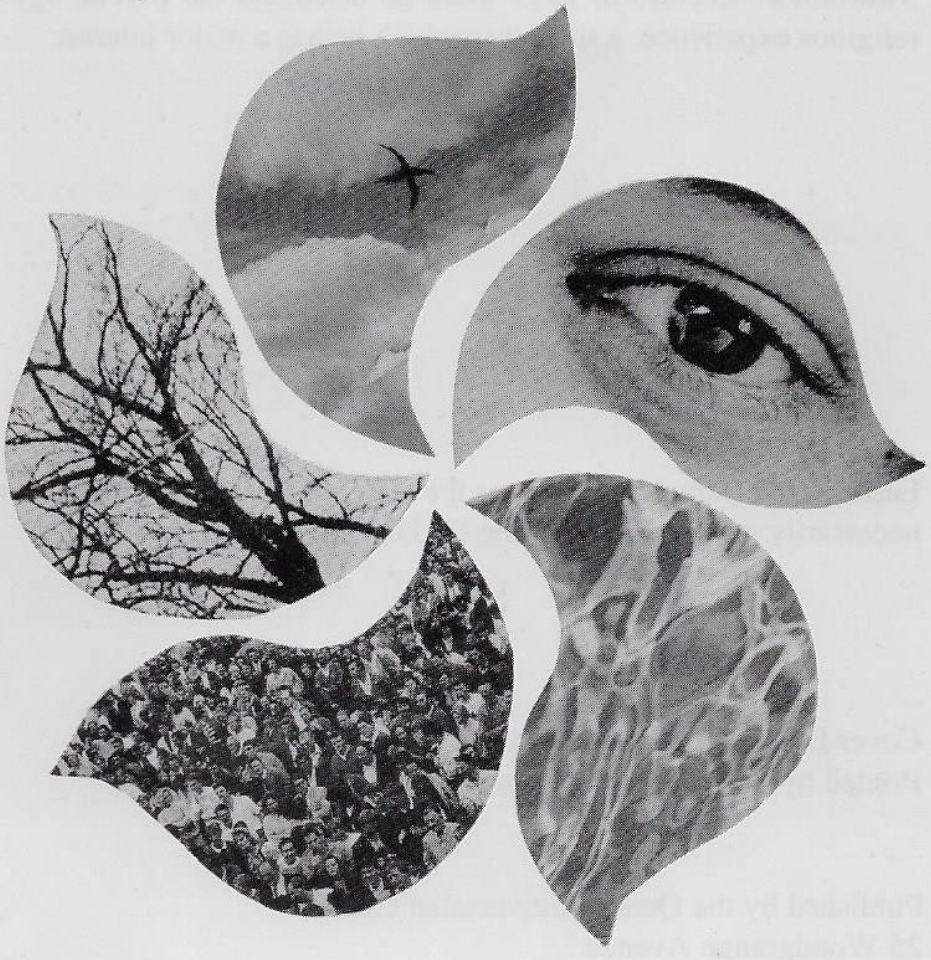
QUAKERISM, UNIVERSALISM AND SPIRITUALITY

Ralph Hetherington



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FOREWORD

As its title indicates, this essay is concerned with three interrelated topics: Quakerism, Universalism and Spirituality.

Quakerism differs from most other religious sects, in that authority for belief and action resides in the individual conscience rather than in an ecclesiastical tradition or the injunctions of scripture. Quakerism has no mandatory creed. This inevitably introduces an inherent and persistent instability which became evident very early in Quaker history and with which the Society of Friends has not always been able to come to terms.

Quakerism has always had a clear *universalist* element in its theology, which has been overlaid in periods of its history, but which has now re-appeared.

Spirituality is not a phenomenon confined to religion but frequently appears in secular contexts. Seeking a common spiritual basis rather than a religious one, might help to meet some of the problems arising from the diversities presently existing within and between Yearly Meetings worldwide, especially if unity can be achieved on the basis of our testimonies rather than our theological beliefs.

Some of the material used in this essay has appeared in a number of Quaker publications both here and in America.

1. WHAT IS QUAKERISM?

Sources of authority in religion

Nearly all religious groups accept that there are three major sources of spiritual enlightenment. The first is the tradition and authority of the Church or sect itself. The second is the authority of canonical texts thought to have been divinely inspired, such as the Bible, the Koran and the Upanishads. The third is the spiritual experience or personal revelation accorded to the individual member of the church or sect.

Religions, and the various sects within them, differ in the emphasis placed on each of these sources. Within the Christian religion, authoritative churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Calvinist Churches have laid down a catechism to which all members are expected to subscribe. Although scripture and personal religious insight may play a part, the final decision about matters of faith resides in the catechistical church tradition.

Larry Ingle in his biography of George Fox (1) writes that 'the underlying principle of Protestantism of whatever variety (was that) the individual conscience was finally the ultimate standard in matters of faith and that institutional restraints had to give way before it'. Nevertheless, he comments 'the catechism's fixed doctrine illustrated how the institutionalisation of the reformed faith hindered the growth of true spirituality and stifled or even killed the spontaneity and immediate intensity that Luther had taught Protestants to expect.' Thus, in the end, the dominance of the catechism or creed rendered the established Protestant churches nearly as authoritarian as the Roman church. Non-conformist churches, however, came to depend more on the scriptures as their source of authority, and were consequently able to develop a doctrine derived from their own interpretation of the biblical texts. Inasmuch as scripture is open to varying interpretations, there was room for some diversity of doctrine, and different dissenting churches tended to vary between one another as to their biblical interpretation on such matters as baptism and the eucharist. Nevertheless, whatever doctrines were finally adopted, they had to be scripturally based, rather than being derived from personal revelation, since the scriptures were held to be inspired by God and therefore could not be challenged by any contrary views derived from individual insights.

The Quaker position

In Quakerism, emphasis is placed on the personal religious experience of the individual which has primacy over scripture and over any tradition that may have

developed. George Fox expressed this view in a famous sermon at Ulverston Church in 1652:

> 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?' (3)

This then, is the first fundamental of Quakerism, namely that religious belief has to be based on personal experience. The second fundamental is that there is something of God in everyone, however depraved a person might appear to be, and that this can be reached by a loving and compassionate approach. Quakerism is non-credal, although it has developed a catechism of a sort in its *Advices and Queries* (2). These however, are not mandatory and are regularly revised. Quakerism differs from most other religious sects in that it claims no single founder guru of its own. There are no recorded sayings that have since become canonical texts. Quakerism supports no ordained priesthood, employs no set liturgy, insists on no formal mandatory creeds and has no sacraments in the shape of eucharist or baptism. These negatives arise directly from the positive belief that there is an Inward Light available to every man and woman which instructs, guides and admonishes, and that this inward guide is the final authority for personal belief and action. The central position given to the Inward Light in Quaker theology makes it impossible to separate secular from sacred events. All experience has its sacred aspect.

Dangers of Ranterism

This, of course, is a risky theology which could lead to Ranterism, the view that the sole authority for belief and behaviour is derived from the personal revelation of the individual, and nowhere else. In Quaker theology, a properly 'gathered' meeting, in which its members are open to the operation of the Inward Light, should come into unity. In practice this does not always work out and unity is not always achieved. For a group to survive, therefore, corporate discipline has to be maintained. Fox achieved this by setting up Monthly Meetings whose duties included a supervisory role over the expressed beliefs and behaviour of its members. This made it clear that personal revelation had to be tested against the 'feeling of the meeting.' This procedure sets up a creative tension out of which beliefs and decisions held to be 'in right ordering' might be expected to emerge. The experience of the Society of Friends over the three hundred years of its history seems to have been that, while the individual sometimes gets it wrong and has to defer to the corporate wisdom of the meeting, there have also been occasions when the meeting has clearly got it wrong, and has had, in the end, to adopt the views of the individual.

It is when a significant number of individuals come to a viewpoint which differs

from the Society as a whole, that real difficulties arise and when schisms and separations may occur. This matter will be discussed further in the final section of this essay.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSALIST IDEAS IN QUAKERISM

Ways in which the term 'universalism' has been used

The terms 'universalist' and 'universalism' in the sense that they are now used by Quakers worldwide, were almost certainly first employed by John Linton in 1977 when he addressed members of the Seekers Association during London Yearly Meeting of that year. In his talk, entitled 'Quakerism as Forerunner', he said that Quakerism should 'move towards a universalist position' and referred to 'the universalism of the Quaker message'. This address first appeared in *The Seeker* in the Spring of 1977 and was reprinted as the first issue of the *QUG Pamphlet Series* in 1979 (4) and in the American *Friends Journal* in October of the same year. The Quaker Universalist Group, founded in 1979, adopted the term, and by the time the American Quaker Universalist Fellowship was formed in 1983, it had become well established and widely used in the Quaker vocabulary. Of course the terms 'universalism' and 'universalist' are not new, and have already been used in other contexts. During the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 there were sessions of the 'World's Parliament of Religions'.(5) These were recalled in 1925 in a book edited by a Quaker, William Loftus Hare. He tells us that in these sessions 'there was a persistent effort to sustain a universalist feeling.'(6) The *Universalist Church* in the USA, which believed in universal salvation, merged with the Unitarian Church some thirty years ago and the combined *Unitarian Universalist Church* has now adopted views which in many ways are similar to those of Quaker Universalists.(7) An *International Society for Universalism (ISU)* has also been founded and held 'The 1st World Congress of Universalism' in Warsaw in 1993. This Society publishes a quarterly called 'Dialogue and Humanism', which indicates its orientation.

There are at least two other theological meanings of 'Universalism'. John Ferguson in his *Encyclopaedia of Mysticism* (8) tells us that the term 'Universalism' refers to a strong stream of mysticism which holds that all human beings are one in and with God. This is to be found in Vedantism, Neoplatonism and Christian Mysticism. Marcus Braybrooke, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* edited by Richardson and Bowden (9), says that Universalism refers to a belief that ultimately all people will be saved. God does not coerce, but in his forgiving love never finally abandons anyone. This view, of course, does not accord with Calvinistic theology. Within Quaker circles, the term 'universalist' has come to be contrasted with the term 'christocentric'. However, a universalist approach would accept a christocentric view as being as valid as any other. Universalism would only be opposed to an exclusivist view that Christianity was the only valid religion. Rex Ambler in his essay *The End of Words* (10) describes what he calls a

'universalism of potential'. This affirms 'the potential of all human beings to realise their unity with other human beings, and with them a unity with God'. This, he asserts, 'does not claim that actual religious experience will always be essentially the same'. But it does get over the problem of the essentially anarchic implications of Quaker belief that inner experience is the source of truth and goodness which, he writes, 'has helped to keep Quakers at arm's length from other churches for most of their 300 year history'.

Early views. William Penn's book *The Christian Quaker* published in 1669 (11) expounded universalist ideas, although the term he used was not 'Universalism' but 'Gentile Divinity'. In this context, 'gentile' means 'heathen' or 'pagan' rather than non-Jewish. 'Divinity' is Penn's term for 'spirituality'. He asserted that the inward Light of Christ was present in all men and women everywhere. It was this light that led to spiritual insight, redemption and salvation. If this is so, it would be hard to argue that this light is not equivalent to the Buddha Nature of Buddhism, the Brahman of Hinduism, or the Tao of Taoism. Moreover, it is directly in line with the teaching of the Fourth Gospel which refers to 'the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world'. (12)

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

Isaac Penington

> And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So, learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their right place, and prizing *that* above them which is above them.(13)

George Fox

> Now the Lord hath opened to me by His invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the divine Light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all, and they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came to the Light of Life, and became the children of it, but they that hated it, and did not believe in it, were condemned by it, though they made a profession of Christ. This I saw in the pure openings of the Light, without the help of any man, neither did I then know where to find it in the Scriptures, though afterwards, searching the Scriptures, I found it. (14)

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

> Because the scriptures are only a declaration of the fountain and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all truth and knowledge, nor yet the adequate, primary rule of faith and manners. Yet, because they give a true and faithful testimony of the first foundation, they are and may be esteemed a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit, from which they have all their excellency and certainty: for, as by the inward testimony of the Spirit we do alone truly know them, so they testify that the Spirit is that Guide by which the saints are led into all truth: therefore, according to the Scriptures the Spirit is the first and principal Leader.(15)

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

The Quietist period. It would be a small step for Quakers to change Fox's assertion that all his 'openings' were later confirmed by reference to scripture, to an assertion that any 'openings' not so confirmed must be false. To take this step, of course, would be to deny the primacy of the Inward Light and to leave the way open to fundamentalism. Like the early Quakers, Friends during the Quietist period of the 18th century, seemed to have stopped short of this, asserting only that the Inward Light helped men and women to interpret the scriptures aright. Indeed, in 1695 a few years after George Fox's death, London Yearly Meeting disowned George Keith who had been a friend of Robert Barclay, for holding that Friends were neglecting the historic Christ when they stressed the importance of the Light within. Keith also denied the possibility that anyone, however enlightened, could achieve salvation if they had never heard the Christian gospel.(16)

Robert Barclay made two assumptions in his *Apology*. The first, as we have seen above, was that the Inward Light was the principal leader to truth. The second was that there was an indissoluble link between the Inward Light and the Jesus of history.(17) During the Quietist period the first assumption was emphasised while the second was underplayed. This may have been because the Jesus of history could only be known through the study of scripture, and too much pre-occupation with the scriptures might impede the operation of 'pure openings' of the Light within. For the Quietists the scriptures were secondary. So apparently was thought itself, as Rufus Jones found when he was eldered by William Graham of Birmingham: 'I was grieved at what thou said in meeting. Thou said that since sitting in the meeting thou hadst been thinking. Thou shouldst not have been thinking.' (18) In this connection it should, perhaps, be remembered that the term 'thought' is itself imprecise. It is true that the primary task in meeting for worship is to quieten one's errant thoughts and to bring one's mind to the still centre. However, this involves

considerable concentration and is a far cry from making one's mind a blank, waiting for divine inspiration. Ministry during meeting will inevitably provide a theme on which many of those present will want to meditate. This also is thinking.

The Evangelical period. Towards the end of the quietist period, some evangelical rumblings were heard, probably as a result of methodist influences. In 1805, Henry Tuke published his *Principles of Religion* which set out a more evangelical theology, and in the following year Phildelphia Yearly Meeting revised its Discipline to make it a matter for disownment for anyone to deny the divinity of Christ, the immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit or the authenticity of scripture.(19) These moves were seen by some Friends as leading away from the doctrine of the primacy of the Inward Light and towards the absolute authority of scripture. Things came to a head in 1827 when Elias Hicks led a sizeable body of Friends to a separation from the main body on this very issue, the Hicksites holding that the Inward Light took precedenece over scripture. London Yearly Meeting on the other hand, despite internal disagreements, managed to remain in one piece by stoutly avoiding what it saw as extremism from either side of the argument. This was shown in 1835 when Isaac Crewdson condemned the doctrine of the Inward Light in quite immoderate terms, declaring it to be an illusion and urging Friends to take the Bible as the one sure foundation for faith. London Yearly Meeting refused to budge and Crewdson and his followers left the Society.(20)

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

Vital Christianity consisteth not in words but in power; and however important it is that we have a right apprehension of the doctrines of the gospel, this availeth not, unless we are regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit.(21)

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

> It has ever been, and still is, the belief of the Society of Friends, that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were given by inspiration of God: and therefore the declarations contained in them rest on the authority of God Himself and there can be no appeal from them to any other authority whatsoever: that they are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus; being the appointed means of making known to us the blessed truths of Christianity: that they are the only divinely authorized record of the doctrines which we are bound as Christians to believe, and the moral principles which are to regulate our actions: that no doctrine which is not contained in them can be required of anyone to be believed as an article of faith: that whatsoever any man says or does which is contrary to the Scriptures, though under profession of the immediate guidance of the Spirit, must be reckoned and accounted a mere delusion.(22)

This remained the dominant tenor of London Yearly Meeting epistles for the next fifty years. The number of biblical texts quoted in the epistles rose from

eleven in the 1840's to forty-five in the 1880's.(23)

A Reasonable Faith. Meanwhile other pressures were developing. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and in 1860 seven distinguished Anglicans supported intelligent, informed and scholarly criticism of biblical texts. The tensions and ferment in religious thinking now built up, and the Society of Friends began to feel the pressures. A Friend, David Duncan, was disowned in 1871 for applying contemporary criticism to the Bible.(24) By 1884 the tide of new opinion could be held back no longer. Three anonymous Friends published a document called *A Reasonable Faith* which offered a lucid, forward-looking alternative to evangelicalism, yet with a strong commitment to biblical reference, but to a Bible subject to intelligent and informed historical and textual criticism.(25)

The Richmond Declaration of Faith. However, evangelical Friends in America were by no means deterred by these developments in Britain. Two prominent British evangelical Friends, Joseph Bevan Braithwaite and Joseph John Gurney had visited America in order to take part in the ferment there which had already led to the Hicksite Separation of 1827 and to the controversy between Joseph John Gurney and John Wilbur over the period 1837-40 while Gurney was doing an evangelical tour of America. John Wilbur had visited England in 1831-33 and had become alarmed at Gurney's views on the infallibility of scripture.(26)

Things came to a head in 1887 when a conference was called in Richmond, Indiana. This was convened, as much as anything, to counter a move by some American Yearly Meetings to introduce what they called 'ordinances'. These were, in fact, the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. The conference was therefore a genuine and laudable attempt to re-assert Quaker principles.(27) However, it was also concerned to oppose the Hicksite meetings which had not even been invited to send delegates. The Declaration of Faith which was adopted at the conference therefore included a statement to the effect that the basis of Quaker belief had to be scriptural and that personal revelation in the shape of the Inward Light had to be subordinate to scripture. This statement was in fact written by Joseph Bevan Braithwaite who took it from the London Yearly Meeting epistle of 1836, quoted above. This Declaration of Faith was brought back to London Yearly Meeting by Braithwaite, in the hope that it would also be adopted in Britain. London Yearly Meeting, however, had other ideas. It declined to endorse the Richmond Declaration of Faith on the grounds that it was too nearly a credal statement, leaving insufficient room for the 'primacy of the Inward Light of Christ in the experience of Friends'.(28)

The Manchester Conference and after. This heralded the end of the domination of evangelical Friends in Britain and paved the way for the great Manchester Conference in 1895 which led to the liberal revival and to a rational and informed criticism of the biblical texts. Nevertheless the Richmond Declaration is still accepted by the majority of Yearly Meetings worldwide, the major exceptions

being the Hicksite and Wilburite Yearly Meetings in America, London Yearly Meeting and most of the European Yearly Meetings. Friends, therefore, remain divided over the matter of the primacy of the Inward Light over scripture.

Since this is an issue central to universalist theology, it merits further discussion. As we have seen, Barclay's first assumption did in fact assert the primacy of the Inward Light. His second assumption, concerning the link between the Inward Light and the historical Jesus, needs further examination. Howard Brinton (29) deplores the confusion between the historical Jesus as described in the first three gospels and the eternal Christ of the fourth gospel. If we are to take seriously the suggestion that the Inward Light helps us to interpret the scriptures aright, then the historical Jesus as recorded in the scriptures must also come under that scrutiny. Since many Friends worldwide now accept the validity of biblical criticism, the Jesus of history has become a more problematical figure. The gospel story is valuable not because it appears in scripture but because it speaks to our condition. Some features of the story we find inspiring, others features less so.

What Quaker universalists mean by 'universalism' today

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

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

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

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

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

3. SPIRITUALITY

Definition of spirituality

In the last decade the term 'spirituality' has become a commonly used term. *Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* (30) has the following entry for *Spirituality*:

> The experiential side of religion as opposed to outward beliefs, practices and institutions, which deals with the inner spiritual depths of a person. Spirituality has been present in all religious traditions . . . It has been revived in recent years after a period of seeming decline in the West . . . it appears that a new spirituality which integrates the material, the humane and the translucent — nature, humans and God — is beginning to emerge in the conditions of our time.

As we have seen, early Friends were convinced that spirituality was universal, that it was an attribute present, at least potentially, in all men and women everywhere, and at all periods of history from primitive to modern times. The Inward Light, of course, has always been regarded by Quakers as a characteristic manifestation of spirituality.

Spirituality and religion

Although 'spirituality' is a term which is now commonly used the difference between this and 'religion', and especially between the adjectives 'spiritual' and 'religious', is not too clear. Most people might accept that the terms are not synonymous, so that a person could be religious but not spiritual or spiritual without being religious. It follows from this that much of what is recognised as being a manifestation of spirituality is of a secular nature. Indeed, many of the experiences recorded in William James's famous book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (31) have no religious content whatsoever.

Most recognisable and distinct *religions* have a founding guru, a set of canonical and sacred texts, and usually an organised priesthood with the power to administer sacred rites. This implies the existence of beliefs and creeds, often concerning a separate deity or deities, a developed and systematic theology and a long and valued tradition. Religions are organised and institutionalised, with an emphasis on the beliefs held by the church of which the individual is a member.

Spirituality, on the other hand, seems to refer to something inherent in the individual rather than in the institution, developing from first hand experience rather than from a culturally loaded system of beliefs acquired from social training. It speaks of awareness, sensitivity. openness and compassion. It is a marker of

personality development towards wholeness and realisation of potential. The term 'religious experience' would, in this sense, mean 'spiritual experience in a religious context'. The contemporary term 'peak experience' would refer to a spiritual experience which might, or might not, be religious.

Should we be asking 'What does the Society of Friends say?' or should we be asking, with George Fox, 'What canst thou say?'. The first question seems to reflect a religious approach and the second a spiritual approach. George Fox asserted that one of the functions of the Inward Light (ie spirituality), was to bring people into unity. Now if this is so, the integrity of the Society will be preserved through a common spirituality, without having to lay down religious statements of belief.

Spirituality and human depravity

The idea that there is a divine element in everyone is, of course, a very old one. Hugh McGregor Ross paraphrases Logion 42 of *The Gospel of Thomas* in this way: 'Be your true selves letting your egos pass away'(32). This must be the definitive statement about universal spirituality. The *Gospel of Thomas* teaches that 'The Kingdom of Heaven' is not a place elsewhere which we may or may not attain at some time in the future, but that it is in us and all around us and that it is here and now. To attain it we have to undergo a personal *metanoia* or transformation. There is nothing here about human depravity, nothing about redemption or even about the need for reconciliation between God and human beings. We have only to enter our inheritance.

The first Christian theologian to advance the claims of universal spirituality was probably Irenaeus in the second century. He preached that although men and women are vulnerable and immature, they are nevertheless capable of spiritual development. Indeed, he went so far as to assert that 'God became human so that humans might become God'(33). Melvin Keiser in his Pendle Hill pamphlet (34) tells us that Irenaeus spoke of the world being made unfinished, and that it was our responsibility to complete it. We are therefore called upon to share in divine creativity. However, Augustine of Hippo, who preached some 200 years after Irenaeus, would have none of it. He declared that men and women had inherited sin and guilt from the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He went further and said that Adam and Eve must already have had the seeds of evil within them, otherwise they would not have been seduced by the snake.(35) This inherited defect made men and women incapable of any good thought or action without the grace of God. They had no divine spark within them. This was laid out in Augustine's doctrine of original sin which has been the official theological teaching of the Roman Church and nearly all protestant and dissenting churches ever since.

However, the teaching of Irenaeus was not forgotten. His ideas have been kept alive by a long list of distinguished men and women: Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Hans Denck, Teresa of Avila, Teilhard de Chardin and our own George Fox.(36) Even in his own day, Augustine had to contend with the British lay theologian Pelagius, who asserted that human beings were able to achieve salvation by their own powers. The last twenty years of Augustine's life were dominated by his controversies with the Pelagians.(37) Although we are told it was a near thing, Augustine finally prevailed and Pelagianism was declared a heresy and was duly disposed of. Had the battle turned the other way, much misery might have been avoided.

4. SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Common features of reported spiritual experiences

Certain experiences have come to be associated with 'spirituality'. They were originally called 'religious' or 'mystical' experiences by writers like Starbuck (38) and William James (39). Starbuck studied experiences associated with religious conversion while James was concerned with a wider range which included mystical experience. Since then it has been realised that such experiences do not always occur in a religious setting and have therefore been given a number of other names. Marghanita Laski (40) called them 'transcendent ecstasies', Adam Curle (41) calls them 'supraliminal awareness'. But the term which seems to have stuck is Abraham Maslow's 'peak experiences'(42). Whatever we call them, they seem to share one or more of the following characteristics:

1. *Ineffability.* The experience cannot be adequately described in words.
2. *Noetic quality.* The experience seems to carry a great weight of meaning and significance although quite what that meaning is may not be evident.
3. *Transiency.* The experience is fleeting, even momentary, and cannot in any case be sustained for very long.
4. *Passivity.* The experiencer is passive. The thing happens to the experiencer who usually takes no active part in its creation or development, although he or she might have been active in preparing for the possibility of such an experience.
5. *Sense of oneness with everything.* One of the most characteristic features of the experience seems to be the feeling of being part of a larger whole.
6. *Timelessness.* The experience seems to be timeless or out of time, or there is a change in the passage of time. There may be an experience of the 'eternal now' or of time standing still.
7. *Loss of the ego.* The experiencer has a strong feeling that the ego is not the real 'I', that there is a 'true self' to be discovered.
8. *Sense of presence.* This is very strong in some reported experiences. It may be of God, or some undefined being or of some power or influence, or of a sense of the numinous producing a feeling of awe.

An analysis of some 5,000 records of such experiences made by the Alister Hardy Research Centre (AHRC) (43) has indicated that the attributes listed above are often overshadowed by some other feature which, if it occurred by itself, would not necessarily identify the experience as being of a spiritual nature. Sometimes this is an apparent patterning of events in the form of remarkable co-incidences, or a fortuitous juxtaposition or sequence of happenings. People often speak of such series of events as having been 'meant'. It might then be attributed to the working of a divine purpose. Answers to prayer constitute another category that emerged from the analysis. Yet another was the reported experience of the sensed presence of a person who had died, usually recently. This might take the form of an actual

visual or auditory hallucination. When such experiences are accompanied by one or more of the characteristic features of transcendence, they can be regarded as indications of spirituality. However, any judgements of this kind have to be made with the utmost caution just because it is so difficult to describe such events in words. This matter is explored further below. In any case, since the Quaker tradition makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular, one should be cautious about categorising certain experiences as spiritual and others not.

It is important to emphasise that while peak experiences are, by definition, both intense and rare, usually only occurring once or twice in a lifetime, there are in addition a whole series of less intense and more frequent experiences, ranging from the peak experience to what Thomas Kelly called 'mild moments of lift and faint glimpses of glory'.(44) These latter might be called 'off-peak' experiences which most people have had at one time or another. It seems, moreover, that because the significance of such experiences is not always recognised at the time, they are not remembered as having been of this particular kind. Thus when we are asked whether we have had anything remotely like a peak experience we may well say 'no'. Yet later, in reading the recorded experiences of others, they resonate in a strange way, as if one must have had some personal experience of the kind described.

The AHRC's collection of 5000 reported religious experiences was made by means of a public appeal for such accounts, appearing in newspapers, magazines and elsewhere. The question asked in each case was 'Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' The collection is therefore not representative of the population as a whole, but rather of a self-selected group of people who responded to the question. When David Hay (45) undertook to include this question in a Gallup survey of a representative sample of 2000 people, he found that about one third admitted to having had experiences of this kind. This is unexpectedly high, bearing in mind the reluctance of people to admit to, or even to recognise, such experiences. However, when David Hay then conducted in-depth interviews of a representative sample of 200 people, the proportion rose to about 60%.

Difficulties in describing Spiritual Experiences

Another factor which might reduce the proportion of reported spiritual experiences, is that of difficulties with language. Pam Lunn in an article in *The Friends Quarterly* said something important about our own Quakerly struggles with language.(46) She wrote:

> We have our own struggles with language, and I am beginning to think that we have a responsibility to a wider group than ourselves to continue to grapple with those language

problems . . . *Maybe* we are in a unique position to speak to those who have no language with which to speak of spirituality.

We try to find a language with which to describe the experiences of spirituality because conventional religious language seems inadequate or inappropriate. This might explain the finding of a National Survey, that religious experience is more often reported by well-educated people than by those less able to use language effectively. (56% of those receiving tertiary education as against 37% of those leaving school at 16).(47)

The search for a serviceable language will necessitate the possible painful exercise of giving up our cherished religious images — at least when trying to communicate with those who are not likely to share or understand them. Thus a phrase like 'my life was transformed when I accepted Jesus and took him into my heart' would be meaningless to many people and barely comprehensible to some Quakers. On the other hand a phrase like 'I felt part of the on-going creativity of the Cosmos' would be equally mysterious to others. Even George Fox's phrase 'Christ has come to teach his people himself' would need considerable explanation before it was understood by many non-Quakers. Perhaps we need to talk at a more basic level about what we actually experience — describing our awareness of the numinous, that awesome sense of presence in special circumstances, our feelings of love and unity with other people, our thankfulness for the beauty of the world, our compassion for those who suffer, our dismay at our failure to meet the demands this suffering makes upon us. Robert Barclay's marvellous phrase 'I felt the evil weaken in me and the good raised up' seems to have pitched the level of communication just about right. It is interesting that most of the descriptions of spiritual experience collected by William James and his successors are at this basic level, rarely employing specialised images.

We vary greatly in our ability to describe, or even to recognise, our spiritual experiences. Sometimes this difficulty leads us to use language which, to other people, may sound conventional, hackneyed, trite, banal or simply meaningless. It is only too easy to take language at its face value, thus missing the authentic experience which underlies it. We have, therefore, to learn to listen and empathise, as we struggle to understand what it is that other people have experienced. We have to feel as well as think our way into such understanding. If we are able to do this we may find that those we have rashly written off as 'humanist' or 'materialist', are as spiritually experienced as we claim to be.

5. QUAKER SPIRITUALITY

Quaker spirituality is manifested in the experience of the Inward Light and in the experience of 'that of God' in everyone. We shall look at each of these in turn.

The Inward Light

The experience of the Inward Light is clearly described by George Fox in his *Journal* when he tells us how he heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition'. (48) This led him to make the confident and often repeated assertion that 'Christ has come to teach his people himself'. This was a direct inward experience, not one arising from church teaching or scriptural authority. This experience of inward guidance is claimed by Quakers to be a central feature of their spiritual lives. As we have just seen, spiritual experience is notoriously difficult to describe. Moreover it must take very different forms in different people. At one end of the scale it seems to be an inner voice speaking in immediate and unmistakeable terms. At the other end it seems to be a slowly growing conviction. The Inward Light, however experienced by Friends, appears to lead to three different but interrelated kinds of conviction.

First, there is the *conviction of truth* about the way things are. A good example of this kind of experience was contained in a letter I received from a correspondent who wrote to me as follows:

> For me, the inner Light is something about knowing I'm part of a vast mysterious unknowable universe which is beautiful; and therefore I feel so strongly about all the driven unconscious ways people (including myself) live and act which work in contradiction to the sacred wholeness: and it includes in that conviction something of 'reverence for life' — everything that is created is so amazingly beautiful, complex and *meant* — my cat, a slug, the hand, the sunset. And those feelings are beyond destruction even if I betrayed them, and they come from the soul. (49)

Second, there is a *discernment of good and evil.* This is much more than a refining of a 'conscience' which is often the result of social training rather than of spiritual insight. Sometimes the discernment is unexpected and out of line with the social norms of the day. A good example is when John Woolman realised, at the age of 22 and in advance of his fellow Quakers, that slavery was wrong.

> My employer, having a negro woman, sold her and desired me to write a bill of sale, the man being waiting who bought her. The thing was sudden; and though I felt uneasy at the thoughts of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow-creatures, yet I remembered that I was hired by the year, that it was my master who directed me to do it, and that it was an elderly man, a member of our Society, who bought her; so through weakness I gave way, and wrote it; but at the executing of it I was so afflicted in my mind, that I said before my master and the Friend that I believed slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion.(50)

Third, there is an unmistakeable *call to action*. As an example of this, I can relate an experience of my own. At the beginning of the war I spent a few months in the Friends Ambulance Unit. After having had some training, I learned of the likely assignments which might involve my having to wear a uniform of some sort. I then came to the conclusion that this would bring me closer to the war effort than I cared to be. So I left the Unit and applied for admission to Spiceland Camp which trained young men for refugee work. When I was all packed up and ready to go and thoroughly looking forward to the experience, I saw an advertisement in *The Friend* asking for applications for the position of Attendant in a residential home for epileptic boys. This was quite the last thing that I had meant or wished to do. Indeed, the prospect quite terrified me. But I knew without any doubt whatever that that was where I had to go. After a few weeks there I realised that what I had done was clearly in right ordering and I worked there happily for six years.

'That of God' in everyone

It is often said by newcomers and visitors to our meetings, that it is very hard to discover what Quakers believe. In an enquiry into this question, Ben Pink Dandelion tells us:

> What *was* said directly about God was that there is that of God in everybody. This is a universal Quaker phrase . . . at the heart of the Quaker witness in the world and is what falls most readily to any Quaker's lips should God come into the conversation at all. (51)

He goes on to comment on the vagueness of the phrase 'that of God'. It might mean, he suggests that there is God in everyone, or panentheistically, everyone is in God. For the agnostic it might mean that of God, if there is a God and for the atheist it might mean that of good. In entertaining these doubts Ben Pink Dandelion is in good company. The Quaker theologian H.G.Wood gave an address to Yearly Meeting elders in 1955 in which he said:

> It helps little to say that we believe in that of God in every man if we do not know what we mean by 'that' and what we mean by 'God'. (52)

Alastair Heron in a QHS pamphlet (53) regards 'that of God' as a 'vague catchphrase' as it is currently used by Friends, quoted out of context. He goes on to quote, in its context, the best known example of Fox's use of the term which he made in 'an exhortation to those in the ministry':

> . . . be patterns, be examples, in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you.

This passage is widely used as evidence that Fox believed that there was indeed 'that of God' in everyone, although the above passage, by itself, does not necessar-

ily imply this, 'answering that of God in everyone' might simply mean 'answering that of God in those in whom it is present'. Were this the only recorded instance that Fox used the phrase, we might be excused for thinking it vague. However, Joseph Pickvance in his *A Reader's Companion to George Fox's Journal* (54) gives us four other contexts in which the phrase is used. The first is when Fox is preaching about the light of Christ within:

> . . . I turned them to the light of Christ Jesus, who enlightens every man that cometh into the world, to let them see whether these things were not true as had been spoken. And when I spake to that of God in their consciences and the light of Christ Jesus in them, they could not abide to hear tell of that . . .

In a letter to 'such as follow after the fashions of the world' Fox writes:

> Are not these the spoilers of the creation, and have the fat and the best of it, and waste and destroy it? Do not these cumber God's earth? Let that of God in all consciences answer, and who are in the wisdom, judge.

He uses the same phrase when addressing the jury during one of his trials:

> So then I spake much to the jury, how that which I did was for Christ's sake, and let none of them act contrary to that of God in their consciences, for before his judgement seat must all be brought.

And in a letter to 'Friends in the ministry' he writes:

> All keep in the Light and life that judgeth down that which is contrary to the Light and life. So the Lord God Almighty be with you all, and keep you, meeting everywhere, being guided with that of God. With that you may see the Lord God among you, him who lighteth every man that cometh into the world, by whom the world was made, that men that be come into the world might believe.

For George Fox, anyway, 'that of God' was certainly no vague catchphrase. Joseph Pickvance tells us that, for Fox, the Light and Spirit of Christ was equivalent to that of God in everyone.

Two aspects of the Light within

Ben Pink Dandelion in the article already cited (55), refers to the Quaker concept of the Light within and comments 'Whether the 'Light' which symbolises God or that of God is 'inward' or 'inner' represents one of the subtle differences amongst some Friends'. Fox never used the term 'inner Light' preferring 'the Light within'. He only rarely used the term 'inward Light' as in 'I was commanded to turn people to the inward light, spirit and grace' (56). Nowadays, the terms 'inward' and 'inner' seem to be used interchangeably by Friends. Perhaps the terms might more usefully be employed to describe two aspects of the Light within, illustrated by the two texts:

That was the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. (John, 1:9)

> Let your light so shine before me that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew, 5:16)

The first text could be said to refer to the *Inward Light*, the 'Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition'. The second text could be said to refer to the *Inner Light* or 'that of God' in everyone, that innate divinity which is an element of our humanity.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The inherent instability of Quakerism

The development of a new religion or sect almost always leads to some form of tension between the views of the founder and the views of some of his or her followers, leading to potential or actual schism within the sect. This was true of Luther who soon discovered that he had let a genii out of the bottle which he was powerless to put back. It was equally true of George Fox who preached from the outset that the Light of Christ within was the final authority for belief and action. When some of his followers, especially James Nayler (57) and later John Perrott (58), disagreed with some of Fox's views, he took this as a challenge to his authority. However, he did not pull rank but rather challenged the validity of their spiritual leadings. With Nayler, it does seem that Fox resented what seemed to be a direct bid for leadership, since Nayler's spiritual stature was amply demonstrated by his ability to preach and to inspire others, an ability which was equal, or at times superior, to that of Fox himself. However, Nayler also seems to have been too easily swayed by sycophantic followers, and was finally led to behave in a way that no-one in the main body of Friends could accept. John Perrott, on the other hand, seems to have had a logical disagreement with Fox on what seems now to have been a relatively trivial matter. The practice had developed among Friends that when prayer was offered in meeting for worship the men, and only the men, should remove their hats. John Perrott argued that this was sexist. St Paul had said that women should remain covered at all times during worship, so why did this not also apply to men? Instead of arguing the point, Fox informed Perrott that his spiritual leading was false. The quarrel was long and bitter, each protagonist attracting his own supporters. It is hard to believe that Fox was not primarily motivated by a perceived threat to his leadership rather than by wanting to win a theological argument. Perrott finally solved the problem by emigrating to America.

Nevertheless, as has already been observed, Fox was entirely right in realising that there had to be some sort of corporate discipline, and introduced his 'Gospel Order' of local and regional meetings to ensure that some discipline was exerted. Without that the Society of Friends would have foundered, as did all other contemporary 'ranterish' sects of the period. Such discipline, at least in theory if not always in practice, would arise from the corporate experience of the gathered meeting, rather than from the insights of a 'weighty' Friend, however charismatic.

Current Friendly diversities

The 1991 World Conference of Friends held in the Netherlands, Honduras and

Kenya has revealed what many knew already that, theologically speaking, there is not one but several Societies of Friends. This does not seem to have impaired personal friendliness and goodwill between members of the Conference, nor does it seem to have diminished the determination of Friends to understand one another although, just as it did at the Young Friends' Conference at Greensboro, North Carolina in 1985, their differences caused anger, resentment, pain and distress. However, there do seem to have been wide theological gulfs which many hesitated to cross lest they compromised their own integrity and abandoned their deepest convictions. Many hoped, and still do, that if Friends could only travel past the words and the dogmas, they might yet be able to reach a place where these differences no longer mattered. The range of theological views held by different Yearly Meetings the world over is too wide to be regarded simply as variations on a common theme, encompassing as it does religious humanism at one end of the spectrum and a biblically based theology at the other. Even the Quaker belief of 'that of God in everyone' seems not to be held by all Quakers.

The Quaker Testimonies

However, there are some patterns of belief and behaviour common to Yearly Meetings worldwide. These are expressed in what are known as the Quaker 'testimonies', which have been modified over the years as some, such as the paying of tithes, have become redundant. New testimonies are now emerging, such as a concern for the environment and equality between races, sexes and social classes. A description of testimonies which might be acceptable to most Yearly Meetings today is set out below.

Personal relationships

This area emphasises social equality and the need for us to accept every person individually, never regarding anyone solely as a member of a class or category. This is why Friends refer to John Smith and Mary Jones rather than to Mr Smith and Mrs, Ms or Miss Jones, and why titles are never used, whether they be social, military, medical, ecclesiastical or academic. Friends oppose discrimination or exploitation on the grounds of creed, race, sex, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, age or social status.

Compassion

This includes the traditional Quaker concern for the relief of suffering due to famine, natural disasters and war. More recently concern for situations nearer at home have emerged, especially for homeless, disadvantaged or elderly people and those who are particularly vulnerable, such as political prisoners, those with AIDS and those who are addicted to drugs. Compassion for animals has led to opposition to factory farming and other forms of cruelty.

Life style

This concerns the adoption of an unostentatious life style and a refusal to consume more goods and services than are strictly necessary. This ties in with traditional ideals of

simplicity, thrift and temperance and the refusal to engage in get-rich-quick enterprises such as raffles, lotteries, gambling and betting, and financial speculation. Recently there has been a renewed emphasis on the dangers of smoking and the misuse of drugs.

Truth

This requires strict honesty and truthfulness, mutual trust and fidelity in our relations with other people. Quakers attracted much business in the early days because of their probity and their insistence on quoting fixed prices which they adhered to. Friends used to disown members who became bankrupt, indicating their insistence that Friends should not incur debts they were incapable of meeting. Friends refused to take oaths, partly on scriptural grounds, but also because they wished to demonstrate that they always intended to speak the truth and not only when 'on oath'. Nowadays Friends are greatly concerned about truth and integrity in public affairs.

Peace

Friends are best known for their 'peace testimony' and their refusal to support international warfare as a means of settling disputes. This implies an opposition to the arms trade, to conscription, and to the threat of nuclear war as a deterrent. Reconciliation, mediation and conflict resolution are promoted, rather than the seeking of revenge and retribution or the use of violence to achieve desired objectives.

Social justice

Quakers have for very many years been at the forefront of penal reform and opposition to capital punishment, emphasising the need for rehabilitation rather than retribution. This testimony also seeks a fairer distribution of wealth, and equal opportunities for employment and education, and in housing and health services.

Green issues

A comparatively new testimony has developed concerning conservation of the environment. Some Friends are beginning to feel that vegetarianism might soon become a testimony. In any case concern for 'the integrity of creation' has become important.

In considering a set of testimonies such as these, it is important to remember the salutary Balby Declaration which runs as follows:

> 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 the 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. (59)

Towards a solution

The problem now is, as it always has been, to decide where, and on what issues, does the line have to be drawn? What are the essentials about which there has to be unity, and what are the non-essentials in which liberty is possible? This is an urgent matter for the Society of Friends. Perhaps the most crucial issue dividing our Yearly Meetings, is whether or not the Inward Light has primacy over scripture in matters of belief and action. The problem of sexual mores, especially concerning the admissability of homosexuality and of a less restrictive code of heterosexual

behaviour, has also become an important matter which divides Friends. It might be possible for most Yearly Meetings to agree on basic principles in these matters concerning the need to avoid any form of exploitation in our relationships with other people. However, this would depend on an acceptance of the primacy of the Inward Light over scripture, since there are clear scriptural injunctions against homosexuality, adultery and fornication, as well as against alternative spiritualities as practised by some Friends. (60) A universalist view accepts the validity of theological differences and accepts the principle of the primacy of the Inward Light over scripture. This view could remove many of the areas of disagreement.

The World Gathering of Young Friends at Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1985 issued an Epistle at the end of their Conference which contained the following remarkable passage:

> We have often wondered whether there is anything Quakers today can say as one. After much struggle we have discovered that we can proclaim this: there is a living God at the centre of all, who is available to each of us as a Present Teacher at the very heart of our lives. We seek as people of God to be worthy vessels to deliver the Lord's transforming word, to be prophets of joy who know from experience and can testify to the world, as George Fox did, 'that the Lord is at work in this thick night'. Our priority is to be receptive to the life-giving Word of God, whether it comes through the written Word — the Scriptures; the Incarnate Word — Jesus Christ; the Corporate Word — as discerned by the gathered meeting; or the Inward Word of God in our hearts which is available to each of us who seek the Truth. (61)

This statement, arrived at after much distress and heart-searching, seems to put theology in its proper place, as a servant and not as a master. It demonstrates that it really is possible to achieve unity without uniformity, indicating that unity can more easily be achieved by seeking a common spirituality rather than a common theology.

George Fox considered that the Inward Light had a dual function: it was to enable us to tell right from wrong and to bring us into unity. (62) If this can be achieved, then we may have found a way of accepting heresy within the Society and of using it to bring about creative evolutionary change. But we have then to be sure we know how to discern those new insights which are in right ordering, and those which are not. This can only be done in a truly 'gathered' meeting open to the operation of the Inward Light. We have much in common with others in our social witness, indeed many of the ethical principles contained in our testimonies are shared by other religious communities and secular organisations. These are sorely needed in a world where the fabric of a moral, just and peaceful society is being eroded. It would be a tragedy if we were prevented from presenting a united witness on these matters because of our theological differences.

Sebastian Franck, the 17th century mystic and spiritual reformer, wrote: 'Every man is dear to me who pants after God and lives uprightly. I do not ask what he believes, but how he lives'. (63)

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THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST GROUP

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 have a monopoly of truth. The group is open to both Quakers and non-Quakers.

About this pamphlet

Here Ralph Hetherington offers a clear and considered statement of the Universalist position that is likely to become a classic reference-point. It is a statement honed out of many years of reflection and discussion of universalism and spirituality within the Society of Friends.

This is a study of the tension, endemic in Quakerism which has no formal doctrine or dogma, between the authority of scripture and accepted practice in religious belief on the one hand, and the authority and power of individual inner experience on the other. This tension was expressed from the beginning, in the mid seventeenth century, by George Fox, William Penn and Isaac Penington among others. The tension between the stability of accepted texts and practice, and the change potential in the individual powerful experience, is part of all living religious institutions. It is however, uneasy, and can lead to both conservatism (as it did with English Quakers in the nineteenth century) or fragmentation and accusations of heresy.

The universalist view has even wider implications, in that it asserts that the inward light is accessible to all humans in the world, whether they belong to any formal religious organisation or not. Ralph Hetherington, in the second part of the pamphlet discusses spirituality which he sees as prior to religious organisation, and the radical concept of the true light which is our real inheritance. To enter into our inheritance is both a natural step and a transformation.

The pamphlet ends by discussing modern research on religious and mystical experience and the way this experience can change lives, inside and outside the Society of Friends. Ralph Hetherington draws attention to the fact that while there are clearly wide variations in theological belief in the Society of Friends world-wide, there is nevertheless, very considerable agreement over the nature of Quaker testimonies, especially those concerning simplicity, personal integrity and social equality.