

One Word: Many Voices

The Vocation of Universalist Friends in the New Millennium

The universalist character of the Friends spiritual movement derives from its roots in Christianity. It comes specifically from the teaching at the beginning of the Gospel of John which affirms that there is a light which enlightens every human being ever called to life. Or, as frequently expressed by Friends, "there is that of God in everyone."

The universal presence of the Logos, or Word, or Holy Spirit throughout human history is also repeatedly affirmed in the epistles of Paul. It follows from this affirmation that spiritual awareness and the apprehension of divine Truth may be achieved by people everywhere. We should not be surprised that profound truths are expressed in various of the great religious systems and cultures which have grown up during humankind's long pilgrimage on earth, nor that similar degrees of truth might emerge in the private experiences of individual seekers the world over.

It is significant that this universalist insight that has characterized the Quaker movement from its very beginning was rooted in Friends' understanding of Christianity itself. Early Friends were not, in general, widely traveled, so they had not had the opportunity to meet people of holiness who were Hindus, Buddhists or Moslems, as we so easily do nowadays. Nor were they able to go down to Border's bookstore and pick up a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Dhammapada* for a few dollars. It is true that one Friend, Mary Fisher, went to see the Sultan of Turkey. It is also true that George Fox demonstrated the universality of the Light to a colonial governor in America by discoursing with a Native American. But these were relatively isolated cross cultural encounters in the late 1600's. For the most part, the universalism of early Friends was derived from their understanding of Christian scripture as read with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This approach to Christianity was one of the things that set Quakers apart from other Christians, even from other radical reformers of Christianity in their own day. For, in spite of the many bitter controversies which divided them, virtually all Christians held to the ideas of the ancient Nicene Creed, formulated at a church council held 325 years after the birth of Jesus.

According to the Nicene formula, a person who walked the earth in Galilee two thousand years ago, one Jesus of Nazareth, was the unique and only son of God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father, the person through whom all other things from the beginning of time were made. (I am deliberately using the non-inclusive language of the Nicene Creed). Moreover, in Jesus, the one thing happened that needed to happen in order to reconcile this universe with its God. Through his office as savior – an office which never need be exercised again in the same way – a new and permanent relationship was established between God and the entire human race. Not unnaturally, people who believe in this unique and extraordinary celestial origin of Jesus and his special mission of atonement regard Christianity as a superior religion and see it as the destiny of the entire human race to be Christianized.

The Quaker idea that there is a Christ-spirit in all people which could lead them to Truth, even if they had never heard of Jesus of Nazareth or of Christianity, an idea which seemed to challenge both the uniqueness of Jesus himself and the pretensions of the Christian Church, made Quakers seem like blasphemers, in spite of the origin of their views in Christian scripture itself. While this was not the only reason why Friends were persecuted by other Christians, it was one key provocation.

In modern times mainstream Christianity has been much weakened by secular and technological culture. Nevertheless, the sort of Christianity fostered by the Nicene formula survives strongly enough to do some destructive work. It tends to advance the idea of a finger-wagging Deity seeking vengeance, or atonement, and prepared to punish us if our performance does not measure up. It tends to visualize such a God as a supernatural being so separate from the world that this God cannot be experienced, but can only be “believed in.” It advances a static understanding of Christian life involving endlessly repeated cycles of sin, guilt, and repentance. It leads to a religion primarily concerned with the afterlife. It images a God as lawgiver and judge, and suggests that everyone should feel guilty. Particularly when inflicted upon small children, this sort of religion can be spirit-killing, cruel, and traumatizing.

Not surprisingly, such traumatized people who still seek a spiritual path can come to find a refuge in Quakerism. Yet, if other Friends, following the alternative Christianity advanced by our Quaker forebears, begin using Christian vocabulary among us, members or attenders who are refugees from Christian malpractice experienced in other denomina-

tions feel that a safe haven they have found is being invaded by an enemy. This, in turn, puts pressure on Friends whose Christian experience is basic to their spiritual life to keep their beliefs to themselves, to remain in some sort of closet.

Now the experience of refugees from Christian malpractice is quite authentic and must be honored. I consider myself to be such a refugee. But it seems to me that the overall state of affairs leaves the corporate body of Friends trying to cobble together a shared spiritual life bereft of any of the poetry, the metaphors, and the ideas which our civilization has developed to address the profound and elusive mysteries of spiritual experience. We are left trying to explore and express a common faith using only such vocabulary as one might hear in a public school classroom.

The situation is further complicated, if we bring our nation's life beyond Friends into view. In public life here in the United States the vocabulary of Christianity seems to be being monopolized by people at one end of the political spectrum. With some considerable success they have managed to associate Christianity with their right wing political views. Now, from a Quaker perspective, this Christianity they promote along with their political views is an unfortunate aberration, and not true Christianity at all. But it nevertheless seems to have the effect of driving everyone else into a secular corner. Masses of people become profoundly allergic to Christian ideas and Christian vocabulary.

This is occurring at the historical moment when the characteristics of North Atlantic culture seem destined to color the first truly global civilization. All civilizations of the past have had some golden treasury of spiritual ideas at their core. Yet today a global civilization is forming which seems rooted solely in the imperatives of commerce and technology. There is no inhibition of arms trading and arms profiteering so long as it is profitable; there is no provision for environmental rescue; there is no safety net for the poor; there is no defense against exploding populations. There is only the assumption that what is good for multinational corporations must be good for everyone.

There is a system in place which simultaneously produces both wealth and poverty, but which seems incapable of assuring that even the bare necessities of life are evenly distributed. Frighteningly, no one seems to be at the helm of this new global civilization based upon commerce and

technology. It is as if an impersonal machine we have carefully designed is dragging us inexorably to our own destruction.

It is only religion and spirituality which can empower us to critique this system from a vantage point outside of itself, and which can inspire the vision, the unity, and the fortitude which is needed if the claims of humanity are to prevail over the system. Moreover, the various spiritual cultures of the world must face this situation together, in a spirit of harmony and of active sympathy with each other. A Christianity which denigrates other spiritual traditions and communities, a Christianity whose only vision is to impose its scheme on everyone else, has always been an inauthentic Christianity, but at this juncture of history it is also a very profoundly dysfunctional Christianity.

Thus, the situation which prevails in the world as a whole points to an important task which faces Quakerism, the task of helping the Christian community as a whole appreciate the universalism in its own tradition, so that more and more Christians are prepared to join with people of other faiths in addressing the spiritual plight of humanity under prevailing trends.

But first, universalist Quakers must bring a special perspective to the dilemma within Quakerism posed by Christian Friends, on the one hand, and those "allergic" to Christianity, on the other. A universalist Friend is ready to see the wisdom and truth in a variety of religious traditions, both enjoying the uniqueness of each and savoring the many common themes which emerge in the face of religious diversity. A universalist Friend can readily recognize that for a person to be hospitable to spiritual thought forms from Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, but at the same time to be hostile to Christian vocabulary and concepts, is illogical and not truly universalist, even if one has been oppressed by some form of Christian malpractice. For all the major religions have their shadow side; Christianity is hardly unique in that regard. So a true Quaker universalist will be wary of tendencies which seem bent on excising Christian vocabulary and Christian thought forms from contemporary Quaker culture, just as he or she will be wary of an intolerant Christian dogmatism which might seek to infect the Religious Society of Friends.

It is important to understand that Quakerism's extraordinary vocation in the common human task of structuring the new global civilization which is struggling to come to birth lies precisely in its traditional capacity to be both Christian and Universalist, and not merely one or the other. We must

embody a Christianity that is magnanimous enough to enter the collaborative process needed among people of faith the world over if we are to advance the spiritual transformations without which we all shall perish.

What, then, might a universalist Christology look like? I have described briefly the bad effects of the Nicene formula, the formula which spawned a kind of Christianity which George Fox dismissed, perhaps too rashly, as "seventeen centuries of apostasy." What would a positive, universalist view of Jesus of Nazareth be?

This is a very large and fascinating matter to inquire into. I will only have time here to offer a brief sketch, to suggest a direction for thinking.

If we turn to the Gospels, which are, after all, what early Friends relied upon heavily as they sought to experience the Christianity of the apostolic age, as they sought to revive primitive Christianity, and if we try to read the Gospels with fresh eyes, as if for the first time, we are caught by several things.

Astonishingly, there seems to be no scriptural basis for the Nicene formula, that cornerstone of the mainstream church. Although Jesus seems to have felt a closeness to God, and felt able to address the Deity as a loving parent rather than as a remote entity, he never does so as if he is an only child. He never speaks of himself as THE son of God, whose intention and purpose is to die for the sins of the world. In fact, Jesus proclaimed the possibility of everyone experiencing the divine in the way he himself did.

Jesus, then, was a spirit person with an experiential awareness of the reality of God. One might, perhaps, say he was the first Quaker. But he was also a teacher who used the classic forms of wisdom speech – parables and aphorisms – to teach something which was subversive of the established religious and political order of his time. In the tradition of the classic prophets of ancient Israel, he criticized elites and offered an alternative social vision which was in conflict with that of the authorities.

In using parables and aphorisms and great one-liners to make his points, Jesus did not so much insist that "thus saith the Lord." Rather, he used invitational forms of speech which encouraged his listeners to reflect, without invoking external authority. There is no clear code of doctrine. There is no set of handy rules which can be unreflectively applied in daily

life. Rather there is an invitation to dialogue, to reflection, and to search in a spiritual quest.

To the extent that Jesus was explicit, the central quality of God which we should emulate is compassion. Rather than a judge which must be satisfied, Jesus saw a God who yearns to be in relationship with us. Relationship and compassion seems to be Jesus' main point – relationship with God, with the world, and with each other.

The pervasive individualism of our own culture inclines many contemporary Christians to see compassion only as an individual virtue to be practiced in private. But Jesus wanted compassion to be a paradigm for public policy. He did not preach a thousand points of light through which individuals try in futility to ameliorate an unjust system; rather he attacked the political and Temple systems themselves which kept people systematically oppressed.

Although some people regarded Jesus as mad, many others, when in Jesus' presence and when listening to his teaching, sensed their own intimacy with God. They became powerfully aware of God's presence when in the presence of Jesus. Have we all not had similar experiences? Has not a person, a situation, or a place made the presence of God palpable to us? Perhaps we can forgive people in an ancient time 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.

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 up in glory on the third day to sit at the right hand of the Father, the crucifixion is reduced from a heroic sacrifice to a kind of inconvenient surgery. If the reason why the Sermon on the Mount speaks to us is because it is backed up by otherworldly retribution, we might just as well forget about it. Unless Jesus' words resonate with something very deep within us, something with which they have a profound and mysterious kinship, they are meaningless. Jesus was a child of God, just as we are all children of God. Jesus was divine, just as we all are divine. When Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem with its magnificent Temple he was proclaiming the royal dignity of common people in the face of the claims of the elites, a point which very much needed restating when the Friend James Nayler rode

into Bristol.

It seems beyond a doubt that Jesus was a person who can still reveal to us how God is. 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 perceives that true godliness is withdrawing.

According to the Gospel stories, Jesus never once described a saved person as one who believed in certain defined doctrines. 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 loved one another. Thus the godliness which Jesus embodied was concerned not with right belief or right doctrine, but with right practice or right living. He did not say I have come to offer you penetrating philosophy or dazzling theology. He sometimes said, "I am the Truth." He exhorted us to "be" perfect as God in heaven is perfect. In other words, he wanted us to make truth visible by the way we are, by the way we live, rather than by elaborate discourse. 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.

Yet Jesus was *not* unique. He represents a type of religious personality which is known cross culturally. To a universalist, to say this is not to demote Jesus, but only to add to his credibility, since it is so highly unlikely that a just and compassionate God would reveal himself in only one time and one place.

Universalists Friends acknowledge that almost every religion has an "incarnational" dimension. It is quite common that a spiritual movement, while acknowledging that God is an unfathomable mystery, will bring this mystery "down to earth," so to speak, finding a way to make the mystery of the divine graspable, accessible, and understandable in human terms.

Furthermore, universalist Friends acknowledge that almost every religion preserves and conveys its vision of human life through narrative, through story. It is a relatively small portion of humanity which engages in abstract thinking, in philosophy and theology. Most people, instead, tell stories which in some way run parallel to life as it is lived and which

illuminate the significance and meaning of the great themes of human destiny in which every life participates. These stories are myths, not in the sense that they are untrue, but in the sense that they are always going on. Although many of these myths have a true historical basis, their power often stems from their location in a distant time or realm where they can be freed from the inevitable idiosyncracies of real remembered events, where they can be idealized so as clearly to illuminate the underlying principles, principles which are often hidden by distracting accidentals in actual experience. From this perspective, the search for the "real" or historical Jesus can be seen as somewhat beside the point, fascinating as it may be. For what is truly significant to us is the "myth" of Jesus – the understanding that this Life, with its obscure and humble birth; its education in poverty; its temptation, mortification, and solitude; its acts of compassion and service; its desolation at moments of apparent abandonment by the Divine; its painful crucifixion of the self; and its final absorption into the Source offers a figuration of the journey that every soul must make if it is to reach fulfillment. Nor, from a universalist perspective, is it disrespectful of the Jesus story to understand that the narrative of the Buddha's life offers similar compelling themes, in many respects congruent or complimentary with Christian tradition and in other respects at variance with it.

What we see in the early Christian Church, in the period from the apostolic age until the proclamation of the Nicene Creed by a church council presided over by the Roman Emperor Constantine, is a gradual transformation of the language of myth and metaphor into the language of lawyerly dogma. Dominic Crossan, a modern Roman Catholic theologian, illustrates the result of this process with a contemporary anecdote. Crossan, after giving a talk to a church congregation about the Jesus of the Gospels, was asked in a somewhat irate fashion by a true believer in his audience, "Well, tell me, do you, or do you not, believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God." Crossan responded by saying, "Yes, I believe he was the Son of God, and the Sophia or Wisdom of God, and the Lamb of God, and the Word of God." The answer was not appreciated by the questioner, who exclaimed in disgust that "You theologians are all alike." Just as Jesus was not literally the Lamb of God, nor the Word of God, so also is he not literally the Son of God. The questioner wanted Dominic Crossan to take literally a metaphoric image.

Jesus proclaimed the Realm of God, and the availability of the Realm of God within us and among us. The early church proclaimed Jesus. The

proclaimer became the proclaimed. This does not necessarily mean that Christianity is merely a vast mistake. It has nourished countless noble souls. But the task of discernment is never complete. As Jesus read the signs of his times, we must read the signs of ours. We are promised that those who seek will surely find. As we face the task of building the new world, the world of the twenty-first century after Jesus, we can share with people of every great spiritual tradition the confidence that, having already found something that is supremely good, there yet remains something more of inexhaustible measure which we, together with them, have yet to achieve.

Daniel A. Seeger
Kalamazoo, Michigan
July 6, 1999