

Universalist Friends

The Journal Of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship

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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.

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ISSN 1072-5024

From The Editor

An Introduction To UF's New Editor

George Amoss edited the *Universalist Friends* from 1997 through 2003. Rhoda Gilman kindly served as interim editor through 2004. Now, grace allowing and creeks flowing quietly, I have volunteered to serve as the next editor. Therefore, because I am largely unknown, I feel an introduction is in order.

I grew up as an Episcopalian and began attending Quaker Meeting nine years ago as a Lenten vow — taking on something new rather than giving something up. In the light, airy Charlottesville, Virginia, Meetinghouse, I felt immediately at home, perhaps because I meditated daily in a light, airy room at home. Asked a couple years later to talk to the Charlottesville Meeting about my own spiritual journey, I described how the Episcopal Church and the Spirit turned me into a Quaker long ago without my being aware of Quakerism — gave me spiritual experience and a commitment to simplicity, equality, truth-telling, and the universality of the Spirit/Light in everyone. I became a recorded member of Charlottesville Friends Meeting in 1999.

I am one of the many learned Quakers — a B.A. and M.A. in English, an M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy. My specialty is philosophy of science, with an emphasis on the theory of evolution and its importance for understanding human nature. I have taught both English and philosophy at the university level, published a couple dozen professional papers on philosophy, and given as many or more talks. With Robert Wesson, I edited a book titled *Evolution and Human Values*.

About ten years ago, I began combining my work on evolution with religion/Christianity and, so, entered the science-and-religion field professionally. As a result, I wrote a book, *Doing*

without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin, which *Choice* magazine named as “Outstanding Academic Title.” I am unusual in the science-and-religion field in having an interest in critical biblical scholarship. The result of this interest was another book, *Where Christianity Went Wrong, When, and What You Can Do About It*. This book was written to introduce the proverbial person-in-the-pew to scholarship on the historical Jesus, a flourishing scholarly field, but also to say what difference that scholarship might make in our lives. Recently, I was elected a Fellow of Westar Institute — in/famous for the work of the Jesus Seminar.

So, I am an editor, a scholar, an academic, and a Quaker by conviction — suitable, perhaps, to edit *Universalist Friends*. But I also walk the walk. Twenty-six years ago, I built my own simple, passive solar house in the mountains of Virginia where I still live off grid. I heat with wood that I cut and split myself — with great pride! — cook and refrigerate with LP, and run lights and computer by solar electricity. By Light abounding, I have spent the last ten years writing full-time in my little house, with gratitude. So happy am I to be at home that I find leaving to give talks or attend conferences almost painful. Nonetheless, I do talk and attend and hope to meet many of you at diverse venues over the next few years, where you can return the favor and introduce yourselves to me!

About This Issue And Hopes For Future Ones

This issue of *Universalist Friends* contains some news from the past — comments on Elaine Pagels’ talk at Arch Street and views from the FGC Gathering. It reviews two books and has two articles, both on universalism, but each different. One is a short, pithy personal essay, the other a longer, more academic work. I hope future issues will have past and notification of future events, book reviews, personal articles, and academically oriented ones. I am also looking for poetry and some letters in response to the

articles — favorable, unfavorable, and critical letters are all welcome.

Articles can be short, a page or two (around 500 words) or lengthy (about 3,000 words). Personal essays are important. They bring Light, understanding, and hope to others. Academic essays are also vital. They keep us informed of our heritage, lead us into the future, and can focus on universalism in Christianity as well as in non-Christian religions, and on Quaker history, biography, sociology, and theology (yes, Friends, there is a theology!).

Don't be shy! We need and welcome submissions!

Please turn all works into those wonderful, speedy electrons, whether smailing them on diskette or CD in WORD to me at P.O. Box 69, Covesville, VA 22931, or emailing them to me as emails or, preferably, WORD attachments to emails, at theologyauthor@aol.com.

Yours in Friendship,
Patricia A. Williams

Universal WHAT?

By Lynne Phillips

When I first saw “Universalist Quakers” in the Marketplace of Ideas, I thought: Here’s another contender for the Oxymoron of the Year contest! *Universalist* seemed so pretentious — like the Americans and their World Series as if no one else on the planet played baseball. *Quaker* seemed so specific and, well, ambitious, to be described as universal, given that Quakers are a nanospeck in the eyes of our planet. Nevertheless, I was intrigued, so I stuck it on my mental shelf for recreational contemplation.

Gradually the concept came alive for me as I read more widely in the field of theology and religious scholarship. Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Sallie McFague — to name a few — echo in one way or another the insight of William Penn (1693): “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 divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers. The world is a form; our bodies are forms; and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit. . . .”

It’s ironic that, although more words have been spilled about God than almost any concept that our minds are capable of, we can say NOTHING about the true nature of God beyond an echo of the words from Meister Eckhardt: “God is.” That’s it, folks. So why have uncounted numbers of wise and devout thinkers wasted pounds of clay tablets, tons of rocks, thousands of papyrus reeds, and millions of trees making images and words about God? William Penn implies the answer: we have bodies made of flesh which have been shaped by a world of rocks and trees and animals. We

can experience God but we can't express our experiences except through words and images from our world.

When I surface from the deep mystical experience of the divine, I need a talisman, something to sustain me in this world. So do many others, which is why we search for models, that is, powerful metaphors that endure over time (Sallie McFague: *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*). Jesus is such a talisman: that wise Jew who was a sage, a healer, a wisdom teacher, a lover, a social revolutionary. Buddha, Mohammed, Lao Tzu, Caridwen, Creator, Isis, Mary, George Fox — all of them have become metaphors of earthly guidance and wisdom to help us express and put into service that ineffable experience of the numinous. Penn got it partly right: "The more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit." But I think Penn overlooked the clamour of our earthly inheritance. Humans have feelings about God. We need to talk about God. We need answers to the perennial questions. Where did we/the universe come from? How will we/the universe end? Why are we here? What is the right way to live?

A universalist Quaker seeks to experience God in the particular tradition of Quakers. I practice our manner of worship because it is a powerful source of energy that opens me to the divine. I value the Quaker way of doing business and giving service because it is a spiritual laboratory for building and sustaining communities. As universalists, we are sometimes accused of being spiritual tourists because we honour not only our own Christian metaphors, but also those of other faith traditions. We learn from other religions, unite with them in common causes, and join in their rituals if invited. As Quakers we follow the practices of our own wisdom teachers because their centuries of experience with rituals for worship, devotion, and service teach us how to practice active compassion.

My journey in Spaceship Quaker 350 gives me protection, companionship, and direction while allowing me to float freely

within the limits of its tradition. Karen Armstrong: “If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving kindness, this was good theology.” Quakers have given me good theology. I can say from experience not only “God is.” but “God is Love.”

— *Lynne Phillips is a member of Argenta MM*

Quaker Universalism In A World Religions Setting

by Paul Alan Laughlin

The central theme of Universalism is that spiritual enlightenment *may* be achieved by everyone everywhere. It may be experienced in the teachings of all the great religious systems or in the personal and private experiences of the individual seeker who may have no religion at all.

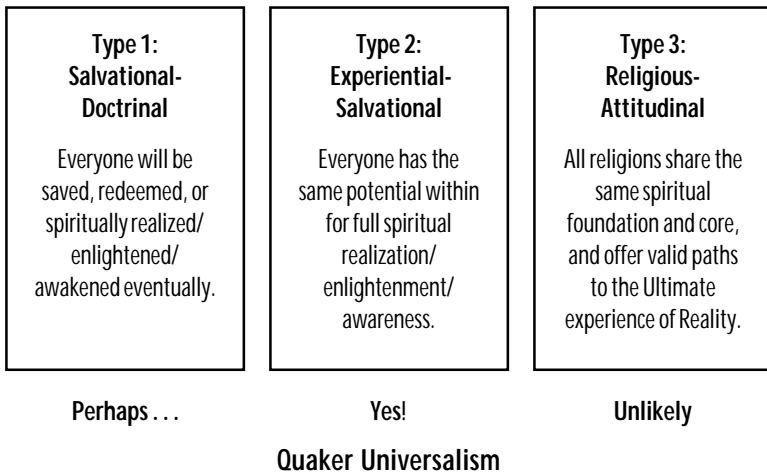
Ralph Hetherington¹

One of the primary benefits of studying the world's religions is that the unfamiliar and sometimes strange phenomena encountered in them can help us clarify our own religious experiences and beliefs and lead us to new insights about them. For example, in the course of teaching religious studies, I have had many Catholic and Protestant students tell me they had never noticed, much less appreciated, the dynamics of their own faith until they had seriously engaged Hinduism and Buddhism. I believe the same beneficial results can accrue to entire religious movements and groups: by examining themselves against the larger backdrop of the world's religious traditions, they will attain a sharper focus on their own spirituality and thereby arrive at a deeper self-understanding.

My specific intention here is to clarify the notion of Quaker universalism by discussing the concept of universalism in the larger context of the world's religions. I undertake this task as an outsider with respect to the worldwide community of Friends, but also as a Christian mystic long at odds with all types of orthodoxy, and therefore a very sympathetic observer. When I peruse the various postings on the Universalist Friends website² from that

perspective, I notice the term *universalism* often being used equivocally. Such equivocation is surely unintentional and probably unconscious; and it is certainly understandable, for the word *universalism* is used in three distinct ways within the context of the world's religions (see figure 1). Each of these meanings is discrete, so it is entirely possible to be a universalist in only one or two ways. It is difficult to imagine, however, that anyone well informed about the diverse religions of the world could be a universalist in all three senses of the word.

Fig. 1. Three Types Of Universalism In The World's Religions



Universalism As A Doctrine About Salvation

The original meaning of the English word *universalism*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* says dates back almost exactly two centuries, is the theological or doctrinal one. In that historical context, it was naturally framed in Christian terms and denoted the conviction that everyone will obtain salvation and redemption from sin and damnation eventually.³ The idea behind this

salvation-oriented doctrine is much older than that, however. Indeed, some see this sort of universalism in the writings of Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 15:22: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive” (New American Standard Version). It can also be seen in Ephesians, a New Testament epistle attributed — probably incorrectly — to Paul, in which verses 7-10 of the first chapter affirm God’s grace and redemption as leading to “the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.” (1:10b, NASV) The same idea appears nearly two centuries later in the notion of *apokatastasis* (Greek, *restitution*) promoted by Egyptian Christian theologian Origen and others. That was their term for their doctrine — never widely held, much less made a part of Catholic orthodoxy — that eventually all sentient beings would be redeemed, including even lost souls and devils. This was the sense upon which the Universalist movement was founded in England in the mid-eighteenth century, most of whose American followers merged some two centuries later with the Unitarians.

Universalism of this sort is found not only in Christianity, but also in many of the world’s religions, and it is always rooted in the idea of divine (or quasi-divine) grace, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Pure Land Buddhism, for example, is a very popular devotional sect that contradicts the historical Buddha’s commendation of self-reliance in spiritual matters by counseling its adherents to trust in an eternal, celestial Buddha named Amida, whose compassion will carry them when they die to paradise in the western sky where he abides. Formally speaking, such a teaching is identical to that of evangelical Christianity: faith in a powerful but gracious redeemer resulting in an eternal heavenly reward. The difference is that Pure Land Buddhists tend to believe that the compassion of Amida is infinite, and therefore all people — including non-Buddhists and even the non-religious — will eventually be received into his celestial abode. Accordingly, they would consider utterly foolish those Christians who affirm a God

whose very nature their own scripture defines as love (1 John 4:8), but who nevertheless is responsible for a system of eternal damnation and punishment. After all, if love or compassion is truly infinite, sooner or later it must touch everyone. A minority of Christians in mainstream denominations would agree.

Universalism As A Belief About Spirituality

In a different but not unrelated sense, universalism is the belief that everyone equally shares the same capability of attaining the highest spiritual experience, awareness, or level regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, or religion. This shared potential may be the result of a divine gift bestowed upon everyone by a transcendent God — a kind of supernatural add-on to human nature. This is a monotheistic view held by a minority of Christians, who may or may not believe that this boon will finally and inevitably come to fruition for all who possess it. (If they do, of course, they are universalists in the salvational sense.) But this sort of universalism is much more common in religions (mostly Eastern) that teach that all human beings have an innate, inherent, and indelible spiritual essence that serves as their true identity and that differs from the Christian soul in that it is non-personal and truly eternal (rather than merely immortal into the future).

In Hinduism, for example, everyone (and, finally, everything) has *atman* (a kind of spiritual energy-essence) as his or her most genuine inner identity or self, and this *atman* happens to be both eternal and identical with *Brahman*, the Supreme Spirit or Ultimate Reality that is immanent-but-hidden in the cosmos, and therefore in all the natural world, including each individual human. This essential identity is one's true self, concealed only by our ego-bound ignorance. Because *atman* is eternal, its return to the Source — the One with which it has always been one — is inevitable. Buddhism complicated the picture with the philosophy of Nagarjuna in the second century C.E. and its identification of

the human spiritual essence as *anatman* or the “no-self” (and Ultimate Reality as *Shunyata*, “Emptiness”), and a few centuries later with the rise of the ever-practical Zen tradition, which virtually ignored references to essences and focused on the cultivation of a particular kind of awareness. Still, even this radical brand of Buddhism, no less than its Pure Land counterpart, maintained a continuity of process from lifetime to lifetime.

Indeed, both Hinduism and Buddhism assume reincarnation or spiritual transmigration as well as the importance of *karma* (deeds and their inevitable spiritual consequences) in that process. Such beliefs allow an eternity for the inner essence — or, in the case of Zen, inner awareness — to be realized. What keeps folks from that goal and stuck in *samsara* (that is, the everyday world as well as recycling in and out of it) is a combination of *karma* and ignorance of one’s true nature; and the debilitating effects are so severe that a single lifetime is hardly enough for anyone to, as it were, see the Light.

Universalism As An Attitude About Religions

As if life and religion were not complicated enough, the word *universalism* can also be used to indicate a particular opinion about the various religions of the world within a spectrum ranging from exclusivism at one end to relativism at the other (see figure 2).

Fig. 2. A Spectrum Of Religious Attitudes

Relativism	Universalism	Pluralism	Inclusivism	Exclusivism
Skeptics & Cynics	Progressive Christians		Evangelical Christians	Fundamentalists, Dogmatic Atheists

Note: As with all typologies, each seemingly fixed position actually defines another mini-spectrum. That is, a person may be more-or-less inclusivist, more-or-less universalist, etc. The term “Progressive Christians” is the increasingly preferred alternative to “Liberal Christians,” and covers a broad range of attitudes.

At issue is whether any religious Truth or truths exist, and if so, where and how It or they are to be found. The range of views could hardly be greater.

At one extreme of this continuum (call it the right wing) is *exclusivism*, an attitude that says, “There is only one religious truth, true religion, or truth about religion — mine.” (I have never run across an exclusivist who says, “There is one right religion, and — rats! — it’s hers, not mine.”) Christian exclusivists, for example, herald their “straight and narrow path” that leads to eternal salvation, and contrast it to the numerous “broad and crooked” ones that lead to everlasting damnation. They typically try to instill fear with a panoply of threats and quote scriptural verses that seem to support their position, such as Jesus’ alleged “no one cometh unto the Father but by me” (John 14:6 KJV). The exclusivist attitude is typical of fundamentalists, both Christian and Islamic. And oddly enough, although it is typical of monotheistic faiths, doctrinaire atheists also fall into this extreme category because of their certainty that religion is groundless. Clearly, exclusivism produces strange bedfellows!

Only slightly to the left of exclusivism on this spectrum (although it sounds as if it should be at the other extreme) is *inclusivism*. This is the notion that while one (mine!) is the purest, truest, or only really effectual religion, others may contain some truth and perhaps even some useful tidbits of spiritual belief and practice. A little further to the left stands *pluralism*, the idea that some, many, or even most religions contain religious truth and are vehicles to the ultimate spiritual reward. The position of universalism as a religious attitude is, then, a little to the left of pluralism, for it declares all religions to be well-founded and valid. Just to the left of universalism, at the far left extreme of our attitudinal spectrum, is *relativism*, which in this context holds that within or behind any religion is to be found not truth, but only opinion. This, of course, is the stance of skeptics and cynics, and the reason why some Quaker universalists have wisely identified that extreme option as a clear and present danger to their own stance.⁴

Universalism in Quakerism

Given the three ways of understanding universalism just described — the salvational-doctrinal, the spiritual-experiential, and the religious-attitudinal — the clear impression one gets from reading Quaker universalists is that their understanding of universalism reflects primarily and sometimes exclusively the second. They are universalists because they believe all people everywhere can attain the most profound spiritual experience.

Yet, an interesting difference of opinion arises among these Quaker universalists. One camp holds that people possess an Inner Light either as natural part of human nature (non-theistic view) or a supernatural addition to it (a theistic view).⁵ These — and especially the non-theists — are the Quakers inclined to equate their Light with the Hindu *atman* (inner spiritual energy-essence). The other camp prefers to think about the Inner Light in a non-metaphysical and non-substantialist (and thus a more existentialist or Zen) way — that is, not as a component that people have by nature or as a supernatural gift, but more as a capacity that everyone possesses either for a certain kind of spiritual experience or awareness. Either camp may see this Light as a power for moral transformation.⁶

Whichever spiritual-experiential position is taken, whether or not all people will actually discover their Inner Light or achieve their potential spiritual awareness is a point of disagreement. The quotation from Hetherington cited at the beginning of this article, for example, emphasizes the word *may* when it comes to the achievement of spiritual enlightenment. Those who express a more Eastern understanding of the Inner Light as *atman*, Buddha-mind, or the Tao,⁷ however, thereby raise the question of whether It, like Its Eastern counterparts, must eventually be realized precisely because it is none other than everyone's spiritual core and essential identity. If it is that, then at some very deep level everyone is already enlightened and merely awaiting the inevitable total awareness of that fact — what Zen calls *satori*.

This latter group of Eastward-leaning Quaker universalists would probably have to entertain or even embrace some notion of reincarnation as their Hindu counterparts do, for the very idea that the Hitlers, Stalins, bin Ladens, child molesters, and serial murderers of the world either did or inevitably will realize their spiritual potential in a single lifetime despite their heinous crimes against humanity is perhaps absurd and certainly repugnant. The possibility that such dim Lights might repeatedly return to work off their enormous karmic debt and realize the brightness of their divine Inner Luminescence would seem to be both just and palatable.

In any case, a Quaker who affirms both the universality of the Inner Light in all people and the inevitability that this Light will bear fruit in everyone embraces a distinct version of our first, salvational-doctrinal meaning of universalism along with the spiritual one. It would not, of course, be framed in such traditional Christian terms as *salvation* or *redemption*, which presuppose a much more negative view of human nature, focused on sin and depravity, than Quakers today are inclined to hold. For a Quaker universalist so inclined, universalism of salvation would be understood instead as a *self-realization* or *self-awareness* that all people must eventually achieve. Other Quaker universalists, however, might consider the question of inevitability a moot point, especially if they regard spiritual experience as being strictly about embracing and expressing the Inner Light or coming to full spiritual awareness as quickly and fully as possible in the here and now of a single lifetime. From that perspective, those who persistently hide their Light under a bushel of depravity would simply lose their single chance to realize their potential illumination.

The Limits of Quaker Universalism?

Both Quakers who are universalists in the root, spiritual sense alone and those who might incorporate some salvational sense as well might find themselves something less than universalist in

the third sense discussed above, that is, when it comes to the question of whether all religions have at their core the experience of the Inner Light. This is a common claim in Quaker universalist literature and is reflected in Katherine Wilson's rhetorical question: "Would it be true to say that Quakerism is not so much one specific sect of Christianity, or one specific religion, as (it is) the core that makes the centre of every religion?"⁸ She clearly believes it is. But to substantiate such a sweeping assertion, one would need to study all religions or at least a fair enough sampling (a hundred, perhaps?) to discover an invariable pattern. Some Quaker universalist writers (like Hetherington in the opening quotation) prove a bit more circumspect in specifying that the experience of the Inner Light is the heart or core of the "great" or "major" world religions, but thereby beg the question of what qualifies them for that lofty status.⁹

As a scholar of the world's religions, I am suspicious of sweeping generalizations about them. Are Shinto, Baha'i, and Confucianism major world religions? Most knowledgeable people would say so. Is the Inner Light at their core, despite the fact that they have never exhibited any sense of a mystical dynamic? I have my doubts. Is the Inner Light the heart of Islam, a faith tradition that teaches no such thing? Its *Qur'an*, in fact, claims to have been dictated by an external angel rather than inspired by Muhammad's Inner Light; and it aims to instill submission (the meaning of the Arabic word *islam*) to a profoundly other and outer God. On top of that, most Muslims treat the mystical Sufi minority of their faith, who come closer than any other adherents of Islam to experiencing and expressing an Inner Light, as deviants and heretics.

Conclusion

In summary, then, I suspect the common ground for all Quaker universalists lies in the spiritual sense that everyone everywhere possesses the Inner Light or the capacity for spiritual awareness,

although there might well be some disagreement about whether all were destined to realize their full spiritual potential. But I truly doubt that many of them would embrace universalism as an attitude toward religions, for they would find themselves having to reconcile the Inner Light with animal and human sacrifices, Satanic worship, necromancy, ritual prostitution, *jihad*, *hara-kiri*, and other religious beliefs and practices that seem to have no spiritual illumination behind them. In the face of such phenomena, pluralism would seem closer to the genuinely universalist spirit of Quakerism: that is, the affirmation that some, many, or maybe even most (but not all) of the world's religions are grounded in the Light, particularly those with a clear mystical inclination. That, of course, opens another can of worms: What is mysticism? But that question must be addressed another time.

For now, Quaker universalists might do well to clarify in precisely what sense or senses and to what extent they are universalists. This would be advantageous not only for their own self-understanding as individuals (which is important enough), but also for conversation among themselves and with those outsiders who express interest in their movement. Some Quakers will undoubtedly dismiss such theorizing as useless and distracting, but it is that only if it draws attention away from the primary or root phenomenon of both Quakerism and all genuine religion: spiritual experience.

Notes

1. Ralph Hetherington, ed., "Readings for Universalists" on the QUF website at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/readings.html> (emphasis his).
2. I am grateful to Patricia Williams, a friend of a friend and now a fellow Fellow of the Westar Institute, for bringing to my attention Quaker universalism and the Quaker Universalist Fellowship website (www.universalistfriends.org).
3. The on-line version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://dictionary.oed.com/>), s.v. "universalism."

4. For example, see Larry Spears, "Quakers and Universalism," in *The Journal of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship* (no. 40, Spring/Summer 2004), under the heading "Dangers of Relativism and Civil Religion," accessible on-line at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/uf040.html>.
5. Patricia Williams, in the draft book manuscript she graciously shared with me, asserts that "the Light is not natural" (p. 31), but rather "the face God turns toward humanity" (p. 33). Such language, of course, evokes traditional theism and its supernaturalism. Yet she also appears to lean in the direction of a more Eastern, immanent (indwelling) Ultimate as well, for she immediately equates that "face" with the terms *Tao* and *Atman*, which are not faces at all, but non-personal (and in the case of *Atman*, neuter) names for none other than the pure, undifferentiated, intra-natural Absolute One in Taoism and Hinduism, respectively.
6. I am most grateful to David Boulton of the British Quaker Universalist Group (and to my friend, Tom Hall, for putting me in touch with him) for critiquing a draft of this paper, and for alerting me to an apparent difference of opinion among Quaker universalists on this score. He points out (in an email to me dated June 17, 2005) that the mission statement of his group speaks only in terms of a "spiritual awareness" that "is accessible to everyone of any religion or none," with no mention of an Inner Light or anything like it that can be possessed. Patricia Williams, by contrast, states, "Quaker universalists believe that everyone has the Light." (p. 135) In a June 18, 2005 email to me, Mr. Boulton suggested that the reason for this apparent difference of opinion may be "that QU in Britain is less wedded to Quaker language, less specifically theistic, and more diverse (in welcoming non-Quakers and humanists, for example)." He added that such theoretical differences seem to matter little among Quaker universalists when it comes to actual spiritual practice.
7. An example of a Quaker universalist who does this is Jim Pym, cited in Williams's manuscript, p. 135. For an example

of a Quaker universalist who sees clear connections with Eastern religion, see Rhoda Gilman, "Thoughts from a Quaker-Buddhist," in *The Journal of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship* (no. 40, Spring/Summer 2004), accessible on-line at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/uf040.html>.

8. Katherine Wilson, cited in Hetherington, *op. cit.*, section "V: Universalism in Its Historic Quaker Setting."
9. The fullest explication of the notion that an important common denominator in the world's religions is the experience of and belief in some sort of a Divine Within that is identical or very similar to the human soul is Aldous Huxley's classic, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York, et al.: Harper & Row, 1944/5). Huxley — who, by the way, includes George Fox as an exemplar of his theory — wisely restricts his purview to "primitive" (i.e., tribal-animistic) religions and "every one of the *higher* religions" (vii, emphasis mine). One suspects, of course, that what makes them "higher" in his view is the presence of his focal notion, and the mystical spirituality and practice that yields it.

— Paul Alan Laughlin is Professor and former Chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Otterbein College, Westerville, Ohio, where he teaches Comparative Religions and American Religious History. A native of Northern Kentucky, he is the author of numerous books and articles on a wide range of topics in religious studies, including **Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know about the Faith, but Probably Doesn't** (Polebridge Press, 2000), and **Getting Oriented: What Every Christian Should Know about the World's Religions, but Probably Doesn't**, forthcoming. An ordained Unity minister and an accomplished jazz pianist, Dr. Laughlin is a frequent guest speaker, workshop leader, and musician at churches and conferences all over the country.

Book Reviews

By Sally Rickerman

Science, Spirit, Wholeness: A Quaker Scientist's Sense of God; Calvin Schwabé; Borders Personal Publishing 2004; \$15.99

The Cosmic Deity: Where Scientists and Theologians Fear to Tread; Robert G. Neuhauser; Mill Creek Publishing; 2004; \$23.95

Recently, I have had the pleasure of receiving two books from scientist F/friends. Both recount their spiritual journeys as “Quaker scientists.” Their destinations are similar, but in reaching them the authors have traveled on different paths in different vehicles. Each explores his progression from a “conventional protestant” upbringing to his development as a scientist and finds that the apparent conflict is reconciled when he discovers Quakerism.

The reason, I believe, that I was honored by these two gifts, apparently out of the blue and within weeks of the other, was that both my F/friends knew of my commitment to informing scientists seeking a spiritual home about the compatibility of Quakerism and Science.

Calvin Schwabé, spent a life time as a distinguished veterinarian, many years, for the World Health Organization, meanwhile hungering to bring together the apparently disparate two aspects of his heart's desire both the divine and science. He describes this adventure in detail with multitudinous footnotes from both the writings of others and his own. One helpful example is from the distinguished British physicist, Sir Arthur Eddington: “In dispensing with creeds (Quakerism) holds out a hand to scientists.” Since I am not familiar with the style of scientific journals, I found the interruption of the frequent citations made

it difficult for me to follow the author's theme. Thus, thoughts that I would have liked to have seen enlarged upon would sometimes get lost in the "proofs" presented. Nevertheless, it is a fascinating personal account of discovery and reconciliation of the two great forces in his life.

In contrast, Bob Neuhauser, an electrical engineer at RCA and developer of the Image Orthicon, ". . . Perhaps the most remarkable electronic device in existence," according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, grew up in Lancaster County PA. His family was immersed in both Anabaptist and Methodist traditions and he records his spiritual journey in a style entirely different from Calvin Schwabé's. He approaches his narrative as he might a series of scientific conundrums, systematically step by step, logically solving each challenge and then moving on to the next adventure.

For this reader, Neuhauser's account is much easier to read. For another, the tale of personal understandings and growth as told in Schwabé's style might be more meaningful. Both are fascinating, each in its own way and could well open the door of opportunity to fellow scientists to find their acceptable path of amalgamating their spiritual longings and their scientific training and protocol. I feel that these two books are of interest to readers of the *Universalist Friends* for both authors have searched for a compatible universal understanding of the divine and each has found it in his own way and on his own path.

Elaine Pagels Speaks To Friends

On the morning of May 21, 2005, renowned scholar of early Christianity, Elaine Pagels, spoke at Arch Street Meetinghouse in Philadelphia on the subject, “The Secret Gospel of Thomas: New Perspectives on Jesus and His Message.” In the afternoon, fifteen workshops were held on various related topics.

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship sponsored the day along with the Outside Lecture Group under the Standing Committee of Worship and Care of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Those from QUF — Phil Gilbert, Jim Harrington, and Sally Rickerman — worked diligently on the project. As a result, 764 people registered for the lecture, ranging geographically from Ontario to Florida to Oregon, with many from the nearby states. More than 300 remained for the afternoon workshops.

Hearing of the talk to come, Mel Keiser wrote Elaine Pagels the following letter:

Dear Elaine Pagels,

Ever since I read your *Gnostic Gospels*, which I enjoyed very much, I have wondered if you knew about the existence of Quakers. The spirituality you portray in that book is very similar to Quakerism — affirmation of the divine present in each person and the possibility of opening to it and living from it, and also women’s equality in leadership in church and worship. I recently read your *Beyond Belief* and again was much illumined and especially appreciated your sharing something out of your own personal life. Again I thought that you might be interested to know about Quakers. Now I discover from an old

Quaker crone that you will (or have already, I don't know when) be speaking to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. While I have been gone a long time, I grew up in that Yearly Meeting. I am delighted you will be speaking to them. I will eventually catch up with my f/Friend and find out how those Quakers respond to your presentation.

I do want to make a comment about your handling of John's Prologue, especially what Friends refer to as the Quaker text — John 1:9. While you give the traditional Protestant reading of John, to say the Light is incarnate in Jesus alone so that everyone must come explicitly to him for salvation, I want you to know that you go to speak to a tradition that reads that text very differently, the same way you represent Gnosticism. My field is not biblical studies but religious and philosophical thought and interdisciplinary studies, so I am in no position to argue with you about the meaning of the Greek. Nevertheless, I want you to know that Quakers over their three hundred and fifty years have taken that text to mean what it apparently says in English (and what I have understood the Greek to say) that the Light is present in everyone.

Early Quakers are very precise about the possibility therefore of people who have never heard of the biblical Christ coming to, being transformed by, and living in faithful relation to that Light. That is to say, the divine dwells within each of us and each of us, regardless of what we know and believe, can be awakened to this presence within and grow into maturity of being filled and guided by it. For one so enlightened, were he or she confronted with the Bible, he or she would, early Friends said, recognize what they know in inwardness to be what is revealed most fully in Jesus. The difference then between Jesus and others is one of degree; they called it a difference in measure of the Light and Life, Jesus having the fullest

measure. The outer Christ in the New Testament then is revelatory of the Light. He is not the locus of an Anselmian transaction. But that Light is at work as a seed in all of us seeking to fructify and grow into our own fullness. (The mixing of metaphors of seed and light was/is intentional.)

In spite of what I have said, I think your thesis still holds if you are understood to be distinguishing the dualistic way the mainstream tradition read John from Gnosticism's interinvolved and emergent spirituality. What John actually meant is of course always shaped by the perspective through which we approach him. And this involves where we start from and what texts are given priority. If one starts with the dualistic reading of scripture as the mainstream has and does, then John 1:9 is fitted into that perspective without much difficulty. If however, one starts with one's experience of the Light within, as George Fox and other early Friends did, and then take up this text as expressing their own experience of the divine within, this text is understood very differently, as are all other texts.

I will say that I used to like Irenaeus when I read him in theological school, for his conception of *recapitulation*, but after what you have incisively presented of his contributions to the formation of orthodoxy, I have to reassess my admiration and see him as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

I hope your time will go (has gone?) well with Friends in the City of Brotherly Love. Should you ever pass in the halls of Princeton my old friend from graduate school — John Gager — please give him and his wife my (and my wife's) warm greetings.

In the Light and Life,
Mel Keiser

After Pagels's lecture, Christopher Densmore, Curator of the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore and facilitator of two of the workshops, sent the following reaction:

So one benefit [of the lecture and workshops] might be to increase and inform the level of discussion on the Bible in general and the Gospels in particular.

Are Friends Gnostics? I confess to a skepticism about various modern forms of "new age" spirituality, goddess worship, Jungian archetypes, sweat lodges, etc., among contemporary Friends. I found the discussion valuable not so much for its illumination of Thomas, but its illumination of the Matthew, Mark, Luke, and particularly John.

To a large extent, Pagels's talk would have been much more challenging to a non-Quaker and conventionally Christian audience. Thomas and Mary have women in the role of disciples. The implications of this are a fundamental challenge to those churches who deny the ministry of women because of the gender of Jesus and his twelve disciples. However, Quakers have been used to reading the Bible for 350 years with an eye toward the role of women who even in the canonical gospels were companions of Jesus, and have never had a problem as a corporate body with woman's preaching.

At the end of one of the workshops on Mary Magdalene, I had a straw poll about how many believed Jesus was unmarried, or married, or could have been either. Most people fell into the opinion that he was likely married. When I asked the question of whether it mattered whether he was or not, most people seemed to think that it didn't matter all that much. A Roman Catholic audience would have likely been much more troubled (and concerned about the answer to the marriage question).

Pagels' was good about the tentativeness of her/our understanding of Thomas (a number of the passages are

unclear or could have various readings) and of the Scriptures generally. That we may not immediately, or ever, understand the meaning of a particular passage in Scripture, or that our understanding of a passage may change as we receive further light, it is also something that will not surprise most traditional Friends. The business of assigning one and only one meaning to a text can be left to the Fundamentalists who require credal tests as a basis for inclusion in their church communities, for in the words of Elias Hicks, “For my own part I am willing to be considered a friend to the proposition and fearlessly assert, that we *cannot*, and therefore *are not*, bound to believe what we can not comprehend.”

Sally Rickerman posed three questions to participants. Here they are, with some of the replies.

I. How would you assess first, the day’s immediate benefits to those present?

1. There was excitement and even joy to see Arch Street packed to the rafters. Comparisons were made to the last couple of Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions, not as a putdown but as a possibility that the room could be filled again. “We can do it.” In particular, ideas for PYM sessions evening speakers.

2. It was inspiring! I was not only impressed with the articulate and knowledgeable speaker but with the level of questions and answers. A lot of people there were very thoughtful and seemed to bring a wealth of information themselves. One of the discussion groups was not good (Quaker view of the Gnostics) as there was no one leading it and the people there did not really know anything about the topic. The other (Primitive Christianity and Quakerism) was interesting and informative.

3. As to benefits to Quakerism, I cannot limit her work to just that. What I found most compelling about her description of the experience of the Inward Christ/Christ within/Inner Light was the profound sense that we need to break down sectarian barriers, be they within Quakerism or within Christianity as a whole. I got caught out for not walking the talk in the middle of reading, and I haven't sorted that through yet.

II. How would you assess second, the day's more permanent fruits that may nourish and benefit Quakerism in the future?

1. Many people seemed to feel that Pagels's approach was an "opening" to Friends becoming able to get closer to the Bible. (I'm simply relaying what I heard, since I'm coming from somewhere else personally.) Also a means to relate better to more biblically based groups (including FUM Friends, etc.).

2. I am not sure what "permanent fruits" would evolve, but if there were more speakers of this caliber and topics that draw in from such a wide area, it would encourage others to seek out Quaker experiences.

III. Any other comments you might wish to share?

1. I have only been a Quaker for 3 years and would really like Saturday seminar type programs that allowed me to hear more knowledgeable Quakers discuss topics of this depth. My Meeting is very small and somewhat eclectic and I am not really hearing discussion of Quaker topics. At First Day School we discuss books such as *Conversations with God* which are really not based on Quaker beliefs and as the small group attending are mostly attenders, not members, and have other backgrounds — Jewish or protestant usually — I am not learning as much as I would like. I am partly to blame as I could be teaching myself through extensive reading and at the moment. I just do

not have the time to read much, although I love to when I do have the time.

2. Many expressed hope for an “annual” event. “Coming up with a speaker” for an expected annual slot is quite different from “Find a venue for Elaine Pagels.” But I think the Standing Committee (of Worship & Care) would be open to supporting leadings in this area.

3. I believe the most important and most relevant concept of Saturday’s presentation was Elaine’s reconciliation of the role of women in the religious movement, especially in her interpretation of Thomas 116 (?114). I think this represents a change in her thinking — for the better!

4. Thanks, from a very deep center, for expediting this. As is usual, I found the limited time I had to read Elaine Pagels’s material (and reread some I’d forgotten) was well worth the time. She writes well, and reading her work was like reading a mystery/novel.

5. Guess I had to really explore Christianity to find out I’m a Universalist AND a Christian. Not so sure about “Quakerism,” since I’m equally happy in other traditions . . . Now if I can find out how to be evangelical and a quietist at the same time . . . Guess the lesson for me was that the Word/Wisdom/Hochma/Sophia trumps lots of words “about” God every time.

6. Many thanks for a vibrant experience. (a) I’ve read three of Elaine Pagels’s books so her extensive lecture firmed two things: a clear understanding of the place in historical literature of the Gospel of Thomas and a review of the intertwining of Christian perceptions. (Good format of lecture, questions submitted, return to answer selected questions.) (b) The underwriting of the clear connection of Quakerism with the early Christians has given the Society of Friends a firm tie to a time earlier than George Fox. (c) Not important, but the workshops had inadequate periods of time.

7. What a JOY and DELIGHT. I so appreciate the opportunity to hear, experience, learn, grow, change, radiate, and love this Friends' Meetinghouse. Dr. Pagels enriched my life. I am enriched and en-LIGHT-ened. Thank you for helping this come to BE.

8. Thanks for all the work in planning the Pagels Lecture Day. It was superbly challenging and worth the travel to attend. Afternoon workshops were a bit confusing, but I don't know how you could have done it differently.

Elaine Pagels offered her own response in reply to Jim Harrington's thanks to her:

Thank you for your kind message. I was glad to join you in that remarkable meetinghouse, and was glad to meet with the Friends for that morning. The response was moving, and the level of insight great. I am so glad we could do it, and was glad to meet you. With best wishes,
Elaine.

CD Available

Pagels lecture and question answering period (audible) along with a printable file with the Gospels of both Thomas and Mary are on a 2 CD set for \$15.00 plus shipping and handling. Contact:

Sally Rickerman
121 Watson Mill Road, Landenberg PA 19350
Tel: 610-274-8856.

Editor's Note: This article was compiled from notes from Sally Rickerman and Christopher Densmore.

Friends General Conference Gathering Events

Bishop Spong Inaugurates the First Elizabeth Watson Lecture:

Moving from a Tribal God to a Universal Presence

By Alice Carlton

Bishop John Shelby Spong opened his talk Thursday night thanking FGC for inviting him to be a Quaker for a few days. Indeed, he sounded like one of us in much that he said. In fact, he gave me hope and a definition of what it means to be a Christian that was a lot more palatable than the one I'd had in the past or the one many today seem to be proclaiming.

I didn't know much about Episcopalians. I grew up Presbyterian. Episcopalian seems just one more step up the social status ladder. I had left mainstream religion when I left college and began to observe the "church of the pillow" on Sunday mornings. Then in 1975, when I was 27, I discovered the Quakers and felt instantly at home.

Bishop Spong gave us a survey of Bible stories obscure to me such as Hosea, Amos, and Malachi to show that the Old Testament, which he said was more aptly called the Hebrew Scriptures, also preached the promise of God's mercy. The frequent Christian teaching that the God of love originated with Jesus he called an example of early anti-semitism.

He pointed out that Jesus was a name and Christ a title. That the early followers of Jesus were Jewish, called the Revisionists, and intended to incorporate Jesus in the Jewish faith as another prophet like Moses who radiated the presence of God to those around him. But the orthodox Jews objected and struggles ensued. Resolution and integration could not be achieved. The

result was a permanent split and the formation of a movement called Christianity. The verses in the Gospel of John saying, "I am the way, the truth and the light. No one comes to the father except through me," were an attempt to show the orthodox that Jesus was in the same category as Moses, using the same words used in relation to Moses, in what turned out to be a vain attempt to reconcile the two groups. Spong assured us that Jesus most likely never made the claim to be the only way to God.

He sees Jesus as a stop along the way of the evolution of our understanding of God and spirit and creation, part of continuing revelation, to use the familiar Quaker phrase. He said he believes there is one God who loves all his creation and there are many equally valid paths to God. His own experience of God leads him to follow the Judeo-Christian path. But that does not mean he invalidates other paths for other people.

I have always considered myself a Quaker universalist. I began to see Bishop Spong's ideas as quite similar.

When he talked about the state of the world, he gave a reassuringly optimistic picture. He reminded us that every 8 years, 4 years of people die and 4 years of young people reach voting age. So just wait and things will change. For example, surveys of those under 35 show homosexuality is not an issue to them at all. In ten years, they will be 45. He believes that the current public debate over homosexuality and gay rights is a hopeful sign. We now know being gay is not a choice, he said, but an orientation one is born with. He believes God loves all creation equally and eventually love with prevail.

As to how to relate to our friends and family who hold fundamentalist beliefs, he urges us just to love them where they are. Some people can't change. Don't waste energy arguing with them. He told the story of a man in his congregation in eastern North Carolina during the civil rights era. When the mere mention of civil rights for blacks came up, he grew red in the face. He was never persuaded to reconsider his rigid stance. Thirty years later, Bishop Spong had occasion to visit with this man's son.

The son acknowledged his father's intransigence on the race issue and the difficulties his father had given Spong. He apologized for his father's behavior. Obviously, his son had formed a different opinion.

The religious struggles going on in the world today, he said, are signs the old tribal religions are still operating, but he seems to see them as bound to pass away eventually. A more unified view of creation is evolving as we learn to see all of creation and all its peoples as one. I for one would like to believe he is right.

— Alice Carlton is from the Chapel Hill MM in Chapel Hill, NC, part of Piedmont Friends Fellowship.

Reflections On *Where Spirituality And Science Collaborate*,

A Talk Given By Patricia A. Williams, July 5, 2005, FGC Gathering, Blacksburg, VA

By Susan Rose

Pat Williams sees scientists and Quakers as allied in five areas:

First, their practices are open to everyone, everywhere.

Second, their methods are experimental/experiential. They depend on intuition and reason and on a collaborative community. Both are open to new ways of seeing, to being reformed. Both depend on periods of withdrawal from the world to support their activity in the world. While their activities are open to everyone, everywhere these require training and practice. Both respect their traditions but do not rely on tradition for authority.

Third, Quakers and scientists share certain "virtues": honesty, patience, humility, attentiveness, cooperation, peace (here Pat points out that the scientists' weapons are reason and evidence, not "carnal weapons."), unworldliness (although in view of what follows, I'm not clear what she means by this).

Fourth, scientists and Quakers are alike in their worldliness. "Worldliness is in our genes."

What I take Pat to be saying here is that if I were not worldly I would die; I and all living creatures are utterly dependent on resources in our environment to survive. If I die I do not pass on my genes, if I survive I do. Worldliness involves what Pat calls the 4Rs. I have added my own notes on what I understand these to mean.

Resources: finding food, water, shelter, etc.

Reproduction: finding a fertile and willing mate.

Relatives: developing an appreciation that there is something special about your babies.

Reciprocity: recognizing that by giving help you get help.

Each of the 4Rs contains within it a moral dimension: The search for resources can lead to greed or to generosity; the search for a mate to lust or love; the appreciation of the specialness of your own kin to nepotism or to seeing non-kin as similarly valuable; the recognition that one gets help by giving help to an attempt to defraud the giver, to convince your helper that you will reciprocate with help in his need, or to a fine sense of justice. In what is, for me, an ironic echoing of Augustine, scientists of evolutionary biology, of sociobiology, of evolutionary psychology have shown us that our nature is “worldly,” that we cannot choose otherwise, except to die, that the genes of the father and mother are passed to all their generations.

Fifth, Quakers and scientists agree that human nature needs transformation. I take it that here, Williams is talking about the moral dimensions of the 4Rs. The fact that we are worldly does not mean that we are evil. It is genes that are passed on, not sins. But to the extent that we distort our survival strategies from generosity to greed, from love to lust, from love of neighbor to hate of the other, from justice to injustice, just so do we threaten our survival. Just so do all the Saints teach us.

Wonderful that I should end up at this place only shortly after having an opening that the Bible was rather like my Girl Scout Handbook — a manual for survival.