

THE PLACE OF JESUS IN QUAKER UNIVERSALISM

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Introduction

Universalism, in my experience, is widely if vaguely discerned within the Society of Friends as an unsettling threat - a sort of disease which, if left unchecked, could gnaw away at the vitals of Quakerism. Above all, it is seen by some as a sanitized form of Quakerism in which Jesus and Christianity have been consciously or unconsciously downgraded. Or worse than that: Jesus is not merely treated as one of the great spiritual leaders, but is studiously ignored. In doing so, Universalism has placed itself on the margins of the Society - or, some would say, beyond them.

In fact, I believe that far from being "fringe", Universalism is part of the very mainstream of Quakerism. The terminology may have changed a little, and our horizons may have broadened, but much of what the early Quakers said and what Universalism is saying seem to me to be one and the same thing. This applies especially to the status of Jesus, where, I would submit, the differences between Universalism and mainstream or orthodox Quakerism reflect an ambivalence going back to the very origins of the Society itself.

Further, it is worth looking at the changing face of Quakerism today. The people who will carry the Society forward into the next century will, by and large, have come to the Society by a very different path. To preserve the Society's essential ethos, it strikes me as imperative that we rediscover our roots. In doing so the apparent divisions between the Universalists and mainstream Quakerism will, I believe, fade into insignificance, and the Society, instead of being divided, will acquire the kind of base it needs to remain a vigorous, dynamic and genuinely spiritual organization. An essential element of that base concerns the way we see Jesus.

In examining the place of Jesus in Quaker Universalism, it is as well to remind ourselves what Universalism claims to be:

"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." Similarly 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." Its aims include promoting "the view that the various religions are all paths towards a truth that is greater than any one religion", and "to encourage the Society of Friends to fulfil its potential as a religious community which aims to provide a spiritual path for seekers from any religious background or none".

Early Quaker Views

We may next compare these statements with the attitudes of the early Quakers. In doing so I am not seeking to justify Universalism by appealing to the "authority" of founding fathers - a habit from which Quakers are by and large mercifully free. The touchstone of "truth" is inward and direct - which is what the early Quakers held, and what Universalism holds. Establishing historical continuity is important only in so far as that tradition still speaks to our condition.

To begin with George Fox, his famous experience that "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition" was a mystical revelation of inner truth. The end to his lengthy struggle was based on inward experience, not Biblical authority: "For I saw in that Light and Spirit which was before Scripture was given forth," and "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 of God?" Again: "And then the Lord did gently lead me along, and did let me see his

love, which was endless and eternal, and surpasseth all the knowledge that men have in the natural state, or can get by history or books."

The hallmark of this inward revelation was light and love: "I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that also I saw the infinite love of God; and I had great openings." Or William Penn: "The Light of Christ within, who is the Light of the world, and so a light to you that tells you the truth of your condition, leads all who heed unto it out of darkness into God's marvellous light; for light grows upon the obedient."

Other early Quakers expressed the same theme of direct, personal awareness of the Divine within, in which the Scriptures play a secondary role. Isaac Pennington wrote, "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." As Lorna Marsden has put it, the early Quakers "were not primarily interested, as the church has been, in an alleged supernatural event in history ... because they saw the world of human experience as *metaphysically* Christ-centred, always and for all time." "Nayler, and the early Friends, saw behind and beyond the gospel figure the inner truth of which he is the symbol - the profound truth Christ is ourselves, humanity."

This brings us to the vital distinction between the historical *Jesus* and the universal *Christ* within. The distinction is not a matter of splitting words: it is central to the divisions that have been evident in Quakerism from the earliest times, to the advent of the evangelical wing in the United States in the 19th century, and to the fact that until recently, Quakerism had for many years felt unable to subscribe to the basic tenets of the British Council of Churches concerning the position of Jesus. The one path - emphasizing the "Christ" -

leads inward and is universal; the other - the primacy of the historical Jesus - leads to fundamentalism and exclusivism.

Instead of the exclusivist claims of both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Robert Barclay wrote, "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 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 of their souls become true members of this Catholic church."

This reminds me very much of a memorable remark by Vivekenanda, Ramakrishna's great disciple, who welded Hinduism into a coherent body of thought and experience and did so much to bring it to the outside world around the beginning of the century. Asked how he would view a devout Christian, Vivekenanda replied that he would automatically regard him as a Hindu.

Moving forward a little in time from Barclay, we find John Woolman saying, "I found no narrowness respecting sects and opinions, but believed that sincere, upright-hearted people in every Society who truly loved God were accepted of him." Similarly he writes, "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." These two statements

are as good a summary as one could wish to find of Universalism. One might add that Woolman's attitudes did much to sway the post-Quakerist 19th century debate within Quakerism in the U.S. back towards the optimistic humanitarianism springing from the Inner Light.

The status of Jesus

When we compare these statements of the universality of religious experience and the central importance of the inner light with the descriptions of Universalism I gave earlier, we may well ask: what is the difference? For Universalism surely focusses on the two central tenets of Friends' belief, which form the sum total of Quaker doctrine: the Inner Light, and 'that of God in every man'.

The difference centres on the status of Jesus. From the very beginning, this issue has been what John Punshon calls "the central ambiguity of Quakerism" that is, deciding between a traditional view of the historical Jesus, the redeemer and Saviour, and the view that divine grace is universal and requires no intermediary. It is an ambiguity found in Fox's teaching, in Robert Barclay's *Apology* of 1676 - for many years the standard work of Quaker theology - and in the tensions that led to the rise of the evangelical wing of Quakerism in the 19th century.

At least in this country, I do not think there are many Quakers who would regard Jesus in the same way as, say, a fundamentalist Baptist, i.e. who felt that only through Jesus could they be saved from sin and that one has to be born again. Such doctrines run directly counter to the Quaker emphasis on inward awareness and the sharing of the wordless in corporate silence. It is true that George Fox and the others had a good deal to say about Christ as Saviour and about the propitiation of sin, atonement and redemption, but I think this needs to be seen in the context of the time, when such thinking was deeply ingrained. Fox also said, "And

therefore none can be a minister of Christ Jesus but in the eternal Spirit, which was before the Scriptures were given forth; for if they have not his spirit, they are none of his." His emphasis is on "the power and light of Christ", and he refers to the "Seed of God within, which is Christ." As Melvin Endy notes, "Fox could say on one occasion that the true cross that Christians should value was not an 'outstanding' thing of stick or stone but the power of God as it comes to man's unrighteous acts, and then at other times state in the strongest terms the necessary atoning value of Christ's death."

Early Quakerism was not theological but intuitive, and has largely remained so ever since. And that was the key difference. The Inner Light and that of God in every man take over from the emphasis on man's essential sinfulness and the dualistic conception of fallen man and the Divine Father. Salvation for the Quakers was not in the world to come but now - and available to all. As John Punshon sees it, the central Quaker doctrine put forward by Fox and the others was "that the 'light' of Christ is in everyone, regardless of their religion, culture, nationality race or anything else." To Fox, he writes, "one condition was necessary. It was not to search the scriptures. It was not to discover the reality of the passion in Jerusalem all those years ago. It was not to realise that one's sins were remitted at the price of a debt too great ever to be discharged. It was simpler than that - it was to exercise true repentance, to turn to the living Christ within, by whom alone the reality of these other discoveries would be revealed."

Thus, at the one extreme, Fox and the early Quakers offend against Protestantism because they emphasize love not sin. As Rufus Jones noted, the Quakers did not hold with the Puritan notion of "dispensation" or an elect few, through whom God's will was worked. God's light shone in all men - and women.

At the other, Roman Catholic, extreme, Fox offended

because he was tilting against the temporal authority of the church. Direct, individual revelation and awareness of the divine cut the ground from beneath the feet of the established church. The Quakers had no priesthood and did not regard buildings as specially holy.

As William Braithwaite notes in his study of early Quakerism, "This great affirmation, that every man had received from the Lord a measure of light which, if followed, would lead to the Light of Life, was in conflict with the current Puritan conceptions of the nature of God and human nature ... The natural man belonged to an undivine order of life, marred by the Fall, and under the dominion of Satan." It is because Fox insists that man can be pure and without sin - that is, by living in the light - even here on earth that he is repeatedly flung in gaol.

Universalists do not deny the validity of Jesus's teachings; nor would they have difficulty with the idea of the "Christ within", as another term for the Inner Light. This has been beautifully summed up by Lorna Marsden: "This Light within the Hindu calls *Atman* - that condition of the spirit that is one with *Brahman* - as the Son is one with the Father. These are words that convey what the gospel of John calls the 'Word', but they convey it stumblingly, in a veiled manner, imperfectly. They express the ineffable consciousness within humanity of its divine affinity. The vessel of this consciousness has been for the West the figure of Christ but it is one vessel the world over, in whatever name - and we fill it ourselves. It is not the elusive historical Jesus with which we are finally concerned, not the elaborate Christology of the churches and their creeds. It is the reality of the inner human condition on which the mysterious figure of Christ opens a door."

Modern scholarship - especially textual analysis - is increasingly calling into question much of the Gospels. Quite apart from the new material provided by the Gnostic Gospels - especially the *Gospel of Thomas* - there are the inner

contradictions and inconsistencies, the passages evidently grafted on at a later point, and the deliberate incorporation of Old Testament mythology and prophecy; in short, the authors' perceptions and convictions intrude and make them slant the story in a particular way to give it even more impact, coherence and credence.

But does this really matter? What appears to have happened 2,000 years ago was an extraordinary upwelling of the spirit. A story, timeless and profound, unfolded. Those close to the actual events of the time were inspired to convey it in a way that was universal and immediate. Many of these were deep, subliminal truths - such as the dying to the self - that could only be conveyed in symbolic or apparently literal terms. This magnificent efflorescence of the spirit underpinned an entire civilization and has indeed inspired art ever since. It is this - the intangible, deep inner truths expressed by the life of Jesus and the writings inspired by it - that speaks to us with an undiminished freshness to this day. The story of Jesus is our story; we have created it, out of the depths of our spiritual consciousness; we carry it forward.

However much Quaker Universalists might reverence the historical Jesus, and draw inspiration from his teachings and life, they do not regard him as the unique Son of God. If Jesus literally is the Son, then God becomes a narrow, anthropomorphic concept; if we interpret "God" as a shorthand for the inexpressible, "Son" then loses its generally received meaning - and certainly any connotations of uniqueness. Nor could they accept Christianity as a unique revelation "based on a moment in history of God's choosing," as the Bishop of London has put it. So also Universalists shy away from concepts such as redemption, atonement and sin.

One of the mysteries of Christianity is how it has survived and indeed flourished for so long when based around the doctrine that Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of a mankind created in the image of his Father. While this offends against logic at even the most elementary of levels, it

is, when viewed allegorically or symbolically rather than as a literal fact, a graphic and beautiful mythological representation of the core teaching of the perennial philosophy, namely the dying to the self. Paul's particular genius lay in synthesizing the Egyptian tradition of the risen king (the Osiris legend) with the Judaic teachings of the sacrificial lamb and the Messiah. In the melting pot of religious ideas in the Middle East at that time, this had an extraordinary integrative cogency. But in doing so it converted the metaphor of our individual spiritual journey into an historical event, replacing inward revelation by mediation and authority.

Dan Seeger, writing in 1982, put it very well. Noting that an awareness of the Inner Light, either as an individual or as a group, is an experience ordinarily termed as mystical, he goes on to say that "-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."

What it comes down to, then, is whether we regard Jesus as our Saviour, or as a great source of revelation of the Inward Light. The same tension is evident in the relationship between the church and the great mystics in the three or four centuries before Quakerism began. Because "knowing God" undermined the priesthood, the mystics were forced to speak in a kind of code, and choose their words carefully. Those most vividly expressing the ultimate truths for which the church stood hovered perilously on the brink of heresy, like Meister Eckhardt - some indeed lost their lives.

There is a further reason why Universalists have problems with their perceptions of the historical Jesus. It is that there are as many such Jesuses as there are observers. Our image or perception of Jesus depends among other things on our upbringing, education, familiarity with the Gospels and other writings, our knowledge of life in Roman Palestine, and indeed

our mood at the time. In that sense, images of Jesus not only differ from person to person, but differ over time for the same person. At certain times we may be mainly impressed by the miracles; at others by the parables, or again by the outflow of love and acceptance, especially towards those on the margins of society. Indeed, we could even say that our image of Jesus is necessarily changing from moment to moment as our knowledge and experience change. If, for example, we read a book such as Morton Smith's *Jesus the Magician*, we will never see Jesus in quite the same way again. We cannot possibly convey to others the precise image we have, as it will be filtered through their particular perceptions, knowledge and beliefs. In precisely the same way, the authors of the Gospels saw Jesus in their own particular way. In conveying what they did they were necessarily selective and subjective, like any reporter. This becomes very evident when we read fuller accounts in the *Gospel of Thomas* of what Jesus is purported to have said (for example on being as a little child to enter the Kingdom). There can, therefore be no such thing as the historical Jesus (in the same way that a biography can at best be definitive for the age in which it is written).

Now it may be objected that this indeed applies to any person, thing or fact we perceive. Just so. All perception is, ultimately, subjective, and its "truth" partial and contingent. Our familiarity with the historical Jesus is, then, at best a vehicle for creating inner awareness, or receptiveness towards the "Christ within".

I do not think the founding Quaker fathers (and mothers) would have had much difficulty with the above. When for example the objection was voiced to William Penn that the universal light in men could not be a "saving" light as it did not tell of Christ who was born of Mary, suffered and died, Penn replied that the historical Christ was not the whole Christ but merely one mode of the eternal Christ's existence.

In so far as the status of Jesus is a stumbling block between Universalists and others, one of the main reasons

has to do with authority. Whatever their views on Jesus and Christianity may be (and they vary considerably), Universalists are, I would submit, firmly in the Quaker tradition in their emphasis on the Inward Light. Where the basic authority for what is "true" or "not true" is the Inner Light (both personal and corporate), it can be difficult to accept the element of insecurity inherent in the Christocentric position, relying as it does on the greater measure of certainty that orthodox Christian doctrine purports to provide. It is this objection which, I think, lies at the heart of the "anti-Jesus" feelings that Universalists are sometimes (falsely, in my view) perceived as having - and it is a very Quakerly objection.

At the same time, my feeling is that the difficulties are sometimes created not so much by Christocentric Quakers (at least in this country - the situation may well be different in the evangelical, pastoral tradition in the US) as by Universalists themselves. Among other things because of vexation at the way Christianity was (in their view) hi-jacked by Paul and returned to the Judaic traditions of appeasement and redemption, there has been a certain tendency (by no means confined to Universalists) to react over-strongly to the whole idea of Jesus. I myself think it a pity that so much of Jesus has been removed in the new "Questions and Counsel". It can (speaking from my own experience) be difficult for a Universalist to find a place for Jesus that is non-dogmatic and not literalist. Because of the suffocating narrowness of so much of formal Christianity, as it has evolved, there is a tendency among some Universalists to push Jesus away altogether. So I think there is a need here for Jesus to be approached in a more symbolic way, for all the fears that this might slip into a literal, paternal and authoritarian Saviour figure.

This applies not just to "official" or self-declared Universalists, but more widely within the Society of Friends. One gets the impression that, not infrequently, Universalists end up taking the rap for unpopular views that are in fact held

by others within the Society. Much of the current debate is, I feel, not so much between Christocentric Quakers and Universalists as it is between Christocentric Quakers and a much broader group, many of whom are disaffected by orthodox Christianity but are not really of a Universalist persuasion, or only very loosely so. But these are very broad generalizations, and we will each have our own views.

The Christian framework

A further, closely related reason why mainstream Quakerism and Universalist ideas may be at odds centres on the view as expressed by Katherine Wilson 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 in the 17th Century, now that we know more of other religions many Friends feel that this supporting Christian frame is not our distinguishing mark" (*The Friend*, January 1968).

Although this is a serious point, it is to my mind far from an insuperable difficulty. The quote comes from 1968 - i.e. well before the Quaker Universalist Group was founded - and it is indicative of a great sea-change within Quakerism. The real question, or "threat", posed by Universalism is: to what extent does the concentration on the Inward Light mean that Quakerism needs to draw on its Christian background? For a long time - over three centuries - Quakerism drew on Christian tradition because there was no alternative, or at least no necessity to do anything else. Quakerism regarded itself in the early days as a reversion to the essential truths of the Gospels. It was, therefore, natural that Quakerism should continue to draw on its Christian origins, and this made it more accessible and acceptable within an overwhelmingly Christian culture than a movement based purely on inner awareness.

Quakerism has always been mercifully free of theology. At the same time, Quakerism is corporate, and ministry plays an important role. People wish to share their experience of the Inner Light, and to translate it into action. That requires words for what is essentially beyond words. And that in turn requires symbols or metaphors - of which the Inner Light is of course one.

The Gospels as symbol or metaphor

What should these tools be, and where should we get them from? The Gospels, if properly read, abound in the most wonderful imagery that can help us to conceptualize and convey the mystical communion found in the silence. It is, to me, a particularly interesting fact that so many great mystics and teachers in the East - Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, the Ramana Maharshi, Krishnamurti - to name but a few - repeatedly turned to the Gospels to illustrate what they were trying to convey.

So it's all there in the Gospels, and the East can help us look at it through different eyes. The best exposition of the Sermon on the Mount that I have read, for example, is that by Swami Prabhavanada in *Vedanta for the Western World* edited by Christopher Isherwood. Seen in this light, Jesus's teachings come marvellously alive and ring far truer than the orthodox Christian interpretation of them, with their emphasis on the Pauline doctrines of sin and redemption. "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God," and "The Kingdom of heaven is within": that is the essential message the East gets from the Gospels, and it is one that ties in perfectly with Quakerism.

So why can't Universalists simply draw on the Gospels as the best way of putting the "core" of every great religion into words? I think they could, and some do - but some have a mental block about doing so, as the Gospels have become so encrusted with an overlay of distorted interpretation over the years. To my mind this is a pity. I suspect that as time goes

by, the aversion on the part of some Universalists to making use of the Gospels will diminish, and a rediscovery of their essential truths will become more likely.

By way of illustration, let me take one small verse that has been the source of endless trouble, "No man cometh to the Father but by me." This is a red rag to a Universalist bull, who is apt to start snorting about the "Scandal of Particularity". I have done so myself many times. Gerald Priestland has said that "this apparently arrogant proclamation has always been a stumbling block to my progress".

But it is quite possible to look at this statement in quite a different, less literal way. For those who believe in Enlightenment, it creates no problems at all, and it is interesting that Eastern teachers do not appear to stumble over this point. The position is well summed up in the following quote:

"I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh to the father but by me."

That has been misinterpreted over the centuries, and has been the foundation of a lot of dogma. A lot of mistakes have been brought into being because of the misinterpretation of those words. Christ obviously meant that it was in following in His footsteps, in other words becoming like unto Him, sacrificing the physical aspects of things, realizing the spiritual power and grace that dwelt within all men, in developing that, and thinking of the things of the Spirit, and overcoming the flesh in consequence - that is 'the way, the truth and the life'."

Never mind that these words are allegedly a communication from the dead by Cosmo Lang, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. We should be open to their truth however they may have come to us, and they illustrate particularly well the different, more mystical way we can look at Jesus's life and teaching.

Let me take another example, the beatitude "Blessed are they that mourn" - a statement that all too often is treated

superficially, as some kind of bromide: "There, there, our heavenly Daddy will soon make it better."

Instead of treating these words as a text for a funeral sermon, let us look at how Swami Prabhavanada interprets them. "Before we are ready to realize God, we must purify our hearts, we must prepare ourselves. Christ teaches us how to do this. First of all, we must free ourselves from the vanity of our earthly ego and possession, and from the vanity of our learning. If an aspirant feels that he is rich in the world's goods, or that he knows a great deal, he cannot make spiritual progress: he has to feel, as it were, alone - that everything is in vain. 'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.' When we feel that we are poor in spirit, then we feel that real lack, that loss of God within ourselves ... The mourning which Christ calls 'blessed' is very rare - because very few people feel this spiritual loss, this loneliness."

Similarly there are all sorts of other familiar statements in the Gospels that can be looked at in a totally different light.. "He who loves his life shall lose it" (in the sense of not clinging to the apparent self or ego); "Judge not, that ye be not judged" is not just a negative injunction but tells us to see that of God in every man, and that we cannot possibly enter into all the complexities of another's mind and experiences; and perhaps above all "Love thy neighbour as thyself" - a precept which has given some great trouble as they find little to love in themselves, or, penetrating deeper, cannot see how their love for others can be equated with the *loss* of love for the self Jesus speaks of. Here, Jesus is saying that the inner awareness leads us to the love of God and that, in turn, that love extends to all creation as the apparent boundaries of the self dissolve. If we do not love the Christ-within, we cannot truly love our neighbour.

Contemporary relevance of Jesus and the Gospels

One could go right through the Gospels in this vein. If we are looking for a "handbook" to put into words the core of all religions, we need then go no further than the Gospels - or at very least they provide an outstanding starting point.

However, much the same could no doubt be said of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Dhammapada or the Buddhist sutras. Universalists do not like to confine themselves to any one path. That is understandable: the real question is whether we take Jesus's teaching as a basis, and work outwards, drawing inspiration from other sources, or instead draw equally from all sources to create a kind of core synthesis of all the great faiths. Here I find myself very much in agreement with Dan Seeger:

"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 in a 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 as 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."

That particular vocation, to my mind, centres on the *love* so characteristic of Christian mysticism, and the way in which Christianity translates the mystic vision not into the intro-

version of the hermit's cave but into action: works and service. In this sense, Christianity seems to me uniquely to blend the individual and corporate inner communion with social concern. Christianity stands apart for its emphasis on *community*: whereas Hinduism turns inward, to the soul or Atman, Christianity reaches beyond to our neighbour. This sense of community is very much more than just a social code of sharing and being helpful: at its heart is the profound mystical truth that no man is an island.

The changing face of Quakerism

In examining the place of Jesus in Quaker Universalism, Dan Seeger's point about the need to attract non-Christians is particularly relevant. It is as well to bear in mind that, as noted earlier, the people who will be carrying the Society forward into the next century will have come to Quakerism by very different paths from most Quakers today. The formation of the Universalists Group a decade ago may be seen as an expression of that very change.

Until recently, the vast majority of Friends were either birthright Quakers or came to the Society because they had not found what they were looking for in the Church of England or (less commonly) Roman Catholicism and the Non-Conformist churches.

All this is changing. Orthodox Christianity has lost its hold on society; many young people now grow up having never sung a hymn and with a very slender familiarity with the Bible. Prayer is no longer commonplace, churchgoing the exception. At school children learn not just about Christianity but all the great faiths - which are accessible in the form of readily available literature in a way they have never been before. Add to that television, travel and the fact that we live in a multiracial society, and it becomes evident that young people are now exposed to far more varied influences than used to be the case.

Zen, Transcendental Meditation, Hare Krishna and all sorts of other Eastern movements have established themselves in the West. At the same time as this rise in interest in the East, there has been an enormous growth of interest in psychological development and self-awareness.

These two broad movements have, it seems fair to say, been both a consequence and a cause of the decline in orthodox religion. Certainly the two are closely allied, and it is interesting that there is a discernible trend within psychotherapy (in its many guises) towards greater acceptance of the spiritual dimension.

The spiritual dimension is openly acknowledged in Psycho-synthesis, but it can also take a more disguised form. This came home to me forcibly during an Insight Seminar which I attended in London. Although the terminology was consistently "neutral" and secular, the Seminar was (I felt) in fact deeply spiritual in nature, and in some ways curiously akin to Quakerism. Instead of the Inner Light, we were encouraged to look at the Inner Beauty in ourselves; "that of God in every man" was the Inner Beauty we saw in others; what is often termed "God" was called "the Universe", while prayer was "listening to the Universe", and meditation was called guided imagery.

Here was a group of people yearning to reach out and to love and be loved. Where, I wondered, would they go after the Seminar? What with the shared silences and awareness of Inner Beauty, I could not but help feeling how much many of them would feel at home in a Quaker meeting. It made me think that in the future, many people will be coming to Quakerism by this route, rather than as disaffected Anglicans or through universalism. What will Quakerism have to offer such people?

Here, it seems to me, there is a very real opportunity. If we can get away from the literalist interpretations of redemption and the resurrection, the way is opened up to an extraordinarily rich appreciation of the psychology of the

Gospels. The symbolism of Jesus's life is very powerful, and this is why, in my view, Christianity has survived down the ages, despite the literalist accretions. The archetypes to be found in Jesus's life and teachings have spoken to people with a subconscious immediacy. It is the opportunity of this age to bring that immediacy to the more conscious level.

Once again it takes the East to see what we have obscured. Radakrishnan wrote that Jesus was best understood as "a mystic who believes in the inner light. ... ignores ritual and is indifferent to legalistic piety." He goes on to say; "The abandonment of the ego is the identification with a fuller life and consciousness. The soul is raised to a sense of its universality ... In Gethsemane, Christ as an individual felt that the cup should pass away. That was his personal desire. The secret of the Cross is the crucifixion of the ego and the yielding to the will of God. 'Thy will be done.'

"The resurrection is not the rise of the dead from their tombs, but the passage from the death of self-absorption to the life of unselfish love, the transition from the darkness of selfish individualism to the light of universal spirit, from falsehood to truth, from slavery to the world of liberty of the eternal."

Jesus's injunction to "love thy neighbour as thyself" cannot be understood in isolation from his other great observation that the Kingdom of Heaven is within, and that we should seek it first. In a very real sense, much of the misery of human history and the world today can be traced to a failure by people to love themselves. Love, not in a narcissistic sense, but in the sense of modern psychology of self-awareness and acceptance. As Jesus says in the *Gospel of Thomas*, "When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realise that you are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty."

This, then, as I see it, is the challenge for Quaker Universalism and indeed Quakerism: the marriage of the

timeless Gospel truths with modern psychological insights, the synthesis of the mind and the soul. That, it is true, is something which both Buddhism and Hinduism do at a profound level, but there are two reasons why we need not feel apologetic towards the East and indeed have something to impart to it.

The first is that this synthesis of the mind and the soul is particularly accessible and immediate in the Gospels. There are the parables (e.g. those about things being "lost", or dealing with the idea of stewardship), the examples from his own life (e.g. his special affinity for the publicans and sinners, or his insight into the woman taken in adultery) and the archetypal events of his life and death.

Secondly, the cross, with its vertical and horizontal dimensions, symbolizes both inner awareness and the reaching out to our fellow human-beings, as Jesus did to the thieves crucified beside him. In dying to the ego and allowing the Self to commune with the self, we also open up new dimensions of contact - often unspoken - with our fellow human-beings. The Divine Consciousness is not, then, a closed circuit between the Universe and the Seeker, as it can all too easily become in the East. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is within - and also that it is to be shared. The life and teachings of Jesus illustrate this aspect with unsurpassed cogency.

The way ahead

Inevitably, an organization as open and unstructured as the Society of Friends will be profoundly affected by these changes in society. For my own part I think it will be no bad thing if the Society adapts in line with these changes. By that I do not mean that the Society should be all things to all men or women, but that we must find ways of providing a home for sincere seekers who come to us by different paths - without in any way needing to compromise our essentials,

namely the shared silence of worship and the primacy of the Inner Light.

I recently asked a Friend who has been in the Society for over 30 years how he felt the Society had changed. He replied that in outward, secondary respects it had changed greatly (e.g. the more relaxed attitude towards alcohol). As to how it had remained the same, his answer was most striking: the Society had remained true to its essentials precisely because it had continued to change.

Change we must, and change we shall. In doing so compromise will, I believe, be required on the part of both traditionalist Christian Quakers and Universalist Quakers. The former need encouragement to see that those sharing their fundamental beliefs of the shared silence and the Inner Light in no way invalidate the importance they attach to the life and teachings of Jesus. Universalists, for their part may need to be more accepting of the Society's Christian heritage and to draw more freely on the magnificent truths of the Gospels.

For me it is all summed up in the description given by a Friend in our meeting of the "visit" she received following her application for membership. "At 18 I was worried because I didn't believe in the Divinity of Christ. I asked my two visitors if it mattered. Simultaneously, one said 'yes' and the other said 'no'. I knew I was in the right place."

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