

# 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

Back last fall, my good friend the Quaker historian Jay Worrall, aged 90, promised me an article on the Quaker split of 1827 between universalists and Christ-centered Quakers in America. He hand-wrote a couple pages, then one morning awoke to find himself unable to read—macular degeneration. Subsequently, dear Jay continued to apologize to me for not having the article ready! Yet, despite much medical assistance, his inability, although diminished, never disappeared. As he continued to worry about keeping his promise, he expressed his concern to a member of our Meeting, Rosemary Gould, who offered to key in his initial work. As a result, Jay and I enjoyed a pleasant discussion of it one evening over basted fish and margaritas. The outcome, with the keyboard assistance of another Friend from our Meeting, Alice Anderson, is here in “Quaker Universalism: A Historian’s Sketch.” As you enjoy the fruits of the labor of so many, please hold Jay in the Light.

Coincidentally, Alfred Roberts, for many years a faithful contributor to the *Universalist Friends*, mentions the 1827 separation in his essay, “Free Will and Justice.” Belief in free will, Alfred thinks, enables us to blame those we disagree with while our passion for justice leads to violence against them. Perhaps. But our cousins the chimpanzees are violent and even engage in something resembling primitive war without believing in free will or expressing (in their behavior) a passion for justice. What does lead to violence in evolved yet articulate and rational creatures?

Art Dewey is a member of the in/famous Jesus Seminar, a scholar of the historical Jesus. He thinks we are all-too-serious about Jesus, who had a wicked (?!—my term!) sense of humor.

*The mission of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is to foster the understanding that within everyone is a directly accessible spiritual light that can lead people to equality, simplicity, justice, compassion and peace.*

QUF Steering Committee, November 2005

#### SUBMISSIONS

We are seeking articles from 500 to 3,000 words. These may be essays on personal experience of arrival or maturation in Quaker universalism or of worship or they may be scholarly works focused on Quaker universalism, history, biography, sociology, scripture, and theology, both Christian and non-Christian. We also welcome book reviews, poetry, personal essays, and letters. Use inclusive language. Please send your submissions by U.S. mail on diskette or CD in WORD to Patricia Williams, P.O. Box 69, Coveseville, VA 22931 or as WORD attachments to email to [theologyauthor@aol.com](mailto:theologyauthor@aol.com). Please put UF in the subject line. **Deadline for next issue: December 15.** We do not accept anonymous submissions without *very good reason*.

Jesus compares the empire of God to unclean entities, makes camels go through needles' eyes, and rain fall on the unjust as well as the just. His stories overturn the assumptions of the domination system of his time, one ingredient, probably, in the Temple/Roman desire to crucify him. In Jesus' parables, mercy contends with justice, and mercy wins. Perhaps mercy would have been useful to Jay's divided Quakers and soothe Alfred's angry folks. Don't believe in Jesus; imitate him—as is good Quaker universalist practice.

I received an anonymous article titled "Knowing the Question." I will be happy to publish it under the author's name. Unless there is very good reason, we do not publish anonymous pieces.

No one took up the challenge to the nontheists in my last editorial. I asked for personal essays (spiritual journeys are fine, too) describing the god they do not believe in. Susan Rose's book review offers one such God, a savage God whose enemies we may slaughter with impunity. I bet most of us don't believe in—him. Really, I'm serious. Let's find out!

## More *Quaker Universalist Readers* Coming

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship published the *Quaker Universalist Reader, Number 1* in 1986. It contains the founding documents of Quaker universalism. Since then, silence. No longer! The Fellowship and its older sibling, the Quaker Universalist Group in Britain, are busily compiling two more Readers, creatively titled Numbers 2 and 3.

Both volumes are collections gleaned from articles previously published in the QUF *Universalist Friends* and the QUG *Universalist*. All are essays rather than letters, editorials, or book reviews. Even so, the volumes together will include more than a hundred separate items. Volume 2 contains articles whose focus is universalism. Its chapter titles are: 1. What Is Universalism? 2. What Is Universal? 3. Universalism and Quakerism. 4. Universalism and Christianity. 5. Universalism and Non-Christian Religions. 6. Universalism and Ecology. Volume 3 concentrates on spirituality. Its chapters are 1. God as Metaphor. 2. What God? 3. Spiritual Experiences. 4. Spiritual Journeys. 5. Spirituality and Mysticism. 6. Spirituality and Science.

The articles are rich and thoughtful, a treasure-trove that we feel privileged to bring to a wider readership. We hope to publish both volumes early next year. Look for them!

Meanwhile, enjoy the sauna bath of summer.

Patricia A. Williams

## QUF Programs At The 2006 FGC Gathering

Once again the Quaker Universalist Fellowship sponsored a full schedule of afternoon sessions and a well-attended evening interest group at the annual FGC gathering. Thanks to Anthony Manousos, editor of *Friends Bulletin* and the author of our pamphlet *Islam from a Quaker Perspective* (2002), programs were arranged that drew a total of nearly 200 people. The focus of the entire week was upon Quaker interfaith work

Of particular note was the Monday Night Interest Group on July 3, which was addressed by a trio of speakers from Seattle faith groups, including Jamal Rahman, a Muslim Sufi, Rabbi Ted Falcon, and the Reverend Don Mackenzie of University United Church of Christ. Richard Barnes, who welcomed the audience of more than 70 and briefly discussed the QUF and its mission, opened the program. He also noted the evolution of the Fellowship from defending the universalism characteristic of Friends from their beginnings in the 17th century to an active involvement with other world faiths, such as Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Native American beliefs.

Other programs during the week included two films and discussions led by Anthony Manousos on the current interfaith movement and by Leah Green on compassionate listening as a tool for interfaith dialogue.

Rhoda Gilman

# Quaker Universalism: A Historian's Sketch

By Jay Worrall

*The light that lighteth every one was coming into the world.*

John 1:9

George Fox when he was 22 years old passed through a troubled time. "I fasted much and walked abroad in solitary places many days and often took my Bible," he recalled in his Journal.

"And when all my hopes were gone...", he recalled, "so that I had nothing outwardly to help me nor could tell what to do, then oh then I heard a voice which said 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,' and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy." And that experience, that that day was the beginning of young George Fox's life work—the founding of the Society of Friends, the Quakers.

Now it is clear that George's Bible had much to do with the insight that led George to his life's work: and it is equally clear that John 1:9, the Bible passage where John describes the birth of Christ as "the light that lighteth everyone" was a leading influence. For all that George wrote or said as a Quaker leader is based on his conviction that there is an inward light, a light of Christ, available to all men and women, boys and girls. George cited the John 1:9 passage in his Journal many times more often than any other Bible verse or story.

Until two years before George Fox's death in 1691, it was a crime to worship elsewhere than in the Church of England. In May of 1689 Parliament passed an Act of Toleration. The Puritan movement was gaining such strength that the act was essential.

The Act of Toleration was a curious compromise that fell short of allowing religious liberty. The preamble explained that it provided only "some ease to scrupulous consciences in the exercise of religion ... to unite their majesties' Protestant

subjects in interest and affection.” All taxpayers no matter where they went to church were still required to pay for the support of the Church of England. And the Act forbade Quakers and other dissenters to witness in court or serve on a jury. Nevertheless by the Act of Toleration, the British government half admitted that it is humankind’s incorrigible nature to worship God in differing ways.

The new Act gave rise in England to a host of dissenting religious bodies along with the Church of England. The Society of Friends, the Quakers, differed in major ways from the Puritan style of worship:

The Friends met in silence, “waiting on the Lord.” They waited on the Inward Light and the still, small voice to guide them in the living of their lives.

Friends had no ritual, no choirs, no profession of religious faith, or paid ministers. Members of the meeting rose in the silence to speak their insights or leadings, but no one was paid to lead their meetings. The style was called a “free ministry” or “free gospel ministry” since the speaker was not required to explicate any particular doctrine or to stay within the bounds of any dogma.

Most Christian congregations favored John 3:16 as a Bible verse. It reads, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that *whosoever believeth in him* shall not perish but have everlasting life.” This verse implies that only followers of Jesus can find a way to heaven. The Friends, however, favored John 1:9, the verse that had inspired young George Fox: “The light *that lighteth every one* was coming into the world.”

The Quakers’ preferred verse accords with the conviction that the Inward Light or the Inward Teacher is inborn in all men and women of whatever faith, Buddhist or Muslim, Confucian or Taoist, Catholic or Protestant. It is the basis for the Quakers’ refusal to engage in war as a way to solve international differences. We are all brothers and sisters, sharing the Inward Light. It is an evil thing to kill and maim our kindred.

The Quaker way does not satisfy all people. Waiting in silence, with no prearranged rite or ritual and no comfortable corps of professional religious leaders, is unsettling to many. George Fox was still alive when this discomfort surfaced in Quaker ranks. The schism's leader was George Keith (1638-1716), a Scottish Quaker born near Aberdeen and educated to be a Presbyterian minister. He was well-versed in theology, a convincing man with a Scottish burr to his talk. He joined the Aberdeen Friends and for 27 years was a leader among Friends.

In 1684 Keith went with George Fox, William Penn, and Robert Barclay on a visit to Germany. He was appointed—through William Penn's influence—to be the surveyor of East Jersey. Until he moved to Philadelphia in 1684, George Keith was in full unity with Friends. But then he began to voice some different views, tinged with his orthodox Presbyterian upbringing and distinctly opposed the idea that God's light, the Inward Light, "lighteth everyone."

"He began to question whether Friends in their devotion to the Inward Light were neglecting the historic Christ. The variety of views the Friends held so freely began to bother him. So he drafted a Confession of Faith for Friends. All new members, he argued, should be required to conform to this Confession by answering 'yea' as each point was put to them.

"And not *all* Friends should be allowed to speak or pray in meeting," he said. That liberty should be reserved for those having "sound knowledge; experience and spiritual ability."

The thrust of Keith's leading was to return Friends to orthodox Christianity with its views about the depravity of humankind, of original sin and the fall of humanity. All this contrasted decidedly with the optimistic Quaker view of "that of God" in every person.

Most Philadelphia Friends rejected George Keith's proposals as "downright Popery," but some that approved them formed a distinct party within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in

support of George Keith. By and by these “Keithians” separated from the Yearly Meeting to form a new group styling themselves “Christian Quakers.”

This was the first rift in the history of the Society of Friends. It did not last long for George Keith was disowned by Friends in 1695 and then was ordained as a Priest of the Episcopal Church in 1700. After that, there was no further division among Friends until 1827.

A rift between the universal and particular began brewing in the interactions between two traveling Quaker ministers, Stephen Grellet and Elias Hicks between 1798 and 1830. Hicks (1748-1830) was a Long Island farmer, the fourth-generation son of a Quaker family. He was recorded as a minister in the Westbury meeting in 1778. Hicks maintained the universalist tone of the Quaker tradition. Grellet maintained a more orthodox Christian position. Born Etienne de Grellet du Mabillier of a wealthy and pious French Catholic family in 1773, educated at the college of the Orations in Lyons, Stephen and his brother Joseph fled France for Long Island after the beheading of Louis XVI. After hearing English Friend Deborah Darby speak in 1796 Grellet became a convinced Friend. Eloquent and sincere with an engaging French accent, Grellet was recorded as a Friend’s minister in 1798.

Hicks, on the other hand, spoke traditional Quaker language, focusing on the Light of Christ, inwardly known. Grellet spoke in Methodist overtones, speaking of the inerrancy of the Bible and the consequences of the fall from grace. “I unfolded this great gospel treasure, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ the Lord; what he had done for us, without us through the blood of his Cross,” he said.

Friends were divided about Grellet’s messages. In 1805 the New York Yearly Meeting hesitated when he requested a travel minute, but three years later appointed him along with Hicks to a committee of six Friends who were to visit all the local meetings in New York. Grellet wrote of this work, “I became introduced into very painful trials; for Elias Hicks, one

of our committee, frequently advanced sentiments repugnant to the Christian faith, tending to lessen the authority of Holy Scriptures, to undervalue the sacred offices of our holy and blessed redeemer.... My distress was great.”

Both Hicks and Grellet “spoke closely” to the Friends, pointing out their shortcomings in dress, address and the holding of slaves. But they also differed greatly. Hicks, a farmer of modest means, traveled by horseback, while independently wealthy Grellet traveled by carriage. Hicks stayed for no more than two weeks at a destination, visiting only locations close to home while Grellet stayed for several months at a time at farther flung meetings. Their greatest difference lay in their messages. Grellet spoke of salvation through Jesus Christ. Hicks’ favorite Bible text was, “There is a spirit in man and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding” (Job 32:8).

Until 1820 the disagreement between traditional Friends and those espousing Methodist positions was noticeable but after 1820 the disagreement escalated. The fault lines tended to be between cities and rural areas. In Philadelphia, as well as eight other yearly meetings, Quaker leadership was in the hands of merchants and business people who lived in cities while country Friends were farmers. As families became more affluent, members of the Philadelphia Quakers left the society to worship in Episcopalian and Methodist churches. Philadelphia’s leaders were influenced by the “outward” religious practices of their family members and neighbors and by 1820 they were pretty much on the new evangelical side of the Society of Friends.

The disagreement between universalists and Christ-centered Quakers came to a head in the tenth month of 1819. Hicks was returning from a visit to Friend’s meetings in Ohio. On his way back to Long Island he spent a week in Philadelphia, visiting its five meetings. He spoke “close words” at Pine Street’s meeting for business. Jonathon Evans was stung by those words.

After admonishing the male leaders, Hicks “expressed a concern” to visit the women’s meeting on the other side of the shutters. Permission was granted grudgingly. While Hicks spoke

with the women, Evans adjourned the men's meeting. Hicks returned to an empty hall. Remembering the discourtesy he said, "It was kind of them to leave my coat behind when they went." The incident left a frost in the formerly friendly air.

When Friends are at their best, loving-kindness predominates. At their worst, their focus on truth and forthrightness predominates, untempered by kindness, tact or courtesy. After tenth month 1819, the worst emerged.

Hicks and his friends began making blunt declarations certain to ruffle evangelicals. While the practice since George Fox's day had been to refrain from criticizing "outward" religious practices, Hicks led in attacking them. He wrote, "The writings of Confucius may be as divinely inspired as the Bible" and "a man may keep the Sabbath, may belong to a church and attend all the observances, have regular family prayers, keep a well-bound copy of the Hebrew scriptures in a conspicuous place, and still not be a Christian at all." He asked Evans' wife Hannah, "Hast thou ever been sensible of any advantage that thou hast derived from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ?" He claimed, "The fullness of the Godhead rests in every human and in every blade of grass."

Grellet, Evans and their cohorts reciprocated, "Hicks seeks to invalidate the Holy Scriptures and sets up man's reason as his only guide, openly denying the divinity of Christ.... [He] is an innovator upon religious principles and inclined to Unitarianism. [He and his followers] practice a loose, hollow kind of morality of that sly, suspicious kind which just clears them from the laws," and, "they will generally practice any kind of dissimulation and misrepresentation to carry their points and promote their own selfish interests."

In earlier disputes between George Keith and the Philadelphia elders four generations earlier, the elders defended traditional Quakerism against Keith and his orthodox Christianity, but in this dispute the elders were on the other side, standing for orthodoxy while Hicks defended traditional Quakerism.

On the fourteenth day of the twelfth month of 1824, on the way home from Baltimore, Hicks attended Pine Street meeting and declared himself openly, bluntly and finally.

Walt Whitman wrote of the scene, “One was present who described to me what happened; in the course of the utterance or argument [Hicks] made use of these words: ‘The blood of Christ—the blood of Christ—why my friends the actual blood of Christ in itself was no more effectual than the blood of bulls and goats—not a bit more—not a bit.’ At these words, after a momentary hush, commenced a great tumult. Hundreds rose to their feet.... Canes were thumped on the floor. From all parts of the house angry mutterings. Some left the place but more remained, with exclamations, flushed faces and eyes.”

After the rise of meeting, Hicks walked along the facing benches shaking hands. Jonathon Evans refused to shake his hand. As Whitman wrote, “This was the definite utterance, the overt act which led to the separation. Families diverged—even husbands and wives, parents and children were separated.”

Hick’s “definite utterance” did not originate with him. He had only paraphrased Job Scott of Rhode Island, who preached to Virginia and Philadelphia Quakers alike acceptably in 1789. Scott’s words were, “The sufferings of Christ could do no more toward reconciling a soul to God than the blood of bulls and goats toward the washing away of sin.”

The separation Whitman mentioned came three sad years later. Friends asked each other anxiously, “Is thee Hicksite?” or “Is thee Orthodox?” In the fourth Month of 1827 at the 146<sup>th</sup> annual gathering of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in Arch Street Meeting House proceedings were rancorous. By the sixth month Philadelphia’s traditional (Hicksite) friends and evangelical (Orthodox) body had formally separated.

By the close of 1828, not only Philadelphia but New York, Ohio, Baltimore and the new Indiana yearly meeting divided. The Ohio meeting split-up was the most violent. Elias Hicks visited on a First Day when 1,500 were present including Elisha Bates, former clerk of the Virginia Yearly Meeting. Several other

former Virginia friends were present including Jonathon Taylor, the incumbent clerk who had moved from the Crooked Run meeting in Front Royal , Virginia and Benjamin Ladd, the outgoing clerk who had come from Virginia's Weyanoke meeting.

After Hicks spoke, Bates rose to declare that Hicks was no longer a recognized minister for he did not believe in heaven or hell except in a spiritualized sense. The lack of civility increased to the point of yelling. Jonathon Taylor at the Clerk's table resisted the efforts of several Hicksites to jerk the table away from him. The walnut table broke to pieces in the struggle. Taylor fell with his spectacles knocked off. It was said, in the melee, that Benjamin Ladd bit a Hicksite on the shoulder.

The divided yearly meetings of Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia were primarily Hicksite as of New Year's Day, 1829. Baltimore divided 2000 Hicksite to 500 Orthodox. New York 13,000 Hicksite to 6,000 orthodox. Ohio, 8,000 strong divided nearly equally. Indiana Yearly Meeting's friends became mostly Orthodox, some 12,500 from a membership of 14,000. There was no division at all in the Virginia, North Carolina and New England yearly meetings. They all became Orthodox bodies.

The separation hurt the Quakers nationwide.

Whether the orthodox branch of Friends clung to the Universal Light is uncertain. It is certain that there are still Hicksites firmly in the Universalist camp.

Quakers sustained witness to the Universal Light in both world wars. In World War I American Quakers sent over two million dollars to provide food for the starving Germans. In World War II young Quakers went overseas to help in the wake of the war.

On November 2, 1965, during the Vietnam war, Norman Morrison, a Baltimore Quaker, in solidarity with Vietnamese refugees cared for by Father Currien, a French priest, drove to the Pentagon and standing below its windows, immolated

himself with kerosene. He explained his actions to his wife Anne in a letter mailed to her from Virginia just before he died, "For weeks, even months, I have been praying only that I be shown what I must do. This morning with no warning I was shown as clearly as I was shown that Friday night in August 1955 that you would be my wife. Know that I love thee but must act for the children of the priest's village."<sup>1</sup>

Morrison's act was widely reported in the media.<sup>2</sup> Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, was in his Pentagon office that day. He later spoke of Morrison's death as "a personal tragedy for me." Before November was out McNamara began to send memos to the White House, suggesting hidden doubts, urging a pause in the bombing. In North Vietnam, "Norman Morrison" became a sainted name. The government there issued a postage stamp with Morrison's picture.

On March 9, 2006, Tom Fox, a member of the Langley Hill, Virginia meeting, met his death after being held hostage for 100 days by insurgents in the Iraqi war. Fox believed that, "there is that of God in every person." It was that conviction that sent him to Iraq as a member of the Christian Peacemakers Team to promote peace. As a Christian Peacemakers Team member he worked with detainees of US and Iraqi forces and provided independent reports from the region. He trained others in non-violent intervention and in documentation of human rights conditions.

The day before he was abducted Fox wrote, "If I understand the message of God, his response to that question [why are we here?] is that we are to take part in the creation of the Peaceable Realm of God. Again, if I understand the message of God, how we take part in the creation of this realm is to love God with all our heart, our mind and our strength and to love our neighbors and enemies as we love God and ourselves. In its essential form, different aspects of love bring about the creation of the realm. I have read that the word in the Greek Bible that is translated as "love" in the word "agape." Again, I

have read that this word is best expressed as a profound respect for all human beings simply for the fact that they are all God's children. I would state that idea in a somewhat different way, as "never thinking or doing anything that would dehumanize one of my fellow human beings."

Fox stood by that conviction, despite its cost. He believed in the "Light that lighteth every one."

## Notes

1. Anne Morrison Welsh, *Fire Of The Heart: Norman Morrison's Legacy in Viet Nam and at Home*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 381.
2. Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Norman\\_Morrison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Morrison)

# Free Will And Justice, An Unfortunate Duality

By Alfred Roberts

Perhaps the one concept which most characterizes the moral and legal structure of western culture is that it conceives that we humans, unlike all other beings, function ultimately on the basis of *free will*. It presumes that our conscious behavior is determined by ourselves as free and responsible beings in the eyes of God and humanity. Although the differences between right and wrong are considered to be self evident, in real life we know that distinctions between the two are often much less than obvious. Further there are multiple and varying criteria among our subcultures for making such judgments. There is the additional reality that our personal motivations are influenced and complicated by experience and by our changing relationships through time. Nevertheless our moral and juridical judgments are based upon the presumption that adults ultimately are fully responsible for their behavior. (In court and socially exceptions may or may not be made for youth or mental disability.)

It would seem evident that this presumption of personal responsibility has as its foundation a religiously derived concept which characterizes our three major western religious groups, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These, having much of the same cultural basis, place particular emphasis on the idea of individual responsibility and freedom of the will to behave accordingly. This orientation is the keystone of the moral injunctions which characterize our culture and with which we indoctrinate our youth and justify the proceedings within our criminal courts. Here punishment for wrong-doing is referred to as retribution, never as revenge. (Any real difference between the two escapes my discernment.)

It has of course been claimed through millennia that punishment and the threat of it for wrong-doers deters and hopefully prevents further undesirable behavior. However, I

am not aware of any research by psychologists or sociologists which confirms that punitive measures in the nurturing of children or in the processing of criminals ultimately deter bad behavior. On the contrary I suspect that such measures stimulate hostility in response to which miscreants find justification for further delinquency. One would think that we would learn from all of history and from personal experience that violence breeds more violence, but I suspect that we do not change in spite of the obvious because ultimately we are invigorated by the challenge of aggression and the threat of danger. This is very evidently expressed in our preoccupation with physical sports which no longer occur with the violence of such spectacles as were performed in the Roman Coliseum but as a milder equivalent. Note though that much of modern entertainment centers on drama notable for its portrayal of violence.

What then is an alternative to this self-perpetuating system of crime, blame, and retribution followed by more of the same that characterizes the way we presently think and react? Perhaps there is nothing that will significantly change events in the near future. It may be that these attitudes are so fundamentally a part of our culture that we will never change. My fervent concern is that without such reform, this orientation, productive of endless and escalating cycles of hate and revenge, could well result in the end of humanity by social and moral corrosion, perhaps combined with the ultimate tool of destruction, the nuclear bomb.

There is, however, some basis for hope. It is that for the most part, everyday most of us behave in a caring manner when we interact with one another and we find such involvement essential to our sense of wellbeing. We are above all else social beings who find our fulfillment ultimately in our relations with others. Further it is evident that human relationship is most fulfilling when experienced as equalitarian, that is, where there is little or no hierarchical difference experienced by the

participants and where each has full recognition and acceptance by the others. Expressions of anger and frustration are relatively infrequent though sometimes fomenting beneath a feigned appearance of calm acceptance. And though a part of us might prefer out and out combat to repression of our feelings, we dare not express our anger for fear of the loss of a meaningful relationship either by creating a hierarchy of dominance or by purposely avoiding one another.

Historically within the Society of Friends, for the most part, there has been an effort to avoid dominating hierarchies and to maintain the basic and defining concept that all participants have equal access to the essential truth. This is notably expressed in the equality of the division of old meeting houses between the men's and women's sides. Although men and women were considered to be equal within the society and "in the eyes of God," they were thought to be so different in their concerns that Monthly Meetings should be held at the same time but separately. Thus we have the panel that can be drawn down to divide the meeting room into two sections. Also, I believe, this separation of the men from the women traditionally was maintained during meeting for worship although with the separating panel raised.

Notably, within the Meeting, our disposition is to avoid dominance of one another, and it is a mode characteristically favored within the Quaker family. Our history, however, is replete with episodes where such values were put aside much to the loss of Quakerism and so ultimately to the wider society. There are frequently episodes of stressful disagreement within Meetings as have occurred at Willistown within recent years. Infrequently such differences have resulted in separations as occurred in Philadelphia in 1827 when the yearly meeting divided into the so-called "Orthodox" and "Hicksite" groups. In retrospect the stated reasons for the separation now seem more petty than realistic. Characteristic of the writings at the time representing either side is an attitude which blames the

other for **willfully** failing to recognize **the truth**—this in spite of the reality that both felt fully justified in the light of their own best judgment.

The same presumption of *freedom of the will* pervades our relations in both national and international politics. We assume that our politicians and those governments with whom we disagree are **willfully** and insincerely taking a stance in opposition to us. We, who are on the side of the right and of God, justify our hostility to such oppositional governments even to the extent of war with its mutual vilification and potential for devastating destruction.

I agree with Voltaire, an outspoken philosopher of the eighteenth century, that, “It would be very odd if all of the planets must behave according to natural laws but that a puny animal five feet tall should behave according to his own caprice.”<sup>1</sup> Like the planets our behavior is the product of infinitely intricate causation. We are not autonomous entities and independent of the rest of reality. We are integral to all of nature such that the idea of “free will” has no rational basis as applied to humans or any other entity in the universe. Would not then the human condition be much ameliorated if we would fully accept the view that condemning and punishing others for behavior of which we disapprove is ultimately self defeating in that it creates endless enmity and is therefore notably ineffective in creating positive change? In that living is uniquely experienced by each of us as a result of the broad variability of the heredity and environment which impinges upon us, it is irrational to blame one another for behavior of which we disapprove. Behavior may be validly recognized as destructive but rancor and punishment will not correct it. In fact it is more than likely that they will aggravate the situation by creating a reaction of anger and alienation. This is not to say that we should not express disagreement with a given idea or disapproval of a certain behaviors. There are of course circumstances where even physical opposition may be required in the preservation

of what we and society believe to be valuable and worthy of protection including the welfare of the offending person or group. That we can have opposition without rancor is a concept that is difficult to maintain in view of our predilection for self-righteousness and disdain for those who disagree with us. The concept of **justice** in most of its applications is based upon the idea of retribution for behavior deemed wrong or immoral by the given social structure. It is such a firmly implanted concept within society and notably within our western religious dogma that to oppose it as ultimately destructive would appear misconceived if not heretical. And yet that is exactly my view since I believe that it is a major underlying basis for human travail from simple ill will to crime and the horror of war. Further the absence of blame and recrimination is the mode of relationship within a fully democratic society as ideally occurs among Quakers and not so incidentally is the ultimate feature of truly Christian behavior. To refer again to Voltaire with a paraphrase of his statement about Quakers who intrigued him during his three year retreat to England: *Here among thirty religions was the boldest sect of all, the Quakers, who astonished all Christendom by behaving like Christians.*<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Taken from a recorded lecture by Professor Daniel N. Robertson, Oxford University.
2. Quoted from Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 158.

# Too Important To Be Taken Seriously

By Art Dewey

G. K. Chesterton once remarked that Jesus had shared almost everything with his followers—everything except his mirth. It is quite ironic that someone like Chesterton, so adept at paradox, could have missed Jesus' jokes. But, of course, he was not alone in this.

Biblical scholars along with many Bible readers through the centuries have often found Jesus too solemn a subject.

Empires, especially God's, are serious business. If you were to ask a Galilean peasant what he saw when he heard the word "empire," he would conjure up the power which dominated his life: Rome. Living in an occupied country, this peasant would understand quite concretely what the effective power of Roman rule meant. He would wince at the prospect of taxes. Inability to pay could mean selling one's children into slavery to settle the debt. He would have heard of the Roman garrisons throughout the country, with the main Roman buildup just across the border in Syria. He would know that on the holiest day of the year even the High Priest had to retrieve the sacred vestments from the Roman Governor who kept them under lock and key. He would also have seen (and perhaps worked on) various Roman building projects.

The Roman Empire through its architecture, coins, and representatives, delivered the gospel of domination. This was the default story of the first century. Imperial Rome promised peace and prosperity to all who would submit to its rule. Of course, this would allow the top fifteen per cent of the population to live off the labors of the remaining 85%.

Even when the peasant would think of the God of Israel, he would maintain the domination pattern. If he had inklings of revolt he would rework the power structure in his mind. The God of Israel would come and destroy the occupiers of the Land. God would purify both land and people on the final day.

Apocalyptic scenarios were the junta sketches of the enthralled. Justice would come through a reversal of fortune and fate. Yet, the theme of domination never is left behind.

If you were that peasant, you would have been completely flummoxed by what Jesus said.

How could he compare the Empire of God to a woman's taking leaven and concealing it in fifty pounds of flour until it is all leavened (Matt 13:33)? First, how could anyone dare compare the magnificent rule of God to this sorry film clip of a woman baking bread? Was this some sort of dirty joke? Yes, for both women and leaven at that time conveyed a sense of uncleanness to Jewish ears. What most modern Bible readers fail to see is the association the ancients presumed: leaven (yeast) had a sinister aspect since it was taken from moldy bread. Further, the rising of the bread was in ancient society linked to the bloating of putrefying corpses. Then there is the matter of fifty pounds of flour. Usually the translation simply reads "three measures," and the reader assumes "three cups." But, no, it is fifty pounds. Rerun that comparison again. It looks like an episode from "I Love Lucy."

But that is not the worst. This whole scene is compared to God's empire. This is the bewildering point. Who would have imagined God's effective presence in this slapstick fashion? Where is the monumental power, the insignia of control? Even the coins of the realm do better than that to invoke the established dominance of the Emperor.

Perhaps you had a Monty Python moment and just misunderstood Jesus' words. Get a little closer to make sure you catch his Galilean accent. But what is this about it being easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye than for a wealthy person to get into God's domain (Mark 10:25)? Everyone knows that wealth is a sign of God's favor. This is how the system works. Benefits and favors come from the gods to extraordinary individuals, who, in turn, give thanksgiving, thereby honoring the divinities that shape our cosmos. The gods so honored continue to shower benefits. And more

sacrifices are given in return. The system grows and swells from such cultivation. Even those who miss out on the benefits understand that something they did to displease the divine has resulted in their poor state. So it goes.

But with this aphorism it doesn't compute. Consider just the first half of the comparison: a camel squeezing through a needle's eye? Some scholars could not believe there was anything funny here. There is an Aramaic word for "rope," sounds very much like the Aramaic word for "camel." Perhaps it is a scribal error. Or, if you don't like that solution, the "eye of the needle" could be the name of a gate of Jerusalem. With a bit of maneuvering—it would be tight—you could get the camel through. Both are wonderful flights of scholarly fancy. First, there was no record of a gate so called in Jerusalem. Second, the only reason one twists "camel" into a "rope" is due to the neuralgic reaction to humor. Who could possibly believe that Jesus intended such a ridiculous image?

But what if he did? Is this outrageous image not exactly what a speaker would use to hook his audience? It is a wonderful "goez-inta" problem. How can a "camel" go through the eye of a needle? Should you start with the nose? An eyeball? The tail? A genital? Preposterous! Nevertheless, the image sticks.

But that would not have been the most shocking thought! If you get over that hilarious cartoon and move onto the second half of the aphorism, you now become thoroughly at a loss. For this directly contradicts everything that your world has been telling you your entire life.

How could a camel squeezing through a needle's eye be easier than maintaining your image of how the world works? The rich are favored by God. Their wealth is the signal of God's favor and proof that this is how the system plays out. Yet, insofar as you, the peasant, conspire to imagine the impossibility of a camel squeezing through a needle's eye, you might begin to re-envision the untouchable assumptions of your life.

If you are still swerving from that aphorism, you'll be knocked flat when you hear about a God who sends sun and

rain on both the “bad and the good,” the “just and the unjust” (Matt 5:45). Of course, both sun and rain are necessities for an agricultural society. But this is not how it should work. The demand for justice calls for a straight accounting. The good and the just should benefit. The bad and unjust obviously should be left barren. But that is not what he said. What sort of God was he thinking of? A God who does not discriminate? How can the world work if there is no settling of scores? The firebrand apocalyptic God vanishes in a shower of rain.

But then take a step back. When you heard those words, where did you place yourself? Most Bible readers through the centuries would have identified themselves with the “good and the just.” But for the first century peasant, who has fallen out of God’s favor (how does he know this? by the fact that he is eking out his life.), he would have seen himself among the “bad and the unjust,” the “dirt of the land.” How would those words sound to you now, as you stand in those worn-out sandals? What would happen if you spied for the first time a God who refuses to give up on you and keeps on delivering the goods no matter what?”

You might be startled enough to hear once more that incredible saying: “Love your enemies” (Matt 5:44). This could be no command, for commands have to be clear and reasonable to be carried out. Moreover, the ancient personality identified with one’s social group. Your worth and identity came from others’ eyes. You loved those within the circle of your extended family, tribe, and nation. But this did not reach those beyond the lines. To hear someone suggest loving those outside of your tribal imagination was not comprehensible. For it counseled doing the unthinkable.

And yet isn’t that what happened when you heard that story of “A man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (Luke 10:30-35)? You immediately identified with that poor fool who would go alone down the robber-ridden road. You knew this story was made-up once the priest and Levite entered the scene. Neither would have gone down alone. But, you still could feel

that antagonism towards each of those snobs. Now, who was to be the third one in? All good stories run in threes. A Pharisee? Possibly, since Pharisees were heroic figures, who often spoke up for the little man. Or, how about an ordinary Jew, who felt something for that fellow? But no, not a Samaritan! Those pretenders to the heritage of Moses! People who would beat you up if you entered their towns! The ones in whose presence your skin would crawl! Yet he, a Samaritan, was the third man. He felt moved by the plight of that victim; he risked pollution associating with a half-dead Jew. He even put him on his pack animal and paid the equivalent of a month's room and board. Who could imagine this: to fall into the hands of your enemy and come out the better for it? Does loving your enemy begin by imagining him?

How is this possible? How can you go beyond those tried and true lines of domination and lineage? Unless that vision of a God who refuses to play the boundary game can be tried on for size. Is it, at least, worth figuring out? Could it be that there is space for maneuvering, genuine breathing room, right in the midst of those who are the expendables of the world? Is that what Jesus meant when he said that the "Father's effective presence is in our midst" but we just "don't get it" (Gospel of Thomas 113; Luke 17:20-21)? It is rather difficult to see it when you have a giant timber in your eye (Gospel of Thomas 26). Could we have been that dense, so long missing the punch lines of that peasant comic?

## Book Review

By Susan Rose

The Trouble with God:

Religious Humanism and the Republic of Heaven

David Boulton, O Books [2005]

*Neither dealing out death nor dying, when for Christ's sake, contains anything criminal but rather merits glorious reward. The soldier of Christ kills safely and dies the more safely. Not without cause does he bear the sword. He is the instrument of God for the punishment of evildoers and for the defense of the just. When he kills evildoers it is not homicide, but malicide, and he is considered Christ's legal executioner.*

St. Bernard of Clairvaux preaching up the first Crusade.

*Oh God, open all doors for me, Oh God, who answers prayers and answers those who ask you, I am asking you for your help. I am asking you for forgiveness. I am asking you to lighten my way...*

*God, I trust in you. God I lay myself in your hands. I ask with the light of your faith that has lit up the whole world and lightened all darkness on this earth, to guide me... We are of God, and to God we return.*

Mohammed Atta, from a paper found in his luggage after the destruction of the World Trade Center.

When I say I don't believe in God, or in Jesus as the Son of God, I am talking exactly about the dark and hungry God that Mohammed Atta is praying to and that Bernard of Clairvaux is invoking. Substitute Allah for Christ and I can hear the voice of Mohammed's teacher in Bernard's justification for mass murder. I don't have to strain a bit to hear George Bush in Bernard of Clairvaux nor does David Boulton to hear the prayers of his parents in Mohammed. They were Plymouth Brethren

and you will be delighted to read Boulton's story of his childhood, going to meetings in Gospel Hall, "where God lived when I was a little boy," waiting for the Rapture, Christ's Second Coming, which could happen at any moment, if God didn't tarry.

I identify myself as a Quaker every chance I get; yet, I have long since stopped calling myself a Christian. I do say that Jesus is my teacher. And more and more I find myself using an image of Christ when I talk to myself. My listening deeply to the words of John and Paul, Julian of Norwich and James Naylor is fleshing this image out. How interesting? The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Words infect us.

In some traditions the world is sung or chanted into existence. In one of our beginnings God says let there be light and there was light; in the other beginning was the Word and the Word created all things. David Boulton argues that we humans create God and there is no God outside of our stories. But language is an incredibly powerful tool. It can serve our need to destroy what we fear: "When he kills evildoers it is not homicide, but malicide..." It can serve to tell of our highest aspirations: the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem of Revelations "where there are no more tears, no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain has somehow survived the disposition of God who was supposed to make these things happen, to make the lion lie down with the lamb and teach men to beat their swords into plowshares. This is still the heaven for which we dream, but we know that 'all things shall be made new', we alone can be the makers—which is why we vow that we shall not cease from mental fight, nor let our swords sleep in our hands, till we have built this new Jerusalem in each of our green and pleasant lands." (p. 207)

There are folks in our Quaker meetings who are uncomfortable or puzzled by the presence of nontheists among us. "What are you worshiping in Meeting for Worship?" Why are you even here? The clear implication of such questions is that there is a litmus test for Quakers. David Boulton is a religious humanist. Through his own story, through God's story

and through the history of humanism he carefully constructs the meaning for him of this label. For some this may be heavy going. For me, who likes reading heavy tomes of often-inscrutable prose, it was a delight. The book is 217 pages. Most of the time, David Boulton writes lucid, often funny prose. As I read his book I found myself comfortably convinced that I am a religious humanist, too, and that in no way disqualifies me from membership in my beloved community. What counts isn't what "airy notions" we believe. What does count is do we love. Is there a spirit which we feel that delights to do no evil? Do we, as John Woolman asked, delight in everybody's happiness? David Boulton's vision for the republic of heaven is as bible-based, as Jesus-centered as you would expect a Plymouth Brethren, evangelical boy's to be. But it is not God's production, except as we read him into our script. It is in our hands. Together we can build a garden where all will delight to dwell. And God will be there too; as our "honorary consultant-adviser helping us create the hallowed secularism which is the hallmark of the republic of heaven." (p. 215)

*Becoming Human*

Once a man come to me and spoke for hours about  
"His great visions of God" he felt he was having.

He asked me for confirmation, saying,

"Are these wondrous dreams true?"

I replied, "How many goats do you have?"

He looked surprised and said,

"I am speaking of sublime visions

And you ask

About goats?"

And I spoke again saying,

"Yes, brother—how many do you have?"

"Well, Hafiz, I have sixty-two."

And how many wives?"

Again he looked surprised, then said,

"Four."

How many rose bushes in your garden,  
How many children,  
Are your parents still alive,  
Do you feed the birds in winter?"

And to all he answered.

Then I said,  
"You asked me if I thought your visions were true,  
I would say that they were if they make you become  
More human,  
More kind to every creature and plant  
That you know."

From *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*,  
translated by Daniel Ladinsky

Note: David Boulton is a Religious Humanist and Quaker Universalist. A broadcaster and author, he has written widely in history and radical theology. His QUF pamphlet, *Militant Seedbeds Of Early Quakerism* (Nov. 2005) is available at: [www.universalistfriends.org](http://www.universalistfriends.org). Go to [www.quakerbooks.org](http://www.quakerbooks.org) for *The Trouble With God* and other works: *Gerrard Winstanley And The Republic Of Heaven*, *Real Like The Daisies Or Real Like I Love You*, and *Godless For God's Sake*, a book of 24 essays by Quaker nontheists edited by David Boulton.

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The Journal Of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship



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