

Universal Quakerism

by

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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 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 (i.e. around 1980).

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*¹ 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 more important things 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 worshipping group. Quakers speak of the Inward Light when they refer to their direct personal experience of God. George Fox had no doubt of 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 *thou* Say? Art thou a child of the Light, and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?²

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

The second fundamental of Quakerism is the realisation 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.³

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 be saved only 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.⁴

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 inadequate. But this is not something, once it is recognised, that is dwelt upon or emphasised. 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 Hick⁵ 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 at 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 series⁶ 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 Hick⁷ 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 many religions, all equally valid, but is a 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 a thoroughgoing religious pluralism. He puts the case as follows⁸:

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 recognised 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 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 Barclay⁹ 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 of 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, man 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 therefore become true members of this Catholic Church.

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 Barclays' *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, wrote¹¹:

Every religious system has its *Quakers* – those who turn from the outward and the legal and the institutional, and focus their attention in the divine that is within. There is much fellowship between Friends and the mystics of other religions. 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 realise 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 expressed a similar view when she wrote¹²:

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, of 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 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 into 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 baptised nor confirmed, since we are committed to no creed, and since we do not require a specifically Christian commitment from our members. *Church Government* states¹³:

Membership, therefore, we see primarily in terms of discipleship, and so impose no clear-cut 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 passage¹⁴:

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. This 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* states¹⁵:

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."¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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. These 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, archaeological and literary scrutiny. Don Cupitt tells us that in the light of modern scholarship, there is very little historical certainty left in the gospel story¹⁸. 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 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 now 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 that we have one of the best ways of arriving at group decisions. Our insistence on the 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 may itself, 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 Robinson¹⁹ 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 organised 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 face of a reactionary opposition. Our *Christian Faith and Practice* is regularly revised [most recently in 1994, after this pamphlet was published and retitled Quaker Faith and Practice] 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?

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