

Quakerism as Forerunner

by

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

Yet there is surely a third category, some of whom are in the Society and perhaps many more who hesitate to join because of its Christian bias. I mean the sort of people who are "not at ease with Zion", who cannot easily use the terms God and Christ because of deeply held agnostic convictions and a commitment to Truth as they understand it. One such person wrote movingly in a letter to 'The Friend' (7.1.77): "It is clear that my agnosticism departs fundamentally from essential Quaker doctrine. Hence it is also clear to me that I could only attend meetings for worship in a purely passive capacity. Nor does it help me that many people who think as I do are evidently able to reconcile their divergent views with orthodox Christian belief."

It was clear from the rest of her letter that the writer was at one with the Society in fundamental attitudes. As one who has joined the Society through sharing her views, my heart went out to her. Have I been guilty of an unworthy compromise in joining the Society? It seems to me that the Society would be greatly strengthened by the influx of people who claim to be agnostic rather than Christian and yet who sincerely share the fundamental aspirations of Quakers. I shall therefore argue not merely that the Society should admit such people as a fringe element of 'second-class members' (which is what they feel at present); but that it should widen its own basis and give up its claim to be a specifically Christian organisation. I think this should be done not just as a matter of expediency, but in the pursuit of Truth, because I believe the Truth is wider than Christianity. And I like to think that Quakerism is about the search for Truth.

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

I refer to the claim of Christianity to be a unique revelation of Truth. Other Seekers will no doubt, like myself, reject this claim, and it would be interesting to know how they

individually came to reject it, assuming that they were brought up to believe it. It may be of some interest and relevance to recall how I myself came to reject it. I was brought up in an orthodox Anglican family, and was in fact for two years an Anglican ordinand. During this period I gradually felt a growing rift between what I was expected to believe on the one hand and my understanding of reality, of the real world, on the other. In the end this sense of rift became so strong that I gave up the idea of ordination. After a time I became a professed agnostic and joined a humanist society. However, after many years I came to feel that the humanists had thrown out the baby with the bath water. There was nothing wrong with man's religious instinct. What was wrong was the irrational element in religion.

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

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

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

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

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

It is part of the same picture that Friends, writing in “The Friend”, almost always refer back to the Bible rather than the Scriptures of other religions. Whilst this is perhaps natural, from a universalist point of view it seems rather parochial. Here we are in Christendom quoting the pronouncements of, or about, God or Christ, while religious folk in the Middle or Far East are doing the same in terms of Allah, Mohamed, Krishna or the Buddha. It is all very well saying, “Our God, our Prophet, our Wise One, is the best”. The others think the same. But, you may say, are our judgements merely subjective? Is not the gospel of Jesus ethically superior to that of the Prophet, or the teaching of the Buddha? I suggest that you must leave this to the Truth behind all truths. I look forward to the day when, in every country, there will be devotees of Jesus, of Mohamed, of Krishna, of the Buddha, of Bahauulla, and many others. Let every man choose his own way to salvation, to the saving Truth, not judging or condemning others who choose differently. Let us choose when we know what the choice is. If we choose Jesus, well and good. Whatever we choose, the Truth will still be above and beyond anything that we can now understand.

What then I am arguing is that Quakerism should abandon its claim to be part of the Christian church, and move towards a universalist position. It should take the line of Hinduism that Truth can be approached from many quarters. To put it crudely, has it not ever occurred to birth-right Friends that they may only be Christians because they have been brain-washed? The Jesuits claim that, if they have a child up to a certain age under their control, they have got him for life. The same applies to other religions. Of course it is all done with the best of intentions, but it is none the less brain-washing, or if you prefer indoctrination. What Christian has studied the other religions sufficiently deeply before deciding to become a Christian? Very few, I suspect. And those who make such a study do not necessarily end up becoming Christian. One thinks for example of an Englishman turned Buddhist who wrote a remarkable letter to “The Times” criticising the Archbishop of Canterbury’s appeal to the nation. The writer said that the majority of citizens need something more than good advice and fatherly telling-off. They need a method and an example which can be seen to work here and now, in their own lives. “In this country today,” he went on, “there are many hundreds of practising Buddhists whose lives testify to the effectiveness of the methods described in great detail more than 2,500 years ago.” It takes time, of course, to study other religions and get used to their thought processes, and perhaps especially to a religion in which there is no creator god in the Christian sense. And yet, if we had been born into a Buddhist community, where Buddhism was the accepted religion, as say in Sri Lanka, would we have felt the need to convert to Christianity? Probably not.

One is inevitably dealing here with the nature of belief. Why is it that seekers are drawn in so many directions? Why does one man have no difficulty in accepting the credal requirements of the Catholic Church, another ends up in a humanist or atheist position,

another is won over to a Buddhist or Islamic point of view? If we could *de novo* see all the religions of humanity in this completely detached way, would we voluntarily come back into the Christian fold? I suggest we should find the Christian Church surprisingly parochial, with its basis of Judaistic thought, its theological concepts, its dependence on miracles and other supernatural happenings at a certain point in history. We might still want to follow Jesus, but that is a different matter. That is still perfectly acceptable within a universalist framework.

Yes, you may say, but Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. He was not just another prophet, like Mohamed. Son of God or Prophet, what difference does it make: it is just a matter of words. The Buddha is held in as great respect by millions as Jesus or Mohamed, yet he did not even talk of God. Ah, I can hear some Christian say, you obviously have not had a genuine experience of Christ, otherwise you would not talk like this. To this I reply, I also underwent the experience of “conversion”. I also felt the immense appeal of the personality of Jesus. I responded with my whole heart to Christian hymns like “When I survey the wondrous cross”. I can still feel and understand the sense of devotion to the Master, as exhibited in the lives of selfless Christians. But so in their own way can Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. They can all feel the sense of dedication to something far above them, but they identify that something differently, perhaps with the founder of their own religion.

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

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

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

Now the great difficulty in the former, the dogmatic position, is that it assumes that the various creeds claiming a monopoly of truth will go on co-existing down the centuries. This

is the position taken by Rabbi Hooker in a talk given recently under the auspices of the World Congress of Faiths. He claimed that one universal religion was neither possible or desirable. He appealed for religious pluralism in the same way that we have cultural pluralism, based upon tolerance and the realisation that nobody has a monopoly of truth. The history of religions has shown progress from coercion to co-existence, and would hopefully move on to co-operation. The aim would be unity of spirit but not uniformity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For what after all is the concern of the great religions of the world? It can surely be summed up in the phrase "spiritual values". Nothing else matters, the dogmas, the magic, the miracles. These ingredients were part of the mental process of mankind at the time when the various creeds entered history, but they are not essential. Man clings to them from force of habit, because he has been "brain-washed", if you like. But, however difficult it may be, the sooner we get away from irrational dogmas, the better it will be for mankind.

The weeding out of irrational dogmas, however, does not in my view mean adopting a rationalist position. I believe in mystical religion. I don't think we have an inkling of the whole truth yet. What I envisage for Quakerism to become is a meeting-place for spiritual seekers of all faiths or none, where they can worship or meditate as they feel drawn. It will

be a worldwide religion, without any particular bias, Christian or otherwise, but enshrining the supreme truths of all religions. And if I envisage Quakerism as fore-runner of this universal faith, I can think of one Quaker who has already bridged the gap. He was Gurdial Mallick, a Hindu known to many Friends, who became a Quaker while remaining a Hindu. He insisted on this condition, claiming that there was nothing incompatible between his Hinduism and Quakerism, but was never the less admitted to membership of the Society. He is my new-style Quaker for you. There are other forerunners who have taken up a similar position, people who have shown by their lives that they have understood the meaning of the Christian gospel without feeling any necessity to join a church, people like Mahatma Gandhi himself or S. K. George, an Indian Christian follower of the Mahatma.

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

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

Next, Lionel Wilkinson in an article "A little door for Vedanta" 'The Friend' 3.10.75: ⁷ "One good reason why Friends should be interested in other religions is the universalism of the Quaker message One of the joys of searching the Vedanta teachings in the Upanishads is the discovery that herein these Hindu writings are insights into the nature of religious experience which harmonize with Quaker testimony. It is not, therefore, surprising to find Christopher Isherwood writing some thirty years ago: "I can see only one little door through which Vedanta might squeeze into Christendom, and that is the Society of Friends. The Quaker doctrine of the Inward Light is in general agreement with the principles of Vedanta ..." There is much to enrich one's mind in studying another religious tradition. One sees a development in one's concept of the workings of God's spirit, from the parochial attempt to put the spirit of God in a Christian or Quaker straightjacket to a vision of this same spirit making itself known universally to all kinds of people in all periods of history This widening of one's horizons brings a new sense of the interdependence and interrelatedness of all human beings, and therefore a stronger hope for the future of mankind."

Dennis Compton, in "The Truths we should publish" ('The Friend', 9.7.76): "Religion is not Christianity. Religion is reality as it is experienced All that matters is whether you have come to realize, of your own accord and in your own perception, that there is such a

thing as 'spirit'; that it is basic to our existence here on earth; and that our progress in understanding the things of the spirit is the most important path that we have to tread There will always be those who need certainty in their thinking, who need to be told exactly what is what, and who will believe their instructors implicitly But the rest - those who think for themselves and who enjoy the benison of a critical faculty - need to be reassured that there is an alternative other than atheism or humanism."

Finally, that doyenne of Seekers, Katharine Wilson, in "Some Questions" ('The Friend', 26.1.68): "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 practise 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 in the seventeenth century, now that we know more of other religions many Friends feel that this supporting Christian frame is not our distinguishing mark."

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

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