QUAKERISM: UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN OUR SPIRITUAL FAMILY

On the Third Day of Eighth Month, 1984, the *Wall Street Journal's* second lead was a feature article about the Religious Society of Friends.

One approaches a *Wall Street Journal* treatment of our Religious Society with a certain sense of dread. But reading it disclosed that, even though individual Friends might wish for an altered emphasis here or there, or for the inclusion of a favorite fact which was omitted, the article was, on the whole, fair-minded
and accurate. That it did not relentlessly confound The Religious Society of Friends with the American Friends Service Committee was, in my own view, a mark of uncommon journalistic sophistication.

The article described a Religious Society founded by George Fox, which spread to the New World from England, which was noted for its members' spiritual and activist devotion to peace and human rights, and which is today colored, on the one hand, by liberalism and secularism, and, on the other, by the revivalist movement which flourished in the United States in the Nineteenth Century. It described a Society the membership of which has persistently declined in number. For example, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, in spite of the tremendous growth of the general population, is now only about half the size it once was. And while the *Wall Street Journal* article did not go into the details of the Orthodox,
Hicksite, Guernyite, Wilburite, Beaconite, Universalist, programmed, un-programmed, and evangelical movements with Friends, it did, nevertheless, portray an extremely small spiritual society which seems to embrace all shades of the religious spectrum, from agnostic humanism to evangelical Christianity.

Reading this rather sobering account of our religious fellowship brought to mind something which was once said of the contemporary mystic, Simone Weil: "She assaulted the garden of Gethsemane, and was mangled by its gate." Here was our own Religious Society laid out for display on the page of the *Wall Street Journal,* founded by people seeking to revive the

Christianity known by Jesus and his apostles, yet left in pieces at the garden gate--a series of fragments, each pretending to be whole.

Certainly, the simultaneous drawing together of Christian and Universalist strands of spirituality within Quakerism is one of the factors giving rise to the sense of confusion the *Wall Street Journal* article noted. Let us ponder this aspect of the state of our Religious Society.

First, Quakerism has had a universalist slant from the very beginning. George Fox's use of the powerful metaphor of the Light was one of the chief means of expressing this universalism. John Pension observes that Fox was very free with his use of the word, and Pension further observes that the power of the metaphor comes in part[1] from the fact that its meaning can never finally be pinned down. But it seems clear that George Fox regarded this Light as abiding in everyone, regardless of their religion, culture, nationality, or race. In an incident reminiscent or Socrates drawing wisdom from an unlettered person through his questioning, Fox, by questioning an Indian, demonstrated to the governor of an American colony that the Indian possessed the "Light and Spirit of God."[2]

Quakers from the outset set themselves apart from Christian exclusivists who claimed that a saving relationship with God can only come to those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They also distinguished themselves from those who promoted the horrible idea of predestination, the idea that God had, from the beginning of time, decided who would be saved and who would be damned. Because of their views about the universality of the Light, early Quakers were often accused by opponents of not being Christians at all.

There are, of course, many familiar and wonderful examples of universalist sentiment through Quaker history. Lucretia Mott, for example, was a good friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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[1]John Punshon, Portrait in Grey. (London: Quaker Home Service,1984). See page 36.

[2]Incident cited by Howard Brinton in *Friends for 300 Years.*

and of other New England Transcendentalists. She averred, admittedly to the distress of some of her Quaker contemporaries, that since God is great and also loving, she fully expected that He would have provided a Messiah in any age and in any culture where one was needed.

Both George Fox and John Woolman, to their everlasting credit, recognized that the movement of Truth could be well observed among Native Americans, even though they were unacquainted with Jesus of Nazareth. John Woolman journeyed far and visited Indian communities at great personal risk during a time of warfare between them and the settlers. Yet, in spite of the polarized attitudes which warfare commonly generates, Woolman testifies that he felt only love for the Indians; he found them measurably acquainted with "that Divine power which subjects the forward will of the human creature." He sought to feel and to understand the Spirit and the life in which the Indians lived, "hoping to receive some instruction from them," and to see, as well, if they might in any way be helped by his own following of the leadings of Truth during his visit. Woolman gave thanks that the Lord had strengthened him to make the journey in spite of the dangers of war, and that he had manifested a fatherly care over him when, in his own eyes, he appeared to himself inferior to so many among the Indians. Woolman further recounts how, when he took his leave of them, an Indian who could not speak English and who had not understood any of Woolman's dialogue, said in his own language "I love to feel where your words come from."

Certainly this is a paradigmatic of the universalist experience, and perhaps it is one of the events which inspired Woolman to write the beautiful lines we all know and love, and which so perfectly express the universalist spirit:

> 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 in the sense of

the expression.

William Penn expresses a similar sentiment in his Reflections and Maxims:

> 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, although the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers.

In his classic systematic statement of the Quaker faith, the Apology, Robert Barclay makes the following observations about the Nature of the Church Invisible:

> The Church...is nothing other than the society, gathering, or company of those whom God has called out of the world and the worldly spirit, to walk in his light and life....Aside from this Church there can be no salvation, because this Church...comprehend(s) all, regardless of what nation, kindred, tongue or people they may be, who have become obedient to the holy light and testimony of God in their hearts. Although they may be outwardly unknown to and distant from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words and have the benefit of scriptures, yet they have become sanctified by their obedience and cleansed from the evil of their ways. For this is the universal or catholic Spirit, by which many are called from all the four corners of the earth, and they shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By it, the secret life is conveyed from the head the the heart to the extremities of the physical body by the blood running in the veins and the arteries. There may be members of this catholic Church not only among all the several sorts of Christians, but also among pagans, Turks, and Jews. They are men and women of integrity

> and simplicity of heart. They may be blind in their understanding of some things and perhaps burdened with the superstitions and ceremonies of the sects in which they have been collected. Yet they are upright in their hearts before the Lord, aiming and endeavoring to be delivered from iniquity, and loving to follow righteousness. (Pages 172–3)

In more recent times, the late Howard Brinton, faculty member at the Quaker Colleges of Earlham, Guilford and Haverford, and with his wife Anna Brinton, co–director of the Quaker center for study and contemplation, Pendle Hill, begins his book *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism* with a comparative study of T*he Bhagavad Gita*, *The Threefold Lotus Sutra of the Pure Dharma*, and the *Gospel of John*. He concludes that:

> These three writings, when they express the loftiest conceptions in their respective religions, show a remarkable similarity to one another. Though in many respects dissimilar, at their highest levels they are much alike. They are like persons who climb a mountain starting from different sides, only to find that the higher they climb the closer they get to one another.

But it would probably be a mistake to assume that early Friends were entirely consistent or logical about their universalism, or that their particular style of universalism would be compatible with the spirit of universalism which characterizes much of modern Quakerism.

For example, in 1657 Mary Fisher traveled to the Ottoman Empire to carry the Quaker message to the Sultan of Constantinople. The Sultan and his Council apparently afforded her more kindly treatment than Quakers were used to experiencing at the hands of fellow Christians. Nevertheless, the court at Constantinople remained unconvinced. I do not know in what spirit and with what expectations Mary Fisher set out upon her encounter with the Sultan. But, our contemporary Friend, D. Elton Trueblood, observes that "the humble yet truly dedicated Christian

missionary goes to others as a learner as well as a teacher. We are not so rich in spiritual resources that we can afford to neglect any." Elton Trueblood further observes that "to claim that all non–Christian religions are intrinsically evil is to deny an obvious truth, for each of the major religions contains elements of undoubted spiritual strength. One cannot observe the discipline of a Buddhist monastery without recognizing this."[3]

More challenging than the missionary zeal of such as Mary Fisher to a modern universalist seeking roots in early Quakerism are such utterances as George Fox's well–known letter to the governor of Barbados:

> And we own and believe in Jesus Christ, His (God's) beloved and only–begotten Son, in whom he is well pleased; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary; in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins, who is the express image of the invisible God...we... believe that He was a sacrifice for sin who knew no sin...that He was buried, and rose again the third day by the power of His Father, for our justification; the that He ascended up into heaven, and now sitteth at the right hand of God. This Jesus, who, was the foundation of the holy prophets and apostles, is our foundation...there is no other foundation.

Can this statement be reconciled with the more universalist flavor of Elton Trueblood's thoughts? It would depend, I suppose, on whether George Fox meant to say of Jesus, who was the foundation of the holy prophets and the apostles, "there is no other foundation (for us)," or whether he meant to be understood as saying, "there is no other foundation (at all)." The former interpretation might allow us to claim that there is nothing in George Fox's statement which need

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[3] See D. Elton Trueblood's book *The People Called Quakers*. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers,1966), page 78.

imply that the religious traditions of those without any knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth were therefore without any spiritual validity or authenticity. But later in the same letter, as if to eliminate any ambiguity about this, George Fox writes: "He (Jesus Christ) is...our wisdom and righteousness, justification, and redemption; neither is their salvation in any other, for there is no other name under Heaven given among men, whereby we may be saved." Thus, the easy employment by George Fox of so much of the vocabulary and so many of the doctrinal concepts which other Christians associate with their own exclusivist and triumphalist claims cannot help but make many modern Quaker Universalists slightly uncomfortable.

In dealing with truly prophetic utterances, whether they be those of George Fox or the apostle Paul, one has to contend with four overlapping phenomena which cause confusion.

The first of these is that spiritual leaders in the grip of a truth and a reality which defies reduction to mere words will often seek to express the truth symbolically or metaphorically, seizing at different times and in different circumstances different metaphors which point at the truth from different directions, or different angles of view. The prophet's dynamism and sense of certainty tends to be such that they imbue the metaphors with a force which makes them seem more complete and definitive than they in fact are. Their spiritual heirs, left with a variety of symbols and metaphors pointing to experience from different directions, are apt to try to treat these overliterally and to draw philosophy from what is more akin to poetry, and to thus be left with contradictions.

Second, many of the most important spiritual insights embrace paradoxes which defy the merely rational mind. We are to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. We are to be both just and merciful (justice without mercy is cruelty, and mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution, said St. Thomas Aquinas). We are to strive after virtue, yet we can achieve nothing save for the grace of God. We believe in the value of both freedom and order; in both stability and change. We know there is that of God in every one, yet we can scarcely deny the pervasiveness of sin. Our logical mind wants to come down on one side or the other of these dichotomies. People of great sanctity somehow transcend these dichotomies without abandoning

the truth on each side of them. Yet their spiritual progeny get caught up in overliteralizing one aspect of these paradoxes and are apt futilely to spend energy debating, for example, either that we are justified by faith or by works.

Third, spiritual leaders are often people who have busy, fast-moving careers. They tend to be builders and activists, solving problems met in their ministry one by one, and not necessarily concerned to leave a neatly balanced and philosophically coherent body of work. This does not necessarily mean they uttered things carelessly or untruthfully. But is is truth formulated differently than it would have been if they had selfconsciously set about to articulate a closely reasoned statement of faith for future generations of people to scrutinize, rather than focusing on the needs of the persons with whom they were dealing directly.

A fourth related phenomenon has to do with the nature of the prophetic office. Prophets must have one foot in their own time and another foot in eternity. The reason that they are able to exert a prophetic office is because they can give timeless and eternal truths an expression particularly fitting to their own time and place. They know their culture's needs and its deficiencies, and they address these using its particular idiom of spiritual expression. What they leave us, then, is something which is at once timeless but also very temporal. As years, and even centuries, pass, greater and greater effort at "translating" the message into contemporary terms must be made. When cultural evolution is proceeding slowly and there is more time for pondering, the effort of distinguishing legitimate adaptation from mere dilution of the prophetic message with the world's business as usual can be undertaken more successfully. As the cultural and temporal distance between contemporary followers and ancient prophets increases, and as cultural evolution accelerates, the process of successfully adapting an ancient teaching requires perhaps almost as much prophetic vision as the original receiver of the message was given in the first place.

The Quaker insight that the Bible and other inspired writings, while indeed <u>inspired,</u> must not be idolized or over-literalized, is a great liberation, and is certainly a manifestly reasonable approach in the face of the above-mentioned characteristics of prophetic utterance. Again, to

quote D. Elton Trueblood, the Quaker view of the Bible "avoids irreverent neglect, on the one hand, and the bondage of literalism, on the other. There is no harm at all in seeing that the various parts of the Bible are vastly unequal . . . It is possible to be deeply appreciative of the Scriptures without being bound by them. We arrive at this point when we see clearly that whey are valuable, though not primary." Elton Trueblood also points out that "the words of the Bible are good words, but they are not superior to the Eternal Word from which they came. The best way to use the Scriptures is to employ them as a means by which we are led into the same spirit which impelled those who first gave them forth."[4]

A Quaker universalist spirituality strives for reconciliation among the different religious communities of the earth; it seeks to heal any overt or covert power struggles among them. It does not expect simply to eliminate religious institutions, nor necessarily to invent a new religion, but sees that each of the great spiritual traditions of humankind can be enriched if their members develop an active sympathy with, and a willingness to learn from others on a different spiritual path. It seeks to sympathize with all,comprehending the special idiom of spirituality each represents, the better to interpret each to all the others. It recognizes that to make exclusivist claims, to denigrate, even by implication, another's most precious possession, his religious faith, is not the best way to love our neighbors as ourselves. At the same time, many Quaker Universalists recognize that all people must know something of Jesus of Nazareth if they are to grasp the full content of God's presence in human history.

Healing divisions within the Religious Society of Friends is an important mission for people with a Universalist Quaker sensibility. A universalist Friend is especially sensitive to cultivate a climate in our Religious Society where all can give authentic expression to their faith. Intolerance of Christianity, or of Christian vocabulary employed in the expression of faith, is not a form of universalism. But neither is an intolerant Christian dogmatism a form of true Quakerism. We must help our Religious Society avoid both extremes.

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[4] Ibid., page 79.

Universalist Friends should not be perceived as a "pole" on the spectrum of acceptable Quaker beliefs--a pole which is the opposite of and which is opposed to Evangelical Friends. Nor should they be seen as people who believe in as little as possible in the spiritual realm. Rather, they should be seen as people who take an active interest in the diverse spiritualities and traditions of humankind, including those spiritualities which manifest within Quakerism, so as to build bridges and encourage sympathetic rapport, and so as to draw out those strands of common experience which are useful for the future and upon which a global spirituality can be built.

Universalist Friends can perform the service of being one avenue through which Friends are kept attuned to and can help advance a growing universalist spirit in the religious communities outside of the Religious Society of Friends. They can help Friends come to know more and more the resources of sanctity which exist among people in communities of faith in eastern and western cultures, and to experience how the activity of God in human affairs is manifested in different modes and traditions of worship.

Quaker Universalism thinks optimistically about the possibility of salvation in all the world's great spiritual tradition. Instead of cataloging the errors and the evils which have sprung up in the guise of religiosity, it practices forgiveness and seeks a new beginning. Its first concern is to cooperate with and to encourage, rather than to convert, anyone who is already promoting the Realm of God on earth. It anticipates the day when all humankind's great religions will cooperate fullheartedly in a mutual building up of a civilization based upon love. It recognizes 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 is the special responsibility of those who would dwell in love. May this capacity to apprehend the One in the many, and the special responsibility it expresses, be the special gift of universalist Quakers to all other Friends, and to people of faith everywhere!