

# Readings For Universalists

edited by

**Ralph Hetherington**

## 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 Penington, 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 Penington**

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 a true shadow, as the substance is a true substance.<sup>1</sup>

### **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.<sup>2</sup>

### **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.<sup>3</sup>

### **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, in 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.<sup>4</sup>

### **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 no one better way and that God needs all kinds of people and ways of living through which to manifest Himself in the World."<sup>5</sup>

### **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.<sup>6</sup>

## **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 quest 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 of 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.<sup>7</sup>

*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.*<sup>8</sup>

## **THE PRIMACY OF 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 by Margaret Fell of Fox's sermon at Ulverston Church. There follow statements on the same theme by Isaac Penington 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.<sup>9</sup>

### **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 he 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 Light and hast walked in the Light and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?"<sup>10</sup>

### **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.<sup>11</sup>

### **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 principal Leader.<sup>12</sup>

### **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.<sup>13</sup>

*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 opposed 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 could 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 a remote 'dispensation', he insisted that God enlightens every soul that comes 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.<sup>14</sup>

## 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 (Christian Faith and Practice, London Yearly Meeting, 1960):*

Are you striving to develop your mental powers, and to use them to the glory of God? Are you loyal to the truth; and do you 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 Penington**

Even in the Apostles' days, Christians were too apt to strive after a wrong unity and uniformity in outward practices and observations, 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.<sup>15</sup>

### **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.<sup>16</sup>

### **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.<sup>17</sup>

### **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.<sup>18</sup>

### **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?<sup>19</sup>

### **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 inquiry, 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 whatever 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 an 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.<sup>20</sup>

### **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 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 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. That is to say, if someone is born to Muslim parents in Egypt or Pakistan, he is likely 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 America or Australasia, 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 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 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.<sup>21</sup>

### **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 the 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.<sup>22</sup>

### **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 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.<sup>23</sup>

## **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 balanced 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 sceptically at the authority of the Bible and the 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.<sup>24</sup>

*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 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 freed from their cultural trappings. Although this discovery was given a Christian framework by Friends of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, now that we know more of other religions many Friends feel that this supporting Christian frame is not our distinguishing mark.<sup>25</sup>

## **A MODERN FABLE**

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

### ***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 and made 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 liked 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 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 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 realise that they all got their flour from the same source. Then they thought it might be a good idea if they got together and agreed on a common recipe for bread which they could all 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 own 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. They were thus 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.

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