

# Universalist Friends

The Journal Of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship

## In This Issue

**3** From The Editor

By Patricia A. Williams

**7** A Letter From John Linton

## Letters From Nontheists

**8** Os Cresson

**9** David Boulton

Rosemary K. Coffey

**10** David Nicholls

**11** Bowen Alpern

**12** William B. Lindley

**14** James Riemermann

**17** Thinking Again About God

By Gil Johnston

**19** Universalism In The Bible

By Stephen Finlan



**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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## From The Editor

This issue of the *Universalist Friends* provides a feast. I am overjoyed to be able to print a letter from John Linton, now aged 95, founder of the Quaker Universalist Group of Britain and initiator of our Quaker Universalist Fellowship here in North America. In a follow-up letter (I asked him to check my spelling of names), he emphasizes his pleasure in meeting so many wonderful people during his trip here.

Last February, we published an article by Eric Thompson on the beginning of universalism in the Hebrew Scriptures. In this issue, Stephen Finlan provides a follow-up. His article begins with the prophets and progresses to present Jesus as a universalizing figure. The early Quakers were, of course, great readers of, and believers in, the Bible. I plan an article on this for the forthcoming issue.

My meeting Stephen is a fine example of the joys of professional scholarship. My *Doing without Adam and Eve* has a chapter on the atonement; Stephen wrote a book titled *Problems with Atonement* and sent me a copy because he knew of my interest in the subject. I read his book with pleasure and appreciation. In it he notes, "The true direction of the Gospel . . . is toward universalism." "Aha!" I said to myself, and wrote back in praise of his book and, at the end, solicited an article for *Universalist Friends*, which he gladly provided. Scholarship offers the pleasure of these sorts of friendly exchanges, of meeting new people, if only by snail and email. My thanks to Stephen!

Delightfully, letters arrived from nontheists about the God each does not believe in, as I had requested in my last two editorials. I think I have Os Cresson to thank, for I think he posted a notice to the nontheist website. In any case, I read them with great pleasure and have published them here. They seem to fall into two categories, roughly speaking: those who

*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

#### UPCOMING

The Elizabeth Ann Bogert Memorial Fund for the Study or Practice of Christian Mysticism, administered by Friends World Committee for Consultation, is offering a grant of up to \$1,000 for proposals. The deadline is March 1. Grants are given annually. Email queries to [muccidem@verizon.net](mailto:muccidem@verizon.net). A brochure is available from Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

#### 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. We do not accept anonymous submissions without very good reason. **Deadline for next issue: June 15.**

do not want to believe in an evil God, and those who do not want to believe in a false God.

Susan Rose is to be credited with a correspondence with Os that elicited a shorter letter than the one originally sent. It is published here. It reminds us that some nontheists seem never to have had a concept of God to reject. Clearly, my question will leave these nontheists cold.

My sympathies are probably about equally divided between concern about belief in an evil God and a false God. As a little girl, I decided that, if I were to believe in God, it would be a good God. I've never changed my mind. Yet, the Bible draws many portraits of God, some silly to us, some jealous, some violent, some resembling a generous parent. Many

people brought up in the country discovered in their teens that they believed in two Gods, the good one of nature and the bad one of the church. Indeed, many of us learned about the evil God in church. So much for Christian education!

As for false Gods, no one believes in the true God, if there is one. We can't, for we cannot know God, as every theology worth its salt and all the mystics inform us. We are stuck with our false, often anthropomorphic, images, our idols. Certainly, David Boulton's "mercy, pity, peace and love" (from the great British mystic, William Blake, as I recall) are more than most of us can manage and sufficient for a life of goodness. My own experience is that they are certainly more than I can manage. But, if I remember to pray for help, I am answered, helped, by something that seems to me to be not-me. That I call God. (A pamphlet detailing central episodes my own spiritual journey is available on our website.)

No sooner had the letters from nontheists begun to arrive than *Friends Journal* published an article by Gil Johnston titled "Thinking Again about God." I received permission to republish it here. I think it will speak to many of us.

Os's original letter expressed concern about our getting into arguments and being rejected if we express our beliefs or non-beliefs about God. Let's hope not! As editor, I offer two promises: I will not edit your letters without your express permission, except, perhaps, for grammar and spelling, and I will not publish negative, argumentative, rebuking letters. But if members of the Religious Society of Friends—and especially we universalists—cannot discuss God peaceably among ourselves, we are in trouble.

So, please, let us continue the dialogue begun here. I am interested, especially, in hearing from those whose God failed to grow up with them (so they gave up on God) as David Boulton comments elsewhere, his God did. Then, also, from those whose God did grow up (so they have a God they can believe in). I think this could be a fascinating discussion that could help us all increase in understanding of each other and (dare I say it?) in mercy, pity, peace and love.

Patricia A. Williams

## A Letter

from John Linton to the editor of the *Universalist Friends*:

Dear Friend,

I thought you might be interested in my memories of the founding of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship. As you perhaps know, I founded both the QUG [Quaker Universalist Group] and the QUF. The QUG was founded in London in 1977 following a talk I gave to the Seekers entitled 'Quakerism as Forerunner'. In 1982, Judith Arness, an American Friend, invited me to come and publicise the universalist message in the States. She {laid on} an {extensive} tour starting in Boston, then traveling via Chicago to the west coast, down to Los Angeles, across to the east coast and ending in Philadelphia. I was of course already familiar with America, having been employed, with my wife Erica, by both British and American Friends for six years as QIAR [Quaker International Affairs Representative] in Delhi.

I only vaguely remember the Meeting Friends laid on for me in Chicago. I stayed in the University Hotel, and attended a concert given by the Symphony Orchestra in the open, and it {rained}! I found the museum showing how Chicago came into being of great interest. In Seattle I stayed with Jewish friends I had met in Oxford. Both my wives were Jewish. The first, Zoye, was Russian Jewish, and the second, Erica, was German Jewish by origin. So I have always been happy with Jewish culture, though not with their religion.

In San Francisco, I gave my talk in the Meeting House, which has a view of the Golden Gate Bridge. I was surprised, and pleased, to see a statue of Gandhi in the city, commemorating his visit. In Claremont, I stayed with Leonard and Martha {Dart}. They, like me, had done a stint in India, so we had that in common. I am still in touch with Martha. In Los Angeles I stayed with a Friend who had a New York Jewish

background, and who objected to Christian Friends trying to convert her!

On my way to the east coast I stayed at Denver, Colorado, the 'mile-high city', where it was snowing in March. My memories of the east coast are disappointingly vague, though I clearly recall stays in Atlanta, Georgia, and High Point, North Carolina. In the latter my host was Mel Zuck, which made me realize for the first time that I was in a foreign country!

My talk 'Quakerism as Forerunner' was never published in the British 'Friend'. But it was published, with beautiful illustrations, in your 'Friends Journal,' issue dated October 15, 1979. [It also appears in the *Quaker Universalist Reader Number 1.*]

Your Friend sincerely (now aged 95!)  
John Linton

## Letters from Non-theists

God is absent

from Os Cresson

My religion centers on life as we see, feel and hear it, as a naturalist describes it. Events known through the senses are glorious, mystifying and sufficient, for me! I proceed without levels we never observe and without religious words such as God, theism and spirituality, and psychological words such as mind, consciousness, self and will. These can be translated into physical terms, or simply omitted. God is absent for me whether as a personality, or a nonphysical power that influences physical events, or a metaphor which I find unnecessary and easily misunderstood.

In freshman Chemistry at Earlham College 45 years ago we were each given a black box with something in it and told to try every physical test imaginable and then to describe a model that would function like the contents of the box, but not to open it. I felt like one of the slaves chained in Plato's cave, staring at shadows on the wall created by people and objects in the sunlight behind their heads. I knew that most Quakers agreed with the point of the venerable, 2500-year-old allegory. For instance, Howard Brinton wrote (*Friends for 350 Years*, p. 37): "As Truth and Substance, (the Light) shines down from a world higher than our world of Deceit and Shadow, and guides us up toward itself."

If I were chained in such a cave I would try looking over my shoulder and studying what is there, expecting to find the same sensible substance as the wall and shadows and me. What I couldn't see, still being somewhat chained, would show itself through its effects or would not be known at all. This is enough for me. I behave as Quakers do even though there is nothing of



the Other in my personal religious life. Brinton did not like this approach (p. 32): “The world of appearance and the world of reality . . . are different. Deceit arises when appearance *takes the place* of reality instead of being a genuine and sincere expression of it.” Happily, the Quakers in the three meetings I have belonged to as an adult haven’t cared about all this. We have sought and found a love that overcomes these differences.

### The Gods I don’t believe in from David Boulton

The gods I don’t believe in are the gods supposed to exist independently of the human creative imagination, the gods supposed to be facts rather than instrumental fictions. The gods I believe in and trust are those understood as imagined projections of mercy, pity, peace and (above all) love. These gods, of course, are atheists

### Anthropomorphic Gods from Rosemary K. Coffey

In the play *Inherit the Wind* (about the trial of Tennessee public school teacher Scopes for teaching about evolution), the Clarence Darrow character says something like this: “They’ve got it all wrong. It’s not that God created man in his own image. It’s the other way around.”

No wonder our usual concept of God incorporates such human qualities! They may be good (kindness, pity, forgiveness) or bad (vengefulness, assigning people to eternal damnation, returning evil for evil), but for millennia the Supreme Being has basically been a “super” human being.

We have quite enough on our plate dealing with other humans. I see no need to bring a “super” human into the equation.

The God I don't believe in is definitely a father-figure.  
from David Nicholls

I left him behind, or so I thought, more than thirty years ago. It didn't seem hard to do: I recall neither a sense of great loss nor of liberation, just another part of growing up, and not by far the most troublesome. I guess I must have just been acknowledging something that had really happened already. The guy in the sky was surely a childish thing, and I had to move on.

I didn't think I was committing myself to a lifetime of unbelief, more that I hadn't yet understood what those grown-ups that I admired and had faith believed in. No hard feelings, then, an amicable separation. I'd leave him alone and he, me. I'd be free to find other, grown-up gods, or none, as my journey took me.

So who broke the settlement? I'm not sure really. I admit I seemed to have to go back now and then to give him a kick. And he still bellowed his jealous commandment. I should have been able to treat all gods, and goddesses, as equals now, but somehow couldn't. And all the anthropomorphizations, grounds-of-being, ultimate-concerns, infinite personhoods and reasonable hypotheses? Idols! of the intellect if not of wood and stone. Anyway, how could you love a reasonable hypothesis? It wasn't God, whatever it was.

So I went back and tried to make it up with him. I'd grown up (a bit) and he would have to. I tried to persuade him: a functional fiction's a fine thing to be! But it wouldn't wash. That's a different god, the go-with-a-story, not the same one grown up.

The only way to be true to the God I don't believe in (and somehow I have to be) is to reject them all. Men and gods are not different kinds of being: there are men and women; there are no gods and goddesses.

The good news is, just because God isn't real it doesn't mean that nothing else is. The daisies are, and love can be.

## My God is a God of justice (and mercy)

from Bowen Alpern

The crux is this: is the universe just? Is it in fact true that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice"? Are the righteous rewarded and the unrighteous punished? This need not require that individual villains be tormented without end. After all, my God is a God of love as well as justice. But, if the jackboots of the powerful are going to stamp on the faces of the powerless forever, then any "God" that might exist is not the God of Jesus and the prophets, is not the God I was taught not to have any other "God's before.

Now, I would like as much as anyone to believe in a just universe. I would like to believe the little child dying of leukemia will experience happiness in another world. I would like to believe that Kate Winslet will be reunited in death with Leonardo DiCaprio. I would like to believe that my friend who was incarcerated for 28 years for a crime he did not commit will be reincarnated into a being who could enjoy a compensating amount of pleasure. I would like to believe a president who starts a war for short-term political advantage will experience pain commensurate with the pain he caused. I would like to be confident that one day the world would reach a point where human beings will not willfully ignore, avoid, chastise, abuse, exploit, maim, kill, torture each other.

I would like to, but I cannot. I refuse to be reassured. I will try as hard as I can to stare into the face of an amoral universe.

What little justice there is in the world was created by people like you and me. If the Kingdom of God is to be built, we will have to build it without Him.

## The God I don't believe in from William B. Lindley

As a subscriber to the Nontheist Friends email list, I accept the invitation to discuss the subject above. I am not a Quaker, but my grandfather Lindley was (until he married a Presbyterian), and the family as a Quaker family dates back at least to 1653, where Isaac Lindley is mentioned in *The Sufferings of the People Called Quakers*. I live across the street from the La Jolla Friends Meeting and sometimes attend there.

An atheist friend of mine, when asked whether he believed in God, would reply: "Which God?" Since there are many God-models and ideas on how the word should be used, I consider this a good question indeed. I shall make a short list of some of the Gods I don't believe in, models that in traditional Christian theology are accepted as aspects of the one and only God whom Christians worship.

1. The fellow who showed Moses his backside on the top of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 33:23). This may be the most humorous of all and may be called "The Moon over Mt. Sinai" as an echo of the song "The Moon over Miami". Prudish people may insist that the areas below God's waist were cloud-covered, but the Bible is silent on this question. The King James Version has "...thou shalt see my back parts", which sounds pretty inclusive. (George W. Foote, an English freethinker, published during the 1880s a cartoon depicting this verse. He ended up in prison.) A question for theologians of the Biblical inerrancy persuasion: given Moses' request in verse 18, Did God show Moses his glory or not?

2. The fellow who ordered His Chosen People to murder babies at their mother's breast. If this sounds like hyperbole to you, I recommend that you give I Samuel 15:3 a good look. If you read the chapter as a whole, you will find that some of King Saul's soldiers disobeyed God, not in refusing to murder babies, but rather in sparing some of the livestock (v. 9). God

punished King Saul for this (v. 23). Dennis McKinsey, author of *Biblical Errancy*, once debated a fundamentalist preacher on radio. He asked the preacher: "If you were in King Saul's army that day, would you obey the command of verse 3?" After some angry hesitation, he said (on the air), "Yes, I would." He refused ever to debate McKinsey again.

3. The God of Deuteronomy 28. As in I Samuel 15, obedience to the Lord was considered a much higher virtue than good deeds. Verses 1-14 describe the blessings that will be conferred if one is strictly obedient; if one is otherwise, verses 15-68 (end of chapter) provide a long series of "curses," or horrible things that God will personally bestow on the disobedient one. One of the more touching items is dingleberries and Kaposi's Sarcoma (or something much like it) in one verse (v. 27). If God is love (I John 4:8), then we might call Deuteronomy 28:15-68 "tough love". Tougher than that of any parent I know or have ever heard of.

The three above are taken from the God of the Bible, and many liberal or moderate Christians reject this God. Those who want to accept the authority of the Bible work hard not to read or know about the verses above. Those who reject the Bible's authority here are far too quiet about it. Too bad. This leaves the biblical inerrantists free to affirm this God, warts and all, and try to impose Him [editor: see section 4] on America. I'm happy to see that this effort is failing, at least at the Congressional level. The struggle isn't over yet, though. I offer two oxymoronic models of God, widely believed, I think, among Christians. These models claim that God has certain properties that in fact contradict one another.

4. The male person who invented gender. God is commonly accepted as a male person (for Trinitarians, three male persons); at the same time, these same people believe that He created everything, and in creating people and (other) animals, He must have invented gender. How can you be the same yesterday, today, and forever (male) and at the same

time invent the concept of male and female as a way of dividing organic life for sexual reproduction?

5. The omnipotent and omnibenevolent creator of this universe. This incoherence is known among theologians as “the problem of evil”. An ancient Greek philosopher called attention to it. The fact that theologians are still working on it is a pretty fair indication that it is insoluble (oxymorons usually are, but you have to recognize them as such before you give up).

Well, that’s it for starters. I haven’t addressed the various interesting ways that the word “God” has been used in more recent times: Alfred North Whitehead and his process theology, pantheists (God is everything), panentheists (God is everything and then some), and so forth. Also there is the charming claim of Tillich that God is the ground of being. It appears that Tillich has removed God from the province of the astronomers and turned Him over to the geologists. There are many God-models out there that are also worthy of not being believed in. Maybe I can get to a few of them before December 15.

## Two Gods at least

James Riemermann

If I am to speak of God at all, even metaphorically, I find I must speak of two gods. This may be the reason I tend not to speak of God. Both gods speak to me as metaphors, but I have difficulty calling them by the same name.

I am not saying that the world is two, nor that the truth is. The world is what it is, and cares nothing for our distinctions. It is often paradoxical, but it is not dual.

Rather, I find that any theology centrally concerned with values must split the world in two, though theologians typically go to great lengths to deny that any split has taken place. This is what they call the “problem of evil.”

First—and needing to be named first—is the god of creation, of Genesis, of the Book of Job, of the all-creating and

all-destroying cosmic dance of Shiva. This god, hereafter referred to as God(1), can rightly be described as creative, powerful, generous, and also horrifying, indifferent at best and brutal at worst. Out of God(1) emerged life, which can only continue as long as it devours itself, literally. Violence, death, disease and suffering are not occasional flukes when life gets out of balance, but central aspects of the way life works, particularly in its most highly evolved forms.

God(1), the first god to be portrayed in the Bible, is a personification of the way the world presents itself to us, in all its fierceness and glory. It is not nice; in fact I would not go so far as to say it is good, though it might be said to contain niceness and goodness. As Job learned, it is not wise to conceive of God(1) as just, as such a god has bigger fish to fry. Job's story is not a morality tale, but a wisdom tale, in which the hero (Job, not God) learns to accept willingly the world as it is, and not as his human sense of justice tells him it should be. Justice is real and important, even more so are love and compassion, but none are qualities of concern to God(1). I make this claim out of my life's experience in the world.

God(1) serves magnificently as a metaphor for the natural world as relating to our incessant but ultimately insufficient efforts to understand it. As a model for how to treat one another, however, it falls seriously short. To treat my fellow creatures as God(1) treats me would not be living up to the light within me. That light—call it Christ, Buddha, love, compassion, the living presence—is not God(1). Enter God(2).

Confusing these two gods is not just a harmless theological technicality, but also a serious and fundamental error in most theology, providing justifications for great cruelty and insensitivity to suffering in the world and in religious practice.

In the liberal Christian tradition we are taught that God is love, that God is good, and that God is the ground of all being. The logical conclusion is that everything is good and lovely. This is false. We are also taught that there is sin, which

is the result of human error, and is the cause of our suffering. This is also false, at least as a blanket statement. Only some suffering is the result of human error. A person dying of cancer, or afflicted with a severe disability, or starving because they were born in famine, suffers at the hand of God(1), and if we seek to relieve this suffering, it will have to be in the name of God(2), not God(1). Which is to say, we must respond with the best of our flawed human selves. That of God(2) must seek to overcome that of God(1), even though the irresistible power of God(1) means we will often, and ultimately, fail.

In a sense, I must admit, all of this is false. God(2) exists within God(1), cannot exist outside of it. There is a grand and complete unity at the deepest level of existence, but that unity is not consonant with goodness. When we fail to distinguish between truth (that which is the case) and goodness (hard to define, but a good start would be, active compassion for all living creatures), we cannot rightly discern either.



# Thinking Again About God

by Gil Johnston

(from *Friends Journal*, August 2006. ©2006 Friends Publishing Corporation. Reprinted with permission.)

Near the beginning of meeting one morning a Friend spoke, saying that despite continuing efforts, she was still not able to come to a clear understanding of God. It seemed this question could not go unanswered, so toward the end of the meeting I gathered my thoughts together and tried to say something, though I confess to feeling very awed by the task. Here is a summary of what was said, plus a few other things—perhaps more important things—that weren't.

Quakers, unlike many others who believe in and worship God as something external to themselves, have always pointed inward and found God as an inner reality. This is not to say that Quakers have always agreed on how best to understand this inner reality. Frequently, we talk about God as a Light Within, or as an Inner Voice, or as a Spirit. Of these words, the one that comes most naturally to me is Spirit, and yet even Spirit—with its suggestion of disembodied, ghostlike beings—does not quite fill the need. When I try to understand what God means to me as an inner reality, I generally find it necessary to resort to images and metaphors. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, did the same thing when he told them, “You are God’s field, God’s building.” “You are God’s temple.” “God’s spirit dwells in you.” I sometimes like to use the metaphor of a house, that is, my body as a house, my own consciousness as a special kind of space. I am not content to think of God as an occasional visitor who occupies the guestroom on Sunday. Instead, God becomes the spirit inhabiting this space.

What does it feel like, then, to discover God within this personal space? I can only answer this question against the backdrop of images of those deprived of such a space—the

victims of a hurricane, the refugees in the wake of an earthquake, the stranded survivors of a tsunami, the homeless man on a park bench. I am blessed in a way that must not be taken for granted in having a door to open, a roof over my head, windows to let in the light, a space to call home—a space, that is, where I feel safe, protected, and grounded, a space where I can simply feel free to be who I am. This is a feeling not unlike that which one has upon entering a meetinghouse. What I'm saying is that such a feeling as this is an intangible something that is more than bricks and mortar. I may call it the spirit of the place, but the word "spirit" hardly does it justice. In a sense, this feeling of well-being can be seen as a gift of grace, something we didn't create, but have received over and above our own deserving.

Then, we move from the metaphor of the house, the meetinghouse, or the temple, and speak more directly of the inner space that is one's own consciousness. I have a similar feeling in this case, a feeling of discovering something larger than myself. Words fail me as I try to say how best to speak of it. A still, small voice? An inner light? A spirit? A presence? None of these is quite right, but the reality is there nevertheless. It's as though my body and my mind, my consciousness, and my unconscious self as well—all these together do not add up to all there is inside. They don't account for the sense of being inwardly cared for, upheld, guided, sometimes even driven, corrected, grounded, and set at peace. If God is the name for whatever it is that makes these gifts available, then so be it. For me this is the way that the word God comes to refer to something manifestly real. I refer to a reality that will never be easily understood or put into words in theologies, creeds, or philosophies. And even though children may know instinctively what all of this means, it may take us a whole lifetime to learn how to find the right words to describe it. [Note: Friends Journal website can be found at [www.friendsjournal.org](http://www.friendsjournal.org)]

# Universalism In The Bible

by Stephen Finlan

“Universalism” can refer either to the concept of the extension of salvation to all ethnic groups, or to the notion that each and every individual person (even the rebel angels) will eventually be saved. The former meaning involves a breakthrough in *social vision*, seeing salvation extending much further than one’s own group. The latter meaning embodies an *eschatological vision* wherein God will eventually succeed in reaching and saving every individual. (“Eschatology” has to do with “end things,” with God’s final ordering of all things on this world and the next.) Of course, both ideas have social, spiritual, and eschatological significance. This paper will focus on the emergence of universalism within the biblical tradition, especially in the Hebrew prophets. This involves the first (“social”) concept, but certainly has eschatological implications as well.

The idea that the knowledge of God could be extended to all ethnic groups emerges with particular force in Isaiah 40-66, which scholars refer to as Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66). It takes on even deeper (yet more concrete) significance in the New Testament. Prophetic universalism is expanded by Jesus and the apostles.

## The Prophetic Ideals

Universalism is a logical development from the prophetic ideals. Early prophets like Amos and Hosea teach that God values honest loyalty and just behavior more highly than ethnic identity or ritual fastidiousness. “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6; I use NRSV unless otherwise noted). In fact, ethical values are fundamental to the Israelite religion, which is founded in the concept of a covenant (agreement)

with Yahweh, the God of Israel. The covenant principles involve not just loyalty to Yahweh, but personal embodiment of justice, truth, kindness (Isa. 5:7; 58:6; Jer. 7:6; 22:16), and knowledge of God (Isa. 11:9; Hosea 4:1-8). “Show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor” (Zech. 7:9-10).

Heightened ethical awareness goes hand in hand with an internalizing of the covenant: God will establish a “new covenant” written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-33), and will replace hard-heartedness with tender-heartedness (Ezek. 36:26). Along with a deepening of the covenant goes the expansion of its social scope. If ethics matter more than ritual practice or ethnic identity, it is a logical next step to say that God will honor these values whenever Gentiles manifest them. Amos had suggested that Ethiopians, Arameans, and Israelites were all the same to God (9:7), but this was more a provocative remark than a proposal for action.

But everything changed after 587 B.C.E., when the Babylonian Exile began. That is the year in which Babylon reconquered Judah, destroyed Solomon’s Temple, and deported Judah’s upper classes to Babylon. For several generations in Babylon, the Jews found themselves living in intimate association with Gentiles, and it became a real possibility to teach their neighbors about the one God—to act “as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). This is the centerpiece of Second Isaiah’s message. If the Jews could become real servants and mouthpieces of the Almighty, then “kings shall see and stand up,” and God “shall startle many nations” (49:7; 52:15).

These notions are expanded after the return to Judah from exile, for instance in Zechariah: “Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people” (2:11); “Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts” (8:22); and in Third Isaiah: “Nations shall come to your light” (60:3). God promises: “I am coming to

gather all nations and tongues” (Isa. 66:18). God will even take some of these foreigners “as priests and as Levites” (Isa. 66:21). A more cautious and conservative editor of Isaiah 66 felt the need to “correct” these statements with nationalistic statements; Israel will receive the loot of nations (66:20), and “your race and your name (shall) endure” (66:22, the NAB translation). It is important to note that both viewpoints, the universalizing and the more nationalistic, are allowed to stand in the text. There is no harmonization, just a co-existence, of the two views. The nationalistic viewpoint has surrounded the universalizing viewpoint, but not deleted it.

One aspect of nationalism in the ancient world is a strong affirmation of cult, including sacrificial cult, so it is not surprising to see that universalism sometimes goes along with an anti-cultic message. Some sayings reduce the importance of the ritual system: “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). Others attack the system; witness the anti-sacrificial barb in Isa. 66:3: “Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck.” Some openly mock sacrifice; a psalmist has God saying “If I were hungry, I would not tell you” (Ps. 50:12; cf. Mic. 6:6-7). Rituals have a boundary-forming function, shutting out outsiders, so the critique of cult is also a way of criticizing tribalism. Spiritualizing attitudes toward cult, then, have both an ethical and a social dimension.

Progress in religious conceptualization moves in an ethicizing and universalizing direction. Spiritual loyalties become deeper (ethically and personally) and broader (extending across social boundaries).

## Progressive Revelation

A universalizing impulse has always been present in the advancing revelation of truth in the biblical tradition. This should lead us to respect our spiritual heritage and to affirm it,

even as we seek to continue advancing. We *grow from* our past, as well as growing away *from* it. Neglect of either half of this truth leads to imbalance, to alienation from one's own history, or to narrow-minded slavery to convention. We must remember "the rock from which you were hewn" (Isa. 51:1)—our spiritual heritage—but also recognize that God will use human agents to proclaim new revelation: "new things I now declare" (Isa. 42:9).

Are believers ready to hear the new things? "I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa. 43:19 RSV). Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah re-shape the covenant in terms of people receiving a new heart or a new spirit (Jer. 24:7; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; 39:29; Isa. 44:3; 59:21), even calling it a "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31-34) or an "eternal covenant" (Jer. 32:39-40), reaching to "the ends of the earth" (Isa. 49:6; 52:10). The New Testament expands upon these concepts; in fact, "new testament" *means* new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 10:16). It was marked with the outpouring of a new spirit, and its goal is "to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (John 11:52).

The Bible affirms that new truth will be revealed, and we need to be ready for expanded revelation. We saw that there is a link between the deepening of ethical insight and the expanding of the concept of the availability of salvation. So also is there a link between universalizing and anticipation of new revelation. Breadth and depth go together. The sincere search for God is always rewarded: "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). Though often subject to setbacks and to cruel reversals, advancing truth will eventually triumph: "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together" (Isa. 40:5).

God always seeks to deepen and expand the revelation of truth, but we humans (including the biblical authors) only perceive a part of the message. We adapt and domesticate new

ideas to old and familiar ways of thinking. We always pour new wine into old wineskins, but the new wine expands and bursts open our containers (Mark 2:22), our old ways of thinking. And so we must seek the assistance of the “Spirit of truth [who] will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13); “his anointing teaches you about all things” (1 John 2:27). This brings us to the message of Jesus.

### Universalism of the Gospel

First we must notice how Jesus shows openness to Gentiles (Luke 7:2-9; 10:33; Matt. 15:22, 28; Mark 3:8). Next we must note that Jesus resists the nationalistic Messianism that his apostles try to apply to him, refusing an effort to make him a king (John 6:15; cf. 18:36), and attacking the nationalistic idea of the Messiah as son of David. The Messiah cannot be David’s son, he says, because no father would call his son “lord,” and David calls the Messiah “lord” in Ps. 110:1 (Matt. 22:45; Mark 12:37). If we have a hard time following this very Middle-Eastern logic, we should recall what his real purpose is: he wants people to think of the Messiah in a non-nationalistic way. However, even when he makes this point in a purely religious way, it evokes outrage from nationalistically minded people. He points out to his fellow townsmen in Nazareth that the only people who were healed in the narratives of their favorite prophets, Elijah and Elishah, were foreigners (a Phoenician and a Syrian), and he is attacked for this (Luke 4:26-29).

Instead of the nationalistic concepts of a royal Messiah crushing Judaea’s enemies, or a priestly Messiah enforcing purity rules and keeping a sharp separation between Jews and Gentiles (the Messiah concepts found in the Dead Sea Scrolls), Jesus affirms a prophetic ideal, “proclaim[ing] release to the captives” (Luke 4:18, where he quotes Isa. 61:1 in order to announce his own mission). Like a prophet, Jesus’ whole purpose is to proclaim

truth: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37).

Jesus sounds like a prophet when he says that covenant ethics are the real proof of loyalty to God. One has made a fatal mistake to have focused on ritual minutiae “and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt. 23:23; echoing Mic. 6:8). Jesus always builds upon the Old Testament. Each covenant grows out of, and expands upon, the previous one.

Jesus heightens prophetic ideas, especially *trusting* God. If a father would not give a snake to his son who asked for a fish, neither would God: “how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:10-11). We stand in the light of God’s love: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). There is no need to bargain with God, “for the Father himself loves you” (John 16:27). Sincerity is the secret of access to God: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt. 5:8). “They shall all be taught by God” (John 6:45; Jesus is quoting Isa. 54:13).

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ “kingdom of God” message centers on honesty and faith, not on his own person, yet he does say “if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matt. 12:28). In the Gospel of John, the person and the spirit of Jesus are central to the message. God draws people to Jesus: “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me” (John 6:44). The scriptures “bear witness to me” (John 5:39 RSV), but this point had already been made in Luke 24:27, 44, so it would not be correct completely to detach the message from its proclaimer.

Thus, Christology should not be pitted against universalism. In fact, the New Testament message is that Christ is the only hope for unification of the human race. If it is through Christ that God “created the worlds” (Heb. 1:2), if “all things



came into being through him” (John 1:3), then the Lordship of Jesus is the actual cosmic basis for unification of the human race, *his* human race.

Thus we see that Jesus is the focalization of the universalizing message: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). We should not surrender verses like this to the fundamentalists. Such sayings have nothing to do with dogmatism, but with God’s saving designs for this struggling human race. If we are children of God, then let us “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

Although most Christians only preserve two or three of the following, there is an essential and indissoluble link between ethics, depth of religious feeling, critical thinking, spiritual progress, universalizing, and the concept of the cosmic Christ.