believed about this Great Experiment in the New World.

one whole. What was said on First Day was lived every day. That was one of the primary reasons I returned to Friends as a young adult. I wanted this experience of wholeness.

I would like to close with a modern parable. Several weeks ago my husband, Stan, was part of a fairly large peace march. This one was on an unusual route as it was aiming at the crowds coming to a Big 10 basketball game just when the basketball season was getting interesting. So the marchers were to take two or three different routes and come together at the sports center. In the crowd, Stan came upon Brian, a blind acquaintance and offered him his arm. So they marched together, in the midst of grown-ups and kids, wagons and strollers and picket signs of all sorts. Stan felt some responsibility for Brian's welfare, so he scanned, dodged, paused, analyzed, reacted, and generally had all of his senses engaged. But, he said, when they crossed the huge boulevards of hectic traffic, they crossed with Brian's white cane. And that, Friends, is really what we are called to do. Lay aside our academic studies, our analytical discussions, our sifting and dissecting that leaves us only with fragments; hold out our white cane of trust and faith and daily, steadily, walk in the Living Spirit of Christ.

References

1. Judith Hayden, **In Search of Margaret Fell**, p. 160 (London, 2002)
2. From "An Epistle of Margaret Fell to Friends - 1654," in **Hidden in Plain Sight, Quaker Women's Writings 1650-1700**, p. 458 (Wallingford, Pa, 1996).
3. **Hidden in Plain Sight**, p. 453.
4. **Hidden in Plain Sight**, p. 454.
5. David K. Leonard, in *Friends Journal*, September 2001, p. 19.

Thoughts From A Quaker-Buddhist

By Rhoda Gilman

In his book **Encounter With Silence** John Punshon says of Quaker worship: “The silence is less significant for what it is than what it is not.”¹ What it is not, he goes on to say, is the music, ritual, eloquent words and soaring architecture that form the clothing of faith in other Christian churches.

That, Friend Punshon, is not enough for me.

If Quaker silence is primarily a rejection of other forms, then how can I take it seriously in and for itself? And how can my “encounter” with it be more than passing and shallow? Where in this time of planetary crisis will I find the passion, the inspiration, the transformation of self that George Fox and his followers experienced? Where is the sense that each moment we live and each breath we draw is something sacred? Where is the feeling that everything in the world around us trembles with a deeper dimension of meaning? — “The Creation was opened to me,” says Fox. “All things were new and . . . gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter.”²

Not all Quakers agree with John Punshon. Many cannot take faith for granted. We are still seekers. In my own life journey, I have had to go elsewhere to find the real depth and meaning of silence. That “elsewhere” has been a Buddhist meditation hall.

There I’ve spent many hours and days in total stillness, following the flow of the breath, noting the sensations of the body, and ultimately watching the movements of thought. Neither recalling the past nor plotting the future, I try to be simply aware that I am present in the here and now, in this one moment of pure existence that is all we can ever really know.

It is sitting on the *zafu* that I’ve experienced at the core of my being the words that blew Robert Barclay’s mind when an

collective reflection among Friends. Universalism refers to those who are now, and will be, in the love of God. Traditionally, the issue of who does God care for has been expressed by asking who is included in the scope of God’s care and grace today, and is addressed through the Christian doctrines of salvation and the last judgment. (Who is included in the scope of God’s care and grace later in our history?)

Quakers are addressing these issues about God’s love within our Protestant tradition of our Roman Catholic tradition of our Jewish tradition of our primordial human tradition of the human spiritual life. They are deeply practical as well as spiritual issues. The question “How far does God’s love reach?” affects how far our concern reaches for people in Iraq, North Korea, Liberia, and elsewhere, because God’s love for the world is expressed through us.

Regarding the scope of God’s love and care at the present moment, the question to be answered is: “Who does God care for now?” The pure universalist answer is: “Everyone, without exception.” However, there is a diversity of views among individual Quakers that extends in one direction closer to “me alone” and extends in the other direction out toward “everyone.”

Those who embrace the universalist idea tend to provide a wider scope for God’s current love and concern than others. Universalists, in practice, may not go all the way in their universalism because it may be a difficult thing for them to include the lives of Hitler, Stalin, bin Laden, Idi Amin, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in our own experience and the lives of Nero, Hannibal and Genghis Kahn from the past — not to speak of persons who are relatives and acquaintances in our present personal lives.

Regarding the doctrine of salvation, the question to be answered is: “Who is rightly related to God at the end of a lifetime and for eternal time?” The pure answer of universalists is: “Everyone, without exception.” But this is not easy, for it may also be emotionally difficult to include these same exceptional

Universalism And Quakers

By Larry Spears

Like all Quakers, I recognize the universalist theme in my faith and practice. I think that we are well served to reflect about this universalist element of our tradition in light of current private and public experience.

Tradition is important. No one lives outside of her religious tradition of birth. As Kathy White has indicated, some find full and sufficient support and guidance within their birth tradition. As Rhoda Gilman has explained, others seek to supplement and enrich their birth tradition by reaching outside to other traditions. I appreciate these testimonies of Quakers rooted in the Christian and Christian/Buddhist traditions.

I was asked to outline some of the elements in the universalist theme in the spiritual journeys among many Quakers.

Summary

To start, universalism is an element of all reflection about God by all Quakers. That is what theology is — collective human reflection about God. There is today some confusion about universalism. It has been a deeply rooted theme in Quaker experience, yet there is much diversity in the current conclusions Quakers draw about the nature and extent of universalism in their spiritual lives. The influence of universalism is expanding for us all, but within universalist thinking there are particular risks of relativism to be minded.

Universalism Defined

Universalism is often misunderstood among Quakers, due in large part to a general distaste for theological language and

anonymous Scottish Quaker rose in meeting to say: “In stillness there is fullness; in fullness there is nothingness; in nothingness there are all things.”³ So it is silence that for this Quaker has been the greatest gift of Buddhism. Silence — not as an absence of form, but as a living, mysterious presence.

The second gift of Buddhism to my life has been equanimity. One often hears it said that Buddhism is pessimistic. I would rather say that it rests serenely on the bedrock of existential despair. And if there were ever a time in history when we needed a firmer foundation than the shifting sands of myth, symbol, and theology, it is now. No horrors of nuclear warfare, no post-modern realism, no logical positivism, no tales of antimatter and exploding galaxies can shake the inscrutable smile of the Buddha. He knows that all of them, like the other stories we have been told, are constructs of the mind. They have no substance in ultimate reality.

We are creatures of time and space. Time is our prison and the source of our suffering. Even as we try to clutch those things in life that are most dear to us, they evaporate like mist. The only permanent thing within us is our yearning for permanence — just as the only permanent thing in the universe of time is change itself. All things arise and fall away. *Annicha*. If we can experience this in our heart as the very nature of self and of reality, then liberation occurs, and we can indeed know that “in nothingness there are all things.”

So why do I remain a Quaker-Buddhist? What gifts does Quakerism bring to Buddhism? One thing is compassion. Yes, compassion is a fundamental concept of Buddhism, too. It follows directly from silence and equanimity. And it is broader than Quaker compassion. It is not human-centered. It takes in all of life — All Beings. But too often in Buddhism, it remains an abstract concept. Compassion can only be truly practiced as compassion-in-action. Like silent awareness, it is a thing that must be experienced, not thought about. And Quakers at their best have lived their compassion.

Mary Orr is another Buddhist-Quaker. For the past three or four years she has taught an annual course at Pendle Hill in mindfulness or insight meditation (known in Buddhism as *Vipassana*). She writes: “Compassion is not feeling sorry for someone, it’s not pity but the willingness to be fully present with the pain of the world, the pain of ourselves, the pain of another being.”

Community is the other great gift of Quakerism. Like compassion, it, too, exists in Buddhism, but only among those who devote their lives to the spiritual path. And the dedication to equality before God that has identified the Quaker community from its earliest moments is largely absent from Buddhist practice. Equality of lay and clergy. Equality of student and teacher. Equality of sexes. Equality of social classes. Only with equality can community truly exist.

So in today’s global world we see these two traditions drawn together and strengthened by each other. It is not only the obvious parallels — their rejection of divisive creeds and dogmas, their shared precepts and testimonies of peace, compassion, simplicity, right livelihood, and right speech. Quakers turning back to their own mystical roots have been drawn to Buddhism by the vitality of its practice and its direct link with living silence; Buddhists pulled from monasteries by the modern world have turned to Quakerism for its example of compassion in action and viable spiritual community. In the West and in modern societies across the East, the movement toward “Engaged Buddhism” reflects this. Here in the United States, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship joins with Quakers in proclaiming that peace is not only the goal, but the way. Here Quakers take as much inspiration from Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama as from any Christian leader, and in Sri Lanka Quakers, for their part, provide practical guidance toward meeting nonviolently the flames of ethnic hatred that Buddhists deal with there.

Silence. Equanimity. Compassion. Community.

If there is hope for today’s crumbling world society, with its materialism, its runaway technology, and its religious fanaticisms, that hope lies in the shared strength of these two traditions.

References

1. John Punshon, **Encounter With Silence**, p. 67 (London, 1987).
2. George Fox, **Journal**, p. 97 (Richmond, Indiana, 1983)
3. Quoted in William C. Braithwaite, **The Second Period of Quakerism**, p. 336 (York, 1979). Braithwaite speculates that the words may have been spoken by the Quaker mystic John Swinton.