I HAVE CALLED YOU FRIENDS

JOHN 15:15

A Reflection on Christian and Universalist Themes In Quaker Faith and Practice

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered at the Adult First Day School
of Gwynedd Monthly Meeting
Gwynedd, Pennsylvania

April 25, 1993

All of us carry within us a great question. In fact, our very life is a quest, a search. Sometimes we are more acutely aware of this than at other times. Sometimes this question is sharply etched, sometimes it is vague and unformulated. When Jesus said that we cannot live by bread alone, he was speaking of this great question, and of our hunger for a corresponding great answer.

This great answer which we seek is indeed given to us. Sometimes it is given to a person in a blinding flash, suddenly, in an instant. To other people it comes slowly and gradually over time. But, however it arrives, there comes upon us a great experience of absolute Spirit and a leading to transform the way we live out our life in the world. Thus, the answer comes both as *experience* and as *praxis*. It comes both as new knowledge and as a transformed way of being, of acting. This great answer is available not only to saints and sages, but potentially it is available to everyone. Not everyone, however, finds the grace to pause, to become silent and still long enough to hear it.

Those who do have this experience of absolute Spirit always insist that it is indescribable. George Fox speaks of it as being "beyond what words can utter." Yet, paradoxically, those who have this experience often seem unable to refrain from trying to communicate, however imperfectly, something of its essence. Obviously, descriptions of the indescribable will vary! Nevertheless, some useful generalizations can be made about these experiences which are associated with people's finding of this great answer.

One thing that usually characterizes these mystical experiences is that persons will, paradoxically, both lose themselves and yet feel more fully themselves than at any other time. They often use expressions like, "I came completely out of myself," or "I was carried away." Yet, while the persons' sense of their own selfhood is diminished, they somehow feel more fully than ever to be whom they were really meant to be.

The second attribute of these peak experiences is a combination of aloneness

and community. These mystical visions sometimes occur in the solitude of a natural setting, but they can also happen in the midst of a crowd. Nevertheless, there is a particular sense that people have during such a spiritual peak experience that they are alone without being lonely. In fact, not only are they not lonely, but they feel themselves to be at one with all that exists. They feel intimately involved with a reality greater than themselves.

The third characteristic of such a spiritual peak experience is that the mystery of life seems somehow to be solved. People find the great answer, even though they cannot express it. This great answer is not likely to be an elaborate philosophy explaining the riddles of good and evil, or of life and death. Rather, it is apt to take the form of a kind of joyful reconciliation with the existence of ultimate mystery.

People who have experienced this sense of belonging, of release from spiritual restlessness, of at-home-ness, of unity with the cosmos, are usually overcome with a boundless joy, with an impulse to express gratitude.

Humankind's religious life, if it is at all genuine, flows out of such peak experiences. Theology, morals and ritual give expression to an on-going religious life based upon, and growing out of, mystical experiences of absolute Spirit.

The exercise of theology is the attempt to penetrate the unnameable mystery. It is natural that human beings, having had an experience that is deeply moving and totally involving, will think about it, reflect on it, seek to understand it, and try to come to know it better. People will try to summarize, for handy use in daily life, truths which can be fully grasped only during towering moments of wordless spiritual experience. As long as the theological enterprise is regarded as a series of hints, rather than as an absolute grasp of the Ultimate Reality, it can be useful. If it pretends to define, rather than merely to suggest, it flaunts and fails. As Greg Lamm, an Evangelical Friends pastor, said when he visited Pendle Hill recently, "All theology is heresy."

Springing from the profound sense of belonging and of unity is a concept of a way of living, a system of morals. Moral rightness consists of behaving as people behave when they know they belong together. We behave as members of one universal household. Ethics is our willingness to behave as one behaves towards those with whom one is united by a strong bond of belonging.

Finally, ritual gives expression to our feelings of gratitude for ultimate belonging, for the gift of the great answer. Mindfully conducted, liturgies and rituals can re-vivify our awareness of the great answer and can re-elicit the sense of beauty and gratitude which the great answer inspires.

It is interesting to reflect that Friends are skeptical of all three of these

"derivative" dimensions of religious life--theology, moral codes, and ritual. Friends' spirituality, in effect, seeks to remain very close to the pristine primordial experience of absolute Spirit and to the associated transformation of living.

Problems arise in Friends meetings and communities, it seems to me, because of the different backgrounds from which people come to our Religious Society. Clearly, in much Christian practice, the pursuits of theology and of spiritual discourse are not regarded as exercises in metaphor or poetry, but as an exacting and legalistic pinning down of the truth. In other words, a wisdom tradition is turned into a kind of ideology. This kills the spirit and is often extremely oppressive and intolerant. We have many people coming into the Religious Society of Friends who might be called refugees from such Christian malpractice. Such Friends can be quite allergic to Christian vocabulary and Christian thought forms. At the same time there are other Friends who, being aware that the ineffable character of our religious experience cannot even be alluded to adequately using only such vocabulary as might be heard in a public school classroom, seek to employ the theological terms and points of reference which people in western civilization--which is, after all, rooted in Christianity--have always used when trying to describe religious experience. But although the Friends employing theological and Christian terms may be using them in a healthy way, the words can be heard by others with all the connotations they bring from usage in a different faith community, a community from which they might have fled. This can result in the odd situation where a Quaker gathering might tolerate perfectly well attempts to allude to what I have called "the great answer" using Buddhist or Hindu vocabulary, but where the introduction of Christian formulations or metaphors to allude to spiritual insight will result in tensions, sometimes serious tensions, within the group. Somehow we have to find a way to release the baggage of previous experience as we pursue our faith dialogue, and recognize that blanket intolerance of Christian thought forms is not, properly speaking, a form of universalism.

Before proceeding to a brief consideration of the significance for Friends of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth it will be useful, I think, to consider two more aspects of the phenomenon of spiritual discourse. One has to do with the nature of language, the other with the nature of spiritual truth itself.

The first thing we might note about our use of language--all language, not only religious metaphors--is that language follows experience, that is, it comes after experience. We experience something, then we seek to describe it. This is true not only of external events, but also of internal states. We experience an event, or an internal state or impulse, then we put it into words. These words may form in our own mind a split second after the event; they may be used to convey the experience to others hours or years later. The important thing to realize is that all language deals with things "posthumously."

Second, language deals with those aspects of reality which things have in common. The word "tree" or the word "love" have meaning because they give expression to the characteristics common to all trees and to all love. To describe a particular tree or particular love becomes more difficult, because again we will begin to use adjectives which derive from the commonality of things and experiences. Language is a great gift and a miracle, and we can scarcely imagine being human without it; yet we must also recognize its limitations--its posthumous character, and its tendency to reduce all things and all experience to a kind of generalization. These limitations of language become particularly acute when it comes to dealing with anything which is not like anything else--especially when it comes to dealing with our incomparable experiences of the divine.

I regard myself as a universalist Friend, and enjoy celebrating the manifestation of Truth and Light found in all spiritual traditions. But I am not a Friend for nothing. Our understanding of the limitations of creeds and of language, and our commitment to the practice of inner silence as a preparation, as a making of ourselves ready to receive an incomparable gift, are vital and important truths.

One of the most important exercises we undertake at Pendle Hill is the practice of inner silence, particularly when we are doing manual work. If we hear a robin when we are raking leaves, we try to hear the sound fully in its uniqueness, from a point of view of total inner silence, to hear the sound without naming it. This simple exercise will not produce a beatific vision in one moment; but the practice of such inner silence or presence, if allowed to permeate the being over time, particularly in a supportive atmosphere such as Pendle Hill provides, disposes a soul to be ready to receive the Light, which comes by grace alone.

A week or two ago, one of our Monday Evening Lectures at Pendle Hill was given by Greg Lamm, an Evangelical Friends pastor who now works at George Fox College in Oregon. I always listen closely to these Evangelical Friends. My universalist temperament and experience inclines me to believe I will hear some truth from them, but I also must confess, though, to a less high-minded motivation for this attentiveness. I am always trying to decide whether or not these folks, true and valuable as the insights they have to offer may be, are really Friends, or if they are just fundamentalist Christians mis-named Friends by historical accident. At any rate, one of the things Greg Lamm said was, and I quote: "All theology is heresy." It seems to me this is a very Quaker idea, related to this topic of language, not an idea one would expect to hear from Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson.

All sanctity is born of conflict--of contradictions resolved, finally, into union. For the landscape of humankind's spiritual world, the world in which we realize our most noble accomplishments and in which we suffer our most crushing defeats, is a landscape of intellectually unresolvable dichotomies. Freedom versus order; self-help salvation versus grace, or even predestination; tradition and innovation; the

simultaneous fallenness and exaltedness of human nature; stability and change; justice versus mercy. (Saint Thomas Aquinas observed that justice without mercy is cruelty, while mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution). In his many wonderful paintings entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom* the Quaker artist Edward Hicks charmingly symbolizes for us an ideal of sanctity which involves the reconciliation of such opposites. The logical mind is offended by these dichotomies and seeks to come down on one side or the other of them; the same dichotomies provoke and stimulate the higher human faculties, the faculties without which human beings are nothing but very clever animals. People of great sanctity somehow transcend these dichotomies without abandoning the truth on each side of them.

Humankind's particular vocation, then, is a precarious balancing act. It is a vocation that can be carried out successfully only with wisdom and love. It is a vocation which cannot be guided by simple, dogmatic assertions, which by their nature tend simply to prefer one side or the other of these dichotomies. The gospels have in common with the techniques of Socrates and of Zen Masters the fact that they question us, rather than telling us things. Legalism, lawyerliness and literalism are the enemies of all true spirituality. Poetry and parable are its friends. When spiritual discourse is reduced to lawyer-like debates, everyone loses.

It is interesting that Jesus never claimed to be a philosopher or an analyst. Indeed, very few of his sermons, as they are passed down to us in the gospels, could even be said to follow an outline. It is hard to imagine these sermons being spoken without long intervals of silence interspersed. Often Jesus spoke in somewhat obscure anecdotes and parables. On several occasions he simply said, "I *am* the Truth." He did not say I have come to give you great ideas or penetrating philosophies. He simply said, "I *am* the Truth." One of these occasions occurred during an interview with Pontius Pilate. Pilate's response to this strange assertion was to ask the question, "And what is Truth?" In asking the question this way, Pilate was, perhaps, revealing his background in Hellenistic culture, with its penchant for philosophizing. And as if to indicate that there was little possibility for rapprochement between one who claimed to "be" the Truth and another ready to dispute about it, Pilate, without waiting for any response from Jesus, turned away, and, ultimately, washed his hands of the entire matter which ensued.

There is a wisdom which is from the Lord, created from eternity in the beginning, and remaining until eternity at the end. It is a wisdom which we are told the Lord has poured out on all his works to be with humankind forever as his gift. (Jerusalem Bible--Ecclesiasticus 1:9,10) But this eternal wisdom is not something we can know with our minds only. Rather, it is something we are, it is a quality of being. Our minds cannot contain what contains us nor comprehend what comprehends us. We can enact this Truth, but we cannot adequately articulate it. Those who have a grasp of this are very wary of debates about spiritual matters. They know that the Truth is to be lived, not merely to be pronounced by the mouth, and

they know that by their so living, that which is unutterable will be rendered visible.

Can we ever know for sure what Jesus was really like? What is agreed to is that surviving scriptural writings, whatever their merits for revealing spiritual truth may be, are completely inadequate as a source for historical data. They account for little more than a few weeks in Jesus' life. When one reads the gospels sequentially, one is mainly aware of common themes; however, if one reads them side by side, comparing accounts of the same incidents or the same teachings, one is more struck by contradictions and disagreements than by similarity. We know how difficult it is to uncover the true personality of people like John Kennedy, Harry Truman or Richard Nixon, even though there are mountains of data and it is all much closer at hand. How then can we know the true nature of Jesus? Alas, it would be too much of a digression here to get into the fascinating story of various attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus.

But what we can probably affirm with safety and conviction is that Jesus seemed to feel and to claim a special intimacy with God. He felt himself to be so close to, and so familiar with, the love and the energy which guides the universe, so imbued with its spirit, that he could address it as mother or father. Moreover, when in Jesus' presence and when listening to his teaching, others, too, sensed their own intimacy with God. They became powerfully aware of the presence of God when in the presence of Jesus. Have we all not had similar experiences? A person, or a situation, or a place makes the presence of God palpable to us? Perhaps we can forgive people in an ancient times for their failure to make neat, analytical distinctions between God, the sense of God's presence, and the one who seemed unfailingly to make God's presence felt in a situation. Indeed, perhaps we can recognize that such an analysis is itself an artifice.

Yet even though Jesus brought many people into a new connection with the divine origin of all things, many others were unable to hear or to respond to his message. Moreover, the evidence seems quite clear that even his most convinced and loyal followers had difficulty actually understanding Jesus. We are told that Jesus himself was impatient with them and frequently driven to despair over their failure to grasp his message. Despite his instructions, his close followers could not always remember his teachings accurately or coherently. Partly this is because they were not trained philosophers or orators; in fact they were not educated people at all. But even more important, the teaching Jesus had to give was itself intrinsically difficult both to understand and to convey. We must dismiss any idea that Jesus was a simple figure. His actions and motives were complex, and he taught something which was elusive and hard to grasp. Jesus had new insights to deliver, or at least, startlingly refreshing interpretations of old insights. But he apparently sought to present this as a fulfillment of the old order. He also sought to include outcast elements in his mission, but seemed also anxious to carry the orthodox along with him. He was a true universalist.

Given all these difficulties, what we have in the gospels regarding the teachings of Jesus is more a series of glimpses than a clear code of doctrine. There is certainly no simple set of handy rules that can be unreflectively applied in daily life. Jesus started a spiritual movement based on dialogue, exploration and experiment, a movement which invites comment, interpretation, and elaboration in a spiritual quest. The radical elements in his teachings are balanced by conservative qualifications. There seems to be a constant mixture of legalism and antinomianism; there is an emphasis which repeatedly switches from rigor and militancy to acquiescence and the acceptance of suffering. Some of this variety reflects the genuine bewilderment of the disciples and the confusion of the evangelical editors to whom their memories descended, but some of it undoubtedly truly reflects Jesus' awareness of the insoluble dichotomies of which we spoke earlier, and thus is essentially a part of his universalist posture.

According to the Gospel stories, Jesus never once described a saved person as one who believed in doctrines A, B, C, or D. In fact, in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus, when speaking to the Pharisees, seems to imply that those who claim Truth as a possession are apt to become as blind people. At another time he is reported to have said that his followers would be known by one thing only, by the way they love one another. He also said that he himself had come so that "all may be one." Thus, the godliness which Jesus embodied was concerned not with *orthodoxy*, with right belief or right doctrine, but with *orthopraxis*, with right practice or right living. It was a godliness which was humane and compassionate. Indeed, in an odd and mysterious paradox, the godliness of Jesus was realized by his living in a fully human way, by his being the ultimate human, the perfect human being.

Our consideration of the relative humanity or divinity of Jesus brings us back once again to all the insoluble dichotomies I described earlier as innate to human-kind's spiritual quest. To come down too hard on one side or the other of this question of humanity and divinity is to miss the point. Relentlessly to deify Jesus distances him from us and robs him of his true greatness. After all, if Jesus knew he was divine and would rise in glory on the third day to sit at the right hand of the Father, we reduce the crucifixion to a kind of inconvenient surgery. Similarly, if the reason why the Sermon on the Mount speaks to us is because of its "extra-terrestrial origins," because it is backed up by a threat of other worldly retribution, one might as well not bother with it at all. Unless Jesus' words resonate with something very deep in one's own being with which they have a profound and mysterious kinship, all is lost. On the other hand, to declare Jesus to be merely another "prophet like Jefferson" is to rob the experience he represents of much of its saving power, and to diminish our own divine potential as well. Jesus was a child of God; we are all in some sense children of God. Jesus was human; we are all human. Jesus was divine; we are all in some sense divine. That Jesus was a person who still can reveal to us how God is seems to be beyond all doubt. That there are other sources of revelation also seems beyond doubt. Arguing about which revelation is more perfect or more or

less normative is futile. In the face of such debate, a sensitive person always senses true godliness withdrawing.

Every person has some sort of god in her or his life. We have seen many of these gods in modern times--money, power, prestige, some aspect of one's passions or emotions, some political or social ideology. Whatever god one is somehow drawn to gives form and shape to one's life, for better or for worse. To place Jesus and what he stood for at the center of our beings and to exist in accordance with the way, the truth and the life which he embodied is to acknowledge his divinity for us.

If spiritual truth is a quality of being, rather than something that we mere know with our minds, Christianity, in common with all the world's faiths, offers a true path of transformation for our being, a path to a *metanoia*, to a new self in which our joy becomes complete, a *metanoia* based on a seed already within us, a seed which is pure, perfect and complete, a seed which corresponds to the highest levels of Truth in the Creation.

The potential of this transformation is infinite in extent. To the degree that we are in a condition to recognize the wisdom, love, and service of those who have manifested the larger possibilities of this transformation we call them saints. Those whose realization of this divine potential seems complete, we see as incarnations of God, or avatars. It is true that the perfect human being, the fully realized or enlightened one, is divine.

The theologian Paul Knitter writes:

> As we deepen our awareness of what we may have encountered in our faith experience, as we search after the hidden face of God, we realize that every discovery, every insight, must be corrected and balanced by its opposite. As we discover the personality of God, we realize that God is beyond personality. As we penetrate into the immanence of divinity, we become aware of its transcendence. As we awaken to the "already" of God's kingdom in this world, we become more conscious of its "not-yet." Every belief, every doctrinal claim, must therefore be clarified and corrected by beliefs that, at first sight, claim the contrary. Realizing all this, we are disposed to look on different religions, with their "contrary" experiences and beliefs, not as adversaries but as potential partners.

In the mundane world of ordinary affairs, the opposite of the truth is a falsehood. But in the sphere of religion, the opposite of a great spiritual truth is often not a lie (although sometimes it is), but often it is another great spiritual truth. At this juncture of history, with the world becoming a global village, and with the need of humanity to find the shared spiritual basis upon which to upbuild world community and world harmony, let us hope that our religious faiths will not become

a cause of strife and bloodshed. To further this hope we certainly must abandon the idea that one of the spiritual traditions which has grown up during humankind's long pilgrimage on this earth is meant simply to swallow up all the others.

Jesus called us his friends. Let us pray that as friends of Jesus we can support within the Christian community the development of a Jesus-faith which permits us to think optimistically about the possibility of salvation in all the world's great spiritual traditions. Let the first concern of the friends of Jesus be to cooperate with and to encourage, rather than to convert, anyone who is already promoting the Realm of God on earth. Let us look forward to the day when all humankind's great religions will collaborate full-heartedly in a mutual building up of a civilization based on love. Let us recognize that while spiritual life in its externals often presents us with a bewildering diversity, the saints of each tradition are practically indistinguishable from each other in their lives, in their way of being. Their theological concepts may be different; their feelings and their conduct are amazingly similar. They dwell in love, and God dwells in them because God is love. Increasingly, in this modern age, the capacity to apprehend the One in the many constitutes the special responsibility of those who would dwell in love. May this capacity to apprehend the One in the many and the love it expresses, be the special gift of the friends of Jesus to people of faith everywhere!

(There followed an open discussion. During it Friends explored the implications of Quaker perspectives on spirituality and Truth, and Quaker perspectives on Christianity and Universalism, for the program of spiritual study at Pendle Hill and for the life of worship and community at Gwynedd Monthly Meeting).