

Fox and Universalism

Notes for a talk to the Quaker Universalist Group

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‘Fox and universalism’ – it is a challenging set of words. Universalism was not something Fox could face in his time; it didn’t come into being until the following century. And when it did come it was part of that Enlightenment project that gave priority to new secular values of equality, liberty and fraternity. It was protesting against the dominant religion of the West that was claiming to be superior to all other religions of the world, which were then being discovered, of course, as Western powers spread their empires across the whole world. But the imperial adventure needed to be justified, and there seemed to be no better argument for the subjection of other peoples than the belief that Christianity was far superior to any other religion they might encounter, even though some, like Hinduism, were far older and more sophisticated than Christianity. But to many people in the West, especially those who had visited the East, this was blatantly untrue – yet, of course, there were serious differences between religions, so the question of which of them was best, or ‘true’, was not wholly irrelevant.

It is in this context, I think, that the idea of universalism arose. It was making the claim that though religions appear on the surface to be different, there were deeper understandings which they had in common. This could be identified, for example, as a liberation of humans from selfishness and a reconciliation with reality experienced as one. That is, I think, a very sound view, even after all that has been studied and discerned in the 300 years since.

But there were and are other kinds of universalism which do not rely on this deeper discernment. You will know about them, because we still discuss these things.

- (1) That all people will eventually be ‘saved’, whatever their present state. This presupposes an idea of an afterlife, of course.
- (2) That all religions are equally valid – or, alternatively, equally *invalid*! This carries a modern assumption of equality of humans as applied to religion.
- (3) That all people have an inborn propensity for faith and can therefore find the truth that is relevant to them – or experience God whatever they may conceive that reality to be. This may be a matter of either faith *or* experience.

It is in this last sense of the word, I believe, that Quakers came to see themselves as ‘universalist’. There is ‘that of God in everyone’, a phrase which they took over from Fox. But this was more than a ‘propensity for faith,’ as I put it. It was a real experience. In some way, everyone experiences ‘that of God within them’, even if they don’t acknowledge it or respond to it. Hence the possibility of ‘answering that of God in everyone’, which they perceived as their mission in the world..

This was a new understanding, and I know of no other Christian group that developed such an idea. For all of them faith was a matter of *believing* what had been said or done and living in the light of that belief. That is true of the Unitarians as well, who dispensed with belief in Christ, and the Universalist church in America which joined in with the Unitarians. So Fox's insight was quite original, and remained so, at least as far as the West was concerned. In the East there was always something like that, some recognition of at least a basic spiritual insight in everyone.

In England and Europe generally it was still assumed that if anything was to be known of God it would have been set out in words, in a book, for example, or a liturgy. So when the young George set out on his travels to find the truth he was looking for, he was expecting to find some words, some teaching, 'that spoke to his condition'. That is why he was thrown into a profound crisis when he realized that there was no-one who could 'speak to his condition', yet the crisis, as we know, was, as often, a chance for a new insight to emerge. You will be familiar with the words, but let me highlight some of them.

As I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then O then I heard voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition". When I heard it, my heart did leap for joy... Jesus Christ enlightens, and gives grace, faith and power... This I knew experimentally.

[Fox *Journal*, ed. Nichalls, p.11; my anthology of Fox *Truth of the Heart*, 1:13.]

This 'giving up' on other people's words and the 'hearing of a voice' are clearly linked, aren't they? It is as 'when all my hopes in them were gone' that 'then, O then I heard a voice'.

So long as he was expecting the truth to come in words from others he could not hear this voice inside him. The implication is, as Fox explained later, that his pre-occupation with the spoken, human words prevented him from hearing anything inside him.

When your minds run into anything outwardly, without the power, it covers and veils the pure in you. [*Truth of the Heart* 1:55]

This means that the sense of truth inside him, 'that of God' in him, is actually blocked off by the preoccupation with words and ideas. It is not then immediately recognizable. He had to warn some intellectuals at one point not to be so absorbed in their ideas because that very commitment will block off the reality:

But all you that be in your own wisdom and in your own reason, you tell that silent waiting upon God is famine to you; it is a strange life to you to come to be silent, you must come into a new world. Now you must die in the silence, die from the wisdom, die from

the knowledge, die from the reason, and die from the understanding.

[*Truth of the Heart* 1:63]

Even sound, wise words can get in the way. That is precisely why silence is so important.

So this fundamental truth, which has become so important for Quakers, was not some idea about human goodness or equality, as is sometimes said today. It was a deep awareness of reality, but it was initially hidden and needed to be discovered.

So it came as a revelation to Fox when he realized – it was one of his many ‘openings’ – that this ‘light of God’ was in everybody:

Now the Lord God 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 that they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came to the light of life and became children of it. [*Truth of the Heart* 1:77.]

This must have been especially surprising to him because he had been brought up to believe that everybody was a sinner and cut off from God, and therefore needed the preaching and sacraments of the church to bring them to God. All that seemed now to be unreal – a deliberate pretence, maybe, or an innocent illusion – a ‘dream’. So Fox’s great mission, we might say, was to awaken that sleeping sense of truth and God that everyone had within them, but is smothered by words and ideas that have been foisted on them.

Awake, awake, all people everywhere who live in (a dream-world of) forms! [*Truth of the Heart* 2:38.

Fox’s ‘universalism’ was practical:

He reached out to ‘answer that of God in everyone’;

he taught people how to practice the meditation that would enable them to see it and own it;

he encouraged them to live by the ‘light within’, so that they could see clearly what to do in their lives,
and

he encouraged them to see the whole world in this light, and so work for justice and unity, and finally, in responding to this truth about the world, to strive to make the unity they saw a reality.

I leave you with this remarkable passage from one of his final epistles, no 358 from the year 1679:

Dear Friends,

With my love to you in the holy peaceable truth

that never changes

nor admits of evil,

but makes all free

that receive it

and that walk in it,

and is over all clouds without water
 and trees without fruit.
 And from the truth floweth justice,
 equity, righteousness and godliness,
 mercy and tenderness,
 that brings a man's heart, mind, soul and spirit
 to the infinite and
 incomprehensible God,
 and from it a love flows
 to all the universal creation
 and would have all to come
 to the knowledge of the truth,
 and it bends every one to their utmost ability
 to serve God and his truth
 and to spread it abroad,
 and it brings their minds out of the earth,
 which makes them brittle
 and changeable and uncertain,
 for it doth not change,
 neither doth it touch with
 that which does change.
 As to unity, it makes all
 like itself
 that do obey it,
 universal, to live out of
 narrowness and self,
 and deny it.
 So it brings all into oneness
 and answereth the good principle
 of God in all people.

[*Truth of the*

Heart 3:84.]
