

### About this pamphlet

*Of one heart, diverse mind* is a robust and inspiring vision of the Quaker faith speaking to the spiritual needs of the 21st century in a universalist voice that it will be most ready to hear. Quakerism, the author claims, is the freest of all faiths to be able to evolve evolutionarily and embrace the insights of God's never-ending revelations and humanity's continuing discovery and experience of the truth because of its universalist roots.

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask, they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers.

*William Penn 1693.*

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

*John Woolman 1762.*

Today Quaker Universalism is at the forefront in giving expression to John Linton's original inspiration in 1977 that Quakerism could be seen as leading the way towards a much-needed global spiritual synthesis (**not** syncretional), which goes beyond religion, whilst welcoming the plurality of singular belief-systems, including Christianity.

'Ideals', says the Dalai Lama, 'are the engines of progress.' Quaker Universalism espouses such an inclusive ideal, exempting no advances in knowledge nor different modes of viewing the human situation.

Adrian Cairns trenchantly substantiates these bold claims with great wisdom and wit, drawing on his wide reading and work within the Society. He explores our post-Christian 'God-as-it-were' contemporary plight within the ongoing processes of a growing Global consciousness. He sees Quaker Universalism as inclusive and not exclusive, and within a metaphorical rather than literal framework, where there is no final revelation nor monopoly of truth.

Warmly received when it was first published by Quaker Home Service, this challenging pamphlet was soon out of print. Now this completely revised edition published by the Quaker Universalist Group has allowed the author to update and extend it in the light of new events and recent publications.

## OF ONE HEART, DIVERSE MIND THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST WAY

Second Edition

ADRIAN CAIRNS



QUG Pamphlet No.29

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### About the Author

Adrian Cairns is an actor by profession although he is given little opportunity to pursue his craft these days. For 25 years he was Associate Principal at the internationally famous Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. He has also been a television announcer, interviewer and presenter. He has written all his life, keeping an occasional journal for nearly 60 years, and publishing a number of philosophical articles, and a book on *The Making of the Professional Actor* (1966).

### The Quaker Universalist Group

The Quaker Universalist Group is based on our understanding that spiritual awareness is accessible to everyone of any religion or none and that no one can claim to have a final revelation or monopoly of truth.

We acknowledge that such awareness may be expressed in many different ways. We delight in this diversity and warmly welcome both Quakers and non-Quakers to join us.

Each Quaker Universalist Pamphlet expresses the view of its author, which are not necessarily representative of the Q.U.G. as a whole.

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### **Preface to First Edition, 1994**

In March 1993, some dozen members of the Quaker Universalist Group's Committee gathered for a week-end retreat at Turvey Abbey in Bedfordshire. Their object was to take time to consider in an un-pressured way the *raison d'être* of the Group, and to suggest its likely future course. Towards this end, each member was asked to produce a short paper beforehand, outlining their personal understanding and recommendations for discussion. These 'Turvey Papers' were made available to the Annual Conference in April 1993 for comment, for it was always the aim of the Committee to be seen as servants of the membership, not its directors. The papers and comments have now provided source-material among others mentioned in the present essay, and I am very grateful to the various Friends mentioned in the 'Notes' for permission to quote their words, often out of their original context, and sometimes in support of a point whose expression has been my sole responsibility; as, indeed, has been the inclusion of later material referring to events in 1994.

### **Preface to Second Edition, 1999**

The Quaker Home Service original edition of this pamphlet (1994) is now out of print. The Quaker Universalist Group has assumed responsibility for a second edition in view of continued requests for copies. The author has taken the opportunity to up-date and extend certain sections where an attitude or fact may have altered during the five-year interim.

Appropriately enough, the QUG Committee itself embarked upon a further three-day retreat to consider its future in July 1999, this time at Totnes. Out of this meeting, it was felt that the QUG had come to the end of a phase. Its initial purpose had been to gain acceptance within the Society of Friends of the viewpoint that 'there are many paths to God' of which Christianity is only one. This view is now largely accepted, although it remains a concern for some Friends that in the strict credal definition of a Christian it is no longer necessary to be one in order to be a member of the Society. The QUG Committee now feels that it has a wider vision to promote: namely, that the sacred is to be found at the heart of all creation. 'That of God in every person' becomes in addition 'that of God in all things'; and in practical living this incurs the ethical requirement for it to be remembered in everything we think, say, and do.

The principal additions to this second edition have been prompted by the most recent publications from the Dalai Lama, Don Cupitt and John Hick; also the important contribution to Quaker culture made by Ben Pink Dandelion's sociological study, and the recent popular impact of an American trilogy, *Conversations with God: an uncommon dialogue* by Neale Donald Walsch, published between 1995 and 1998. All have perspectives to offer on Quaker Universalism (not directly, but in substance) which may point to ways forward. Nothing living can remain static; and the universal law of change is something which any group calling itself Universalist cannot ignore.

## 1. What is a Quaker Universalist?

'Universal' is a large and many-faceted word for a simple idea. Jane Austen uses it with delicious hyperbole in the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* when she suggests that 'it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' My dictionary offers a prime definition of this usage as meaning 'extends over, comprehends, affects or includes the whole of something specified or implied'. A secondary definition is obviously that which is 'of or throughout the universe', but this may also be allowed to mean only 'of the world or all nature' or even simply 'existing or occurring everywhere or in all things'. The dictionary goes on to define it in relation to law, to language, to logic and philosophy, to the Church, to persons, to machines, to arithmetic and to suffrage. The word is clearly overloaded with separate meanings according to where it finds itself.

So what about 'Universalism' and 'Universalist'? Here the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* is much less forthcoming. Theologically, Universalism refers to the doctrine of universal salvation or redemption, or the belief that all people will be saved regardless of circumstance; and a Universalist is one who believes in this, or in the United States is specifically 'a member of a sect holding this doctrine'. *Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* goes on to say that Universalism 'implies rejection of the traditional Christian belief in hell', and that it is 'a feature of much contemporary Protestant theology' which is motivated by 'a recognition of the validity of other non-Christian world faiths'. The latter is about the only point where a dictionary definition even begins to approach the meaning of the word in its present context.

What, then, is a Quaker Universalist? In view of the universalist ideas propounded by William Penn and other early Quakers - for example, Penn's unambiguous tenet about devout souls being 'everywhere of one religion' - it is quite surprising to note the term is quite recent. It was probably first used by John Linton in a talk given to the Seekers Association in 1977 called *Quakerism as Forerunner*. In this he spoke of 'a universalist point of view' and 'the universalism of the Quaker message' and how Quakerism should 'move toward a universalist position'. Christianity he saw, and sees, as too 'parochial', but for those who 'still want to follow Jesus ... that is still within a universal framework'. That was the start of the movement and the Group. Since its inception following John Linton's talk, the Quaker Universalist Group (henceforward referred to as the QUG) has been very fortunate in having the scholarly and

passionate support of Ralph Hetherington. In the summer of 1993 he had a pamphlet published, *Universalism and Spirituality*<sup>1</sup>, in which he notes three major 'defining marks of Quaker Universalism' as:

- i) *The Reality of the Inward Light*; which reflects '... the possibility of a direct, unmediated communication between the individual human being and the creative source of love, light and life for which we commonly use the word God.';
- (ii) *The Primacy of the Inward Light over Scripture*; and
- (iii) *The Belief in 'That of God' in Everyone*; which rejects the Augustinian teaching of original sin with its Fall and Redemption theology. Quaker Universalists, believing in '...no unbridgeable gap between God and human beings', are more compatible with what is called today 'creation-centred spirituality'.

There seems nothing in Hetherington's 'defining marks' which most Quakers would not accept, so where, precisely, are the differences in being a Quaker Universalist? Before I came to Quakers some fourteen years ago, I was fearful of acceptance by a group so principled and strict in their ways. Indeed, I found them so; yet they also had such a warm and liberally open-minded attitude to 'free-thinkers' like myself that, like so many before me, I felt I had arrived at my spiritual 'home'. The overtly Christian language and wide biblical scholarship evident among some Elders and others, and in the *Book of Discipline*, remained rather daunting; but I soon recognized that alongside this was an honesty about contemporary experience and an individual integrity of spiritual searching which more than balanced the discomfort of what I felt was an outmoded theology. Shortly, I was introduced to the *Universalist* magazine and the QUG. The main difference between being a Quaker and a Quaker Universalist struck me as residing in this business of accepting the diversity of liveries which make us strangers, and that 'when death has taken off the mask' we would all know each other. Penn has always spoken to my condition rather more than Fox, and while we are clearly all of one heart, whether as Quakers or anyone else, some Quaker minds are more diverse than others. The breadth of diversity exemplified in the QUG with its insistence on spiritual awareness being accessible to all without exclusive conditions, seemed to me to be very special within the one Society of the Friends of Truth, as I found we originally called ourselves.

The main difference, in brief, between a Quaker and a Quaker Universalist is the vital emphasis placed by the latter on the universalist roots of the Society. In a similar fashion, the American Quaker Universalist Fellowship describe themselves as, 'Friends and

others influenced by the strains of Quaker thought that warn against literalism and celebrate the universality of inward religious experience.'

Hetherington's pamphlet takes his reader through these historical roots of universalist ideas in Quakerism, from the aforementioned Penn and his concept of pagan spirituality whereby the Inward Light 'lighteth every man that cometh into the world', through Pennington and Fox and Barclay, then to Elias Hicks in America in 1827, and the Manchester Conference in 1895 which 'made biblical criticism respectable and freed Quakers from a constricting fundamentalism'. Worldwide Friends remain divided over the actual primacy of the Inward Light over scripture, but Universalists are firmly with those who believe in the Esoteric Tradition, sometimes called the Perennial Philosophy, as it reveals its historical continuity in the mystical basis of Quakerism, so pertinently researched by Rufus Jones. Jones, incidentally, once noted in true universalist fashion that 'Religion is an experience which no definition exhausts.' Hetherington concludes that Quaker Universalism is particularly well fitted to answer such contemporary needs as the urgency for current international recognition of 'green issues' and the protection of the ecosphere as part of a spiritual as well as material cosmos in which all creation is interdependent. It is, in fact, quite an old idea whose time has not only come into its own at last, but which carries with it the hope of helping to safeguard our threatened future.

Friends in Britain, it has seemed to me from some of their writings, are increasingly expressing the necessity of taking Quakerism into the twenty-first century with a change of emphasis in its theology. It is no accident that, for example, Rex Ambler, lecturer in theology at Birmingham University, can give seven affirmations of what Quakerism stands for without once mentioning Jesus or Christianity<sup>2</sup>. It is symptomatic of the 'movement' or 'process' taking place in the Society. In the old *Advices and Queries* there were eight mentions of Jesus and eighteen of Christ or Christianity; the newly-accepted re-draft has only four and six respectively. At Yearly Meeting, 1994, as it was struggling with the birth pangs of the new *Book of Discipline*, mental anguish was expressed by some over such omissions and the absence of reference to elements of traditional Christianity such as the resurrection. But the uncomfortable truth is that 'pain' (as it is more often referred to by Friends) is the inevitable consequence of change, of growth, and of evolving maturity, in theology as in everything else. There is also 'pain' experienced by others, or at any

rate, mental discomfort, at the rigidity enforced by old forms and old language resisting change, and stunting growth. The 'offence' taken by some Friends is an 'offence' given to others. There is no escaping this equation; life is like that, and the suffering entailed must be endured, with understanding and patience, from either side of the balance. As Yearly Meeting made tenderly clear, some passions - from whatever quarter - have to be 'set aside' for the general 'sense of the meeting' in 'seeking the right way forward'.

Nevertheless, in answer to the increasing pace of change, often spearheaded (forgive the old phrase!) by those with universalist attitudes, it has to be observed that there is currently a defensive and conservative wave of traditional Christian witness, among Quakers as among other branches of a beleaguered Christian Church, wishing to maintain the status quo. But equally observable is the rising tide of fresh and courageous thinking, even among clergy, seeking to recreate more honestly our individual, unmediated relationships with the Divine. A *cause célèbre* in the summer of 1994 dramatically illustrated this dichotomy.

## 2. The post-Christian 'God-as-it-were'

Ten years ago, in 1984, BBC television transmitted a series of programmes called *The Sea of Faith* presented by the then Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the Rev. Don Cupitt. The series took its title from Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, written in the 1860's and giving an unforgettable image for what the poet saw as the decline of religion in his time:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Five years later in 1989, a Sea of Faith Network was formed to pursue Cupitt's ideas of a post-Christian religious faith, located firmly in this world, entirely human, limited by language, yet centred in spiritual and caring activity. He himself was never the 'leader' of the group, although he attends its conferences and writes for its quarterly magazine when he can. The Sea of Faith Network has a very mixed membership from Humanist to Roman Catholic, with Anglicans perhaps dominating among a minority of clergymen, but heavily out-numbered by non-clerics and agnostics. Its six hundred or so membership includes some Quakers, and especially Quaker Universalists, because, as one of their spokesmen, David Boulton, says: 'By its nature, Sea of Faith is Universalist.' In its liberating way, without creed or involvement with any institutionalized religion, it is for a number of priests much the same as the QUG is for the Religious Society of Friends. It is in the *avant-garde*; and quite possibly may become the main voice in a post-Christian twenty-first century when its heretical messages pass into orthodoxy, and metaphor and symbol are seen to carry more significance than 'literal' truth. Much the same might be said of Quaker Universalism.

That 'long, withdrawing roar' of institutionalized faith is still rumbling in 1999. It is sometimes called 'Churchianity' to distinguish it from the true Christianity which, as G.K.Chesterton observed, has hardly been tried yet. The roar has seldom been so obvious as in the case of the Rev. Anthony Freeman: even his name is symbolic! Mr. Freeman was the priest-in-charge at St. Mark's in the small, rural village of Staplefield in West Sussex. In 1993, as an ironic fate

would have it, he was invited to write a short book telling the story of his personal spiritual journey as a way of helping to spread the gospel. That book, called *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism*, spoke of God as having no external existence, but being rather the creation of the human heart and mind, a sum-total of all that was good in the world. 'There is nothing out there,' he wrote, 'or, if there is, we can have no knowledge of it.' Not an exceptional view among Quaker Universalists, although obviously posing some difficulties of conscience and the use of language for a practising priest. Mr. Freeman's bishop was a leading Anglo-Catholic and bastion of the traditional Church, so that when he read the book, it inevitably shocked him. After consultation with his peers and others, Dr. Eric Kemp, Bishop of Chichester, dismissed Mr. Freeman from his post as director of post-ordination training, and gave him a year to consider his future at St. Mark's. That year soon passed during which Mr. Freeman could not find it in his conscience to recant. As a result, he became the first Anglican priest in this century to be dismissed for publishing unorthodox views.

It caused quite a furore. Sixty-five fellow ministers, including Don Cupitt, Paul Oestreicher and Keith Ward, put their names to a letter in *The Independent* calling the occasion of Mr. Freeman's last official sermon, 'a day of sorrow for those who value breadth and openness.' For over a week, the nation's press and letters columns, and the radio and television networks, had a field-day with headings like 'A priest who pushed dissent too far', 'So what is God really like?' and ' "unbeliever priest" defiant to the end'. It was all rather predictable; and the only reason for it all was that a sincere, honest, unsophisticated, conscience-stricken priest had used lay language to state the obvious about the most profound of theological issues, and especially about the nature and existence - or non-objective existence - of God. Mr. Freeman had quite mildly pointed out that the Emperor had no clothes. The same observation, or at any rate, the same intellectual attitude, coming as it has done frequently before from the austere eyries of Oxbridge would seem to concern no one in the media.

In David Hare's fine play *Racing Demon*, about the state of the Church of England today, the beleaguered inner-city priest, the Rev Lionel Espy, is obliged to coin the phrase 'God-as-it-were' to avoid putting off his street-wise and cynical congregation. If 'God-as-it-were' is ever to become a national issue, clearly He must do it on the media's terms; any Second Coming would have to pass the test of tabloid headlines before the Vatican even got near it; or as the popular scientist, Bryan Appleyard, put it: 'Unless He can come

up with something big, God is on the way out.'<sup>3</sup> I do not think that is true. As has been said before, if God did not exist, it would be necessary to create Him - as, indeed, has always been done. We simply have to go on doing it in a more acceptable way, given the historical advances in knowledge about ourselves, our consciousness, and the universe around us.

The Rev. Freeman, as it happens, is one of the minority of Anglican priests who are members of the Sea of Faith Network. It is reported that many, even hundreds, outside the Network support his views, albeit surreptitiously for fear of offending not only their bishop but their more conservative parishioners, and of course for fear of their livings. Mr. Freeman, in this respect, has unwillingly been given the role of martyr; although he has not carried it at all tragically but with humour and grace. His story has been a dramatic rite of passage - moving into, through, and out of the official Church. Just a day or too before he gave his farewell sermon to the parishioners of St. Mark's he was attending the Sea of Faith Conference at Leicester University where I was involved with him in a small group workshop concerned with 'Creating Rites of Passage'. He was the obvious subject for some practical work, so in silent mime the group told his story, briefly and simply. It was an emotional event, and even - I think it might be hazarded - redolent of conciliation and healing. Only a few days later, the small private 'ritual farewell' so clearly enacted for the Conference was almost exactly duplicated on the TV screens of the nation. Mr. Freeman bade farewell to his parishioners at his church door, embracing each in turn. It was an important demonstration of the power of symbolic action, of the truth as shadow matching the truth as real; and I mention it in some detail here as an illustration, because in the conclusion to this essay, I point to how Quaker Universalism might express itself in action, and perhaps develop a living theology through the use of art-forms.

Five years on, in August 1999, the Rev. Freeman's 'rite of passage' has come full circle. A more enlightened bishop (Exeter) has given permission for him to preach again. The media is unlikely to take such an interest this time. For a licensed priest to put 'God-as-it-were' back in the picture, even basically as a Humanist, is too subtle for a headline or a soundbite.

### 3. Quaker Universalism as Forerunner

Theology as an art-form has also been promulgated by Don Cupitt in one of his many recent books (*After God: the Future of Religion*<sup>4</sup>). But more recently still, he has continued his pre-occupation with a language-confined philosophy ('the outside-less world') by 'discovering' the extraordinary presence over the past few decades of an 'up-to-date religious philosophy of *life*' expressed forcibly in the idioms of everyday speech. 'It turns out that ordinary language is the best radical theologian, and significantly sharper than the professionals' (Foreword to *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech*<sup>5</sup>.) He is talking about such phrases, so often currently heard, as 'the meaning of life', 'having a life-style', 'that's what life's all about', and the brutal injunction to 'get a life'. Or again, lay philosophy talks about 'getting my life together', or 'getting back to normal life'; and then the recognition that 'life must go on' after offering the 'highest praise' to a deceased friend by saying that they 'loved life' and 'lived life to the full'. This is the contemporary linguistic focus on *life now*, and not on the hereafter. It is the articulated belief (faith, if you will) that the value, worth and sanctity of life is in the material present moment. It is not an unexpected conclusion in a largely materialist age.

The Sea of Faith Network, for which Cupitt is the mentor, 'has no creed' - rather like the Quakers; and while its object is 'to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation, nothing is set in tablets of stone'. It exists essentially as a forum for discussion over a wide range of ethical and philosophical subject-matter. The QUG has sometimes felt that it was falling into the same comfortable trap, that is, becoming a mere 'talking shop' for its like-minded members, without ever getting beyond the always relative and interpretable 'word'. Where was the action which should follow the vision? What, indeed, was, and is, the vision?

John Linton's original inspiration of 'Quakerism as Forerunner' which led to the formation of the QUG remains a valid ideal today, albeit as we have said, now partially realized. Linton saw Quakerism as leading the way to a spiritual synthesis (*not* syncretical) which goes beyond all religions, locked as they are within their own specific language and culture. Out of his personal experience in India, and particularly at the Quaker Centre in Delhi, he saw that through silent worship and meditation 'it was possible to accommodate different temperaments and approaches, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, agnostic ... bringing people of all faiths, or no faith at all, together in a common concern for spiritual values'.

Quakerism could 'provide a nucleus for the universal faith that I believe must come, a faith that no longer divides but unites humanity'. Truth, he saw, is wider than Christianity alone.

The Dalai Lama writes in the same vein in his most recent book, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World : Ethics for a new Millennium*<sup>6</sup>, 'Being a firm believer in religious pluralism ... my aim has been to appeal for an approach to ethics based on universal rather than religious principles'. It is that same pluralism which Ben Pink Dandelion has identified as the one half of a Quaker 'double culture' (referred to later), whereby a very wide spectrum of views is largely hidden under a smokescreen of silence.

Quaker Universalism is at the forefront in giving expression to Linton's ideal, and more so than the 'traditional' Quakerism which continues to be uncertain of its now-changed identity (while remaining firm in its commitment to its Social Testimonies). In today's global cultural climate (which, of course, has to include today's remarkable scientific discoveries and advances in physics and cosmology), it is Quakerism's universalist roots which offer spiritual succour and support for the necessary paradigm-shift in world attitudes to the divine aspect of human nature. But it cannot any longer afford *even to be linked to any one religion*, nor to any specific theological language. It *has* to speak from common everyday language and experience; and in the kind of accepted idiom which Cupitt has observed, almost to his surprise. Like some of the writings of Tolstoy and D.H.Lawrence among others, it has to believe in *life itself*, and not in any intellectual fabrication alone as to what life is about (although that may afterwards have its place). It has to believe in the *fact* that you and I are One; and moreover, One with all creation; or in yet other words, One with God, with the Creative Process, the *logos*. Anything we do, or even think, to harm others and our global environment, harms us also. Likewise, if we *choose* to act lovingly and responsibly, it will be returned to us, like the bread upon the waters. But what we choose for ourselves must first be given away to others. 'If you want more love in your life, cause another to have more in theirs ...'

Those words, which are in the kind of simple, accessible language being suggested, come from the trilogy mentioned in the Second Preface by an American lawyer, Neale Donald Walsch. *Conversations with God*<sup>7</sup> has had a considerable popular success, helping to fill that spiritual vacuum left by materialist attitudes and the signal failure of the Churches to address it for new generations. Walsch talks of thought, word and deed as the three levels of

creation, the three energies of creation. They have the power to produce our reality. Although it is often the case that we think, speak and act in contradiction to what we believe and truly desire. This inconsistency creates problems with our experience of reality - to say the least! But essentially, *being* comes before action. We are what we choose to do and be. We are what we think. If we want to *change* that, if we want to take actions to rectify our condition and that of those around us, we must first change ourselves; and especially the awareness, the thoughts and feelings which must precede our actions. The prime work is on ourselves. There's never any unemployment problem here.

It is in our own practical, rational and ultimate interest to love others, to put ourselves in their place, and to be responsibly compassionate in all our actions. Easier said than done, you may say; and that is true. It *can* be done now, but the most likely scenario is that it will take time, a lot of time and many generations. It will also take much rethinking about education. But time itself is not the relevant factor. *Now* is the relevant factor, to which all Time is subject, and in which all 'past' and 'future' is contained. Both can be 'changed' by our free-will acting with unconditional love; both can be 'redeemed' by that love (despite Eliot's erroneous claim in the marvellous but Christianly-orthodox 'Four Quartets' that 'all time is unredeemable'), because both *are* - in a totally irrational and mystical sense - present Now. You may say that History *cannot* be changed, and in the worldly sense that is true; but in the unworldly sense that, somewhere, somehow, it is *constantly recurring now*, it *can* be changed by those with the privilege of life now. We are up against the Ultimate Mystery here, to which our hearts and intuition, if not our intellect, may respond ... or not.

It is obligatory (though not through any man-made law) that each of us should continually be seeking the centre - the still centre - from which we came and to which we return, only to be found in our most inward and personal experience. It is the seeking which matters, the desire and intent to 'know' that sense of being which ratifies our mostly clouded consciousness of the Inward Light, that revelation in light which assures us of our Divine Origin, and knows without any doubt whatever that 'all will be well'.

This, I suggest, is core Quaker Universalist thinking; and it runs ahead of the Society's present position, offering both a lead and a hope for an inclusive future. It excludes no one religious faith nor attaches to one; it includes the humanist, the agnostic, and the atheist. It takes the whole human situation as it finds it, and with its

ever-changing viewpoints and advances in knowledge. It is the forerunner of an ideal; and as the Dalai Lama has commented, 'Ideals are the engine of progress'<sup>8</sup>.

#### 4. Global consciousness and ongoing process

The Green movement is a reminder that so-called primitive races may have got more things right than modern thinking gives credit. They understood that totality of Nature and their place in it. Primal religions, or 'native spiritualities', need to be looked at again. 'They lived in balance and reverence with the natural world, and we do not.'<sup>9</sup> Matthew Fox, of *Original Blessing* fame, uses a special technical term for the concept of 'God being in all things and all things being in God'. It is *panentheism*, which is subtly different from *pantheism*. Pantheism is defined as 'God being everything and everything being God' and hence describing the heathen worship of all the many gods which are given names. With panentheism, on the other hand, 'Divinity is not outside us. We are in God and God is in us. That is the unitive experience of the mystics East and West.'<sup>10</sup> Now, our new scientific understanding, especially through the implications of the quantum theory and the rapid growth of 'global consciousness', is pointing again to that total interconnectedness and dependence of all things which was mentioned earlier. This new knowledge, essentially universalist, does not seek to detract from the 'distinctiveness' of expression in each great religion. It is of an inclusive not an exclusive nature, as we shall be discussing more fully later. We have to admit, for all our advances, that we are not necessarily *wiser* than previous ages; we merely *know* a lot more about the material universe. Another American theologian tells us that 'we must rediscover the dimension of consciousness of the spirituality of the primal peoples' and that 'this new global consciousness must be organically ecological, supported by structures that will ensure justice and peace'.<sup>11</sup>

Creation, which must include what we call 'God', is an ongoing Process, a force working towards wholeness and harmony, and whose mystery we can only touch at different levels of our being. We ourselves, our bodies and personalities, are but forms of that creation; and we also create our own forms, not only in the arts, but in religions and institutions; yet in the final analysis, 'all forms are temporary and will die'. This makes it an uncertain world, and because we can only bear a limited uncertainty, we are doomed to failure in our religious guesses where 'All "certainties" are a defence against the greater reality.'<sup>12</sup> The 'security' of fundamentalism can be no more than a temporary anodyne, destined to ultimately fail and disappoint. The greater reality cannot be born easily. It challenges a responsibility which only great courage, suffering and love can meet. It is not at all comfortable, as witness the recorded agonies of the saints and mystics struggling with the dark night of

their souls. But if it can also be the supreme prize, hard won, beyond pride and even personal possession; for there can be no ego present, no self that is not every self, no separate identity from the total identity of an absolute consciousness, where all is light and joy and compassion and understanding, and that incredible power and ultimate security we call love.

Walsch refers to 'the Process' as 'the way things work', the 'cosmology of all life', the 'System'. 'God is a Process ... by which All is created, and experiences Itself.' He quotes Werner Erhard: 'life resolves itself in the process of life itself'. Walsch continues: 'life is the Process and the way ... trust the Process, trust God, trust yourself ... we are All One. This is what you are. You ARE this Process. This is what God IS. God is the Process. ... You are both the Creator and the Created' (all capitals from Walsch, *Conversations with God, Book III*<sup>13</sup>).

The second part of Yearly Meeting in 1994 was much exercised at one stage with an addition to the new *Book of Discipline* by Sidney Bailey which concluded: 'Peace is a process to engage in, not a goal to be reached.' Perhaps those Friends who were worried by this statement might have found some illumination from Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese meditation master, who once wrote that 'There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.' It is much the same with our concepts of God: there is no way to Him. He *is* the way. It is said that the Church only exists to pursue the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. If that goal is ever reached then there would seem to be no further need for the Church. Karen Armstrong said as much when discussing conscience and the Anthony Freeman case on the radio.

Moreover, if God is a presence with us now, again there would seem no need for an intermediary priesthood. Quakers, especially, understand that; and Quaker Universalists, perhaps, more than most. It would appear that the time has already come to call in the bluff of St. Paul's creation, the Church, with all its unnecessarily invested power. As Karen Armstrong concludes in her much-acclaimed book *A History of God*, 'The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.'<sup>14</sup>

Universalism is not about God or substitutes for God, nor about opposites, the division of one against another; it is not even about right and wrong, good and bad, the contention of ideas and

arguments. It is about harmony, about the music of the heavenly spheres and the separate chords of sunrise and cloud-set, the oneness of desert and flood, fire and ice. It is about the wholeness of Nature, and our part in it.

Or if that is rather too poetic for some tastes, let us look at an academic's view of universalism. Rex Ambler, who was mentioned earlier and is a Quaker, sees his subject as one which is there 'to illuminate and not to stipulate'. We need to articulate a global spirituality, he says, and to share our understandings rather than our dogmas. This is a most encouraging attitude which is in keeping with much contemporary thinking across the spectrum of churches and faiths which recognise a form of universalism. Ambler sees it as 'a universalism of potential, since what affirms it is the potential of all human beings to realize their unity with other human beings, and with them a unity with God'.<sup>15</sup> It does not claim 'that actual religious experiences will always be essentially the same', but rather that the very differences help a better understanding of our mutual human situation through dialogue between each other. He also sees other interpretations of universalism affecting inter-faith relations, and incidentally, what he suggests is the 'misunderstanding' of Quakers concerning 'Christocentric' and 'Universalist' viewpoints. His first 'most cautious interpretation' is the same as the QUG's assertion that 'spiritual awareness (he calls it 'true religious experience') is accessible to men and women of any religion or none ...'. His second interpretation sees this experience, or awareness, as the essential 'core' of every religion, however disguised or distorted by cultural and historical factors. Thirdly, this 'primary expression' may be seen as the same, or universal, in every religion; and fourthly, the dictionary definition already quoted whereby everyone will be 'saved' whatever their mode of spiritual consciousness. In universalism, so to speak, 'all paths lead to God'. Only the third of these interpretations will offer difficulties to the Christocentric Quaker. The dogmatic statement in John 14.6 about Jesus saying that 'no one comes to the Father except by me' is a 'particularity' which cannot be shared. Ambler also comments that in reasoning about the spiritual life, we have to admit, at every step, the inadequacy of words; and at the same time, their indispensability. To articulate our beliefs may not, at the last stage of experience, be actually possible in words; but the attempt to do so may not only be necessary but beneficial. To suppress internal conflicts and uncertainties, instead of trying to work them out through dialogue, may well prove spiritually unhealthy.

Sensing this danger, there is a need, even a desperate one in

some quarters for a forum in which those of a universalist turn of mind can meet and discuss and share their stumbling apprehension of these things. The Quaker mode of meeting for worship provides an extremely valuable basis and focus out of which the pursuit of such a forum can take place. The Quaker movement has a vital role in this respect, furthering, 'new ways of expressing old truths', helping to 'push out the boundaries with new enlightenment in new language', being at once a cutting-edge for the advance of spiritual consciousness and the growing point of its own destiny. But should such an analysis seem too cold and intellectual, we must never forget the prime commandment, which comes before and after all fabrications of thought and institutionalized concepts - the simple, unequivocal command to love one another.<sup>16</sup>

With roughly fifty percent of Britain Yearly Meeting now claiming to be non-Christian, the old Christocentric/Universalist confrontation and division is not so much a discussion-point as a fact. The 1994 tri-part statement from Ralph Hetherington, Alastair Heron and Joseph Pickvance (QFP 27.04, See Appendix for full text) seeking damage-limitation on behalf of the Society, was supposed to have settled the division (for which at least one Friend went dramatically to his knees to give 'prayerful thanks' at Yearly Meeting 1994 which should have been recognized as a partisan warning!). But the truth was that the statement, although it reads very well, simply ignored the reality of a basic difference, putting it behind some carefully-balanced wording. It was a cleverly-posed syllogism to conclude that all persons before or outside Christendom had responded to a divine principle within them; all Quaker Christians did the same, therefore in these terms all Quaker Christians were Universalists. Plainly they are not (or what is the 50% all about?) What is more important today than the division between committed Christian and Universalist viewpoints is the manner of the Quaker decision-making process. This is underpinned by what Dandelion has analysed as the Quaker 'double-culture' in his important study, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers : the Silent Revolution*<sup>17</sup>. The 'double-culture' refers to a liberal belief-pluralism operating within, or alongside, a behavioural creed which is conformist and traditional; and which is inclined to create a tension (which is, perhaps, a creative tension) between individual conviction and corporate wisdom.

The status-quo is that dissenting individual Quakers should not 'stand aside' (as some asked to do over a Meeting for Sufferings Minute in 1999) but should 'think it possible that they may be mistaken', and give way to the corporate decision as expressed in

the Minute, supposedly being 'the will of God', or at the very least, 'the sense of the Meeting' as interpreted by the clerk or clerks. It is never posited that the Meeting itself should consider that it may be mistaken, except in rare cases where it is recorded that 'unity' could not be found, and the issue is deferred to another time. But this did not happen (although it should have done) in the continuing controversy over the Society's application for Full Membership of the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland (now Churches Together in Britain and Ireland). The issue was whether the Society should sign up to a credal clause allowing it to join, or whether this betrayed our non-credal foundation. The clerks at Yearly Meeting 1989 'read' the decision as opting to join up. This rankled with many Friends, some of whom resigned over the issue. It was re-considered and re-confirmed at Yearly Meeting 1997, followed by ongoing discontent. It would seem to illustrate the point that Friends give more importance to practical co-operation on common social concerns (which, of course, is a good thing in itself) than to 'mere words' about what they and others 'believe' to be the truth.

To the Quaker Universalist such credal issues are largely irrelevant and superceded by the attitude which looks to a future when thinkers of all persuasions may find it possible, through love and mutual respect given to fellow-seekers on the path, to meet together in their plurality. The differences of language, culture and faith would only have a *secondary* significance.

## 5. Quaker Universalism is inclusive not exclusive

We can never really know which of our words will resonate with others far beyond their original context. What would George Fox and, to take another example, Shakespeare, have made of the fact that several hundred years later, some of their most casual words, often only part of a longer phrase, achieved such prime significance? 'Be patterns ... and come to walk cheerfully ...'; 'To be or not to be ...'; 'Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit ...'; 'Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow ...'; and 'What canst thou say?' These are words which touch a common nerve in us all.

It was one such phrase with which John Linton, the founder of Quaker Universalism, first expounded his case. In his seminal talk to the Seekers Association in 1977 he said that he liked to think that Quakerism is about the search for Truth and that 'Truth is wider than Christianity'. That led him to 'the universalist position' which he saw should be completely detached from indoctrination, a process to which most of the human race is exposed from its earliest years. Was it possible to be a 'religious rationalist' whilst knowing that 'religion goes beyond reason'? The universalist would probably think so, because the religious impulse in all members of the human race may be rationally perceived as either leading to delusion or enlightenment, but only experientially can the difference be decided.

There are some Friends, as is frequently shown in the letter pages of *The Friend*, for whom so-called Quaker 'fringe groups' are divisive. They are seen as 'watering down' the 'true faith' and 'Quaker morality' and encouraging a frivolous acceptance of 'anything goes' in the experiential truth of individual members. This is to misconceive what has been described as 'a sign of vitality within our Yearly Meeting'.<sup>18</sup> Far from being an 'anything goes religion', modern Quakerism is more inclined to insist on being a 'nothing goes religion which does not owe obedience to the Inward Light' whatever form such obedience may take. Whatever our concept of 'God' may be, it is a hard and not weak task-creator. The priorities, so rightly given by Jesus, are that the concept should be loved with all our being, and that because of it we should behave to others as we would have them behave to us. There is no weakening of morality there.

The role of the QUG is precisely to emphasize inclusivity rather than exclusivity, a role which has always been the special contribution of heretical Quakerism in establishing the officially established viewpoint. Quaker Universalism is wrongly seen by some

as being in opposition to Christocentric views; but the fact is, as was mentioned earlier, that inclusivity focuses uncomfortably on Christianity's own specific dilemma; namely that it can only be inclusive of other religious traditions by contradicting its own belief in particularity. But this dilemma has never been apparent in the same way in the mystical strands of Christianity, of which Quakerism is often quoted as one. In these, the Christ figure is often seen in his cosmic spiritual dimension, 'open to humankind from the beginning and not limited in time or place'. This is the early Quaker inheritance and understanding of the Christian faith. As such, it may well continue to stand in its rebellious way at 'the forefront of the religious search for universal reconciliation'.<sup>19</sup>

The inclusivist nature of Universalism, of course, embraces not only those of Christian persuasion but also includes the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Muslim and so on, not forgetting the Humanist agnostic. The point about universalist spirituality is in the belonging, whatever mode it takes. As Thomas Merton said, 'To be religious and serious about it one must, generally, belong to a religion.' We need our religious roots, in most cases, as we need our linguistic and cultural ones. It is only through being thus connected that we can respond sensitively to the deepest elements in another. Merton was a prime example of one whose own deep commitment enabled him to build what might be called 'universalist bridges' between Christianity and the Taoist, Buddhist and Hindu faiths. 'One of the signs of our time', it has been said, 'is that the world religions can no longer live in isolation from each other.'<sup>20</sup> Fundamentalism in any of them tends to deaden their spirituality.

Universalists are sometimes derided for being syncretic, that is, for aiming to reconcile and unify different traditions. But that is not the case at all, even if it were possible. The Quaker Universalist would wish to preserve intact the separate diversities of religious faith whilst taking an overall view. Moreover, past history shows that so-called unique traditions have invariably expropriated and absorbed to themselves anything usefully rooted around them. 'New' forms have often grown out of pre-existent ones which were given re-definition. This is not syncretism. No more are Quaker Universalists syncretic in moving towards the vision of a global spirituality, seeking to express a convergent yet always emergent faith; one which acknowledges what Lorna Marsden has called 'the universality of the image'<sup>21</sup> which underpins all religions, yet also acknowledging its specific expression in different vocabularies. As has been established, it is no part of the Quaker Universalist way to be intolerant of Christian vocabulary, or any other, in the expression

of faith. On the other hand, an intolerant dogmatism from whatever quarter has no part in its philosophy either.

It has been suggested that Universalists are people who have reacted against the strictures and hypocrisies often present in a Christian upbringing. That may be an element in some cases, but it is certainly not a pre-requisite for being a Universalist. The reverse, rather, is the case. Those who are intolerant of Christian language, as of any other, are *not* following a Universalist position. Tolerance is an important factor which is often misunderstood by those who can only see it as a weakness. It is, in fact, a great strength and a saving grace for any religious organization which hopes to meet the challenges of today's world. It is the antidote to fossilization and the rigidities of fundamentalism, and an attitude which deserves to be celebrated. It allows for 'creative listening' and a compassionate understanding - not necessarily agreement - with those of different persuasions. This openness, however, does not extend to the blinkered activities of bodies like the Evangelical Alliance. Such unquestioning 'certainty' and exclusivity can only be a retrogressive factor in the building of 'universalist bridges.'

Being a Quaker in the 21st century will surely be ultimately defined by our concept of the Inward Light as an individual manifestation. That Light is a *continuing* revelation in which truth occurs as Process. Nothing is fixed. There is no final answer, no 'theory of everything' as some scientists are hoping shortly to achieve. We are not here in a mathematical field where it may prove possible. We are not even in a spatio-temporal one. The essential mystery at the heart of things resides in untold dimensions beyond our very limited capacity to understand in this life. Yet this life is surely all there is, at least for us. This world, in some extraordinary way, is it. To echo the heretical thoughts of Anthony Freeman, there is no other stage - of which we can be aware - on which the creative consciousness, the Logos, is unfolding its cosmic drama.

## 6. Literal or metaphorical *What canst thou say?*

John Hick, the world renowned theologian and philosopher of religion, and back in 1977 the editor of that seminal collection of essays, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, identifies Christianity's crisis at the end of this century as having 'to decide whether it is literal or metaphorical'. In the latest of his many books, much to be commended, *The Fifth Dimension : an Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*<sup>22</sup>, he finds God existing in the many 'forms which human awareness of the Real has been given by human consciousness' and all of which may contain a degree of authenticity. Hick was one of those who wrote to *The Independent* in 1994 about the 'vulnerable' Mr. Freeman, making the point that it is not a case of God being *either* a sort of 'cosmic Father Christmas' or simply a 'purely human projection'. More subtly, he opted then for what he called a 'critical realist' attitude rather than the 'non-realism' of Don Cupitt. The terms need some elucidation: 'realism' is the old belief which states that there are separate truths out there; 'non-realism' on the contrary refers to the belief that 'we are the only makers of meanings, truths, and values' and that any other reality is never proveable and of indeterminate status. There is also a term 'anti-realism' which is much the same as 'non-realism' except that it says that proof of a reality independent of consciousness actually depends on consciousness itself. This is closer to Hick's 'critical realism'.

Hick does not close the door on the supra-natural in the way that Cupitt does. Cupitt argues himself into the ultimately depressing cul-de-sac situation where this world is all there is, and that's it. He is brilliant about it, but Hick has more common sense in allowing for the vital possibility, indeed likelihood, of a Fifth dimension of spirituality. The whole Esoteric Tradition and much personally-reported experience, speaking of mysteries, supports him. He does not throw the baby out with the bathwater of pure rationalism; although concerning this metaphor, Cupitt's New Zealand counterpart, Lloyd Geering, comments that there is no baby, only bathwater! Well, as ever, you pay your money and take your choice.

All this philosophical verbiage can be dismaying to some lay-readers. It is a fair simplification of the basic question to ask where our apprehensions of 'the truth' are literal or metaphorical. It is a question we are each obliged to respond to when considering scriptural accounts in Christianity and most other religions.

Most Universalists would not argue with this, although for Quakers in general, it has mostly seemed non-productive to worry about these 'faith issues' in such an intellectual way. As we said earlier, Quakers prefer to address the material priorities of social concern and action. They already 'know' a firm basis in their regard for silent worship, where what they 'believe' does not have to be articulated. They have a mistrust of scripture and language generally, and are more readily persuaded that behaviour speaks louder than proclamation. 'By your actions are you known'. Quaker Universalists, of course, concur with this. Where they get more worried than the average Quaker is in squaring their intellectual conscience when dealing with some of the elementary tenets expected of Christians. Even some bishops have been uncomfortably exercised over this, wishing to see an end to the 'literalist' interpretation of events such as the 'virgin birth', the miracles which are contrary to natural law (though the 'healing miracles' may simply be beyond current medical understanding), and any suggestion of a physical 'ascension into the clouds'. On the whole these things speak symbolically or by metaphor, unlike the direct wisdom of the parables and much of the Sermon on the Mount. But for all this, Universalist Friends would probably recognize that there is a false dichotomy in separating the dimension of spirit and matter which partake of one substance and existential reality. In this regard, one Friend has asked whether it is not time to 'reject altogether the dualism of the supernatural'.<sup>23</sup>

But in pursuing such mystical concepts of the One and the Many, we must not forget the 'other side' of our human nature. C.G.Jung reminds that '... none of us stands outside humanity's black collective shadow ... We are in a split condition to begin with .... and recognition of the shadow leads to the modesty we need in order to acknowledge imperfection'. Too often, we cloak our inner world with deceptive language, when the real point is to ask 'exactly how mystical themselves are people who talk of mysticism?' 'To counter this danger,' says Jung, 'the free society needs a bond of an affective nature, a principle of a kind like *caritas*, the Christian love of your neighbour.'<sup>24</sup> We will be returning to that.

Both 'God' and 'Christianity' in history may be seen very differently from the 'dark' angle of observation. Would an all-powerful creator really subscribe to man's centuries of vileness by staying at one remove, leaving us to infer either that he couldn't interfere with free will or just didn't care? Also, Christianity's evolvment has been a manifest failure of a supposedly omnipotent will. A Friend writes that

Two thousand years may be a blink in the experience of the Almighty, but it's a hell of a long time for suffering humanity. To send one's son, or a projection of oneself, to "save" the world, on this basis, was a pretty lamentable operation in the first place (on the human level we could call it sadism or sadomasochism), and in the event, the Church got the message wrong. Think of all the wars that would have been avoided if it had eschewed slaughter over the centuries!<sup>25</sup>

There is an undeniable honesty behind this comment. Will Christianity, or rather, more accurately, 'churchianity' - the whole man-made, male-oriented, theological and credal edifice which is supposed to be guiding our sinful natures towards salvation - will it ever be able to admit that 'it got it wrong' - not so much about Jesus and what he taught, nor even about the Cosmic Christ or Spirit that is with us always - but over Pauline theology and the construction and manipulation of creeds and language (not to mention translations) centuries after the event? The latest encyclical to come out of Rome (1993), with its imposing and self-justifying title, *Veritas Splendor (Splendour of Truth)*, makes a positive answer seem most unlikely in the near future. But our ever-accelerating history may yet tell (as it has told before in the case of many thousand years of ancient Egyptian 'certainties') that the institutions if not the originator 'got the message wrong':

'Churchianity' has failed us. In George Steiner's phrase at his 1994 Salzburg lecture, 'The churches flounder in mundane compromise and theological vacancy'. They have mostly left us trying to deal on our own with a new Dark Age, and it is about time to question all the 'facts' and the myths and the historical jugglings anew. The slate needs wiping clean so that we can re-start from where we are. Some are already doing it, of course, and not surprisingly, they are often women. Karen Armstrong, mentioned earlier, took the Pope to task in an hour-long TV programme for seeming to ignore the agonies perpetuated by his insistent ban on contraception, especially in the Third World ravaged by AIDS. Irish women, she observed, often now make their own decision. Tasleema Nasreen, the Bangladeshi writer, also questions infallibility of text and the male Ayatollahs who enforce it. In fighting for the rights of subjected Muslim women, she has created as much controversy and danger for herself as in the notorious case of Salman Rushdie. There will be many more examples, less highlighted by publicity, as women continue to establish their equality, world-wide.

Wiping the slate clean of accrued and encrusted theology has its attraction, of course, but the image is probably too precipitate and mere wishful-thinking. There is nothing quite so conservative and deep-rooted as religion. It takes a very long time to change, leave alone die out. But over the countless generations and years, change it will, and probably die to be born again. If Matthew Arnold's image for the dying of the sea of faith was on *Dover Beach*, then an image for religions that refuse to change and adapt with the times might be Shelley's 'Ozymandias, King of Kings' whose gigantic statue, discovered by 'a traveller in an antique land', lies broken in the desert:

'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
the lone and level sands stretch far away.

Turning from the dark side to the light again, another Friend<sup>26</sup> found that Janet Scott had expressed all the theology that was needed when she wrote: 'We may be Christian, Buddhist, Hindu - the Spirit seeks us and loves us, and calls us to turn to the universal love and unity. ... The Kingdom of God is present in every loving heart and selfless act.'<sup>27</sup> That is admirably uncomplicated. Although even here, there will be some who will find difficulty over the word 'Kingdom' with its sexist overtone; or perhaps because it has been used recently by Don Cupitt in its Old Testament sense of a 'Kingdom-religion' which aims 'to integrate the human into the world, and vice-versa'<sup>28</sup>; not to mention because of its really threatening and dismaying use by Middle American Christian fundamentalists. Moreover, quoting Janet Scott's eulogy to the Spirit that unites the principal faiths should not be taken to imply that Quaker Universalism is simply another form of inter-faith dialogue, although it is true that the latter will incline those who partake in it to a universalist viewpoint. Nor does it imply, as we said earlier, the syncretism of trying to unify the different traditions, although universal Love might well lead to such a consummation.

Quaker Universalism at this time stands, rather, for the recognition of what John Punshon terms an 'underlying psychic unity' which is evident in 'the functions and outward form of all religions.' Punshon's words come from a 'Background Paper on *Universalism in the Quaker Tradition*'<sup>29</sup> in which he inclines to marginalise it as an interesting historical bywater of Quakerism. The QUG, on the other hand, sees the universalist approach as becoming the energy of the main flood. The principal component of youthful or early Quakerism is usually seen as the 'one Jesus' who spoke to

George Fox's condition. But for others, the individual Inward Light, and that component of universalism inherent in mystical Christianity as elsewhere, has grown in this century to be at the heart of what might be termed later Quakerism.

## 7. No final revelation nor monopoly of truth

Truth is not divisible, with some parts being more true than others. One expression of the truth in culture or time may be preferred to another, but it is not thereby better, or more true in its truthfulness. It is merely different. Before he was even a Quaker, Isaac Pennington had put it immortally in 1653: '... every Truth is true in its kind. It is substance in its own place, though it be but a shadow in another place (for it is but a reflection from an intenser substance), and the shadow is a true shadow, as the substance is a true substance.' From this it follows that all human souls are precious, whatever the shortcomings and betrayals in their expression; just as all Nature is beautiful and precious, whatever its perceived savagery or ugliness.

The assertion that there can be no final revelation nor monopoly of truth - as Quaker Universalists claim - does not deny the enormous value and glory of the different great prophets and teachers. We live in a plural universe, and its plurality has to be recognized alongside the distinctive existence of individual forms. Above all forms is the Logos, the creative energy at the heart of matter, indecipherable, mysterious, awe-inspiring, and ultimately unknowable by thought.

We saw the rite of passage for Anthony Freeman at Leicester repeated later at his church door: a case of nature imitating art (*pace* Wilde). A living theology is really an art-form, a matter of creative energy and process; and it is to be hoped that Quaker Universalists, having stated their position, at least for now, might move their practice in the direction of the arts. Painting, poetry, music and drama, can all contain universal themes and symbology. As with Quakers everywhere, it is not our peculiar ways but our actions which speak for us. But Quaker or not, wherever we are born, to whatever culture, at whatever living standard, it is ourselves that we have to learn to know and control in the School of Being - that School in which we are all, in the final analysis, seekers after truth. Not after Truth with a capital 'T', for that we can never know in this life, but at least truth as far as it can be known in human space and time. The School of Being is in the business of turning mere ideas and thoughts of the spiritual life into the actions of day-by-day reality. The scenario that is required of us to play is one of heightened awareness whereby 'meaning' and 'values' are made manifest. It is a precious scenario whose final significance, whatever the evils and miseries and deceits surrounding it, will proclaim the revelation shown to Mother Julian that '... all will be well'.

Early Friends had a vision of a universal community - God's humanity - drawn together by a recognition of the Inward Light that is everyone's birthright. They called themselves 'Children of Light'. In today's materialist darkness, the time is ripe once again for a similar fresh start that recognizes the unifying ground of individual spiritual enlightenment when it can find communal expression. There exists a real sense in the world today that our very survival may depend upon re-establishing that consensus of the heart which is non-intellectual, which does not rely on either education or culture, but only on the common humanity of blood and feeling. This is Jung's 'bond of an affective nature'. Such a sense is sometimes touched in an Olympic ceremony, or by the sight of the world's misery on television, especially of injured or starving children, when there is a shared public sense of the need, and of the mutual responsibility.

This consensus of the heart has no prescribed texts, no exclusive scripture; and although it may call upon all the wisdom, the poetry and insight that the human race has accumulated down the ages, it will do so not in eclectic fashion, and certainly not in one of contentious rivalry, but as an honest seeking after 'new light from whatever quarter it may come'. It is providing a forum for such an ongoing search, as was said earlier, that the Quaker Universalists have such a vital contribution to make. More seriously still, they may provide a springboard for both individual and corporate action. They answer the needs of a contemporary yearning which apprehends the One Spirit in many guises, and however diverse in cultural thinking, is of one heart and one mind in recognizing the fearful necessity to act upon ideals, exercising what has been profoundly termed 'the special responsibility of those whom would dwell in love'.<sup>30</sup>

The greatest achievement is correct being. Most religions would probably agree with that; which makes a small start from the personal to the universal and back again. The Zen monk who creates his formal garden out of rocks and pebbles and rhythms, and then sits in front of its beauty, is making that circular journey. It seems that religion, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. But however diverse the culture and its spiritual expression, what is seen to be beautiful in all the manifold forms of nature - like the awe and majesty in the universal image of the rainbow - speaks of God's mysterious covenant with all the human race. We are one race, one people, a part of the whole conundrum of Creation, and in this there is a singular comfort and glory.

#### **Appendix : Quaker Faith and Practice, 27.04.**

We have acquired a much greater understanding of non-Christian religions from newcomers who have settled in this country since the end of World War II and this has increased the sympathy and respect of many Friends for these faiths. This broader approach to religion has led to an affirmation by 'universalist' Friends that no one faith can claim to be a final revelation or to have a monopoly of the truth and to the rejection of any exclusive religious fundamentalism whether based on Christianity or any other religion.

The ferment of thought in this post-war period has produced a wide variety of beliefs in our Religious Society today and not a little misunderstanding on all sides. Intolerance has reared its head. Some Friends have voiced objections to the use of Christian language in meetings for worship and for business; others have been told that there is no place for them in our Religious Society if they cannot regard themselves as Christians. It has become quite customary to distinguish between 'Christians' and 'universalists' as if one category excluded the other.

The situation has led many Friends to suppose that universalist Friends are in some way set over against Christocentric Friends. This is certainly not the case. Universalism is by definition inclusivist, and its adherents accept the right to free expression of all points of view, Christocentric or any other. Indeed, in London Yearly Meeting there are many universalists whose spiritual imagery and belief are thoroughly Christocentric.

From the beginning the Quaker Christian faith has had a universal dimension. George Fox saw the Light 'Shine through all' and he identified it with the divine Light of Christ that 'enlightens every man that comes into the world' (John 1:9). He pointed out, as did William Penn in greater detail, that individuals who had lived before the Christian era or outside Christendom and had no knowledge of the Bible story, had responded to a divine principle within them. In these terms, all Quaker Christians are universalists. Obedience to the Light within, however that may be described, is the real test of faithful living.

Alastair Heron, Ralph Hetherington and Joseph Pickvance, 1994.

## Notes and references

- 1 Ralph Hetherington. *Universalism and Spirituality*. Pendle Hill Publications, 1993, pp.28-29.
- 2 Rex Ambler. *The End of Words: issues in contemporary Quaker Theology*. QHS, 1994. I am very grateful to the author for a pre-publication sight of his manuscript.
- 3 *The Independent*, 3 August, 1994.
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