

A person stands in a vast, snowy landscape under a starry night sky. The person is silhouetted against a bright light source on the ground, possibly a flashlight or a small fire, which illuminates the snow around them. The sky is filled with numerous stars and a soft, colorful glow, suggesting a clear night or perhaps a nebula. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

THE
QUAKER UNIVERSALIST
READER
NUMBER 1

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS,
ADDRESSES, AND LECTURES

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*This volume is dedicated to all those who seek to have an
understanding of Quaker Universalism*



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INTRODUCTION

Winifred Burdick

This small book is published with two purposes in mind. The first is to answer questions about the present universalist movement in the Religious Society of Friends. The second is to suggest a new and exciting role for the Society – to accept what is, perhaps, its destiny.

The movement arose in response to a lecture, entitled “Quakerism as Forerunner,” given in 1977 before the Seekers Association in London. In this lecture, John Linton suggested that the Religious Society of Friends is uniquely qualified to serve the many religious seekers who feel unable, or hesitate, to accept a commitment to any specific denomination or creed. The lecture challenged Friends to broaden their outlook and to extend their area of concern.

A group of Friends, inspired by the lecture, felt the need of an organization to extend the message and to keep interested persons in touch. Thus came about the Quaker Universalist Group in Britain, which was followed five years later by the Quaker Universalist Fellowship in America. Subsequently, the British QUG published a series of pamphlets, the first six of which are included in this book. The seventh section has been added to these—a talk given in America during Friends General Conference’s Gathering of 1984. Inevitably, since these pamphlets were published separately, the reader will find some quotations repeated as each author weaves them into his/her thesis. The first section is John Linton’s original lecture.

Read the book with questions in mind: Does Quaker universalism include or exclude Christians? Will it divide or enrich the Religious Society of Friends? More general questions might include: What is the essential basis of religion? Is the Inward Light or scripture the principal leader to Truth? Of the world’s various religions, how much is essential religion and how much cultural accretion?

NOTES ON AUTHORS

Horace Alexander attended the Friends school at Bootham, York, and from there went to Kings College, Cambridge, where he read History. During his career, he has taught International Relations at Woodbrooke and spent many years in India where he worked both with Gandhi, whom he first knew in 1927, and the British Friends Service Council. In 1984 his work in India was recognized by its president who awarded him the Padma Bhushan.

Winifred Burdick, a Wellesley graduate, feels that one of the most important courses she even took was one on critical Bible studies. This was because it stimulated her early interest in comparative religion. Her entry to Quakerism was accidental, through a casual remark, but once at meeting, she felt completely at home. She was awakened to the questions stimulated by universalism when a Jewish friend asked if Quakerism were Christian, and a member of her yearly meeting's worship and ministry committee summarily said, Of course!

Ralph Hetherington joined Friends as a young conscientious objector during World War II. A psychologist by profession, he has been active in the Society for over 40 years and was the Swarthmore lecturer at London Yearly Meeting in 1975. He has been a member of the Quaker Universalist Group almost from its beginnings in 1977, and is now its secretary.

John Hick is professor of Systematic Theology at Claremont Graduate School of Theology, Claremont, California, and the former H. G. Wood (one of the Woodbrooke's founders) Professor of Theology, University of Birmingham, England. His first Quaker connection was as a student at Bootham School. His next was when he served with the Friends Ambulance Unit from 1942 to 1945 and since then he has taught at Haverford College (1964-1968). He has

held other visiting professorships in the United States as well as in India and Sri Lanka and in the British Isles.

Rufus Jones is probably the best known and beloved of 20th century Quakers. He was deeply involved in the religion of his forebears and did much that was healing in and for the Religious Society of Friends. Some of these activities were helping to found the American Friends Service Committee, Pendle Hill, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Wider Quaker Fellowship. He was also Haverford's distinguished professor of religion and writer of more than 50 books.

John Linton is a British Friend who did war service in India. In the fifties he was Indian Program Organizer in the external service of the BBC. Later, with his wife Erica, he served as Quaker International Affairs Representative in South Asia for six years, working for both the British Friends Service Council and the American Friends Service Committee.

Daniel Seeger became acquainted with both Friends and eastern spirituality through his evolution as a conscientious objector during the Korean War. This case of *The United States of America vs Daniel A. Seeger*, which came before the Supreme Court, greatly broadened the basis for religious conscientious objection to military service. He is a member of New York's 15th Street Meeting and is the Regional Executive Secretary for the American Friends Service Committee.

CHAPTER I

Quakerism as Forerunner

John Linton

The other day I attended a Peace Committee conference at Stanwick. Looking out of my bedroom window I saw a car sticker proclaiming “Thank God for Christ!” That does not sound like Friends, I thought to myself, and sure enough it wasn’t. An evangelical group was sharing the conference facilities that weekend. Yet, at the Meeting for Worship on Sunday, it was clear that most Friends present were professing Christians. This, I thought, would be true of the Society as a whole. Most members would accept the basic Christian beliefs, while preferring to live them out in their lives rather than proclaim them on the housetops.

Yet there is surely a third category, some of whom are in the Society and perhaps many more who hesitate to join because of its Christian bias. I mean the sort of people who are *not at ease in Zion* who cannot easily use the terms God and Christ because of deeply held agnostic convictions and a commitment to Truth as they understand it. One such person wrote movingly in a letter *The Friend* in the January 1, 1977, issue. “It is clear that my agnosticism departs fundamentally from essential Quaker doctrine. Hence it is also clear to me that I could only attend meetings for worship in a purely passive capacity. Nor does it help me that many people who think as I do are evidently able to reconcile their divergent views with orthodox Christian belief.”

It was clear from the rest of her letter that the writer was at one with the Society in fundamental attitudes. As one who has joined the Society though sharing her view, my heart went out to her. Have I been guilty of an unworthy compromise in joining the Society? It seems to me that the Society would be greatly strengthened by the

influx of people who claim to be agnostic rather than Christian and yet who sincerely share the fundamental aspirations of Quakers. I shall therefore argue not merely that the Society should admit such people as a fringe element of second class members, which is what they feel at the present; but that it should widen its own basis and give up its claim to be a specifically Christian organization. I think this should be done not just as a matter of expediency, but in the pursuit of Truth, because I believe the Truth is wider than Christianity. And I like to think that Quakerism is about the search for Truth.

What I have to say may be unacceptable to those Friends who claim to be Christian, but it is not meant to be hurtful. Of course the Truth may be hurtful, but I do not claim to know the Truth. Let each Friend judge what is true for himself. Much, perhaps all, of what I say will be acceptable to some Seekers. Much may appear obvious and commonplace. Yet the implications of what I say have not, in my view, been sufficiently faced by Friends.

I refer to the claim of Christianity to be a unique revelation of Truth. Other Seekers will no doubt, like myself, reject this claim, and it would be interesting to know how they individually came to reject it, assuming that they were brought up to believe it. It may be of some interest and relevance to recall how I myself came to reject it. I was brought up in an orthodox family, and was in fact for two years an Anglican ordinand. During this period I gradually felt a growing rift between what I was expected to believe on the one hand my understanding of reality, of the real world, on the other. In the end this sense of rift became so strong that I gave up the idea of ordination. After a time I became a professed agnostic and joined a humanist society. However, after many years I came to feel that the humanists had thrown out the baby with the bath water. There was nothing wrong with man's religious instinct. What was wrong was the irrational element in religion.

It was at this stage that I applied to join the Society of Friends. My intention was not so much to go back into the Christian fold, but to join a group of sincere seekers who eschewed dogmas. However, I soon found that the basic Christian dogmas were still tacitly accepted by the majority of Friends. At one point this caused me to leave the Society, only to come back again. Eventually I determined to try to change the situation from within, and make the Society truly free from dogma.

What I had found particularly difficult about the Christian claim to be unique was the geographical limitation of Christendom. The same applied, of course, to other religions claiming uniqueness. Most people are Christian because they happen to have been born in a Christian country; if one had been born in India, one would probably been a Hindu, or in Indonesia, a Muslim. Consequently it seemed to me nonsense to claim absolute Truth for any one religion such as Christianity. Otherwise, why did the good God condemn large parts of the globe to ignorance, superstition and, according to the more orthodox, an extremely uncomfortable life after death, while reserving the knowledge of the truth and salvation mainly to the natives of Europe and America? Could the knowledge of the true religion really be a matter of accident?

Moreover, despite the hopes of Christian proselytisers, there seemed, with the demise of the British Empire, even less likelihood that the mass of Hindus or Buddhists would ever be converted to Christianity. With nationalism came a natural tendency to promote the indigenous religion, while Christianity seemed too often to be a mere adjunct of imperialism. Of course there is always a stock Christian answer to such difficulties, and that is to say that, *God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform*, and it is not for us to think that we know better than God. The only trouble with this argument is that it can be adduced by anyone, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, or, shall we say, the latest sect from Outer Mongolia.

We come back to the position, held I imagine by many Friends, that while we do not accept the Christian claim to uniqueness, we believe that Christian teaching is superior to that of any other religion, and so we not only go along with it but actively support it, claiming to call ourselves Christians as well as Quakers. I would like to suggest that even this position, preferable though it is to orthodoxy, does not stand up to the promptings of Truth. I say this for two reasons. On the one hand, the religious divisiveness which arises from claims to superiority is still one of the great dangers facing humanity. One need only to point to the partition of India and Ireland, or to the situation in Lebanon, all arising out of the religious exclusiveness on both sides. On the other hand, a position of religious tolerance and liberalism within any denomination or creed is vulnerable to attack from those who want to restore what they claim to be the true faith. One only needs to look at the comparative success of the Catholics, or of even more authoritarian though less respectable sects. Religious intolerance can only be countered by the abandonment of all claims to superiority.

So it is not enough, in my opinion, for Quakers, while admitting the possibility of Truth in other religions, to go on sticking to the assumption of the superiority of the Christian religion. The only tenable position, it seems to me, is that of Hinduism. Let those who wish follow the way of Christ; others may follow other *gurus*. As Dr. Radhakrishnan has pointed out, behind all the different formulations of words, the Truth remains the same. "The Hindu tradition discriminates between essential spiritual experience and the varying forms in which this experience has in the course of time appeared. While the former is universal and unifying, the latter is diverse and divisive . . . These interpretations are bound to be divergent as they are conditioned by the varied historical circumstances in which their formulators lived."¹

It is part of the same picture that Friends, writing in *The Friend*, almost always refer back to the Bible rather than to the scriptures of other religions. Whilst this is perhaps natural, from a universalist

point of view it seems rather parochial. Here we are in Christendom quoting the pronouncements of, or about, God or Christ, while religious folk in the Middle or Far East are doing the same in terms of Allah, Mohammed, Krishna or the Buddha. It is all very well saying, *our God, our Prophet, our Wise One*, is the best. The others think the same. But, you may say, are our judgments merely subjective? Is not the gospel of Jesus ethically superior to that of the Prophet, or the teaching of the Buddha? I suggest you must leave this to the Truth behind all truths. I look forward to the day when, in every country, there will be devotees of Jesus, of Mohammed, of Krishna, of the Buddha, of Bahauallah, and many others. Let every man choose his own way to salvation, to the saving Truth, no judging or condemning others who choose differently. Let us choose when we know what the choice is. If we choose Jesus, well and good. Whatever we choose, the Truth will still be above and beyond anything that we can now understand.

What then I am arguing is that Quakerism should abandon its claim to be part of the Christian church, and move towards a universalist position. It should take the line of Hinduism that Truth can be approached from many quarters. To put it crudely, has it not ever occurred to birthright Friends that they may only be Christians because they have been brainwashed? The Jesuits claim that, if they have a child up to a certain age in their control, they have got him for life. The same applies to other religions. Of course it is all done with the best of intentions, but it is none the less brainwashing, or if you prefer, indoctrination. What Christian has studied the other religions sufficiently deeply before deciding to become a Christian? Very few, I suspect. And those who make such a study do not necessarily end up by becoming Christian. One thinks, for example, of an Englishman turned Buddhist who wrote a remarkable letter to *The Times* criticizing the Archbishop of Canterbury's appeal to the nation. The writer said that the majority of citizens need something more than good advice and a fatherly telling off. They need a method and example which can be seen to work here and

now, in their own lives. "In this country today," he went on, "there are many hundreds of practicing Buddhists whose lives testify to the effectiveness of the methods described in great detail more than 2,500 years ago." It takes time, of course, to study other religions and get used to their thought processes, and perhaps especially to a religion in which there is no creator god in the Christian sense. And yet, if we had been born into a Buddhist community, where Buddhism was the accepted religion, as say in Sri Lanka, would we have felt the need to be converted to Christianity? Probably not.

One is inevitably dealing here with the nature of belief. Why is it that seekers are drawn in so many different directions? Why does one man have no difficulty in accepting the credal requirements of the Catholic Church, another ends up in a humanist or atheist position, another is won over to a Buddhist or Islamic point of view? If we could *de novo* see all the religions of humanity in this completely detached way, would we voluntarily come back into the Christian fold? I suggest we should find the Christian Church surprisingly parochial, with its basis of Judaistic thought, its theological concepts, its dependence on miracles and other supernatural happenings at a certain point in history. We might still want to follow Jesus, but that is a different matter. That is still perfectly acceptable within a universal framework.

Yes, you may say, but Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. He was not just another prophet, like Mohammed. Son of God or Prophet, what difference does it make; it is just a matter of words. The Buddha is held in as great respect by millions as Jesus or Mohammed, yet he did not even talk of God. Ah, I can hear some Christian say, you obviously have not had a genuine experience of Christ, otherwise you would not talk like this. To this reply, I also underwent the experience of *conversion*. I also felt the immense appeal of the personality of Jesus. I responded with my whole heart to Christian hymns like "When I survey the wondrous cross." I can still feel and understand the devotion to the Master, as exhibited in the lives of selfless Christians. But so in their own

way can Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. They can still feel the sense of dedication to something far above them, but they identify that something differently, perhaps with the founder of their own religion.

Finally, I can hear a Christian say, *Yes, but the truth of Islam and Buddhism does not compare with the truth of Christianity.* Here again, Muslims and Buddhists feel the same way about their religion, and resent the assumption of superiority on the part of Christians. This resentment is well expressed by a Jewish writer, Dr. Ezra Spichandler. Discussing the question of interfaith dialogue in the special circumstances of Jerusalem, with its population of many different creeds, he recalls the history of Jewish Christian relations over the centuries. In the Middle Ages, he recalls, Jews were often subjected to physical violence and even death by the dominant Christian authorities, unless they agreed to conversion. He goes on to say that physical violence has not given way to moral coercion, which is a step in the right direction, but still not enough. Only very few Christians, he maintains, have moved forward to the position which is acceptable to him, namely, “real dialogue is impossible unless it is free from missionary intent.”²

In other words, the inter-faith relationship has radically changed from that of, say, the nineteenth century. In those days of Christian self confidence, when the British Empire was at it height and *the faith followed the flag*, it was a natural assumption that Christianity would spread to the end of the world and all would have a chance of *salvation*. With the end of empire, the Christian religion has also gone on the defensive. That the world should be converted to Christianity is now inconceivable. Every religion, like every nation, demands equality of status. It is this situation which has brought into focus the absurdity of different faiths each claiming a monopoly of Truth.

Let us now turn to the distinction between the proselytizing and non-proselytising religions. Of the former, Christianity and

Islam are the main examples, of the latter, Hinduism and Buddhism. Someone has made the interesting distinction between theological religions, those which dogmatize about God, and those theosophical religions, those which speculate about God. The former insist on certain beliefs, the latter are not too worried about what you believe provided you follow the moral path and search sincerely. (Quakerism, it will be noted, has at least moved some of the way from the former to the latter position.)

Now the great difficulty in the former, the dogmatic position, is that it assumes that the various creeds claiming a monopoly of truth will go on coexisting down the centuries. This is the position taken by Rabbi Hooker in a talk given recently under the auspices of the World Congress of Faiths. He claimed that one universal religion was neither possible nor desirable. He appealed for religious pluralism in the same way that we have cultural pluralism, based upon tolerance and the realization that nobody has a monopoly of truth. The history of religions had shown progress from coercion to coexistence, and would, hopefully, move on to cooperation. The aim would be unity of spirit but not uniformity.

The only trouble with this point of view is that religion is not the same as culture. It makes specific claims on man's intellect. These varying claims cannot, as they stand, be reconciled.

There has recently appeared in *The Friend* an interesting correspondence under the heading "An interfaith cocktail." This has been about syncretism. Chambers' Dictionary describes syncretism thus: "The attempt to reconcile different systems of belief: fusion or blending of religions, as by identification of gods, taking over of observances, or selection of whatever seems best in each: illogical compromise in religion. I don't think any Friend will argue in favor of syncretism. The different religions and religious philosophies are so disparate that you can either accept one or the other or none at all, in any orthodox sense.

Let us see then what the humanists and rationalists have to say about religion. They regard it as an attempt to answer moral and intellectual questions of a given time or place. But religion is essentially man-made, they argue, and theology, magic and miracles are all the product of human imagination. There is however something called religious humanism which gives a place to man's mystical experience. The claim of religious devotees to have had an experience of the presence of Christ or the Buddha can be understood as a yearning after righteousness.

Here again one can learn from Eastern thought. The Eastern view is that there is more to life than logic. Rationalism is just a phenomenon of Western man's mental processes, and is not to be taken too seriously. The dogmatic demands of Western religion are the other side of the same coin, part of Western man's craving for logic, you had to answer humanistic rationalism by religious rationalism. But Eastern thought makes no such sharp division necessary. The world of reality and illusion, *maya*, are all mixed up; the idea of the occult creates no intellectual hesitations: astrology coexists with astronomy.

The Hindu idea of *bhakti* (devotional) religion is a neat way out of the dilemma. If you want to follow Jesus or Mohammed or Krishna or Gautama, good luck to you. It all comes within the Hindu frame of reference. Hindu sages have written books with titles such as "The Christ I adore." Gandhi, a Hindu, admitted his debt to Jesus. What of Christ's claim to be the *only way*? Of Mohammed to *the one, final prophet*? The Hindu answer is, Don't be too logical; it must all be seen in the right perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis* (in their eternal aspect). As Dr. Radhakrishnan, that great interpreter for the East to the West, has written: "The whole course of Hindu philosophy is a continuous affirmation of the truth that insight into reality does not come through analytical intellect, its mysteriousness can be grasped only by intuition."³

Some of the great Western thinkers have got the message. Arnold Toynbee, in his *Study of History*, rejected the claim of certain races to be a *chosen people*, and of certain creeds to be of a unique revelation of the truth. He did not accept the idea of a divine incarnation at one place or time. "Which," he asks, "is the more consonant with the Christian belief that God is Love? The belief that there is only one revelation of the truth and one road to salvation? Or the belief, common to Hinduism and to the Christian religions of the Hellenistic world, that the heart of the mystery of the universe must be approachable by more roads than one?"⁴

Aldous Huxley has written similarly in *The Perennial Philosophy*. He speaks of *a certain blandly bumptious provincialism* even among learned Christians, which makes them feel and write as if nobody else had ever thought about the eternal verities. "The core and spiritual heart of all higher religions is the Perennial Philosophy; and the Perennial Philosophy can be assented to and acted upon without resort to the kind of faith about which Luther was writing . . . So long as the Perennial Philosophy is accepted in its essential simplicity, there is no need of willed assent to propositions known in advance to be unverifiable." And what is the Perennial Philosophy. It is, in Huxley's words, "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being."⁵ Beneath the revelations of all the great world religions, the teaching of the wise and holy of all faiths, and the mystical experience of every race and age, Huxley argues, there lies a basic unity of belief which is the closest approximation man can attain to truth and ultimate reality. This is the Vedantist position which makes belief in exclusive theological positions unnecessary.

There appears, then, to be a fundamental polarization of thought processes between East and West. The American psychologist Robert Ornstein has sought to explain this from the field of

physiology. According to this theory, each hemisphere of the human brain is specialized, the left in logical *masculine* thinking, the right in intuitive *feminine* thinking. For some reason, the West has come to be identified with the left hemisphere, the East with the right. Both approaches are one sided, and need to be supplemented by the other, since only the development of the whole man can bring a solution to man's problems. The task of our century is to create a synthesis of Eastern and Western thinking, of intellect and intuition.⁶ (Synthesis, it should be noted, is not the same as syncretism. To quote Chambers' Dictionary again, it is "putting together, make a whole out of parts, the combination of separate elements of thought into a whole.")

The exciting thing about Quakerism is that it makes a first move towards this synthesis. The turning away from dogmas, the following of the Spirit of Truth wherever it may lead, these are steps in the right direction. Perhaps I can give an illustration of the sort of thing I have in mind, where Quakerism can lead the way. At the Quaker Centre in Delhi, we used to advertise the Sunday Meeting as *for worship and meditation*. In this way, it was possible to accommodate different temperaments and approaches, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, agnostic. Such a meeting was a unique way of bringing people of all faiths together in a common concern for spiritual values. As I wrote in a letter to *The Friend* in May 1971 from Delhi, "it, more than any other religious gathering that I know of, can provide a nucleus for the universal faith that I believe must come, a faith that no longer divides but unites a humanity."

For what after all is the concern of the great religions of the world? It can surely be summed up in the phrase *spiritual values*. Nothing else matters, the dogmas, the magic, the miracles. These ingredients were part of the mental processes of mankind at the time when various creeds entered history, but these are not essential. Man clings to them from force of habit, because he has been brainwashed, if you like. But, however difficult it may be, the

sooner we get away from irrational dogmas, the better it will be for mankind.

The weeding out of irrational dogmas, however, does not in my view mean adopting a rationalist position. I believe in mystical religion. I don't think we have an inkling of the whole truth yet. What I envisage for Quakerism to become is a meeting place for spiritual seekers of all faiths or none, where they can worship or meditate as they feel drawn. It will be a world wide religion, without any particular bias, Christian or otherwise, but enshrining the supreme truths of all religions. And if I envisage Quakerism as the forerunner of this universal faith, I can think of one Quaker who has already bridged the gap. He was Gurdial Mallik, a Hindu known to many Friends, who became Quaker while remaining a Hindu. He insisted on this condition, claiming that there was nothing incompatible between his Hinduism and Quakerism, but was nevertheless admitted to membership of the Society. He is my new style Quaker for you. There are other forerunners who have taken up a similar position, people who have shown by their lives that they have understood the meaning of the Christian gospel without feeling any necessity to join a church, people like Mahatma Gandhi himself or S.K. George, an Indian Christian follower of the Mahatma.

The Fellowship of the Friends of Truth was set up to enshrine these ideas. That little is heard of it these nowadays does not mean that it is wrong in principle. (Perhaps it would be better to call it the Fellowship of Seekers after Truth.) Personally I would like every Quaker Meeting to turn itself into an FFT branch. (If anyone is ignorant of the FFT, he can find an article about it in the *Friends Quarterly* of October 1976.)

It may be appropriate to end with some quotations from *The Friend* which point in the same direction. Here is Kenneth Strong in a letter from the Friends Centre, Tokyo:

As Friends, many of us speak somewhat glibly of our Quaker

readiness to accept new light from wherever it may come, but we have at the same time a curiously restricted idea of where the sources of future illumination are likely to be found. A recent overnight stay, self-invited, with a young Buddhist priest in a Kyoto temple was, for me, a source of precious light. As I listened to him answering, with the indescribable grace of both manner and of speech, my questions about his daily life and his work among his parishioners, I was aware of two powerful impressions. First, that if the words he spoke, loving and selfless, had not happened to be Japanese, I might have been listening to a saintly Quaker overseer or elder, or to a Catholic monk, so nearly identical in every language is the voice of truth. Second, that there was about him an air of tranquility that clearly derived from the particular kind of religious discipline by which he lived . . . Rather than draw back in distaste before the unfamiliar, should not Friends seek eagerly and with joy for truth among all religions in our contracting world?

Next Lionel Wilkinson wrote in an article "A Little Door for Vedanta," *The Friend*; October 3, 1975:⁷

One good reason why Friends should be interested in other religions is the universalism of the Quaker message . . . One of the joys of searching the Vedanta teachings in the Upanishads is the discovery that here in these Hindu writings . . . are insights into the nature of religious experience which harmonize with Quaker testimony. It is not, therefore, surprising to find Christopher Isherwood writing some thirty years ago: 'I can see only one little door through which Vedanta might squeeze into Christendom, and that is the Society of Friends. The Quaker doctrine of the Inward Light is in general agreement with the principles of Vedanta . . . There is much to enrich one's mind in studying another religious tradition. One sees a development in one's concept of the workings of God's spirit from the parochial attempt to put the spirit of God in a Christian or Quaker straight jacket to a vision of this same spirit making itself known universally to all kinds of people in all periods of history . . . This widening of one's horizons brings a new sense of

the interdependence and interrelatedness of all human beings, and therefore a stronger hope for the future of mankind.’

Dennis Compton states in “The Truths We Should Publish”; *The Friend*, August 9, 1976:

Religion is not Christianity. Religion is reality experienced. . . . All that matters is whether you have come to realize, of your own perception, that there is such a thing as *spirit*; that it is basic to our existence here on earth; and that our progress in understanding the things of the spirit is the most important path that we have to tread . . . There will be those who need certainty in their thinking, who need to be told exactly what is what, and who will believe that instructors implicitly . . . But the rest - those who think for themselves and who enjoy the benison of a critical faculty need to be reassured that there is an alternative other than atheism or humanism.

Finally, that doyenne of Seekers, Katharine Wilson, writes in “Some Questions”; *The Friend*, January 26, 1968:

Would it be true to say that Quakerism is not so much one specific sect of Christianity, or one specific religion, as the core that makes the centre of every religion? Hence both the ease with which we make contact with men and women of all religions, and the impossibility of describing what our distinguishing marks are? Is it that we hesitate to claim anything for ourselves alone because it belongs to everyone by nature? Do our experiences and attitudes indeed imply that what we profess and practice is basic religion? It may be that Friends did not discover anything new at all but only what is at the heart of all religions if free from their cultural trappings. Although this discovery was given a Christian framework by Friends in the seventeenth century, now that we know more of other religions many Friends feel that this supporting Christian frame is not our distinguishing mark.

May I emphasize in conclusion those words: “Now that we know more of other religions?” My personal view is that the more

one knows of other religions, the less can one stick rigidly to any one religion. Is it not time, as I wrote in a letter to *The Friend*, that “. . . those who no longer need the forms and assurance of orthodoxy should be prepared to move out into the deep waters growing through and beyond the old ways of thought to a higher conception?” Perhaps the message of this talk can be summed up simply as: Friend, stop being complacent in your Christian parochialism!

*Love beyond telling, Good imagined,
Light without measure, shine now in my heart.*

—Jacopone da Todi

CHAPTER II

The Meeting Place of the World's Great Faiths

Horace Alexander

Gerald Hibbert, in his Swarthmore Lecture, "The Inner Light and Modern Thought", delivered at London Yearly Meeting in 1924, had this to say about Quakerism and other world faiths:

Every religious system has its *Quakers*-those who turn from the outward and the legal and the institutional, and focus their attention on the Divine that is within. There is much fellowship between Friends and the Mystics of other religious systems. Let a Mohammedan or Hindu mystic teacher come to this country, and we realise at once how much we have in common with him. We believe we have something we can give him, but we realize also he has something to give us. Our conception of God and of Christ is distinctly *westernized*, and to that extent partial and limited; we are increasingly coming to see that the East (with all its faults and failure) has its contribution to make to the full experience of God in Christ. The mystics of the world everywhere join hands. Their spirits leap together in a flash of joyful recognition; in the great deeps they find their unity and their abiding home.

I have quoted the whole of this passage, although I was tempted for two reasons to leave out the sentence about our conception of God and of Christ being too westernized, first because the unfortunate words in parenthesis almost suggest that only the East has faults and failures, but also because it seems to be dealing with a subject distinct from what goes before and what follows. The need of Christendom for a fresh, eastern interpretation of Christ is quite different from the insistence, before and after, that the mystics of all great faiths of the world find unity in the great deeps. It is possible

to accept the one but to reject the other. Personally, I accept both.

But what did Gerald Hibberts mean by *the mystics*? Was he thinking only of the rare souls who have ecstatic visions, and deep inexpressible experiences of union with the divine? It is in that sense that the word *mystic* is often used and understood. That is not the sense in which Gerald Hibberts was using it, as he himself indicates at an earlier point in his lecture. “Mysticism,” he writes, “as opposed to Rationalism and (in the narrower sense) to Evangelicalism, may be defined as a firsthand knowledge of God and direct communion with Him. It takes many forms, and varies in degree, but in essence it is this.”

For myself, I think I should like to go further still. Gerald Hibbert’s definition of mystical experience covers every kind of direct experience of God. But he leaves us, perhaps, in some doubt of the content he would give to the word *God*. To my mind whenever a man surrenders to an inner prompting of kindness, of selfless service, of spontaneous generosity, whether it takes the form, as known among Quakers, of voicing some message that seems to be *given* in a silent Meeting for Worship, or of rescuing some child seen to be in danger, or giving a helping hand to an old woman crossing a street, or making the life of some refugees a little more tolerable—or indeed any one of a thousand other selfless deeds that are done often without thinking—then that man or woman is undergoing a mystical experience. The only criterion is that the action is done from a pure motive, an inner prompting to selfless goodness.

I am at some pains to stress this embracing definition, because Henry Cadbury, in whose honour this essay is written, has in his own Swarthmore Lecture—1957, declared in effect that he is no mystic. He quotes there, with warm appreciation, from a pamphlet written by William Littleboy called “The Appeal of Quakerism to the Non-Mystic.” “Does God,” asks William Littleboy, “speak to *all* men, or are His direct appeals confined to few saintly and sensitive souls? Can I who never consciously heard the inward voice,

who am not of those to whom it is given to see visions and dream dreams—*dare* I believe that a real and intimate relationship exists between God and my own dull earth-clogged soul?” He answers, in effect, that most religious writers imply that it is only the *saintly and sensitive souls* who can have a first-hand knowledge of God. He prefers to believe what is surely the characteristic Quaker view. This is, that the seed of God is in every man, whether he recognizes it or not, certainly whether or not he can claim ever to have had moments of mystical ecstasy. It is perhaps not being too personal to add that to one who, like myself, often listened to William Littleboy’s ministry in Friends Meetings, it is incredible that those messages were not in some sense direct messages from the source of all truth, William Littleboy, conscious like most of us of a dull earth-clogged soul, refused to claim to be one of the mystics. And if in fact the mystic is one who can lay claim to special ecstatic revelations, presumably most Quakers, like ordinary mortals, would find themselves in William Littleboy’s company. But perhaps it is not too late to rescue the word *mystic* from the narrow interpretation some religious writers have put upon it.

One of the central assertions of the Society of Friends is that God, the eternal and unchangeable goodness, is alive in the soul of every man, however badly clogged it may be in many of us by selfish cares of this world. In other words, Quakers say, every man is really a mystic, though each man may have a different experience of God from his neighbor. And this, as I understand him, is the use Gerald Hibbert was making of the word *mystic*, when he asserts that the mystics of all the world and of every faith are akin to one another. He is, in fact, saying something not unlike William Penn’s famous saying: “the humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when Death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers.”

But is this true? Is it true that men of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish or other religious background are essentially akin to Christians? Certainly (if we still follow Gerald Hibbert's distinctions), so long as we examine the outward forms, the legal and institutional systems, and even, let me add, perhaps most of all the orthodox theologies of these several faiths, far from discovering unity, we find sharp diversity and contradiction. It is true, however, as he claimed, that if we look for those who "focus their attention on the Divine that is within," we shall find, not necessarily full unity but at least deep harmony. Do the *Quakerlike* Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Parsis and others agree together that it is the *humble, meek merciful, just, pious and devout souls* who best interpret God's truth to man? Or would they make quite different lists of the highest virtues? Let us take a few examples and see the result. But first let us be quite clear on one thing. The examples I venture to quote are not claimed as representative figures. All are in some degree, perhaps, unorthodox. But all are men of note and influence. They are not mere isolated voices. Let me begin with Islam. I have heard it stated by men from the West who have lived in the East that there is no such thing as Islamic mysticism. But even if mysticism be interpreted in its narrower sense, this is not true. Let anyone who has any doubt about this look for a little book by Gurdial Mallik entitled *Divine Dwellers of the Desert*. Here an Indian Quaker has given us a vivid picture of the life, teachings and rhapsodies of the Sufis who have lived recently in Sind, now a province of Western Pakistan.

One of Gurdial Mallik's own experiences may be given here.

It was Friday afternoon (the hour for Islamic prayer). When the prayer was over, the *maulvi* (minister) preached a sermon, in the course of which he quoted a couplet from Kabir, a famous Indian saint and mystic. The eyes of the congregation were aflame with anger and the worshipers whispered to one another, *What is the matter with the maulvi today? Has he gone mad? For he has cited the words of a kafir* (unbeliever) . . . Next day the Chairman of the

Council called upon the *maulvi* to explain to the congregation why he had departed from the beaten track and quoted the couplet of a *kafir* and that, too, in Hindi, which God evidently did not look upon with any degree of favor, else the *Koran* would not have been written in Arabic . . . The *maulvi* bowed to the congregation and in a voice, which betrayed firmness and fervor, said "O Beloved Ones of God, if your God knows only Arabic then He cannot be the God of the whole world, at least not my God." Saying this, he bowed again to the people present there and walked out of the mosque . . . The door was flung open that day and he walked forth into the light that illuminates the whole world . . . He attracted to himself, during the years that followed, hundreds of admirers belonging to all communities and creeds and colors. He did not wear the ochre-coloured robe (in India the usual mark of a devotee), nor did he become a factory for manufacturing disciples. He went about in ordinary dress and earned a living by selling some Urdu books every day in one of the by-lanes of Bombay, where he had a small shop . . . He spent the nights alone in a small room in a big building. He would sit silent, while the rosary of remembrance was being told in his heart.

"Why did you engage in this mundane matter of making a living?" some of his admirers once said to him. "We shall be only too glad to keep you in comfort, so that you could spend your whole time in devotions."

"But this book selling is also a kind of devotional exercise. Work is worship; worship is work. Moreover, a seeker should always see to it that the fragrance of the rose-scent is hidden within a cotton plug, lest he might lapse into subtle self deceit."

"Did you have any sorrows in your life? If so, how did you face them and yet attain to poise and peace of mind?"

"My refuge," he replied, "all along has been the name of Allah."

"Do you mean that you repeat His Name and difficulties disappear? Such a prescription has at least never helped us to cure ourselves of our ills."

"Not repetition, but remembrance; not separation, but union;

not duality, but unity.” was his laconic answer.

“We do not understand you,” they rejoined.

He remained silent for a moment, and then remarked, “Whenever you have suffering or sorrow, sit in the open under the starry sky or by the seashore or on a hill, and you will receive sympathy from them.”

From this unnamed Muslim saint of western India and Pakistan, it may be proper to turn to a figure in the modern political life of India, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a distinguished scholar and Islamic writer, colleague of Gandhi in the struggle for Indian freedom, first minister of education in the new India after 1947, and intimate friend of Nehru.

Since his death a volume of essays has been written in his honor. Professor Habib, of Aligarh University, a close friend of Maulana for many years, in an essay on “The Revolutionary Maulana”, summarizes his (Maulana Azad’s) thesis about the unity of religion thus:

(1) Belief in the existence of God is found in all creeds; it is the common inheritance of mankind. “The worship of God is ingrained in the nature of man.” (2) The differences between religious groups are, therefore, only found in three things:(a) varying insistence laid on the attributes of God: (b) differences in forms of worship; and (c) differences in religious laws. These differences are due to differences in time, environment and circumstances as well as the stages of man’s mental development. About the existence of God, no one has anything new to say; the messages of the Prophets on this point are mere repetitions; also the nature of God is totally beyond human comprehension.

From the same volume I take another extract, from another Indian Muslim scholar who, though a younger man, might belong, shall we say, to the same vintage as Maulana Azad. This is Asaf Fyzee, whose essay in honor of Azad is appropriately called, *The*

Reinterpretation of Islam. Here is Mr. Fysee's declaration of faith:

I believe in God, I believe that the universe is created by God, and that there is order in the universe. The belief in God and the belief in the orderliness of the universe are the two fundamentals of my faith. I believe that Muhammad, blessed be his name, was a Messenger of God, that he was neither greater nor lesser than the other great teachers of the world. "We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the Prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered." (Quoted from the *Koran*, II, 136). I am profoundly moved by the teaching of the *Upanishads*, the Buddha, Moses and Jesus. I respect all religions and faiths. I revere the great doctors of Islam, but do not follow them blindly. My faith is my own, a faith fashioned by my own experience, my own intuition. I give to every Muslim, and indeed to every man, the right to fashion his own faith—"To you, your religion; to me, mine." I do not believe that the Gate of Interpretation is bolted and barred.

A brief comment on this confession of faith may not be out of place. Much of it would, no doubt, horrify an orthodox Muslim. But the writer, who feels himself to be in the roots of this being still a Muslim, still a part of the great tradition in which he has been reared, does his utmost, by quoting the *Koran* and using his Islamic phrases, to persuade his orthodox friends at least to give him a hearing. So much for the intellectual part of the argument. Naturally it will not satisfy an orthodox Christian, who will resent finding Jesus put on a list of the world's prophets, neither greater nor less than others. But surely the essence of the whole paragraph is in the noble climax at the end. "To you, your religion; to me, mine. I do not believe that the Gate of Interpretation is bolted and barred."

Let me add, before passing on to Hindus, one simple utterance

of a Pakistani taxi driver, who was taking me across country where a few years before Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had been murdering one another in the name of religion. He said: "There is only one God and we all worship Him. Why should we fight one another?" And the souls of the dead seemed to echo, *Why, oh why?* And the answer came to my mind, only too surely, *because the priests and the maulvis, those whom George Fox called the professors had hounded the simple people on to kill one another, telling them that it was their duty to destroy infidels or false faiths.*

Turning to Hinduism, let us look again at Gandhi. The three men from whom I have just quoted, reinterpreters of Islam, were in their various ways all influenced by Gandhi. Indeed, his influence has penetrated far and wide, even more perhaps among the simple and unlearned than among the educated of Asia.

Let this first be said of Gandhi. He was not in the ordinary line of mystics. I am sure he did not claim to have any special divine illuminations. It is true that he would spend times of each day in silent meditation, and he would listen to what he called the inner voice before embarking on any special action. But if he were asked what he meant by the inner voice, he would no doubt have said the *voice of conscience*. Although he believed in God, and used expressions such as *laying his weary head on the lap of his Maker*, he argued against the idea of a personal God; his reasons for rejecting the efforts of devout evangelical Christians in South Africa to convert him to Christianity are stated in terms of almost cold reason. In religion, as in all other matters, his whole approach was the approach of quiet reason. He remained a Hindu to the day of his death, not because he thought Hinduism the best religion but because he had been born a Hindu, and therefore found it reasonable to remain one and to try to reform Hinduism from within, in so far as he found it in need of reform. His Hinduism was always qualified by the condition that if, in the Christian or Muslim or any other faith, he found qualities superior to Hinduism in his judgment, or qualities that were lacking in Hinduism, he would unhesitatingly

adopt them. In other words the judgment of his own reason, lit by a sensitive conscience, must be final for him in religion as in everything else. Here are a few of the conclusions to which it led him.

The only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and to be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity. My countrymen are my nearest neighbors. They have become so helpless, so resourceless, so inert that I must concentrate myself on serving them. If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in an Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity. (*Harijan*, August 28, 1936).

And as I know that God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty, I am struggling to reach the status of these. I cannot do so without their service. Hence my passion for the service of the suppressed classes. And as I cannot render this service without entering politics, I find myself in them. (*Young India*, September 11, 1924).

Again: Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so there is one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many, as it passes through the human medium. The one Religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such language as they can command, and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Whose interpretation is to be held to be the right one? Everybody is right from his own standpoint, but it is not impossible that everybody is wrong. Hence the necessity for tolerance, which does not mean indifference to one's own faith, but a more intelligent and purer love for it. Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is as far from fanaticism as the north pole is from the south. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and faith. (From *Yeravda Mandir*, 1945).

I venture to add two quotations about Jesus, which will show two aspects of his mind. Here is the first:

Jesus expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see Him and recognize Him as the Son of God. And because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that He belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world, to all races and people. (*The Modern Review*, Calcutta, October 1941)

S.K. George, a distinguished South Indian Christian, in *Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity*, first published in 1939, quotes from a reply given by Gandhi over ten years ago, to some question put to him at a Christian Missionary Conference he had been invited to address in Calcutta. It is perhaps worth while to note that what follows is an earlier utterance than the last quotation, still more, perhaps, that it was addressed to Christian missionaries, whereas the earlier quotation is addressed to all readers of the *Modern Review*, most of whom would be non-Christians. In other words, when addressing non-Christian India he speaks of the claims of Jesus to the devotion of all the world. But when Gandhi speaks to Christian missionaries, he shows why he cannot subscribe to their language about Jesus. These were his words:

I do not know what you mean by the Living Christ. If you mean the historic Jesus, then I do not feel His presence. But if you mean a spirit guiding me, a presence nearer to me than hands or feet, than the very breath in me, then I do feel such a presence. If it were not for the sense of that presence, the waters of the Ganges would long ere this have been my destination. Call it Christ or Krishna: that does not matter to me.

This quotation from Gandhi is followed by George's statement:

That I believe is a crucial statement—a testimony to a living experience of spiritual power, borne out by a life of heroic activity, but mediated apart from the Christian channels, and therefore testifying to a Source of Power beyond all labels, beyond and behind all historical manifestations of it in time and space.

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Perhaps one more Gandhi quotation may be permitted. As early as 1926, he wrote in his weekly paper, *Young India*.

Let me own this. If I could call myself, say, a Christian, or a Mussulman, with my own interpretation of the Bible or the Koran, I should not hesitate to call myself either. For then Hindu, Christian and Mussulman would be synonymous terms. I do believe that into the other world there are neither Hindus, nor Christians or Mussulmans. They are all judged not according to their labels or professions but according to their actions irrespective of their professions. During our earthly existence they will always be these labels. I therefore prefer to retain the label of my forefathers so long as it does not cramp my growth and does not debar me from assimilating all that is good anywhere else.

I am tempted to add further quotations from C.F. Andrews' book, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas*, especially from his chapter called "The Place of Jesus". But it may be better now to turn from Gandhi to his intimate Christian friend, C. F. Andrews himself.

Charles Andrews, as he liked his friends to call him, grew up in a very narrow Christian sect, and even when, at Cambridge, he became a member of the Anglican Church, he was still an intolerant young man. A contemporary of his at Cambridge once told me how indignant young Andrews was at the very idea of participating in Nonconformists at the Holy Communion table, at the time of some Student Movement meetings.

Then he went to India as a missionary, and became a member of the teaching staff of St. Stephen's College, an Anglican mission college in Delhi. Within a few years revolutionary things had happened to him. He himself has told the story in his book, *What I Owe to Christ*. India captured him, and not only Christian India, though his Christian colleague, Sushil Rudra, later principal of the college, was probably the first to open his mind to the spiritual glories of non-Christian India. Then he became intimate with a saintly Muslim, Zaka Ullah, whose life he later wrote about as a pious duty to one who had awakened a new spiritual sense in him. It was later that he became the intimate friend and associate of two of the greatest Hindus of the age, M.K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

For Andrews, a priest of the Church of England, the point of conscience came when he was conducting a service at the little Anglican Church at Burdwan, close to Rabindranath Tagore's university centre at Santiniketan. One Sunday he was confronted with the Athanasian crowd, condemning to hell fire those who do not accept the Christian faith. How could he possibly publicly damn those among whom he had made this home, and who were his close friends and beloved and revered colleagues? He omitted the creed, and resigned his position as a priest. Unlike his close friend Samuel Stokes, however, he did not thereupon cease to call himself a Christian. On the contrary, once he had ceased to be bound by man-made creeds, his Christian disciples meant more to him than ever. And it was in this later period of his life, when his closest friends in India were Hindus and Muslims that he wrote *What I Owe to Christ* (which is a spiritual autobiography), *Christ and Labour*, *Christ and Prayer*, *Christ in Silence*.

His biographers, Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, have given the best account of his religious outlook in these later years.

It does not appear that Andrews ever reformulated in intellectual

terms those dogmas of the nature of God or the person of Jesus Christ which he had once felt compelled to discard. The centre of his religious experience was an intense personal devotion to a living, human Christ; his prayers were intimate talks with a Great Companion, vividly, warmly present at his side, the Jesus of the Gospels. His strong visual imagination had been centered from earliest childhood on this beloved Figure. Religion for him was not a system of speculative ideas; it was the source and counterpart of the affectionate devotion which he lavished on his friends on earth; it was *bhakti*, and he was content to let intellectual speculation rest. "Christ has become for me in my moral and spiritual experience the living tangible expression of God. With regard to the infinitude of God that lies beyond this I seem able at this stage of existence to know nothing that can be defined. But the human in Christ, that is also divine, I can really know; and when I see the divine beauty, truth and love in others also, it is natural for me to relate it to Christ." (Andrews wrote). He came to accept and to use the historic creeds of his own church as the endeavor to put into human words a divine experience beyond the power of words to express. The Church of England was and remained his spiritual home. But his circle of religious fellowship included everyone, of any creed or none, who served with humility and brotherly love the living God of all.

I have not sufficient firsthand acquaintance with any modern Buddhist to add any Buddhist quotation to this patchwork. But I am confident that Buddhist and Jew, Taoist and Parsi, Sikh and others could be found to join the chorus of love to God through love to man which these fragments represent

But lest any reader should take up the quotation from Maulana Azad, and suggest that after all the *varying insistence laid on the attributes of God* is so diverse that one religion in effect contradicts another (for one, God is a God of love: for another, he is a God of vengeance, and so on), let me give this quotation from Gandhi, on the Buddha's idea of God:

I have heard it contended times without number and I have read it in books claiming to express the spirit of Buddhism that Buddha did not believe in God. In my humble opinion such a belief contradicts the very central fact of Buddha's teachings . . . The confusion has arisen over his rejection of all the base things that passed in his generation under the name of God. He undoubtedly rejected the notion that a being called God was actuated by malice, could repent of his actions, and like the kings of the earth could possibly have favourites. His whole soul rose in mighty indignation against the belief that a being called God required for his satisfaction the living blood of animals in order that he be pleased—animals that were his own creation. He, therefore, reinstated God in the right place and dethroned the usurper who for the time being seemed to occupy the White Throne. He emphasized and redeclared the eternal and unalterable existence of the moral government of the universe. He unhesitatingly said that the Law was God Himself . . . (Similarly) Nirvana is undoubtedly not utter extinction. So far as I have been able to understand the central fact of Buddha's life, Nirvana is utter extinction of all that is base in us. Nirvana is not like the black, dead peace of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of a soul which is conscious of itself, and conscious of having found its own abode in the heart of the Eternal.

When C.F. Andrews published his autobiography, *What I Owe to Christ*, I remember that *Artifex* (Canon Peter Green), by no means an unorthodox Anglican, but above all a servant of the needy, wrote a review of it in the *Manchester Guardian*, which showed how deeply moved he had been by a story of this man who gradually opened up, flowering more and more, finding more and more spiritual communion, indeed of what he did not hesitate to call Christian living, among men who would never call themselves Christians, and whom Andrews would have been ashamed even to wish to *convert*. *Artifex* was persuaded that this book must have a profound effect on Christian thinking. But he seems, in the

short run at least, to have been proved wrong. On the contrary, under the influence of the new orthodoxy, Andrews is dismissed as sentimental and wooly, and even positively dangerous. This, of course, is what commonly happens to God's saints. Mid-nineteenth century Quakers were disturbed because John Woolman's *Journal* had not enough theology in it. This can be learned at second hand from Henry Cadbury's Swarthmore lecture. Perhaps after all we need not to be too disturbed about such criticisms. These are bound to exist. For, in all religious systems there are many timid souls, who take fright when they see a man boldly launching out on uncharted seas. If he tells of magic islands he has found, they will stop their ears.

But the truth of God moves on, slowly, painfully but irresistibly. And every man who has struck out from a second hand, derivative faith, and has battled with the harsh and painful perplexities of life, till he has finally wrought a faith of his own, finds comrades among men and every name and clime on the hard road of truth and beauty and wonder.

CHAPTER III

Christ in a Universe of Faith

John Hick

Theologians have usually been very good at taking account of all sorts of abstruse or obscure data, but sometimes failed to notice quite obvious facts which are obvious to ordinary people. And one of the things which are obvious to ordinary people, and yet sometimes not noticed by the theologians, is this: that in the majority of cases—say, 98 or 99 percent of cases—the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he was born. That is to say, if someone is born to Muslim parents in Egypt or Pakistan, he is very likely to be a Muslim; if to Buddhist parents in Sri Lanka or Burma, he is very likely to be a Buddhist; if to Hindu parents in India, he is likely to be a Hindu; if to Christian parents in Europe, North America or Australia, he is very likely to be a Christian. Of course, in each case he may be either an authentic or merely nominal adherent of his religion. But if one is born in this country, for example, the religion which one either accepts or rejects will normally be Christianity. If you undergo a religious conversion at the age of 17 or 18, it will in this country normally be a conversion to Christian faith rather than to some other faith. And even if you are a humanist or an atheist, you will be a recognisably Christian one—quite different from, say a Chinese or an Indian humanist. In short, whether you are a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, or Sikh, a Hindu, a Buddhist—or for that matter a Marxist or Maoist—depends nearly always on the part of the world in which you happen to be born.

Now this is something which is evident, and undeniable once you notice it. And any credible religious faith must be able to make

some sense of this obvious fact. A credible Christian faith must make sense of it by relating it to the faith in the universal sovereignty and fatherhood of God. We believe that God is the creator of all mankind, that he has limitless love towards all men and women, and that he is seeking to save all men and women, and not only Christians and the Old Testament spiritual ancestors.

I have introduced the idea of salvation already because I take it that this, whatever it is, is the central business of religion. Salvation surely is what religion is all about. What, then, do we mean by salvation? It used to be thought of in Christian theology as a juridical and metaphysical idea: Christ had died for us on the cross, and so now God could justly forgive and accept us. But it is very hard today to make sense of such a morally alien idea. Surely salvation must be thought of more concretely, in terms of the actual quality of human existence. Let us say that God's saving activity is his gradual creating of *children of God* out of human animals. Salvation consists of human beings becoming fully human, by fulfilling the God-given potentialities of their nature. And this is not an all-or-nothing affair but a long and gradual change which indeed takes much longer than the span of our life on this earth. Salvation, then, is a slow and many-sided process. Instead of asking someone, *Is he saved?* it would be more appropriate to ask, *Is he on the way of salvation? Is he becoming more authentically human?*

Let us now connect this understanding of salvation with the problem of other religions. Given a faith in the universal saving activity of God, it is impossible to hold that salvation is only for those living within one particular strand of human history, namely the Judaic-Christian strand. It is impossible to hold that only those born in certain periods of history have open to them the possibility of salvation. Such an idea would be neither religiously nor morally acceptable and since Vatican II, it has only been taught by extreme Protestant fundamentalists. For it is now widely acknowledged, within the churches that the other world religions also nourish spiritual life, and also produce saints and prophets, and that within

the religious life of those faiths men and women are both growing and failing to grow towards their full humanity just as within the borders of our own Christian faith. Nor is it possible to claim on any responsible basis that Christianity has produced more saints (in relation presumably to the size of the populations concerned), or better saints, than this or that other great world religion. We have to recognize that, so far as we can tell, the long, slow business of fashioning human animals into children of God is going on, and has long been going on, not only within Christianity but also outside Christianity and within the wider religious life of mankind.

Now theologians have been hard at work, particularly during the last decade or two, trying to square this new awareness of God's activity throughout the world and throughout history with traditional Christian beliefs. And at the point they have mostly reached—in so far as there can be said to be any kind of consensus at all—it is a set of variations on the theme that whilst there is salvation within other religions, it is all to be seen as the work of Christ. The official Roman Catholic way of putting it is in terms of implicit faith: it is not the fault of the deeply religious Muslim, for example, that he has never properly encountered the gospel—but his spiritual state may be even such that he would respond to it if he encountered it—and in this case he has an implicit Christian faith. Karl Rahner has introduced the notion of the *anonymous Christian*. Devout men and women of other religions are to be regarded as anonymous Christians, and are to be acceptable to God and in the way of salvation. And there are other variations on this same basic theme. What they all amount to, in one form or another, is this—that God is saving men and women within other religions as well as within Christianity, and this is possible because there are men and women within those other religions who are Christians at heart, even if they have never heard the name of Christ. They are anonymous Christians, saved by implicit faith.

Theories of this kind are attempts to combine two insights which however do not in the end sit comfortably together. Our

aim is to retain at the theological level the traditional Christian exclusiveness, the conviction that there is salvation only in Christ, and the *there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved*. And the other aim is to acknowledge, at the historical and practical level, that salvation is in fact taking place outside of Christianity, and even among people who know little or nothing about Jesus Christ. It is natural, and indeed inevitable, that this first phase of the Christian attempt to come to terms with the wider religious life of mankind should be an attempt to say both that there is salvation only in discipleship to Christ and also that there is salvation outside that discipleship: and the notion of the *anonymous Christian* tries to do just this. And such attempts represent a big step forward from the older assumption that those who are born and die outside Christendom are doomed to forfeit salvation. But nevertheless I do not think these well-intentioned theories can stand as more than interim measures.

One awkward thing to notice about these ways of granting a secondary kind of validity to the religious life of the non-Christian is that the same move can be made by others as well as by ourselves. And there are in fact Hindu philosophers who say that devout Christians are advaita Vedantists at heart, because they have a real desire for the truth although they do not yet know what the truth is. They are *anonymous* Hindus. And likewise there are Muslims theologians who say that the devout Christian has Islam in his heart and is an *anonymous* Muslim. But I would suggest that these devices—whether used by Christian, Hindu or Muslim—serve the same function as the epicycles with which the old Ptolemaic astronomy was maintained in existence for a little longer before it finally collapsed. The old astronomy, as you know, was based on the dogma that our earth is the centre of the solar system and that the sun and all the planets revolve around it. This dogma became more and more at variance with new observations of the paths of the planets. It was only saved by postulating epicycles—imaginary circles centring on the circumference of other circles--so forming

new and more complex paths which were closer to the actually observed orbits of the planets. In theory, by postulating ever more complicated systems of epicycles, it might have been possible to maintain the Ptolemaic dogma indefinitely. But sooner or later the human mind calls a halt to such a method and prefers realism to *a priori* dogma. And so eventually the astronomers were ready for the Copernican revolution from an earth-centered to a sun-centred model of the universe, seeing all planets, including our own earth, as moving around the sun. This was a breakthrough to a greater realism, in which the increasingly artificial epicycles were no longer required.

But it seems to many of us today that we need a Copernican revolution in our understanding of the religions. The traditional dogma has been that Christianity is the centre of the universe of faiths, with all the other religions seen as revolving at various removes around the revelation in Christ and being graded according to their nearness and distance from it. But during the last hundred years or so we have been making new observations and have realised that there is deep devotion to God, true sainthood, and deep spiritual life within these other religions. So we have created our epicycles of theories such as the notions of Anonymous Christianity and of implicit faith. But would it not be more realistic now to make the shift from Christianity at the centre to God at the centre and to see both our own and the other great world religions as revolving around the same divine reality?

What would this mean? It would mean that that which we call God has always been present, the divine Spirit ever pressing in upon the human spirit. During what Jaspers has called the axial period, beginning around 800 B.C., great revolutionary experiences occurring in different parts of the world gave rise to different streams of spiritual life which have congealed into what we now call the great world religions. And within all of these, men and women are on the way of salvation by responding to a Transcendent Being. But each religion, as an historical entity, is a mixture of

the influence of the divine Spirit and of culture—specific human traditions. Within this human element there has, alas, been much evil in the forms of violence and hatred, privilege and oppression and the authoritarian cramping of the human spirit. So religions, as historical phenomena, are by no means unambiguously good: each is its own unique mixture of good and evil. Yet each also provides a home for the human spirit, within which it can grow in grace.

But now let me turn to what for the most of us must be the crunch issue in the encounter of Christianity with the other world religions, namely, the place of Jesus Christ in all this. For the traditional view of Jesus is of course that he was God Incarnate—or more precisely that he was God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, living a human life. And if he was in this sense God Incarnate, and if this is the only point within human history at which God has ever come to earth and revealed himself directly to mankind, then clearly Christianity is unique and cannot be categorized as one among the world religions. If as Jesus says in the Fourth Gospel, “No man cometh to the Father but by me”, or if as St Paul says, “There is no other name given under heaven whereby men must be saved,” then it seems clear that all men and women, or all nations and cultures, must sooner or later become disciples of Christ in order to come to God.

Again if, as the Church has traditionally taught, it is by Jesus’ death, and by this alone, that there is salvation, that by a conscious commitment to Jesus as Savior, and by this alone, man may appropriate that salvation, it follows that all men must be converted to Christian discipleship as the only way to God. If God has come to meet man in Christ and nowhere else, then men must come to Christ, and nowhere else, to meet God. This is the unavoidable logic of the traditional view of Christ as uniquely God the Son Incarnate. And this takes us straight back to the older view of the other world religions as streams of alienated life from which men must be rescued by transference into the Body of Christ, within which alone they are fully acceptable to God.

But we have already seen how impossible that older view is. You simply cannot affirm the logical conclusion of the full traditional view of Christ, namely, that there is salvation only for those who believe in him. And so it is not surprising that the gradual abandonment of this latter view has been accompanied by the development of serious strains and stresses in the traditional understanding of Christ. It used to be assumed—of course in some Christian circles it is still assumed—that Jesus himself, the man who actually lived in Palestine in the first third of the first century A.D., was conscious of being God incarnate. The assumption was also that he was God incarnate, so that you either have to believe him or to reject him as a deceiver or a megalomaniac. *Bad, mad or God* goes the argument. And of course if Jesus did indeed claim to be God incarnate, then this dilemma, or trilemma, does arise. But did he claim this? The assumption that he did is largely based on the Fourth Gospel, for it is here that Jesus does make precisely such claims. He says, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” and “I and my Father are one” and “no man cometh to the Father but by me.” But I presume that it is no secret to you in this year of grace 1977, after more than a hundred years of the scholarly study of the Scripture, that few if any New Testament scholars today hold that the Jesus who actually lived ever spoke those words or the Aramaic equivalents. They are much more probably words put into his mouth by a Christian writer who is expressing the view of Christ which had been arrived at in his part of the Church, probably about two generations after Jesus’ death. The broad consensus of most New Testament scholars today is that the historical Jesus did not in fact claim to be in any sense God incarnate. This precritical assumption that Jesus walked the earth as a consciously divine being, teaching the view of himself as attributed to him in the Fourth Gospel, has been abandoned. Those—and they are still the majority—who hold to the traditional interpretation of Jesus may say instead that the claims that were later made about him were implicit, rather than explicit, in his earthly words and deeds. Others

may say—and this is the most recent epicycle of theory—that Jesus’ divine Sonship was enacted and revealed, not in earthly life, but in his resurrection, so that it is the raised and glorified Christ who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

But the implications of these new epicycles of doctrine are very damaging to the traditional position. The idea of incarnation, becoming flesh, must refer to the earthly Jesus, the Jesus of flesh and blood who walked the hills and villages of Galilee, for otherwise we are no longer talking about incarnation at all. If this earthly Jesus, who is part of our human history, did not think of himself as God incarnate, then what a strange doctrine we now have—a Jesus who was God but did not know that he was God! Far greater than the traditional paradox of God incarnate is the new paradox of God incarnate who does not know that he is God incarnate! So the situation has become this: although Jesus did not think of himself as God, the Church nevertheless knows that he was God. This development must surely have reached the end of the road in the implied claim that the Church knows who Jesus was better than he knew himself. Yet that this same Jesus, who did not know what the Church knows about him, was none other than God incarnate!

No wonder many of us are finding it necessary to look back through this accumulation of human paradoxes to Jesus himself. What sort of man do we then see? Here it must be admitted that what we see, across the span of so many centuries, depends partly upon ourselves. The New Testament evidences are complex, fragmentary, and ambiguous. Those of us who are Christians are Christians because of the powerful and indeed converting impact upon us of some aspects of Jesus’ personality and teaching. But it may be a partly different aspect for different people. For the Jesus who we call Lord is the Jesus who meets our spiritual needs. He is thus many things to many people, and indeed precisely this is the secret of his continuing appeal to miscellaneous millions of people of different temperaments, classes and cultures nineteen centuries later.

I see Jesus, then, as a young man who, when he appeared on the stage of history, was living in a full consciousness of God and a complete self-giving to God's purposes. In this consciousness of existing in God's presence and within the sphere of God's ongoing creative purpose, he was able to make God real to others, to challenge them with God's claim upon their own lives, to declare to them God's forgiveness and his offer of a new and better life, and to bring bodily and spiritual healing to them by the divine power of life flowing through his hands. His awareness of God was so powerful that in his presence people became conscious of being in God's presence—not in the sense that the man Jesus literally was God, but in the sense that God was so real to Jesus that he became real to others through Jesus and their lives were changed as they responded to the divine presence.

Your life and mine can also be changed and can go on being changed as we respond to God's healing and challenging presence made real to us through the Jesus reflected in the gospel records. But—and here I return to our theme of Christ and the world religions—we can rejoice in God's revelation to us through Jesus, without having to assert that God has not revealed himself and drawn people into a new and better life anywhere else than in Jesus. We can affirm that we know and have experienced without having to deny what other people know and have experienced. For perhaps God—the infinite divine reality—is larger even than our Christian understanding of him.

Finally, let us be conscious of the new situation in which we are today. In the past the world religions grew up substantially in isolation from one another, but we are now in the *one world* of instantaneous global communication. And in this global village the religions are in active interaction with one another and are all in varying degrees influencing each other's development. For remember that a religious tradition is not a static entity but a living and growing organism, a history of change, sometimes moving very slowly and sometimes very rapidly. Today the various world

religions have either moved or are moving out of their periods of medieval stability into a period of rapid change under the impact of modern science and technology and the resulting secularization of society. And in this turmoil of change each religion is increasingly, through interfaith dialogue and in many other less formal ways, contributing its experience, its insights, its ideas, its criticisms, to the development of the others. That is why this is the most exciting period of the interaction of religions, whose outcome no one can at present foresee.

CHAPTER IV

Universal Quakerism

Ralph Hetherington

The purpose of this section is to set out the reasons why universalist members of the Religious Society of Friends hold the views that they do.

There continues to be some misunderstanding as to what universalist Quakers are saying and a widespread fear that they are trying to dispel this fear that they are trying to change the Society. It is hoped that this section will do something to dispel this fear and to show that a universalist view is, in fact, an essential ingredient in Quakerism. Thus no change in the nature of the Society of Friends is being advocated, but rather a clearer understanding of the implications of the mystical basis of Quakerism.

This section is based on a number of talks given and articles published over the last two or three years.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF QUAKERISM

The fundamentals of Quakerism can be seen very clearly if the Society of Friends is compared with other religious groups. A significant criterion for comparison is that of the basis for religious belief. At the risk of oversimplification, it is suggested that within the various churches and sects, bases for belief fall into three categories: the authoritarian, the biblically based and the inspirational. These differences are nicely reflected in the architecture of the church buildings of the various denominations.

In the authoritarian church, the priesthood is the source of church doctrine. Although a *reasonable uncertainty*⁸ about the absolute truth of church doctrine is nowadays permissible, members

are expected to subscribe to the church's creed. Examples are the Roman Catholic and the Anglican communions. Their church buildings are designed so that the altar is at the focus of attention because the most important thing that happens is the celebration of the mass or eucharist. The Roman Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King at Liverpool is a splendid example of this, where the seats are arranged in a vast horseshoe around the great white block of carrera marble that forms the altar.

Fundamentalist denominations base their beliefs on the authority of holy scripture. Inasmuch as scripture is open to varying interpretations, beliefs of this sort leave some room for disputation, although many fundamentalist sects are surprisingly rigid in their beliefs. In church buildings of these sects we find that the focus of attention is now the pulpit, which is often a large and prominent structure around which the seats are arranged. The most important thing that happens in these denominations is the expounding of the word of God. The altar has now become an inconspicuous *Lord's table*. Sects of this sort are the various dissenting churches such as the Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian.

Purely inspirational denominations are few. In these, personal religious experience is considered to be the only valid source of enlightenment, all other sources being derivative. The Society of Friends is certainly the best known example. Quakers have no church buildings as such. Indeed, Meeting for Worship can take place anywhere and does not need any specially consecrated building. There is no altar and no pulpit. Seats are arranged in a circle or hollow square, round a table on which there are books and possibly a vase of flowers. The emphasis here is not on the administration of the sacraments nor on the expounding of the word of God, but rather on the experience of the worshiping group. Quakers speak of the Inward Light when they refer to their direct personal experience of God. George Fox had no doubt about the primacy of the Inward Light when he said:

Then what has any to do with the scriptures but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say Christ saith this and the apostles say this, but what canst though say? Art thou a child of the Light, and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?⁹

This, then is the first fundamental of Quakerism, namely that religious belief has to be based on a personal religious experience.

The second fundamental of Quakerism is the realization that there is something of God in everyone, however, apparently sinful and depraved, and that this can be reached by a truly loving and caring approach. George Fox in a letter written from Launceston jail put it thus:

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.¹⁰

This, of course, runs directly counter to the doctrine of the depravity of man which is almost invariably found in Christian churches of whatever denomination. This stems from the doctrine of the fall of man and of original sin. Man is held to be innately wicked and unregenerate. He can do nothing on his own and can only be saved by the grace of God. As one hell-fire preacher put it:

You would have gone to hell last night, had not God held you like a loathsome spider over the flames by a thread.¹¹

That is not to say, of course, that Quakers have not a lively awareness of sin. It is the easiest thing in the world to make a Quaker feel guilty and inadequate. But this is not something, once it is recognized, that is dwelt upon or emphasized. Of course we are inadequate, of course we are sinful and fall short of the ideals we set ourselves. But knowing there is something of God in everyone and even in ourselves, we are encouraged to look forward to the future in hope rather than to look back to the past in despair.

These two principles, then, the belief in the Inward Light and the belief that there is something of God in everyone, constitute the fundamentals of Quakerism.

WHAT IS UNIVERSALISM?

The argument for Universalism takes its departure from what has come to be known as the Scandal of Particularity. John Hick¹² gives a good account of this view. He tells us that the Council of Florence in 1438-45 declared that no one remaining outside the Catholic Church can become partakers of eternal life but will go to the everlasting fire. This is the expression of the traditional Roman Catholic dogma *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: No salvation outside the Church. As recently as 1960, the Congress on World Mission at Chicago declared: “In the years since the war, more than one billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of these went to the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ, who He was or why He died on the cross of Calvary.” With the gradual disappearance of cultural boundaries and the subsequent contact with other faiths, this view has become as absurd as it is unacceptable. Gerald Priestland in his recent radio series,¹³ put the objections to this view as follows:

But now comes a scandal—literally a stumbling block—jutting out from Chapter 14 of the Gospel according to St. John: Jesus said unto Thomas, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh to the father, but by me.” Here is the Scandal of Particularity: the exalted claim that Jesus is the one and only way to God, which Christians have extended to mean that this first century Jew was utterly unique—once for all time—and that the church he founded has something other faiths can never have. I must admit that this apparently arrogant proclamation has always been a stumbling block to my progress. I have spent part of my life in the Middle East and South Asia, and now I live among Jews. Are my Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Jewish friends second-class souls? Is it just bad luck that they have never seen the New Testament? Surely a loving God cannot be as narrow minded as that?

John Hick¹⁴ goes on to tell us that Christian theologians have adopted a number of strategies to cope with this awkward argument. These have included such notions as implicit faith, baptism by desire, the latent Church and so on. Then there is the notion of the anonymous Christian. This suggests that the devout Hindu, Moslem, Sikh or Jew may be regarded, as it were, as honorary members of the Christian Church, although they have never expressed any desire for such membership. In all these exercises in theological legerdemain, there is the implicit assumption that Christianity is more than just one of the many religions, all equally valid, but is unique revelation which judges and supersedes all others. Thus we are asked to believe that although some religions may lead people to a measure of the truth and to some degree of enlightenment, only Christianity can take you all the way. John Hick rejects all these notions in favour of the thoroughgoing religious pluralism. He puts the case as follows¹⁵:

What we are picturing here as a future possibility is not a single world religion, but a situation in which the different traditions no longer see themselves and each other as rival ideological communities. A single world religion is, I would think, never likely, and not a consummation to be desired. For so long as there is a variety of human types there will be a variety of kinds of worship and a variety of theological emphases and approaches. However, there are Universalists who look forward to the development of a new world religion arising out of an emerging world culture, a religion which would enshrine the truth of all religions. Much will depend on how the term religion is defined and what people look to a religion for. A possible definition is that a given religion, or a given system of religious thought and practice, can only be recognized as such if it is based on the teaching of some *messiah, prophet, avatar or guru* which is set down in recognized sacred writings such as *the Bible, the Sutras, the Upanishads or the Koran*. If this is so, then it may have to be accepted that Universalism is leading towards a religionless Society.

In such a Society, people would come together for worship and mutual support, for religious study and training, and to help one another along the religious path. Such an association of religious people would depend on no avatars, no creeds, no sacred writings, but would seek a direct relationship with, and awareness of, the numinous.

Robert Barclay¹⁶ gives a splendid account of just such a religionless community. Although he refers to his community as “this Catholic Church,” it is religionless in the sense that has been used above. This is how he describes it:

The Church (is) no other thing but the society, gathering or company of such that God hath called . . . to walk in his light and life. The church then, so defined, is to be considered, as it comprehends all that are thus called and gathered truly by God . . . of whatever nation, kindred, tongue, or people they be, though outwardly strangers, and remote from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words, and have the benefit of the Scriptures, as become obedient to the holy light and testimony of God in their hearts . . . There may be members therefore of this Catholic Church both among heathen, Turks and Jews, and all the several sorts of Christians, men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart, who . . . are by the secret touches of this holy light in their souls enlivened and quickened, thereby secretly united by God, and therethrough become true members of this Catholic Church.¹⁷

UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF QUAKERISM

There has always been a strong and clearly evident Universalist strand running through the cloth of Quaker history. This strand has never been broken and, broadly speaking, represents the mystical element within the Society. One expression of this has already been given in the quotation from Barclay’s *Apology*. A later expression is to be found in John Woolman, who put his view as follows:

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is however

pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

Gerald Hibbert, in his 1924 Swarthmore lecture, wrote¹⁸:

Every religious system has its Quakers—those who turn from the outward and the legal and the institutional, and focus their attention on the divine that is within. There is much fellowship between Friends and mystics of other religious systems. Let a Mohammedan or Hindu mystic teacher come to this country, and we realize at once how much we have in common with him. We believe we have something we can give him, but we realize also that he has something to give us . . . The mystics of the world everywhere join hands. Their spirits leap together in a flash of joyful recognition; in the great deeps they find their unity and their abiding home.

Janet Scott in her 1980 Swarthmore lecture express a similar view when she wrote¹⁹:

Thus we may answer the question *Are Quakers Christian?* By saying that it does not matter. What matters to Quakers is not the label by which we are called or call ourselves, but the life. The abandonment of self to God means also the abandonment of labels, of doctrines, or cherished ways of expressing the truth. It means the willingness to follow the spirit wherever it leads, and there is no guarantee that this is to Christianity or to any *happy ending* except the love, peace and unity of God. Like the sword which Fox told Penn to wear as long as he could, we take our religion and beliefs as far as we can, we take our morality and our notions of goodness as far as we can, we take our ideas of truth as far as we can. All these are good. But they are not what we seek. In the end, we place them in to the hands of God, in trust, to make or break, to crown or destroy, for they are nothing in themselves, but God is all in all.

The fundamentals of Quakerism, the experience of the Inward Light and of that of God in everyone are fully consonant with Universalism.

THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Many Friends would be horrified at the suggestion that the Society of Friends is not part of the Christian Church. Indeed the 23rd Query specifically refers to the Society as being “within the world-wide Christian Church.” Quakerism was born and nurtured within a Christian culture, and all the early Friends used Christian theological terms in which to express their experiences and their beliefs. They were fully conversant with the Bible and continually quoted from it, although as we have seen, George Fox insisted that we had to experience that Spirit which gave the scriptures forth, rather than to depend on the scriptures themselves. However, we should also remember that the first Quakers were most emphatically not regarded as Christians by the Church of the day. Even today many people would not regard Quakers as Christians since we have neither been baptized or confirmed, since we are committed to no creed, and since we do not require a specifically Christian commitment from our members. *Church Government* states²⁰:

Membership, therefore, we see primarily in terms of discipleship, and so impose no clearcut tests of doctrine or outward observance. Nevertheless those wishing to join the Society should realize its Christian basis.

The paragraph in *Church Government* which advises Friends appointed to visit applicants for membership has the following passage²¹:

Moral and spiritual achievement in an applicant is not asked for; sincerity of purpose is. The chief conditions to be looked for are that he is a humble learner in the school of Christ; that his face is set towards the light; and that our way of worship helps him forward in his spiritual pilgrimage. Visitors may need to make it clear that the Society is essentially Christian in its inspiration, even though it asks for no specific affirmation of faith and understands Christianity primarily in terms of discipleship.

These two passages would hardly reassure a conventional member of the established Church or the Church of Rome, that the Society of Friends could properly be regarded as part of the Christian Church. The World Council of Churches in 1961 defined a Christian as one who confesses the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures. This necessarily excluded Unitarians and Quakers. Clearly, therefore, the term Christian is being used by Friends in some different sense.

THE LIGHT OF CHRIST WITHIN AND THE JESUS OF HISTORY

Friends use the term *the Light of Christ within* when they speak of the Inward Light. The use of the term should cause no difficulty for any seeker after Truth, since no one is likely to dispute that the Light that inspired the Jesus of history also inspires us. This Light might equally well have been called the Tao, or Atman or Brahman. In this context names do not matter, the experience itself does. However, the Light of Christ is sometimes identified with the Jesus of History. *Christian Faith and Practice* states²²:

The crux of Fox's discovery was that in the present spiritual reality he was aware of the same living Christ to whom the scriptures and doctrines bore witness. It was a mystical apprehension of the fact that the person of Christ belongs not only to history at a given time and place, but also to an eternal world into which Fox and his friends knew that Christ had brought them.

This particular paragraph goes on to refer to the essential unity between the spiritual experience of the living Christ, and the historical revelation of God in Jesus. Hugh Doncaster at Yearly Meeting in 1979 gave a prominent expression of this view when he said, "Without the Light of Christ, the Light of Jesus, Quakerism would soon die."²³

Mahatma Gandhi perfectly expressed the difficulty which this view introduces when he spoke as follows:

I do not know what you mean by the Living Christ. If you mean the historic Jesus, then I do not feel his presence. But if you mean a spirit guiding me, a presence nearer to me than hands or feet, than the very breath in me, then I do feel such a presence . . . Call it Christ or Krishna, it does not matter to me.²⁴

There are major difficulties in attempting an identification between the Light of Christ within and the Historical Jesus. Mystical apprehension can be happily and meaningfully expressed in Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Taoist terms. There are, as it were, different languages in which eternal truths can be expressed. For many of us raised in a Christian culture, and for some people who were not, it is clear that the Christian gospel story has a majesty and power which continues to touch our hearts and to speak to our condition. The gospel story has, for us, a saving grace. In Jung's phrase, the gospel story is archetypal. It rings true. Then so do the Upanishads, the Koran and the Buddhist Sutras. Like great poetry, great art and great music, like Nature herself, they speak for themselves. They need no historical support, no shrines, no holy relics. Instead, they themselves inspire great art, great music, great literature and great architecture.

However, once great religious writings are associated with some *historical* figure, and the writings are used as historical records (which they were almost certainly not meant to be), other considerations come into force. If the factual truth of the scriptures is insisted upon, using them like some Turin shroud, then the whole matter becomes subject to philosophical, historical, archeological and literary scrutiny. Don Cupitt tells that in the light of modern scholarship, there is very little historical certainty left in the gospel story.²⁵ We know that a man called *Christos* was crucified in the time of Pontius Pilate, and that is about all. Of the scriptures, it is a matter of conjecture and continuing debate as to which are the true historical records and which are later additions. It is difficult to be sure which are mistakes of translation and transcription, and which records have been faithfully reproduced. Once we are into the game

of carbon dating, as it were, we enter an entirely new universe of discourse.

SHOULD ALL FRIENDS BE CHRISTIANS?

It would be true to say that most members of the Society of Friends would be happy to accept the proposition that there are other religious systems which provide paths to Truth, at any rate for people of other cultures. However, while applicants for membership who cannot regard themselves as Christians are often admitted to the Society, most Quakers would reject the suggestion that the Society itself is not Christian, at least in the sense that Quakers like to use the term. In light of the Society's history and origins this is perfectly understandable, although this view poses certain difficulties and dangers. We are living in a post-Christian era. Our culture is no longer based on Christian beliefs, nor does it aspire, if it ever did, to Christian ideals and objectives. Yet there are probably more people seeking religious experience, more people searching for Truth, than at any time since the first world war. Assumptions that have been made for centuries are being challenged. Established and traditional churches and their teachings are being ignored because they are seen as meaningless or irrelevant. In many churches membership is falling fast, and it may be so in our own Society as well. Radical and exciting new religious sects are springing up and are receiving an enthusiastic following. Charismatic churches, pentecostal sects, meditation groups, scientology, arica and such nonreligious groups as EST all claim to give people enlightenment. There is not an annual festival of Mind, Body and Spirit which is largely attended at Olympia in London.

We believe our Society has discovered a valuable method of group worship and meditation. We believe we have one of the best ways of arriving at group decisions. Our insistence on primacy of religious experience makes the Society as potentially explosive as any religious group anywhere. Why, then, are we not making more

of an impact? It may be that the Society does not get across to people and fails to appeal to sincere seekers because it is stuck with a charisma and a label that tends to repel them. For many, Quakerism along with Christianity as a whole, is associated with stuffy, smug, churchy sanctimoniousness. Christianity itself may, in addition, be associated with the horrors of the Crusades and the Inquisition, the violence of sectarianism and the evil sequelae of much of Victorian missionary enterprise. This association is, of course, grossly selective. It ignores the glories of Christianity. Properly understood, the Christian ethic is very well suited to western culture and we know it can have a saving power. But, as some modern theologians such as John Robinson²⁶ have urged, the Churches may have to drop old terms, discard outworn phrases and clichés, and get back to the sources of their inspiration.

THE WAY FORWARD

The Society of Friends has also much to do along these lines. We have to shed our awesome rectitude, our spurious charisma of being such good people. We have to bring our language up to date. We have to begin where people are. Once the Society does this it may find itself well placed to take a major part in the new reformation. We have a structure and well tried procedures for dealing with new ideas, which are considered within the context of the gathered meeting without prejudice and with open minds. If ever there were a group of seekers organized to receive new light from whatever quarter, it is our beloved Society. We have no creed to impede new growth, no priesthood with a vested interest in maintaining the established order, no liturgy to be painfully modified in the teeth of a reactionary opposition. Our Christian Faith and Practice is regularly revised so that it continues to reflect contemporary insights. Can we not therefore make a start by welcoming into membership seekers from all religious backgrounds or none? Should we not now make this practice explicit in our written statements for all the world to see? Should we not revise our

Advices to those who visit applicants for membership? People are still discouraged from applying for membership because they fear they will not be welcome. Our Quaker path to truth is attractive to many people today and particularly young people. It speaks to their condition yet they hesitate to join us. There is a great people to be gathered. How are we to speak to them?

CHAPTER V

Sources of Universalism in Quaker Thought

Selected and condensed by Winifred Burdick

*From passages in
Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries*

By Rufus M. Jones

INTRODUCTION

Quakerism is no isolated or sporadic religious phenomenon. It is deeply rooted in a far wider movement that had been accumulating volume and power for more than a century before George Fox became a "prophet" of it to the English people.

This quotation is taken from Rufus Jones' book *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries* selected passages from which provide material for this section. The whole book has a deeply mystical flavor which is admirably reflected in the passages selected. They illustrate the sources from which modern Quaker universalism has developed. Words have occasionally been altered, or added or omitted to ensure clarity.

HANS DENCK

Hans Denck is the earliest exponent in the sixteenth century of a fresh and unique type of religion, deeply influenced by the mystics of a former time, but even more profoundly moulded by the new humanistic conceptions of man's real nature.

There are few biographical details of Denck's life available. In 1522 he was appointed Director of St. Sebald's School in Nuremberg

which was then the foremost seat of learning in that city, a great centre of classical humanistic studies. During the first period of his life he was closely identified with the Lutheran movement, but he soon aligned himself with the radical tendencies, which at this period were championed in Nuremberg by Thomas Münzer. It was Münzer's teaching of the living Voice of God in the soul, of the Word which God Himself speaks in the deeps of man's heart, that won Hans Denck to the new and perilous cause. He was himself sane, clear minded, modest, sincere, far removed from fanaticism, and eager only to find a form of religion which would fit the eternal nature of things on the one hand, and the true nature of man on the other—man, I mean, as the humanist conceived him.

We must now turn to the little books of this persecuted and homeless humanist to see what his religious teaching really was and to discover the foundation principle which lay at the root of all the endeavours of this period to launch a Christianity grounded primarily on the fundamental nature of man.

The fundamental fact of man's nature for Denck is personal *freedom*. He begins with man as he knows him—a sadly marred and hampered being but still possessed of a potentially divine nature and capable of cooperating, by inward choices and decisions, with the ceaseless effort of God to win him completely to Himself. His little book, *What Does It Mean When the Scripture Says God Does and Works Good and Evil*, is throughout a protest against the idea of *election*, which he says, involves "a limitation of the love of God," and it is a penetrating account of the way in which a man by his free choices makes his eternal destiny. "God has given free will to men that they may choose for themselves, either the good or the bad." "God," he says again, "forces no one, for love cannot compel, and God's service is, therefore, a thing of complete freedom."

It is freedom, too, which explains the fact of sin. God ordains no one to sin. All the sin and moral evil of the world have come from our own evil choices and purposes. "The thing which hinders and

has always hindered is that our wills are different from God's will. God never seeks Himself in His willing—we do. There is no other way to blessedness than to lose one's self-will." The whole problem of salvation for him is to bring about such a transformation in man that sin ceases, and the least thing thought, said or done out of harmony with the will of God becomes bitter and painful to the soul.

Not only is there a power of free choice in the soul; there is as well an elemental hunger in man which pushes him Godward. There is, he says, a witness in every man. If a man will keep still and listen he will hear what the Spirit witnesses within him. Not only in *us* but in the heathen and in Jews this witness is given and men might be preached to outwardly forever without perceiving, if they did not have this witness in their own hearts. The Light shines, the invisible Word of God is uttered in the hearts of all men who come into the world. He who turns to this Divine, spiritual reality, which is one with God, and obeys it and loves its leading has already found God and has come to himself. "All who are saved," he says, "are of one spirit with God and he who is foremost in love is the foremost of those who are saved."

But salvation is from beginning to end a life-process and can in no way be separated from character and personal attitude of will. "He who depends on the merit of Christ," he goes on, "and yet continues in a fleshly, wicked life, regards Christ precisely as in former times the heathen held their gods." He insists that no one can be *called righteous* or be *counted righteous* until he actually is righteous. Nothing can be *imputed* to a man which is not ethically and morally present as a living feature of his character and conduct. No one can know *Christ as a means of salvation* unless he follows Him in his life.

Having reached the insight that salvation is entirely an affair of the spirit, Denck loosened his hold upon the external things. Sacraments and ceremonies dropped to a lower level for him as things of no importance. "Ceremonies," he writes, "in themselves

are not sin, but whoever supposes that he can attain to life either by baptism or by partaking of bread, is still in superstition.” He appeals to Christians to stop quarreling over these outward and secondary matters and to make religion consist of love to neighbour.

He does not belittle or undervalue the Scriptures—he took the precious time out of his brief life to help translate the Prophets into German—but he wants to make the fact forever plain that men are saved or lost as they say yes or no to a Light and Word within themselves. “The Holy Scriptures,” he writes, “I consider above every human treasure, but not so high as the Word of God which is living, for it is God Himself, Spirit and no letter, written without pen or paper so that it can never be destroyed. For that reason, salvation is not bound up with the Scriptures, because it is impossible for the Scriptures to make good a bad heart, even though it may be a learned one.” *To love God alone and to hate everything that hinders love* is a principle which, Denck believes, will fulfill all law, ancient or modern.

Such were the ideas which this young radical reformer tried to teach his age. His task, which was destined to be hard and painful, which was in his lifetime doomed to failure, was not self-chosen. “I opened by mouth,” he says, “against my will and I am speaking to the world because God impels me so that I cannot keep silent. God has called me out and stationed me at my post, and he knows whether good will come of it or not.”

BÜNDERLIN AND ENTFELDER

The study of Denck has furnished the main outlines of the type of Christianity which a little group of men, sometimes call *Enthusiasts* and sometimes called *Spirituals*, but in reality sixteenth-century Quakers, proclaimed in the opening period of the Reformation. They differed fundamentally from Luther in their conception of salvation and in the basis of authority. The large inner circle of *Spirituals* was never numerically large. The men,

however, who composed it had a very sure grasp of a few definite, central truths to which they were dedicated. They did not endeavor to organize a sect because it was a deeply settled idea with them all, that the true Church is invisible. It is a communion of saints, including those of all centuries who have heard and obeyed the divine inner Word.

The two men whose views we are about to study are hardly even names to the world today. Their little books lie buried in the forgotten past, though the ideas which they promulgated never really died, but were quick and powerful in the formation of the inner life of the religious societies of the English Commonwealth.

Johann Bänderlin, like his inspirer Denck, was a scholar. He understood Hebrew; he knew the Church Fathers in both Greek and Latin. Bänderlin's religious contribution is preserved in three little books, the central ideas of which I shall give in condensed form and largely in my own words, though I have faithfully endeavoured to render him fairly.

Bänderlin held that all external means in religion are to awaken the mind and to direct it to the inward Word. In the infant period of the race God has used the symbol and picture book. The supreme instance of the divine pictorial method was the sending of Christ to reveal God visibly. But no one must content himself with Christ historically known. That is to make an idol of Him. His death as an outward historical fact does not save us; it is the supreme expression of His limitless love and the complete dedication of His spirit in self-giving and it is effective for our salvation only when it draws us into a similar way of living.

God is training us for a time when picture-book methods will be no longer needed, but all men will live by the inward Word in their own hearts. The written word will always serve as a norm and standard, but the true spiritual goal of life is the formation of a rightly fashioned will. Ceremonies and sacraments do not belong to the religion of the Spirit. Christ's baptism cleanses from sin not with

water but with the burning fire of love.

Christian Entfelder, like his teacher Bänderlin, held that everything that concerns religion occurs in the realm of the soul. In every age and in every land, the inner Word of God, the Voice of the Spirit speaking within, clarifying the mind and training the spiritual perceptions by a progressive experience, has made for itself a chosen people. This is the true church. There is, however, through the ages a steady ripening, a gradual and progressive onward movement of the spiritual process. He states, "He who thinks that he has all fruit when strawberries are ripe forgets that grapes are still to come."

Externals of every type—written scriptures, even the doings and sufferings of Christ—are only pointers to bring the soul to the living Word within. There is no salvation possible without being buried with Christ in a death to self-will and without rising with Him in joy and peace and victory. Those who have this Sabbath-peace within themselves will give up constructing theological systems, will stop building the Church out of baptism and the supper—*only clay-plastered walls at best*—and they will found the Church instead upon the true sacramental power of the inward Spirit of God.

Here, then, in the sixteenth century there appeared a little group of men who proposed that Christianity should be conceived and practiced as a *way of living*—nothing more nor less. They rejected theological language root and branch. They seem to have begun afresh with the life and message of Jesus Christ without every dreaming that all the theological world would unite to stamp out their *pestilent heresy*.

Instead of beginning with the presupposition of original sin, they quietly assert that goodness is at least as *original* as badness. They assert as the ineradicable testimony of their own consciousness that human choices between Light and Darkness are the things which save a man—and this salvation is possible in a pagan, in a Jew, in a Turk even, as well as in a man who says paternosters. They reject all the scholastic accounts of Christ's metaphysical nature, they

will not use the term Trinity. In an age which settled back upon the Scriptures as the only basis for authority in religious faith and practice, they boldly challenged that course as only legalism and scribism in a new dress. They insisted that the Eternal Spirit who had been educating the race from its birth, is a real Presence in the deeps of men's consciousness, and is ceaselessly voicing Himself there as a living Word whom it is life to obey and death to disregard.

SEBASTIAN FRANCK

Sebastian Franck (b. 1499) is one of the most interesting of German Reformers, a man of heroic spirit and a path-breaking genius. No person, however great a genius he may be, can get wholly free from the intellectual climate and the social ideals of his period, but occasionally a man appears who seems to be far ahead of his age. Sebastian Franck was a man of this sort. He was extraordinarily unfettered by medieval inheritance and he would be able to adjust himself with perfect ease to the spirit and ideas of the modern world if he could be dropped forward into it. Sometime before 1530, Franck had come into intimate connection with Denck, Bänderlin, Schwenckfeld and other contemporary leads of the *Spiritual* movement and their influence upon him was profound.

Franck's *Book of the Ages* unfolds his conception of the spiritual history of the race, under the tuition of the Divine Word. At the beginning are patriarchs living in the dawn of the world under the guidance of inward vision, and at the end are saints and heretics, whom Franck finds among all races, following the same inward Light, now after the ages grown clearer and sufficient for those who will patiently and faithfully heed it. He writes, "we ought always in all matters to notice what God says *in us* and never to think, or act, against our conscience. Let every one weigh and test Scripture to see how it fits his own heart. If it is against his conscience and the Word within his own soul, then be sure he had not reached the right meaning, for the Scriptures must give witness *to* the Spirit, never against it."

This book naturally aroused a storm of opposition, and for the years immediately following, Franck was never secure in any city. He supported himself and his family, now by the humble occupation of soap-boiler, now by working in a printing-house, only asking, he says that he might not be forced to bury the talent which God had given him.

It was Franck's primary idea that there is a divine element in the very structure of the soul, which is the starting point of all spiritual progress and the eternal basis of the soul's salvation. He names this inward endowment by many names. It is the Word of God, the Power of God, Spirit, Mind of Christ, the inward Light. "The inward Light," Franck says in the *Paradoxa*, "is nothing else that the Word of God, God Himself, by whom all things were made and by whom all men are enlightened." This deep ground of inner reality is in every person. This Word is eternal and has been the moral and spiritual guide of all peoples in all ages.

Franck always comes back to *experience* as his basis of religion. But experience with him does not mean visions and raptures. Ecstasies furnish no ideas or ideals to live by. As fast as the life comes under the sway of the *kingdom of conscience* and that a solid moral character is formed, the inner guidance of the Word of God becomes more reliable. Not only must all spiritual experience be subject to the moral test, it must further be tested by the Light of God in other men, and by the *spirit of the Scripture*.

The invisible Church forms the central loyalty of Franck's fervent soul. "The true Church," he writes, "is not a separate mass of people, not a particular sect to be pointed out with the finger; it is rather a spiritual and invisible body, seen with the spiritual eye. It is the assembly and communion of all truly God-fearing, good-hearted persons in the world, bound together by the Holy Spirit and the bonds of love. This church the Spirit is building through the ages and in all lands. Love is the one mark and badge of Fellowship in it." No outward forms of any sort seem to him necessary for

membership in this true Church. “The Kingdom of God is neither prince nor peasant, food nor drink, hat nor coat, here nor there, yesterday nor tomorrow, baptism nor circumcision, nor anything whatever that is external, but peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, unalloyed love out of a pure heart and good conscience and an unfeigned faith.”

In a letter he says, “I am fully convinced that, after the death of the apostles, the external Church of Christ vanished from the earth, and for these past fourteen hundred years there has existed no true external Church and no efficacious sacraments.

Franck’s valuation of scripture fits perfectly into this religion of the inward life and the invisible church. The essential Word of God is the divine revelation in the soul of man. It is the *prime* of all scripture and it is the key to the spiritual meaning of all scripture. To substitute *scripture* for the self revealing Spirit is to put the dead letter in the place of the living word, the horn-pane lantern in place of the Light. Frank insists that, from its inherent nature, a written scripture cannot be the final authority on religion:

- (a) It is outward, while the seat of religion is in the soul;
- (b) It is transitory and shifting, for language is always in process of change, and written words have different meanings to different ages and in different countries, while for a permanent religion there must be a living eternal *word* that fits all ages, lands and conditions;
- (c) Scripture is full of mystery, contradiction and paradox;
- (d) Scripture at best brings only knowledge.

It lacks the power to deliver from sin which it describes. No amount of *ink, paper and letters*, can make a man good, since religion is not knowledge but a way of living. Franck pushes back through the ink, paper and letters of Scripture to the Spirit and Truth which these great writings reveal.

Sin means, for Franck, the *free choice* of something for one's private and particular self in place of life-aims that fulfill the good of the whole. It is not inherited, it is self chosen. We do not sin and fall because Adam did; we sin and fall because we are human and finite, as he was.

This will be sufficient to show the character of the religion of this lonely man. He was too remote from the currents of evangelical Christianity to impress the common people and he was too radical a thinker to lead even the scholars who had become liberated from tradition by their humanistic studies and by historical insight.

CASPER SCHWENCKFELD

Casper Schwenckfeld was born of a noble family in Lower Silesia, in 1489. He always remembered that it was the trumpet call of Luther which had summoned him to a new life and he always carried in his long exile—an exile for which Luther was largely responsible—a beautiful respect and appreciation for the man who had first turned him to a knowledge of the truth.

Luther's final break with the spiritual Reformer of Silesia was primarily occasioned by Schwenckfeld's teaching on the meaning and value of the Lord's Supper. Scwenckfeld's position had culminated in a suspension of the celebration of the Lord's Supper—the so called *Stillstand*—until a right understanding of it, according to the will of the Lord, should be revealed. The immediate effect of his position was such a collision with Luther that Scwenckfeld's mission in Silesia became impossible. He went, in 1529, into voluntary exile never to return. For thirty years he was a wanderer, but he could thank his Lord Christ, as he did, for granting him an inward freedom and for bringing him into *his castle of Peace*. We must now turn to a study of this type of Christianity as it appears in his writings.

All spiritual service (Schwenckfeld held) arises through the definite call and commission of God. Persons so called and

commissioned are rightly prepared for their service, not by election and ordination, but by inward compulsion and illumination. Thus Schwenckfeld returned to the ideal of the primitive Apostolic Church as far as he knew how with this limited historical insight.

It was his ideal purpose to promote the formation of little groups of spiritual Christians which should live in the land of quietness. He saw clearly that no true reformation could be carried through by edicts. To this work of building up little scattered societies under the headship of Christ, he dedicated his years in exile. The public records of Augsburg reveal the existence of Schwenckfeld's residence there. Their leaders were men of menial occupations. Under the inspiration they received from the writings of this reformer from Silesia, they formed a *little meeting*—in every respect like a seventeenth-century Quaker meeting held in worshipers' homes. They discarded all use of sacraments and waited on the Lord for edification rather than on public preaching. They objected to any form of religious exercise which did not spring directly out of the inward ministry of the Word of God.

Schwenckfeld's books and tracts found eager readers and transmitters. As early as 1551 an English writer mentions the *Schwenfeldianes*. One of the most obvious signs of his influence in the seventeenth century appears in the *Collegiants* of Holland and the corresponding society of *Seekers* in England. The cardinal principle of these groups in both countries was the belief that the visible Church had become apostate. There, those who held this view were waiting and seeking for the appearing of a new apostolic commission, for the fresh outpouring of God's Spirit on men and for the refounding of the Church.

"We ask," Schwenckfeld writes, "where in the world today there is gathered together an external Church of the apostolic form and type." He continues pointing out that, scattered everywhere throughout the world—even in Turkey and Calcutta—God has His own faithful people known only to Him who live Christ-like and

holy lives. But the time is coming when once more there will be a completely reformed Church of Christ. In the interim, let the chosen children of God rejoice that their salvation rests neither in an external Church nor in the external use of sacraments nor in any external thing.

SEBASTIAN CASTELLIO

There were serious and impressive attempts to give the Reformation a totally different course from the one it finally took in history and these attempts, defeated by the sweep of the main current, became submerged and their heroic leaders had been forgotten. Sebastian Castellio is one of these submerged venturers. But after the long and silent flow of years the world has come up to his position.

He was born in a little French village in the year 1515. Sometime during his college period he came under the influence of the divine and simple Christ of the Gospels. This simple Christ had been *rediscovered* by the humanists and to whom Castellio now dedicated the central loyalty of his soul. Now twenty-five years of age and a splendid classical scholar, he went to Strasbourg to share the task of the Reformers. In 1541 Calvin summoned Castellio to be Principal of the College of Geneva which he, Calvin, planned to make one of the foremost seats of Greek learning as well as one of the most illuminating centres for the study of the Scriptures.

In the course of his studies Castellio found himself compelled to take the position that the *Song of Solomon* was not only an ancient love poem but also that the traditional interpretation of it being a revelation of the true relation between Christ and the Church was a strained and unnatural one. He also felt that, as a scholar with intellectual honesty, he could not agree with the catechismal statement that *Christ descended into hell*. Calvin challenged both of these positions.

Calvin made it impossible for him to continue in Geneva his

work as an honest scholar. To remain meant he must surrender his right of independent judgment, he must cease to follow the line of emancipated scholarship, he must adjust his conscience to fit the ideas that were coming to be counted orthodox in the circle of Reformed faith. He went into voluntary exile where he might think and speak as he saw the truth. For ten years (1545-1555) he lived with his large family in pitiable poverty. He fished with a boat hook for driftwood along the shores of the Rhine. Every moment that could be saved went into the herculean task to which he dedicated himself—the complete translation of the Bible into both Latin and French.

In the *Preface* of his Latin Bible he boldly insists that the Reformation shall champion the principle of *free conscience* and shall wage its battles with spiritual weapons alone. The only enemies of our faith, he says, are vices and vices can be conquered only by virtues. The Christ, who said if they strike you on the one cheek turn the other, has called us to the spiritual task of instructing men in the truth. This work can never be put into the hands of an executioner!

Two years after this appeal to the new Protestantism to make the great venture of spreading its truth by love and persuasion, there came from Geneva the decisive answer in the burning of Servetus. This act was followed by the famous *Defense* which was written mainly by Calvin. One month later a brief Latin work appeared in favour of toleration. The Preface was beyond doubt written by Castellio. This preface is one of the mother documents on freedom of conscience. Selected passages follow:

Christ asked *us* to put on the white robes of a pure and holy life, but what occupies our thought? We dispute not only of the way to Christ, but of His relationship to God the Father, of the Trinity, of predestination, of free will, of the nature of God, of angles, of the condition of the soul after death—of a multitude of matters that are not essential for salvation.

. . . an honest follower of Christ who believes in God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, and who wants to do His will, but who cannot see that will just as others about him see it . . . I ask you whether Christ, who forgave those who went astray, and commanded His followers to forgive until seventy times seven, Christ who is the final Judge of us all, if He were here, would command a person like that to be killed? . . . O Christ does Thou see and approve these things? Hast Thou become a totally different person from what Thou wert? When Thou wert on earth, nothing could be more gentle and kind, more ready to suffer injuries. Thou wert like a sheep dumb before the shearers. Beaten, spat upon, mocked, crowned with thorns, crucified between thieves, Thou didst pray for those who injured Thee. Hast Thou changed to this? Art Thou now so cruel and contrary to Thyself? Doest Thou command that those who do not understand Thy ordinances and commandments as those over us require, should be drowned, or drawn and quartered, and burned at the stake?

Calvin, who recognized the hand of Castellio in this defense of freedom of Thought, proceeded to demolish him in a *Reply*. In his answer to the *Reply*, Castellio declares, "I do not defend Servetus. I have never read his books. Calvin burned them together with their author. I do not want to burn Calvin or to burn his book. I am only going to answer it." ". . . All the sects," he reminds the great Reformer, "claim to be founded on the Word of God. They all believe that their religion is true. Calvin says that his is *the only true one*. Each of the others says that his is the only true one. Calvin says that they are wrong. He makes himself (by what right, I do not know) the judge and sovereign arbitrator. He claims that he has on his side the sure evidence of the Word of God. Then why does he write so many books to prove what is evident?" Castellio continues to state that the truth is surely not evident to those who die denying that it is truth! He also reports that Calvin asks how doctrine is to be guarded if heretics are not to be punished. "Doctrine," cries Castellio, "Christ's doctrine means loving one's enemies,

returning good for evil, having a pure heart and a hunger and thirst for righteousness. *You* may return to Moses if you will, but for us others, Christ has come.”

Love, he constantly insists, is the supreme badge of any true Christianity and the traits of the beatitudes in a person’s life are a surer evidence that he belongs to Christ’s family, than is the fact that he holds current opinions on obscure questions of belief. He writes, “There is no doubt about the worth of forgiveness, of patience, of pity, of kindness and of obedience to duty. Why leave these sure things and quarrel over inscrutable mysteries?”

There are, I know,” he says, “persons who insist that we should believe even against reason. It is however, the worst of errors and it is laid upon me to fight it. I may not be able to exterminate the monster but I hope to give it such a blow that it will know it has been hit. Let no one think that he is doing wrong in using his mental faculties. It is our proper way at arriving at the truth.”

There have been, Castellio holds, progressive stages in the Divine education of the race. The mark of advance is always found in the progress from law and letter to spirit, from outward ceremonies to inward experience. The written word of God is the garment of the Divine Thought which is the real Word of God. Only the person who has in himself the illumination of the same Spirit that gave the original revelation can see through the garment of the letter to the eternal message. Within us as image of God there is a Divine Reason which existed before books, before rites, before the foundation of the world and will exist after books and rites have vanished and the world has gone to wreck. It was by this that Jesus Christ lived and taught us how to live. This Reason is in all ages the right investigator and interpreter of Truth, even though time changes outwards things and written texts go corrupt.

Castellio was not a theologian of the Reformation type. The time was not ready for him but he did his day’s work with loyalty, sincerity, and bravery and seen in perspective is worthy to be honoured as a hero and a saint.

COORNHERT AND THE COLLEGIANTS

One of the earliest Dutch exponents of this type of spiritual religion which we have been studying as a by-product of the Reformation in Germany was Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert. He was born in Amsterdam in 1522. A keen desire to go back to the original sources of religious truth and to read the new Testament and the Fathers in their own tongue induced him to learn Greek and Latin after he was thirty years of age. He undertook the translation of great masterpieces such as Erasmus' *Paraphrases of the New Testament*. He was deeply influenced by Erasmus throughout his life.

In his youth he had seen with his own eyes the methods which the Spanish Inquisition employed to compel uniformity of faith and he dedicated himself to the cause of liberty of religious thought. With this passion for intellectual and spiritual freedom was joined a deeply grounded disapproval of the fundamentalist ideas of Calvinism. As a humanist he was convinced that however man had been marred by a *fall*, he was still possessed of native gifts and bore deep within himself an unlost central being which joined him indissolubly to God.

On the great theological issues of the day he *disputed* against the leading theologians of the Netherlands. Jacobus Arminius at the turning of his career was selected to make once and for all a refutation of Coornhert's dangerous writings. He however became so impressed as he studied the works which he was to refute that he accepted many of Coornhert's views and he became himself a greater *heretic* and a more dangerous opponent of Calvinism than the man he was chosen to annihilate. It is certain, too, that he loved and translated the writings of Sebastian Castellio.

Coornhert himself endeavored to find the way to a religion grounded in the nature of things and of universal value. The *law* of true religion is a disposition toward goodness. Religion of this true and saving sort never comes through hearsay knowledge, or

along channels of tradition or by head knowledge of texts and of the written word. It comes only with inward experience of the Word of God and it grows and deepens as the will of man lives by the Will of God. Every stage of this process, which in a word is *obedience to the Light*, makes the fact and meaning of sin clearer and the nature of goodness more plain. It also leads away from a superstition of fear to a religion of love and joy. The real Sabbath is not a sacred day but rather an inward quiet, prevailing peace of soul, a rest in the life of God from stress and strain and passion.

Coornhert especially criticizes Calvin for having given undue prominence to *pure doctrine*. All speculations about the Trinity or about the dual nature of Christ transcend our knowledge and should be rejected.

On behalf of those who could not conform he pleaded for freedom of conscience and for the right to live undisturbed as members of the invisible Church. These members should be waiting meantime and seeking in quiet faith for the coming of new and divinely commissioned apostles who would *really reform* the apostate Churches and gather in the world a true Church of Christ.

Meantime, while waiting for this true apostolic Church to appear, Coornhert approved of the formation of an *interim-Church*. This interim-Church was to have no authoritative teachers or preachers. In place of official ministry the members were to edify one another in Christian love. All persons who confess God as Father and Jesus Christ as sent by God and who in the power of faith abstain from sins may belong to this interim-Church. Coornhert's proposed interim-Church was conceived as only a temporary substitute for the true apostolic Church. This Church, for which every spiritual Christian is a *seeker*, found actual embodiment in a movement of the early seventeenth century known in Dutch history as the *Collegiants*.

The leaders of this movement, the Van der Kodde brothers, owed the course of their religious development to the writings of

men like Sebastian Castellio and Jacobus Acontius. Acontius, the Italian humanist, laid down the principles that no majority can make a binding law in matters of faith and that only God's Spirit in the hearts of men can certify what is truth. Deeply imbued with the ideas of these spiritual reformers and in sympathy with many of the views and practices of the Mennonites about them, the Van der Kodde brothers decided to come together without any minister and hold a meeting of the free congregational type.

Giesbert Van der Kodde now expressed himself emphatically against listening to preachers who live without working and at the expense of the community and who hindered the free exercise of *prophecy*. They soon moved their meeting, a *Collegium* or gathering, to the neighbouring town of Rynsburg. There it received additions to its adherents, largely drawn from the Mennonites, many of whose ideas were strongly impressed upon the little *Society*,--for example, opposition to taking oaths and refusal to fight. They also adopted as the Mennonites did, the Sermon on the Mount as the basis of their ethical standard. The Collegiants insisted on simplicity of life, plainness of garb, rejection of the world's etiquette, absence of titles in addressing persons and equality of men and women, even in public ministry.

From the first there was a pronounced tendency to encourage a ministry of *prophetic openings*. John Van der Kodde declared that he should fear the loss of his salvation if he failed in a meeting to give utterance to the Word of God revealed to him in his inner being. They encouraged the custom of silent waiting as a preparation for *openings*. However they were persons of scholarship and refinement and not tumultuous or strongly emotional but on the contrary they highly valued dignity and propriety of behavior.

As the movement spread *Collegia* or societies were formed in other localities. Once every year they had a large yearly meeting in Rynsburg to which members came from all parts of Holland.

A young Mennonite doctor, Galenus Abrahams, soon became the most prominent Collegiant leader in Holland. We get a very interesting sidelight on Abrahams in the *Journal* of George Fox. William Penn and George Keith held a *discussion* with this famous Collegiant leader in 1677. Fox himself had a personal interview with Abrahams at about the same time. Fox says he found this “. . . notable teacher very high and shy so that he would not let me touch him nor look upon him, but he bid me keep my eyes off him, for he said they pierced him!” But at a later visit in 1684, Fox found the Collegiant doctor very loving and tender. In spirit they were both very near together and with a little more insight on both sides the two movements might have joined.

The most important book which came from a member of this group—*The Light on the Candlestick*—is indistinguishable in its body of ideas from Quaker teaching and differs only in one point, that it reveals a more philosophically trained mind in the writer than does any early Quaker book with the single exception of Barclay’s *Apology*. The author was probably Peter Balling, one of a group of scholarly Collegiants. *The Light on the Candlestick* was very quickly discovered by the Quakers who circulated it as a Quaker Tract. It was translated into English in 1663. The Collegiant author writes in this book:

We direct thee to within thyself, to mind and have regard unto that which is within thee, to wit, the Light of Truth, the true Light which enlightened every man that cometh into the world. Here thou shalt find a Principle certain and infallible, through which increasing and going on into, thou mayest at length arrive unto a happy condition. Of this thou mayest highly adventure the tryal. He that will not adventure, shall never begin, much less finish his own salvation. We say then that we exhort every one to turn unto the Light that’s in him.

We can judge no doctrine, no Book to be Divine except by some inward and immediate knowledge of what really is Divine. Without

this Light the Scriptures are only Words and Letters. No finite thing can bring us a knowledge of God unless we already have within us a sufficient knowledge of Him to make us able to appreciate and judge the Divine character of the particular revelation. God must be assumed as present in the soul before any basis of truth or of religion can be found. The Light is the first Principle of Religion. –Mind, therefore, the Light that is in thee.

This Light—the first Principle of all Religion—is also called in this little book by many other names. It is the *living Word, the Truth of God, the Light of Truth, the Christ and Spirit*. As a Divine Light it reproves man of sin. It leads man into Truth, he says, “. . . even though he has never heard or read of Scripture.” It also gives him peace of conscience in well-doing and, if obeyed, it brings him into union with God. It operates in all men. As soon as a man turns to it he discovers, Balling writes, “. . . a Principle whereby he may, without ever erring, guide the whole course of his life, how he is to carry himself towards God, His Neighbour and himself.” The author is not trying to draw his readers to any new sect. He says, “We will not draw thee off from one heap of men to carry thee over unto another.”

Such is the teaching of this strange little book, revealing the maturest expression of this slowly developing spiritual movement, which began with Hans Denck, flowed through many lives and burst out full flood in England in the *Children of the Light*, who became known to the world as Quakers.

CONCLUSION

The Quakers of the seventeenth century are obviously one of the greatest historical results of this slowly maturing spiritual movement and they first gave the movement a concrete body and organism to express itself through. The modern student, who goes to the original exposition of Quakerism to find out what the leaders of this

movement conceived their message to be, quickly discovers that they were not radical innovators setting forth novel and strange ideas, but that they were, on the contrary, the living embodiment of ideas which have now become familiar to the reader of this chapter.

It was, we are all now aware, out of the Seeker groups of the northern counties of England that the new *Society* was actually born. Also it grew as it gathered in the prepared groups of *Seekers*. The creation of the Quaker *Society* was not the work of any one man; the groups were there before the formative leader appeared. In fact the very term *Quaker* had already been in use as far back as 1646 for the members of some of these highly emotional Seeker communities. As soon as these groups—intense in their expectation—found a leader, the effect was extraordinary. Their group experience of a common divine Spirit coming upon their lives, their discovery that God was in their midst and Fox's compelling sense of apostolic mission were grounds enough to change these Seeker groups into a Body possessed of the faith that the long-expected Church of the Spirit had at last come.

Fox reveals in a variety of ways his connections with the great body of spiritual ideas that had been accumulating for more than a century before his time but for the most part these influences worked upon him in subconscious ways, as an atmosphere and climate of his spirit, rather than as a clearly conceived body of truth which he got by reading authors. He can be rightly appreciated only as he is seen to be a member of an organic group-life which formed him as much as he formed it.

The expositions of the more scholarly Quakers show an explicit acquaintance with the writings of these men whom we have been studying and they cannot be adequately understood in isolation. The ideas and peculiar phrases of the spiritual reformers pass and come again in their works. No Quaker has presented this view in a more adequate way than has Barclay in one of his early tracts who said, "The manner whereby Christ's righteousness, death and

sufferings become profitable unto us, is by receiving Him, and becoming one with Him in our hearts, and we are cleansed from our sins, *not imaginarily*, but really, and we are really and truly made righteous.”

The root principle of Quakerism is belief in a divine Light in the soul of man. It is also frequently called the *Word of God*, or *That of God in you*, or *Christ within*. But under whatever name it goes, it is always thought of as a *saving Principle* for him who says yes, responds, obeys, cooperates and allows this resident Seed of God to have full sway in him. All the Quaker terms for the *Principle* were used by Sebastian Franck and Casper Schwenckfeld.

Quakerism is thus no isolated religious phenomenon. It is deeply rooted in a far wider movement that had been accumulating volume and power for more than a century before George Fox became a *prophet* of it to the English people. Both in its new English and its earlier continental form it was a serious attempt to achieve a more complete Reformation, to restore primitive Christianity and to change the basis of authority from external things, of any sort whatever, to the interior life and spirit of man.

CHAPTER VI

Readings for Universalists

Ralph Hetherington

This collection has been arranged so that those with a similar theme come together. This series of themes is connected, where it seems necessary, by introductory and explanatory notes.

The themes are:

- I The Universality of Revelation
- II The Mystical Nature of the Inward Light
- III The Primacy of Personal Revelation over Scripture
- IV The Validity of Light from Whatever Quarter
- V Universalism in its Historical Quaker Setting
- VI A Modern Fable

I THE UNIVERSALITY OF REVELATION

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

Quakerism testifies to the reality of the inward Light which is available to everyone, be they heathen, Turk or Jew.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Quaker literature from its very beginnings has reflected the theme of the universality of revelation. We shall be meeting this at various places in the pages that follow. At this stage it will be enough to quote Isaac Pennington, John Woolman and William Penn from among the earlier writers. Of the many later writers, quotations from Caroline Fox, Henry Hodgkin and Margaret Hobling have been added.

Isaac Pennington

All Truth is a shadow except the last, except the utmost; yet every Truth is true in its kind. It is substance in its own place, though it be but a shadow in another place (for it is but a reflection from an intenser substance); and the shadow is the true shadow, as the substance is the true substance.²⁷

William Penn

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they wear here makes them strangers. This world is a form; our bodies are forms; and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit; for the more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit.²⁸

John Woolman

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is however pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.²⁹

Caroline Fox

I have assumed a name today for my religious principles—Quaker-Catholicism—having direct spiritual teaching for its distinctive dogma, yet recognizing the high worth of all other forms of Faith; a system, the sense of inclusion, not exclusion; and appreciation of the universal and the various teachings of the Spirit, through the faculties given us, or independent of them.³⁰

Henry T. Hodgkin

By processes too numerous and diverse even to summarize, I have reached a position which may be stated in a general way somewhat like this: "I believe that *God's best* for another may be so different from my experience and way of living as to be actually impossible for me. I recognize a change to have taken place in myself, from a certain assumption that mine was really the better way, to a very complete recognition that there is not one better way and that God needs all kinds of people and ways of living through which to manifest Himself in the World."³¹

Margaret Hobling

We are conscious of Christianity as one among a number of religions competing for the allegiance of intelligent and spiritually minded men, and the relationship between them exercises men's minds and hearts. The world is much smaller, much more interdependent than it used to be and Christendom is no longer a self-contained unit. Few may have had the benefit of intimate friendship with the saints of other faiths like Gandhi or Vinoba Bhasve, but . . . increasing numbers of people have had personal contact with humble men and holy of heart in all walks of life whom they dare not deny that they have been taught of God.³²

II THE MYSTICAL NATURE OF THE INWARD LIGHT

It is increasingly the practice now for Quaker writers to regard the experience of the Inward Light as being mystical. A lucid expression of this view now follows.

Daniel Seeger

Mysticism is one of the slipperiest words in the English language and much trouble can admittedly come from its careless use. It is a relatively new word, probably one which was unknown to most of the people to whom it is, in retrospect, applied. Yet, when George

Fox hears a voice which says, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition,” and when he understands this voice to be the voice of God, and when the Lord shows him from atop of Pendle Hill a great people to be gathered, these are what in any standard use of the English language are termed to be mystical experiences.

Similarly, if it is presumed that an individual attending to an Inner Light, or a group alive to the Presence in the Midst, can know the Divine Will, such a presumption is an assertion of the validity of experiences ordinarily termed mystical. Indeed, most prophets base their teachings on mystically apprehended understandings of God’s will.

Mystical people—people who have openings to God’s will—are always regarded as subversive by institutional ecclesiastical authority, for mystics believe that in their quests for Truth it is possible to bypass such authority. Hence the trouble in which such people, including the Quakers, frequently find themselves. Although there has been a strong stream of mysticism in Christian history, . . . it might be argued that mysticism is subversive to Christianity itself, since the entire concept of Christ’s unique saving mission as a mediator between God and his people, who are presumed to be confined in darkness unless they respond to Christ’s saving call, tends to be undercut by mystical assumptions.³³

In light of this view, the following quotation from John Ferguson’s Encyclopaedia of Mysticism is relevant.

The Society of Friends is perhaps the most remarkable demonstration in history of the availability of mystical experience to groups of open but otherwise ordinary people.³⁴

III THE PRIMACY OF PERSONAL REVELATION OVER SCRIPTURE

From the earliest days Quakers have asserted the primacy of the Inward Light, that is of direct revelation, over scripture. From George Fox onward, this assertion has been repeated over the years, sometimes in the face of severe opposition from institutional churches, and occasionally even from within the Society of Friends itself.

Below appears the famous assertion of George Fox, together with the description of Margaret Fell of Fox's sermon at Ulverston Church. There follow statements on the same theme by Isaac Pennington and Robert Barclay.

George Fox

Now the Lord hath opened to me His invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the Divine Light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all, and they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came into the Light of life, and became children of it, but they that hated it, and did not believe in it, were condemned by it, though they made a profession of Christ. This I saw in the pure openings of the Light, without the help of any man, neither did I know where to find it in the Scriptures, though afterwards, searching the Scriptures, I found it. For I saw in that Light and Spirit which was before Scripture was given forth, and which led the holy men of God to give them forth, that all must come to that Spirit, if they would know God or Christ or the Scriptures aright, which they that gave them forth were led and taught by.³⁵

Margaret Fell

And the next day, being a lecture on a fast day, he went to the Ulverston steeplehouse, but came not in till people gathered; I and my children had been a long time there before. And when they were singing before the sermon, he came in; and when they had done singing, he stood up upon a seat or form and desired that he might have the liberty to speak. And he that was in the pulpit said

he might. And the first words he spoke were as followeth: "He is not a Jew that is one outward, neither is that circumcision which is outward, but is a Jew that is one inward, and that is circumcision which is of the heart." And so he went on and said, How that Christ was the Light of the world and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this Light they may be gathered to God, etc. And I stood up in my pew, and wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before. And then he went on, and opened the Scriptures, and said, "The Scriptures were the prophets' words and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord." And said, "then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light and hast walked in the Light and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?"³⁶

Isaac Pennington

And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So, learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their right place, and prizing that above them which is above them.³⁷

Robert Barclay

Because the scriptures are only a declaration of the fountain and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principle ground of all truth and knowledge, nor yet the adequate, primary rule of faith and manners. Yet, because they give a true and faithful testimony of the first foundation, they are and may be esteemed a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit, from which they have all their excellency and certainty for, as by the inward testimony of the Spirit we do alone truly know them, so they testify that the Spirit is that Guide by which the saints are led into truth:

therefore, according to the Scriptures the Spirit is the first and Principle leader.³⁸

Balby Elders

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter; for the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life.³⁹

In the early days as much as at the present time, this Quaker view about the validity of personal revelation contrasted sharply with the fundamentalist viewpoint which placed absolute authority in the scriptures. In the passage from Rufus Jones quoted below, he describes how Puritan fundamentalism directly apposed the Quaker view.

Rufus M. Jones

For the Puritan, revelation was a miraculous projection of God's Word and Will from the supernatural world into this world. This *miraculous projection* had been made only in a distinct *dispensation*, through a limited number of Divinely chosen, specially prepared *instruments*, who received and transmitted the pure Word of God. When the *dispensation* ended, revelation came to a definite close. No word more could be added, as also none would be subtracted. All spiritual truth for the race for all ages was now unveiled; the only legitimate function which the man of God could henceforth exercise was that of *interpretation*. He could declare what the Word of God meant and how it was to be applied to the complicated affairs of human society. Only a specialist in theology could, from the nature of the case, be a minister under this system. The minister thus became invested with an extraordinary dignity and possessed of an influence quite *sui generis*.

For the Quaker, revelation was confined to no *dispensation*, it had never been closed. If any period was peculiarly the *dispensation of the Holy Spirit*, the Quaker believed that it was the present in which he was living. Instead of limiting the revelation of the Word of God to a few miraculous *instruments* who had lived in remote *dispensation*, he insisted that God enlightens every soul that cometh into the world, communes by His Holy Spirit with all men everywhere, illuminates the conscience with a clear sense of the right and the wrong course in moral issues, and reveals His Will in definite and concrete matters to those who are sensitive recipients of it. The true minister, for the Quaker of that period, was a *prophet* . . . a *revealer* of present truth, and not a mere interpreter of a past revelation.⁴⁰

IV THE VALIDITY OF LIGHT FROM WHATEVER QUARTER

With the collapsing of barriers between the cultures of the world, and the consequent mixing of people from all the great religions, the universalism implicit in the Quaker view has become explicit. This openness is enshrined in Query 12:

Are you striving to develop your mental powers, and to use them to the glory of God? Are you loyal to the truth and keep your mind open to new light, from whatever quarter it may arise? Are you giving time and thought to the study of the Bible, and other writings that reveal the ways of God? Do you recognize the spiritual contributions made by other faiths?

There now follows a number of quotations from both classical and modern texts which develop this point of view.

Isaac Pennington

Even in the Apostles' days, Christians were too apt to strive after a wrong unity and uniformity in outward practices and observation, and to judge one another unrighteously in those things, and mark,

it is not the different practice from one another that breaks the peace and unity, but the judging of one another because of different practices . . .

And here is true unity, in the Spirit, in the inward life, and not in an outward uniformity . . . Men keep close to God, the Lord will lead them on fast enough . . . for He taketh care of such, and knoweth what light and what practices are most proper for them.⁴¹

Robert Barclay

The church is no other thing but the society, gathering or company of such as God hath called out of the world, and worldly spirit, to walk in his light and life. The church, then, so defined, is to be considered, as it comprehends all that are thus called and gathered truly by God . . . of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue, or people they be, though outwardly strangers, and remote from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words, and have the benefit of the Scriptures, as become obedient to the holy light, and testimony of God, in their hearts . . . There may be members therefore of this Catholic church both among heathens, Turks, Jews, and all the several sorts of Christians, men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart, who . . . are by the secret touches of this holy light in their souls enlivened and quickened, thereby secretly united to God, there-through become true members of this Catholic church.⁴²

Gerald Hibbert

Every religious system has its Quakers—those who turn from the outward and the legal and the institutional, and focus their attention on the Divine that is within. There is much fellowship between friends and the mystics of other religious systems. Let a Mohammedan or Hindu mystic teacher come to this country, and we realize at once how much we have in common with him. We believe we have something we can give him, but we realize also

that he has something to give to us . . . The mystics of the world everywhere join hands. Their spirits leap together in a flash of joyful recognition; in the great depths they find their unity and their abiding home.⁴³

Janet Scott

Thus we may answer the question, “Are Quakers Christian?” by saying that it does not matter. What matters to Quakers is not the label by which we are called or call ourselves, but the life. The abandonment of self to God means also the abandonment of labels, of doctrines, or cherished ways of expressing the truth. It means the willingness to follow the spirit wherever it leads, and there is no guarantee that this is to Christianity or to any happy ending except the love, peace and unity of God. Like the sword which Fox told Penn to wear as long as he could, we take our religion and beliefs as far as we can. All these are good. But they are not what we seek. In the end, we place them into the hands of God, in trust, to make or break, to crown or destroy, for they are nothing in themselves, but God is in us all.⁴⁴

Gerald Priestland

But now comes a scandal—literally a stumbling block—jutting out from chapter 14 of the Gospel according to St John: Jesus said unto Thomas, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no man cometh to the Father, but by me.” Here is the Scandal of Particularity: the exalted claim that Jesus is the one and the only way to God, which Christians have extended to mean that this first century Jew was utterly unique—once for all time—and that the Church he founded has something other faiths can never have. I must admit that this apparently arrogant proclamation has always been a stumbling block to my progress. I have spent part of my life in the Middle East and South Asia, and now I live among Jews. Are my Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Jewish friends second class souls? Is it

just bad luck that they have never seen the New Testament? Surely a loving God cannot be as narrow minded as that?⁴⁵

Lorna Marsden

Despite all its lacks and defects the modern world has given to us one supreme gift—the sense that the closed mind is no longer operative for humanity. The world of science has built up its achievements on a basis of unbounded enquiry, inevitable progression from one hypothesis to the next, refusal of unalterable certainty. This is the climate of the mind in which we live, in its positive aspect. Uniquely in the Christian tradition, the Quaker stands at the same point. The true Quaker is open to new knowledge from what every quarter it may come. When we seek for certainties in an uncertain world, or cry out for a return to the safety of what is known as fundamentalism, we forget our heritage. We are not answering Fox's challenge: "What canst thou say?" The Inward light by which the Quaker lives, falls not on the closed circles of a institution walled against experiment, but on the open ground whose darkness is illuminated step by step as he proceeds—and the illumination that he carries with him has come to him from the past.⁴⁶

John Hick

Theologians have usually been very good at taking account of all sorts of abstruse or obscure data, but sometimes failed to notice the obvious facts which is obvious to ordinary people. And one of the things which is obvious to ordinary people, and yet sometimes not noticed by the theologians, is this: that in the great majority of cases—say 98 or 99 per cent of the cases—the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he was born. This is to say, if someone is born to Muslim parents in Egypt or Pakistan, he is like to be a Muslim; if to Buddhist parents in Sri Lanka or Burma, he is very likely to be Buddhist; if to Hindu

parents in India he is very likely to be a Hindu; if to Christian parents in Europe, North American or Australia, he is very likely to be a Christian. Of course, in each case he may be either an authentic or merely nominal adherent of his religion. But if one is born in this country, for example, the religion which one accepts or rejects will normally be Christianity. If you undergo a religious conversion to Christian faith rather than to some other faith, and even if you are a humanist or an atheist, you will be recognizably Christian one—quite different from say, a Chinese or Indian humanist. In short, whether you are a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Sikh, a Hindu, a Buddhist—or for that matter a Marxist or a Maoist—depends nearly always on the part of the world in which you happen to have been born.⁴⁷

Harry Williams

As one fed by the Christian religion I find it necessary to distinguish between the historical Jesus and what could be described as the Christ Reality. I believe that the historical Jesus embodied Christ Reality to a unique degree. But I don't believe that the Christ Reality was confined to him or that he monopolized it. And I see that if I had been fed by another religion I should call the Christ Reality something else—the Buddha nature, for instance, especially with regard to the compassion shown by the Buddha when he refused Nirvana for himself in order to bring enlightenment to men. Many of the hymns addressed in the Japanese Buddhist tradition to Amida Buddha are in content identical to hymns addressed by Christians to Jesus.

The historical Jesus embodied and bore witness to the Christ Reality, but it was found in many places centuries before he was born and continued to be found among people who had never heard of him: in the experience of the Hebrew prophet Hosea and the vision of that unknown prophet of the Exile whose words are found in our book of the prophet Isaiah. And in various degrees the Christ

Reality was embodied and shown forth by the Buddha, Lao-Tse, Mohammed, Hafiz, Kabir, and countless others who have left no memorial.⁴⁸

Mahatma Gandhi

I do not know what you mean by the Living Christ. If you mean the historic Jesus, then I do not feel his presence. But if you mean a spirit guiding me, a presence nearer to me than hands or feet, than the very breath in men, then I do feel such a presence. If it were not for the sense of that presence the waters of the Ganges would long ere this have been my destination. Call it Christ or Krishna: that does not matter to me.⁴⁹

V UNIVERSALISM IN ITS HISTORIC QUAKER SETTING

Universalism has figured neither largely nor explicitly in the various Quaker histories until John Punshon published his short history of Quakerism in 1984. What he has to say is important on two counts. The first that he established grounds for taking Quaker Universalism seriously, and the second that he suggests reasons why universalists in the Society of Friends may be misunderstood. Four passages from various parts of the book are quoted below.

John Punshon

The Starting Point from Barclay's Theology

Barclay's first controlling assumption is that scripture is neither the principal basis of knowledge nor the main standard of faith. You can deny this assumption either because you think it wrong, or because the small print of his argument makes it an overstatement. If you are right, the way is clear for evangelical Quakerism.

Barclay's second controlling assumption is the unity or indissoluble link between the spiritual reality he calls the light, and Jesus Christ as an historical figure. If you take the view that modern biblical and theological scholarship renders the traditional Christian

doctrines obsolete, and you are right, the way is clear for mystical universalist Quakerism.

Either of these courses can be taken, but each is in turn vulnerable to the criticism that it tends to fragment the Quaker tradition as Barclay develops it, by concentrating on one aspect of a balance whole. If the work of Barclay was instrumental in stimulating divergence, a re-examination of the issues he raises might also be instrumental in recovering that wholeness.

A Possible Source of Misunderstanding

If you are willing to retain a biblical faith, the word Christ will operate as a reference to the Lord of the New Testament as described in scripture and experienced in the Church. On the other hand, if liberal tradition has encouraged you to look skeptically at the authority of the Bible and credibility of the twin doctrines of incarnation and atonement, then the word will have a different reference. You will tend to understand it more as the name used by people who have fortuitously been brought up as Christians for the ultimate reality which is given other names by other people. This difference between a name and a description gives rise to different ways of approaching the problem of religious diversity and helps to explain the significant differences between the universalist Quakers and the others which they do not always themselves perceive.

The Mystical Appeal of Universalism

Religious pluralism . . . sees the great faiths as special interpretations of truth with their own special dynamics. They are in a sense languages for talking about God. No one has the monopoly of truth, or even a preponderance of it, for all are equally acceptable paths, to vary the metaphor, up the same mountain, and they meet at the peak. This view is almost unavoidable if the claims of Christianity about Christ are found to be unacceptable. Few articulate universalists are syncretists, that is wanting to create a

new faith out of various bits of the old: most have a serious concern to be open to new leadings of truth, whatever its source. Their position is encountered widely in the silent tradition among Friends. Its great strength is its tolerance in a world of prejudice. It appears to have been particularly appealing to Quakers because of the universality of the mystical mode of religious experience.

Universalism and the Quaker Disciplines

Some Yearly Meetings have adopted Disciplines which clearly envisage universalism as an acceptable stance within Quakerism. London Y M has not yet (1984) formally taken this step, and the Quaker Universalist Group, founded in 1979, . . . works (among other objectives) for a revision of London's Discipline that would radically alter the present basis of membership.⁵⁰

It would be appropriate to end this section with a quotation describing the nature of Quakerism and its relation to Universalism.

Katherine Wilson

Would it be true to say that Quakerism is not so much one specific sect of Christianity, or one specific religion as (it is) the core that makes the centre of every religion? Hence both the ease with which we make contact with men and women of all religions, and the impossibility of describing what our distinguishing marks are. Is it that we hesitate to claim anything for ourselves alone because it belongs to everyone by nature? . . . Do our experiences and attitudes indeed imply that what we profess and practice to basic religion? It may be that Friends did not discover anything new at all but only what is at the heart of all religions if freed from their cultural trappings. Although this discovery was given a Christian framework by Friends of the 17th Century, now that we know more of other religions many Friends feel that this supporting Christian frame is not our distinguishing mark.⁵¹

VI A MODERN FABLE

This section concludes with a modern fable which appeared in The Friend in January 1980.

Ralph Hertherington

The Bread-Eaters

There was once a miller who ground the most beautiful flour and every baker in the land came to his mill to buy his flour. Each baker had his own way of baking bread. Some added salt, sugar and yeast and water to make a dough which they turned into simple loaves. Other bakers added seeds or nuts or currants or malt and many other things. Sometimes when the baking became too elaborate people demanded a return to plain bread. Many people, however, like the rich loaves and thrived on them. In the early days there was not much contact between the various villages and people were brought up to like the loaves their own bakers sold. Sometimes a new baker would try out a new kind of loaf which sold well for a bit but by and large people tended to go on with the loaves they were used to.

However as the years went by there was more coming and going between the villages, and travellers returned to their own homes with tales of the extraordinary bread that was eaten in other places. Then some of the bakers began to feel sorry for the people in the other villages, thinking how much better off they would be if they ate bread baked in the proper way. So they mounted expeditions to other places and offered their loaves for sale to the people there. Sometimes their loaves were enjoyed but often they were rejected because the people were not used to them.

Some bakers now began to think that they were the only ones who baked bread with the miller's flour and suspected that other bakers were growing their own corn and milling their own flour. So they tried to stop other bakers selling the bread and tried to make

everyone eat the loaves they baked. This led to quarrels and even to persecution, torture and wars. It was a long time before the bakers began to realize that they all got their flour from the same source. They thought it might be a good idea if they got together and agreed on a common recipe for bread which they could use and so get out of the difficulty of competition. However when they did this the loaves they produced were so dull and tasteless that no one would buy them. So it was not long before they returned to baking their own traditional loaves and even to trying out some new recipes.

However there was a little group of bread-eaters who found that they did not like much of the bread that the bakers supplied. They decided to go to the miller themselves and buy their flour, although this was something that the bakers had always discouraged. They made a habit of meeting once a week and going to the mill together. Thus they were able to bake the sort of loaves that suited them best, constantly trying to improve their recipes. They would often have discussions about bread-making and would try out each other's loaves. But what they specially liked was the weekly visit to the miller.⁵²

CHAPTER VII

Is Coexistence Possible

Daniel Seeger

Christianity and Universalism in the Religious Society of Friends

This section was prepared for the session, Variation on the Quaker Message which was sponsored by the Advancement Committee of Friends General Conference. It was given at the 1984 Gathering at St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY.

The human enterprise can be likened to a journey.

The most obvious journey is an external physical one—beginning with humankind's origin somewhere in the Middle East or Africa and proceeding over a period of millions of years to the north, east, south and west, until, ultimately, our species has inhabited the far reaches of this planet.

But there are other journeys, journeys which, although they may have an outward expression, are essentially inner or spiritual journeys. Such journeys are charted in Homer's *Odyssey*, or in the Biblical account of the wanderings of the people of Israel in search of the promised land.

Some of these pilgrimages are entirely spiritual, such as that of Dante from the Inferno to Paradise.

Others are carried out in both the spiritual and physical realms. The ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu wandered from kingdom to kingdom seeking the prince wise enough to govern in accordance with the way of Truth. Failing to find any, he ultimately retired to a cave hermitage, and there wrote a concise scripture of a mere 5,000 Chinese characters which subsequently became the basis of a great civilization.

The Indian prince Gotama, now known as the Buddha, upon reaching adulthood within an artificial paradise fashioned by his parents so as to protect him from all knowledge of evil, accidentally encountered victims of poverty, sickness and death. Sorely troubled in spirit, he left his protected paradise and wandered across the face of India in the most strenuous of spiritual searches. Finally, he was enlightened by a great truth, and thereafter gave of himself unceasingly to yet further travels, challenging and uplifting multitudes with the power of his teaching.

Two thousand years ago a young, itinerant rabbi in Galilee, one who was what we could be, miraculously transformed sinners into saints, social outcasts into public benefactors, common fisherfolk into fishers of women and men. How many spiritual journeys were set into motion by faith in the Truth which Jesus of Nazareth revealed to humankind! A mere handful of disciples in Galilee, Jericho and Jerusalem spread to Egypt, to India, to Corinth, to Ephesus, to Rome and to the entire world. One thinks of the peregrinations of St. Francis of Assisi and his followers who travelled to the earth to spread the good news; or we remember St. Augustine's *Confessions* in which the author frequently likens the course of his life to a journey from darkness to light. Nor must we forget the travels in ministry under Christian inspiration of more recent times, such as those of George Fox, John Woolman, and Lucretia Mott.

And yet, sadly, we have come to a juncture in the road where it is possible for reasonable people to wonder if all these many journeys, at long last, will be abruptly ended together. For we see now that the good earth, in spite of its ice ages, floods, droughts and volcanic eruptions, all of which have tried human capacity for survival over the many millions of years of these journeys, is indeed a paradise in comparison to the infernos we can create through our own spiritual lapses. Thus, in this great human journey it seems to be our own destiny to come face to face with the very worst that evil can do.

One of the many things which all people of faith have in common, no matter which it is of the world's great spiritual traditions which nourishes them, is their approach to this great challenge of our own times. People of faith know that human beings can never succeed in structuring a family, an institution, a social order, or a world community which exceeds in wisdom and goodness the degree of wisdom and goodness they themselves have a grasp of within their own hearts. They understand that the first step in rendering service is spiritual preparation of those who would serve; that social transformation depends upon spiritual transformation. With Meister Eckhart, they understand that only if we within ourselves are as we should be will our works give off a beautiful light. It is thus on the inner drama of each human being's journey in search of Truth that the unfoldment of the outer drama of history ultimately depends. People without faith, or with a kind of faith which is inadequate to humankind's new responsibilities, will not be able to build or to hold on to the new world order without which we will all perish.

Such a world order cannot be the work of people whose only vision it is to impose their particular scheme on everyone else, a foible which some Communists and some Christians have in common. Rather, the problem is for us to all learn to live together with our different traditions and to live not only without bloodshed, but in genuine peace, which implies some sort of mutual trust and active sympathy. It is of no use to talk about loving our neighbor while at the same time dismissing as inferior or mistaken his most cherished possession, his religious faith. Indeed, it is the transforming power of religious faith which offered the only hope out of our present impasse, and so a significant aspect of the great task before us is to come increasingly to discover how the world's faiths can nourish each other and how we can collaborate with all people of faith in the challenge we face together.

During most of history, humankind's several great spiritual streams have existed more or less in isolation from each other.

True, people of the Jewish faith were scattered within Christian and Islamic societies. True, there were encounters between Christians and Moslems, but these were mainly on the battlefield. Overall, until the present age, it has been quite possible for most people to live and die without every encountering the adherents of another major stream of spirituality, and certainly without ever developing the most elementary understanding of other people's religious belief and practices. Given this great difficulty that Christians have had in getting along even with each other, this relative isolation from Hindus, Buddhists and Moslems was, perhaps, a blessing.

Throughout all these centuries, the traditional posture of the Christian Church with respect to humankind's other religious traditions has been that of proselytizing evangelism. But today, the missionary enterprise of the Christian Church is in crisis. After all, two millennia of Christian evangelism has left the Hinduism of India, for example, largely intact. Except for the case of very few Christian organizations, most evangelization has been abandoned and has been replaced by the concept of services. Canon Max Warren, General Secretary in London of the Church Missionary Society, has delivered a riveting three sentence obituary on the practice of Christian evangelism: "We have marched around alien Jerichos the requisite number of times. We have sounded the trumpets. And the walls have not collapsed."

Having been privileged to visit the sites of some contemporary Christian mission activity, I can suggest that Canon Warren's statement is perhaps overdrawn. Clearly there remain situations in which the Christian faith can provide great nourishment for people who long to hear of it, just as in our society the mission of Zen Buddhists or of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Society can uplift people with respect to whom our indigenous spiritual institutions have somehow failed. The main point of these observations is that we clearly live in a world which is inevitably pluralistic as far as religion is concerned. Moreover, with the shrinking of the world community into a global village, we have the unprecedented

experience, not merely of hearing about the Buddhists, Moslems, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Taoists in tales brought back by the occasional Marco Polos, but, at least in a place like New York City, where I come from, we actually drink coffee and run peace demonstrations with them every day. A universalist perspective is one outgrowth of these encounters.

There is a new world that is waiting to be born out of the exciting interaction and religious pluralism which the modern age makes possible. But the situation is not without its dangers. The most obvious, of course, is that the encounter among people of different faiths, rather than providing each with nourishment, may simply provide another excuse for strife and conflict. One can scarcely contemplate the recent news from the Punjab or from Lebanon, not the trials of Judaism throughout the Christian era, without recognizing that religious pluralism can indeed be an explosive mixture. Even to observe a diverse group of Quakers reacting to each other's theology can be sobering!

If strife and conflict are avoided there is another result which is sometimes produced which can be counterproductive. The universalist spirit can sometimes degenerate into a sort of amiable, broad-minded relativism, wherein Truth is simply drowned in camaraderie. It is not true universalism casually to accept the diversity of religious cultures and religious loyalties simply because one feels that no religious culture and no religious loyalty is ultimately valid, that nothing is inherently worthwhile. Such modern relativism is a sophisticated kind of cynicism. It is not a proper understanding of the diverse faiths of humankind to develop an explanation of them which simply makes fundamental nonsense of each. A corollary of this is that a true universalist does not find it surprising or peculiar that people in western civilization who earnestly hunger after Truth find great nourishment in the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth, anymore than it is surprising to find devotion in the four noble truths and to the eightfold path in

cultures influenced by Buddhism. Nor need it cause a universalist any surprise or dismay if people come to regard the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as so perfectly fulfilling the leadings of Truth that this person is identical with the highest concepts of Truth in the universe, indeed with the very creative principle of the universe itself, and that this manifestation is so powerful that it can reverberate through the centuries, calling people everywhere to an awareness of their own true nature as creatures in whom there is something which corresponds to this same great and true principle. Somewhat analogous attitudes are identifiable in other faiths regarding the manifestations of great Truth, and to be phobic about Christian references within the religious life of the Society of Friends, for example, while seeking to cultivate openness and tolerance for other religious traditions, is obviously not an adequate expression of universalism.

It is useful to remember that a religious tradition's worst enemies are not people of a different faith. The United States is now the object of a self-consciously proselytic movement out of the Oriental traditions, yet it is scarcely any more likely that the USA will someday be a Hindu or a Buddhist nation than it is that India would have become a Christian one. What really undermines Christianity in the United States and Hinduism in India are the degradations to which each is brought by people claiming to be these faiths' own adherents.

A universalist interest inevitably brings one into the field of comparative religion, about which it is possible to write and speak much nonsense, either about how the major world faiths are all essentially alike, or are all fundamentally different. This question of the similarities and differences among the major faiths is too complex to enter into here, but it is important to keep one principle in mind in the field of comparative religion—remembering that each religion's worst enemies are its own adherents, it is always important, when making comparisons, to compare the best with the best. It makes little sense to compare Hinduism and Christianity by

using Mahatma Gandhi and John Foster Dulles as examples, even though Gandhi and Dulles were contemporaries, were both devout and were both statesmen. Nor would it make sense to compare Judaism with Buddhism by studying Martin Buber, on the one hand, and the quasi-superstitious practices of a remote Himalayan village, on the other.

Genuine universalism is very demanding of its practitioners. For it is true, as has often been said, that a religion can only be understood from the inside. One has only to read the section of the Encyclopedia Britannica on Christianity to realize that an objective account of a religious tradition, however accurate, will never reveal the essential spiritual experience enjoyed by those who are convinced of it. We must learn to contemplate other people's faiths not only without a chip on our shoulder, but also in quite a different frame of mind than that with which we are inclined to regard an oddly shaped sea shell. Moreover, the transforming power of any religious tradition which enables its adherent to achieve a new level of life, to be born again, and to exist in a new and different way, is not something which is achieved by a casual visit, by dabbling, or by Wayhopping. Indeed, it is necessary to go so far as to say that, while exceptions are always possible, the most likely path toward an understanding of the significance of a multiplicity of religions is to encounter deeply the experience of one religion, preferably the one closest at hand, which for the most of use would be Quakerism and its Judeo-Christian heritage.

It is true that the universalist sensibility tends to clash with those members of the Christian communion who insist that people who do not recognize Jesus of Nazareth as their Lord and Savior are ipso-facto inferior in spiritual realization. But a genuine universalist, before becoming agitated unduly over this lapse from the true Christian spirit among Christians, recalls that the phenomenon is not unique to Christianity. Something akin to it is a major theme in Islamic, Shinto and Jewish experience, with Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism being more successful at

projecting a generous and true-spirited universalism, although there are lapses in practice among people of these faiths, too.

Christian universalism began with Jesus of Nazareth, who rebelled against the kind of lawyer-like focus on doctrines which tends to divide people into chauvinistic spiritual camps. Jesus was much less interested in orthodoxy, in right doctrine, than he was in ortho-praxis; right living or right practice. With the simple statement that the Sabbath exists for people and not people for the Sabbath, he disposed of stacks of learned treatises on what was and was not permissible on the holy day. Jesus repeatedly refused to be separated from Samaritans, regarded as the spiritual outcasts, as the heathens, of his own day, and taught that a Samaritan could surpass even a Levite in goodness and truth.

Similarly, from the earliest times, sensitive Christians have insisted on seeing sanctity and holiness in the *pagan* philosophers, a holiness which was not only entirely consistent with Christianity, even though it occurred many centuries before Christ's birth, but which could even enrich and enhance Christian understanding. Such Christian spirits often incurred the wrath of their co-religionist over their fondness for pagans. Plato, Plotinus and some of the Stoics were the objects of this Christian veneration during the early centuries of Christianity, when for some reason Aristotle seems to have been lost. But once Aristotle was recovered by way of interaction with Islamic culture, he, too, became revered by great-souled Christians.

As has been indicated, during much of Christian history, the Greek philosophers were the only encounter in depth that Christians could have with non-Christian spirituality of an advanced sort. All this has changed in our own day. Jesuit novice masters enthusiastically study Hindu practice to gain greater insight into the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. A Christian of profound spirituality and deep social awareness, Thomas Merton, clearly ended his life as a universalist, without diluting his Catholicism or

his commitment to his Trappist community at all.

In fact, it is useful to reflect for a moment on the journey of Thomas Merton. He converted to Roman Catholicism while a student at Columbia University and a few short years later entered a Trappist monastery, one of the most rigorous spiritual communities in Christendom, and one in which the practice of silence is central. His first major publication as a Trappist monk was *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which became a best seller and which has been translated into scores of languages. It is a somewhat disturbing book. On the one hand, there is evident in it a towering spirituality, about which there can be no doubt. On the other hand, there is also an unmistakable bitterness and condescension with respect to anything not Roman Catholic. Even Anglican Christianity is treated witheringly by Merton's pen. On one occasion the author actually participated in Quaker worship at Flushing Monthly Meeting. It was, if his account is accurate, not one of Quakerism's better First Days, but he took it as being typical. Alas, this is the experience of Quakerism which is immortalized in this great work. In short, Merton's attitude in *The Seven Storey Mountain* reflects the intolerant enthusiasm of the newly converted.

With the passage of years in the practice of inner silence and in the disciplined rigors of monastic life, Thomas Merton's perspective gradually changed. He produced volume after volume of devotional literature in which the old harshness and chauvinism gradually disappeared and was replaced by a more genuine sort of Christian charity. In spite of his strict isolation he wrote with stunning insight on the great political and social issues of our time. Even more surprising, he eventually translated the writings of Chuang Tzu, one of the scriptures of Taoism. He developed an insightful introduction to a new translation of the *Bhavadgita*, and he wrote a perceptive study of Gandhi and of Gandhi's spiritual roots in Hinduism. He came to disown *The Seven Storey Mountain* and claimed to be struggling to live it down. Finally, near the end of his life, he was granted temporary leave from the Abbey of Gethsemane

and he made a joyous pilgrimage to the great spiritual masters of the Far East, including the Dalai Lama with whom he held loving and brotherly dialogues.

As we know, he met an accidental death while attending a convocation on the eremitical life held in Bangkok, Thailand, which drew together people from both eastern and western monastic communities.

Let us consider these words which Thomas Merton entered in his *Asian Journal* upon visiting the great Buddhist shrine of Polonnaruwa:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass and wet sand. The silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace . . . that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—*without refutation*—without establishing some other argument, For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening . . .

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious . . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem and really no *mystery*. All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with *dharmakaya* . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with . . . Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage had become clear and had purified itself. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton, page 233.*

We, like Thomas Merton, must disown the spiritual chauvinism of the past. We must recognize that in the field of spirituality we

are playing a zero sum game—it is not necessary to suppose that because we know our own faith to be true that, therefore, someone else's faith, in an equal and opposite measure, must be false.

Our experience of Truth is nourished through many things—a formula of Einstein's, the music of Beethoven, a beautiful sunset, the death of a loved one, the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Increasingly, it is possible to see that one can be nourished as well by other spiritual traditions. Is there any need to assume that Thomas Merton's Catholicism was in any measure diluted by his response to the great shrine at Polonnaruwa?

In their commitment to rediscover and to practice the essential Christianity of Jesus and his Apostles, our Quaker forebears also rediscovered and practiced essential Christianity's universalist spirit.

The concept of that of God in every person obviously has profoundly universalistic implications. Bound by no religious creeds or dogmas and exercising a tradition of experimental revelation, silent worship, direct individual relationship to God and openness and inclusiveness, the Religious Society of Friends incorporated a spaciousness which can welcome into membership people who are not Christian, and to be enriched by their contribution.

There are many examples of the universalist spirit in Quaker experience. Lucretia Mott, for example, was a good friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson and of other New England Transcendentalists. She averred, admittedly to the distress of some of her Quaker contemporaries, that since God is great and also loving, she fully expected that He would have provided a Messiah in any age and in any culture where one was needed.

Both George Fox and John Woolman, to their everlasting credit, recognized that the movement of Truth could be well observed among Native Americans, even though they were unacquainted with Jesus of Nazareth. John Woolman journeyed far and visited Indian communities at great personal risk during a time of warfare between them and the settlers. Yet, in spite of the polarized attitudes which

warfare commonly generates, Woolman testifies that he felt only love for the Indians; he found them measurably acquainted with “that Divine power which subjects the forward will of the human creature.” He sought to feel and to understand the Spirit and the life in which the Indians lived, “hoping to receive some instruction from them,” and to see, as well, if they might in any way be helped by his own following of the leadings of Truth during his visit. Woolman gave thanks that the Lord had strengthened him to make the journey in spite of the dangers of war and that he had manifested a fatherly care over him when, in his own eyes, he appeared to himself inferior to so many among the Indians. Woolman further recounts how, when he took his leave of them, an Indian who could not speak English and who had not understood any of Woolman’s dialogue, said in his own language: “I love to feel where your words come from.”

Certainly this is paradigmatic of the universal experience and perhaps it is one of the events which inspired Woolman to write the beautiful lines we all know and love, and, which so perfectly express the universalist spirit:

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren in the best sense of the expression.

William Penn expresses a similar sentiment in this *Reflections and Maxims*.

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion, and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, although the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers.

In his classic systematic statement of the Quaker faith, the

Apology, Robert Barclay makes the following observations about *the Nature of the Church Invisible*:

The Church . . . is nothing other than the society, gathering, or company of those whom God has called out of the world and the worldly spirit, to walk in his light and life . . . Aside from this Church there can be no salvation, because this Church . . . comprehend(s) all, regardless of what nation, kindred, tongue, or people they may be, who have become obedient to the holy light and testimony of God in their hearts. Although they may be outwardly unknown to and distant from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words and have the benefit of scriptures, yet they have become sanctified by their obedience and cleansed from the evil of their ways. For this is the universal or catholic Spirit, by which many are called from all the four corners of the earth, and they shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By it, the secret life is conveyed from the head and the heart to the extremities of the physical body by the blood running in the veins and the arteries. There may be members of this catholic Church not only among all the several sorts of Christians, but also among pagans, Turks, and Jews. They are men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart. They may be blind in their understanding of some things, and perhaps burdened with the superstitions and ceremonies of the sects in which they have been collected. Yet they are upright in their hearts before the Lord, aiming and endeavoring to be delivered from iniquity, and loving to follow righteousness. (Pages 172-3)

In more recent times, the late Howard Brinton, faculty member at the Quaker Colleges of Earlham, Guilford and Haverford, and with his wife Anna Brinton, co-director of the Quaker center for study and contemplation, Pendle Hill, begins his book *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism* with a comparative study of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Threefold Lotus Sutra of the Pure Dharma*, and the *Gospel of John*. He concludes that:

These three writings, when they express the loftiest conceptions

in their respective religions, show a remarkable similarity to one another. Though in many respects dissimilar, at their highest levels they are much alike. They are like persons who climb a mountain starting from different sides, only to find that the higher they climb the closer they get to one another.

Contemporary Quakerism will not realize its true destiny if it retreats from its traditional reconciliation of Christianity and universalism and resorts to a narrow, Christian sectarianism, or if it fails to attract, to admit into membership and to cherish non-Christians; but neither will it survive, I think, if there develops within Quakerism a climate which permits only such theological discourse among ourselves as might be admissible into a public school classroom. Quakerism's extraordinary vocation in the common human task of structuring the new age which is struggling to come to birth lies precisely in its traditional capacity to be both Christian and universalist, and not merely one or the other. I feel uneasy about a tendency among some to gnaw away at the specifically Christian content of Quakerism, as if seeking gradually to reduce it to a form of ethical culture, as I do about Christocentric Friends who seem to seek to import into Quakerism the sort of dogmatism and chauvinism which has plagued so much of the rest of Christian history. It is natural and useful for the theologies of individual Friends to vary widely. But is it not also a particular mission of Quakerism to embody a Christianity capable of the magnanimity and the devotion suitable to the essential collaborative process needed among people of faith the world over in the common task of advancing the spiritual transformations without which we shall all perish?

Clearly, Quakerism is summoned to an astonishing destiny. If it fails to live up to the magnificent duty, the fault will not be in Quakerism, but in ourselves.

In February of 1984, I was traveling with two other Friends on the island of Jamaica, visiting Quaker churches there in behalf of Friends United Meeting.

Although Jamaica is a small island, perhaps the size of Connecticut, the mountainous terrain and spectacular seacoast give it the grandeur of a continent. One of the Quaker churches my two colleagues and I were scheduled to visit was located high in the mountains, and to get to it required traversing a difficult, torturously winding road which ran steeply uphill along the sides of the canyon, down the center of which rushed the waters of a very lively mountain stream. From time to time along the way we encountered a small settlement whose inhabitants we would see doing laundry in the stream, or carrying water from it for some other household purpose. Eventually, very high up, where coffee is grown on the astonishingly steep slopes, we reached Cascade Friends Church, so named because from it, in the distance, yet higher overhead, one could see a long slender waterfall which fed the stream we had seen along the way.

Various local Friends had laid down their daily occupations to greet their foreign guests and they served a wonderful lunch of curried goat, rice and peas, and a punch of tropical fruit juices given a noticeable zap with a generous dollop of ginger flavoring. And as we spoke over lunch delicate mists began to gather around the jagged peaks which surrounded us. I felt certain that if a geologist had been among us he would have confirmed that the rugged landscape which we had traversed had been created by the wearing away of the mountains by the swift stream, the stream in turn being fed by the condensation of these mists which by their delicacy, seemed so striking a contrast to the rugged rocks around which they collected.

As I sat with our fellow Friends amid these steep slopes, I remembered the wonderful Chinese paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art back in New York City, paintings of mountains and mists, which depict scenes so much like those visible to us in Jamaica that day, even though the paintings were produced hundreds of years ago and in a place about as far away as one could get while still remaining on this planet earth. These beautiful

and delicate Chinese paintings reflect the Taoist philosophy of the culture from which they sprang, a philosophy which teaches us that human beings at their best are like a mountain stream: they live close to the earth, they seek the common level of life and they serve as they go along; when rooted in a spirit of gentleness like the mist, they can succeed with quiet patience in wearing away all that is brutal and hard in human nature. And I, having been brought by the mountain setting to mindfulness of another great message given on a mountain in Galilee, a message capable of filling every human need again and again, recognized how often in that remote Cascade Friends Church the same truths have been affirmed that have been sounded in my own meetinghouse amid the hubbub of New York City and which had also been understood by those great Chinese painters and calligraphers from worlds and cultures away: and it was possible to perceive, at least in that instant, the great merging of ages and of nations which Truth and faith makes possible.

In New York City, at the Quaker complex where I work, I was surprised and happy one day to see an old friend (and a Friend) from the midwest who stopped in to do some research in the Records Room of New York Yearly Meeting. My friend was looking up the minutes about the disownment of her mother by Oswego Monthly Meeting. The disownment occurred, as you can probably guess, because her mother married a person of the wrong faith. Now it was not that she married a Hindu, or a Roman Catholic, or a Jew, but Oswego Monthly Meeting, being a Hicksite meeting, disowned her mother because she had married an Orthodox Friend! At first blush this sounded mildly comical, but it quickly took on the coloration of tragedy as my friend went on to explain that because of the rift which this situation had caused, she had never even known her own grandparents.

If we can let our imaginations loose just for a minute, let us suppose that Lucretia Mott, St. Francis of Assisi and Mahatma Gandhi could meet each other. Would they not recognize a deep kinship? Certainly, they would be clear-minded about their diverse

devotional practices and doctrinal concepts and even about their very different philosophies of social change. Yet we would hardly expect any spirit of alienation, or of disownment, to arise among them.

The unity which universalism sees in the various religious faiths is not one of doctrine, nor of manner of worship, even though many similarities in these areas can be identified; rather the essential point of convergence is in the quality of the human person, the quality of spirit, which the sincere and selfless devotion to any of these different spiritual paths can produce. For spiritual wisdom is not something we know, but it is something we are, it is a quality of being. Our minds cannot contain or comprehend knowledge of God; for we cannot contain what contains us nor comprehend what comprehends us. We can embody spiritual truth, but we cannot adequately articulate it. Indeed, the longer the radius of our vision, the wider the circumference of mystery. Those who have a grasp of this never engage in debates about doctrine. They know that the Truth is to be lived, not merely to be pronounced by mouth and they know that by their so living, that which is unutterable will be rendered visible.

Thus, the unity among such spirits as Mott, Gandhi and Francis is beyond words and beyond concepts. We will experience it directly, and increasingly frequently, as our shrinking planet brings us closer to more and more people of sanctity from other religions. In this encounter we will not be creating a new unity with them. Rather, we will be rediscovering an old unity. We will discover that we have always been one with them but have only imagined that we were not.

We are told that in the beginning there was but one Word, a Word which is the Mother of all things, a Word of grace and truth. This Word abides within each and every one of us and within every human being ever called to life. Existing in the beginning before all other things were made, the primordial, saving Word was uttered out of silence and to silence we must return if we hope to

hear it again. People of faith everywhere are engaged in a common journey, a pilgrimage, to discover within themselves this Word and its revelation of the universal and eternal things upon which all right living and true peace is based. There are many paths possible on this journey of search and one of them always opens up to those who selflessly seek after it. For it is one of the characteristics of Truth that those who thirst after it eventually come to partake of it and to express it, as if the price at which Truth is bought is the sincere and pure longing for It itself. This is why we are promised that those who seek will surely find.

Let us, as Friends, then, share with all other people of faith the confidence that, having already found something that is supremely good, there is something more of inexhaustible measure which, together with them, we have yet to achieve.

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(Endnotes)

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“There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren”

—*John Woolman*

ABOUT QUF

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is a gathering of Friends who work to foster understanding among Quakers, and people from the diverse spiritual cultures which flourish in our globalized human community.

The Fellowship draws inspiration for its work from such traditional and respected statements of Quaker faith as are represented by the following:

[B]e patterns, be examples ... wherever you come; that your life and conduct may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you...

— George Fox

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names: it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no form of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity.

— John Woolman

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion, and when death takes off the mask, they will know one another though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers.

— William Penn

The work of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship expresses Friends' belief that there is a spirit of universal love in every person, and that a compassion-centered life is therefore available to people of all faiths and backgrounds.

QUF seeks to promote learning and dialog through publications, lectures, a weblog, fostering interaction on social media, and

publicizing related works. The Fellowship seeks to encourage appreciation of the diverse paths to that spirit available in humankind's various spiritual cultures, to overcome discord, and to foster openness and listening among people of different religious faiths. In carrying out this work we cooperate with Friends from every branch of Quakerism.

We seek, or create, opportunities for all Friends to engage in constructive dialogue among Quakers and with representatives of other spiritual traditions, in the hope that religious faith, although diverse, will become a force which unites rather than divides the human family. We seek to nurture that unity through lives of simplicity, humility, justice, mercy, and peace so that it becomes a beacon drawing together the human family in love and service to all earthly life •

— QUF Steering Committee, October 2009

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