

THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSALIST IDEAS IN QUAKERISM¹

Ralph Hetherington

Ways in which the term 'universalism' has been used

The terms 'universalist' and 'universalism' in the sense that they are now used by Quakers worldwide, were almost certainly first employed by John Linton in 1977 when he addressed members of the Seekers Association during London Yearly Meeting of that year. In his talk, entitled *Quakerism as Forerunner*, he said that Quakerism should "move towards a universalist position" and referred to "the universalism of the Quaker message". This address first appeared in *The Seeker* in the Spring of 1977 and was reprinted as the first issue of the QUG Pamphlet Series in 1979 [1] and in the American *Friends Journal* in October of the same year. The Quaker Universalist Group, founded in 1979, adopted the term, and by the time the American Quaker Universalist Fellowship was formed in 1983, it had become well established and widely used in the Quaker vocabulary. Of course the terms 'universalism' and 'universalist' are not new, and have already been used in other contexts. During the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 there were sessions of the 'World's Parliament of Religions' [2]. These were recalled in 1925 in a book edited by a Quaker, William Loftus Hare. He tells us that in these sessions "there was a persistent effort to sustain a universalist feeling" [3]. The *Universalist Church* in the USA, which believed in universal salvation, merged with the Unitarian Church some thirty years ago and the combined *Unitarian Universalist Church* has now adopted views which in many ways are similar to those of Quaker Universalists [4]. An *International Society for Universalism (ISU)* has also been founded and held 'The 1st World Congress of Universalism' in Warsaw in 1993. This Society

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publishes a quarterly called *Dialogue and Humanism*, which indicates its orientation.

There are at least two other theological meanings of 'Universalism'. John Ferguson in his *Encyclopaedia of Mysticism* [5] tells us that the term 'Universalism' refers to a strong stream of mysticism which holds that all human beings are one in and with God. This is to be found in Vedantism, Neoplatonism and Christian Mysticism. Marcus Braybrooke, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* edited by Richardson and Bowden [6], says that Universalism refers to a belief that ultimately all people will be saved. God does not coerce, but in his forgiving love never finally abandons anyone. This view, of course, does not accord with Calvinistic theology. Within Quaker circles, the term 'universalist' has come to be contrasted with the term 'christocentric'. However, a universalist approach would accept a christocentric view as being as valid as any other. Universalism would only be opposed to an exclusivist view that Christianity as the only valid religion. Rex Ambler in his essay *The End of Words* [7] describes what he calls a 'universalism of potential'. This affirms "the potential of all human beings to realise their unity with other human beings, and with them a unity with God". This, he asserts, "does not claim that actual religious experience will always be essentially the same". But it does get over the problem of the essentially anarchic implications of Quaker belief that inner experience is the source of truth and goodness which, he writes, "has helped to keep Quakers at arm's length from other churches for most of their 300 year history".

Early views

William Penn's book *The Christian Quaker* published in 1669 [8] expounded universalist ideas, although the term he used was not 'Universalism' but 'Gentile Divinity'. In this context, 'gentile' means 'heathen' or 'pagan' rather than non-Jewish. 'Divinity' is Penn's term for 'spirituality'. He asserted that the inward Light of Christ was present in all men and women everywhere. It was this light that led to spiritual insight, redemption and salvation. If this is so, it

would be hard to argue that this light is not equivalent to the Buddha Nature of Buddhism, the Brahman of Hinduism, or the Tao of Taoism. Moreover, it is directly in line with the teaching of the Fourth Gospel which refers to 'the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' [9].

It seems clear that any theology which is rigidly based on the Christian scriptures cannot be universalist, since there are biblical statements, or theological dogmas derived from the Bible, which stress the uniqueness of Christ. If something unique and indispensable happened when Jesus was born, lived, died and rose again, it would seem that those who have remained in ignorance of the gospel are irredeemable. Many Christians, of course, do not hold such rigid views. A universalist theology has to be based on a doctrine of personal revelation which has always been available to men and women everywhere and at all periods of history. The Quaker doctrine of the Inward Light could therefore be the basis for such a universalist view. For this to be so, the primacy of the Inward Light over scripture has to be established. Both Isaac Penington and George Fox were clear that this was so.

Isaac Penington

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. [10]

George Fox

Now the Lord hath opened to me by His invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the divine Light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all, and they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came to the Light of Life, and became the 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 then know where to find it in the Scriptures, though afterwards, searching the Scriptures, I found it. [11]

Robert Barclay in his *Apology* makes the same point:

Because the scriptures are only a declaration of the fountain and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal 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 all truth: therefore, according to the Scriptures the Spirit is the first and principal Leader.

[12]

It is interesting that George Fox in the passage quoted above, while claiming the primacy of the Inward Light, also claimed that his revelations were always confirmed by reference to the scriptures. However, this did not mean that the revelations were invalid if they were not confirmed by scripture, nor that the Inward Light and scripture were equivalent. Many of George Fox's quarrels with ministers and priests were about this very point. The Inward Light helped men and women to interpret the scriptures aright. The scriptures, on the other hand, could not be used to validate the Inward Light, although they could help in discerning a false leading.

The Quietist period.

It would be a small step for Quakers to change Fox's assertion that all his 'openings' were later confirmed by reference to scripture, to an assertion that any 'openings' not so confirmed must be false. To take this step, of course, would be to deny the primacy of the Inward Light and to leave the way open to fundamentalism. Like the early Quakers, Friends during the Quietist period of the 18th century, seemed to have stopped short of this, asserting only that the Inward Light helped men and women to interpret the scriptures aright. Indeed, in 1695 a few years after George Fox's death, London Yearly Meeting disowned George Keith who had been a friend of Robert Barclay, for holding that Friends were neglecting the

historic Christ when they stressed the importance of the Light within . Keith also denied the possibility that anyone, however enlightened, could achieve salvation if they had never heard the Christian gospel [13]

Robert Barclay made two assumptions in his *Apology*. The first, as we have seen above, was that the Inward Light was the principal leader to truth. The second was that there was an indissoluble link between the Inward Light and the Jesus of history [14]. During the Quietist period the first assumption was emphasised while the second was underplayed. This may have been because the Jesus of history could only be known through the study of scripture, and too much pre-occupation with the scriptures might impede the operation of 'pure openings' of the Light within. For the Quietists the scriptures were secondary. So apparently was thought itself, as Rufus Jones found when he was eldered by William Graham of Birmingham: "I was grieved at what thou said in meeting. Thou said that since sitting in the meeting thou hadst been thinking. Thou shouldst not have been thinking" [15]. In this connection it should, perhaps, be remembered that the term 'thought' is itself imprecise. It is true that the primary task in meeting for worship is to quieten one's errant thoughts and to bring one's mind to the still centre. However, this involves considerable concentration and is a far cry from making one's mind a blank, waiting for divine inspiration. Ministry during meeting will inevitably provide a theme on which many of those present will want to meditate. This also is thinking.

The Evangelical period.

Towards the end of the quietist period, some evangelical rumblings were heard, probably as a result of methodist influences. In 1805, Henry Tuke published his *Principles of Religion* which set out a more evangelical theology, and in the following year Philadelphia Yearly Meeting revised its Discipline to make it a matter for disownment for anyone to deny the divinity of Christ, the immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit or the authenticity of scripture [16]. These moves were seen by some Friends as leading away from the

doctrine of the primacy of the Inward Light and towards the absolute authority of scripture. Things came to a head in 1827 when Elias Hicks led a sizeable body of Friends to a separation from the main body on this very issue, the Hicksites holding that the Inward Light took precedence over scripture. London Yearly Meeting on the other hand, despite internal disagreements, managed to remain in one piece by stoutly avoiding what it saw as extremism from either side of the argument. This was shown in 1835 when Isaac Crewdson condemned the doctrine of the Inward Light in quite immoderate terms, declaring it to be an illusion and urging Friends to take the Bible as the one sure foundation for faith. London Yearly Meeting refused to budge and Crewdson and his followers left the Society [17].

Nevertheless, the underlying trend all through the major part of the 19th century was away from Quietism and the primacy of the Inward Light and towards Fundamentalism and the primacy of scripture. This can be nicely traced by comparing London Yearly Meeting epistles over this period. In 1827 the epistle contained the following passage:

Vital Christianity consisteth not in words but in power; and however important it is that we have a right apprehension of the doctrines of the gospel, this availeth not, unless we are regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit [18].

But by 1836 the epistle had changed its views as the following passage shows:

It has ever been, and still is, the belief of the Society of Friends that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were given by inspiration of God: and therefore the declarations contained in them rest on the authority of God Himself and there can be no appeal from them to any other authority whatsoever: that they are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus; being the appointed means of making known to us the blessed truths of Christianity: that they are the only divinely authorized record of the doctrines which we are bound as Christians to believe, and the moral principles which are to regulate our actions: that no doctrine which is not contained in them can be required of anyone to be believed as an article of faith: that whatsoever any man says or does which is contrary to the Scriptures, though under profession of the immediate

guidance of the Spirit, must be reckoned and accounted a mere delusion. [19]

This remained the dominant tenor of London Yearly Meeting epistles for the next fifty years. The number of biblical texts quoted in the epistles rose from eleven in the 1840s to forty-five in the 1880s. [20]

A Reasonable Faith.

Meanwhile other pressures were developing. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and in 1860 seven distinguished Anglicans supported intelligent, informed and scholarly criticism of biblical texts. The tensions and ferment in religious thinking now built up, and the Society of Friends began to feel the pressures. A Friend, David Duncan, was disowned in 1871 for applying contemporary criticism to the Bible [21]. By 1884 the tide of new opinion could be held back no longer. Three anonymous Friends published a document called *A Reasonable Faith* which offered a lucid, forward-looking alternative to evangelicalism, yet with a strong commitment to biblical reference, but to a Bible subject to intelligent and informed historical and textual criticism. [22]

The Richmond Declaration of Faith

However, evangelical Friends in America were by no means deterred by these developments in Britain. Two prominent British evangelical Friends, Joseph Bevan Braithwaite and Joseph John Gurney, had visited America in order to take part in the ferment there which had already led to the Hicksite Separation of 1827 and to the controversy between Joseph John Gurney and John Wilbur over the period 1837-40 while Gurney was doing an evangelical tour of America. John Wilbur had visited England in 1831-33 and had become alarmed at Gurney's views on the infallibility of scripture. [23]

Things came to a head in 1887 when a conference was called in Richmond, Indiana. This was convened, as much as anything, to counter a move by some American Yearly Meetings to introduce what they called 'ordinances'. These were, in fact, the sacraments of baptism and the

eucharist. The conference was therefore a genuine and laudable attempt to re-assert Quaker principles [24]. However, it was also concerned to oppose the Hicksite meetings which had not even been invited to send delegates. The Declaration of Faith which was adopted at the conference therefore included a statement to the effect that the basis of Quaker belief had to be scriptural and that personal revelation in the shape of the Inward Light had to be subordinate to scripture. This statement was in fact written by Joseph Bevan Braithwaite who took it from the London Yearly Meeting epistle of 1836, quoted above. This Declaration of Faith was brought back to London Yearly Meeting by Braithwaite, in the hope that it would also be adopted in Britain. London Yearly Meeting, however, had other ideas. It declined to endorse the Richmond Declaration of Faith on the grounds that it was too nearly a credal statement, leaving insufficient room for the 'primacy of the Inward Light of Christ in the experience of Friends' [25].

The Manchester Conference and after.

This heralded the end of the domination of evangelical Friends in Britain and paved the way for the great Manchester Conference in 1895 which led to the liberal revival and to a rational and informed criticism of the biblical texts. Nevertheless the Richmond Declaration is still accepted by the majority of Yearly Meetings worldwide, the major exceptions being the Hicksite and Wilburite Yearly Meetings in America, London Yearly Meeting and most of the European Yearly Meetings. Friends, therefore, remain divided over the matter of the primacy of the Inward Light over scripture.

Since this is an issue central to universalist theology, it merits further discussion. As we have seen, Barclay's first assumption did in fact assert the primacy of the Inward Light. His second assumption, concerning the link between the Inward Light and the historical Jesus, needs further examination. Howard Brinton [26] deplors the confusion between the historical Jesus as described in the first three gospels and the eternal Christ of the fourth gospel. If we

are to take seriously the suggestion that the Inward Light helps us to interpret the scriptures aright, then the historical Jesus as recorded in the scriptures must also come under that scrutiny. Since many Friends worldwide now accept the validity of biblical criticism, the Jesus of history has become a more problematical figure. The gospel story is valuable not because it appears in scripture but because it speaks to our condition. Some features of the story we find inspiring, others features less so.

What Quaker universalists mean by 'universalism' today

On every publication of the Quaker Universalist Group in the United Kingdom, there is a statement which runs:

The Quaker Universalist Group believes that spiritual awareness is accessible to men and women of any religion or none, and that no one Faith can claim to be a final revelation or to have a monopoly of truth.

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship in the United States of America declares:

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our dialogue with all who search sincerely. We affirm the unity of God's creation.

Contrary to what is sometimes asserted, neither the QUG nor the QUF is in any way opposed to a christocentric view. Indeed, both groups have many members whose spiritual imagery and belief are thoroughly christocentric. The universalist position is, by definition, universal, so that it includes any sincerely held view. If there is a theological position to which universalism is opposed, it is that of exclusive religious fundamentalism whether based in Christianity or any other religion.

Ralph Hetherington had been a member of the Society of Friends for over 50 years when he wrote this pamphlet in 1995. He worked as a professional psychologist both as a practitioner and as a university teacher, and in 1975 he gave the Swarthmore Lecture on the psychology of religious experience.

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