

**Is Coexistence Possible?**  
Christianity and Universalism in the Religious Society of Friends\*

The human enterprise can be likened to a journey.

The most obvious journey is an external, physical one—beginning with humankind's origin somewhere in the Middle East or Africa, and proceeding over a period of millions of years to the north, east, south, and west, until, ultimately, we have inhabited the far reaches of this planet.

But there are other journeys, journeys which, although they may have an outward expression, are essentially inner or spiritual journeys. Such journeys are charted in Homer's Odyssey, or in the Biblical account of the wanderings of the people of Israel in search of the Promised Land.

Some of these pilgrimages are entirely spiritual, such as that of Dante from the Inferno to Paradise.

Others are carried out in both the spiritual and the physical realms. One thinks of the wanderings of the ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu, who went from kingdom to kingdom seeking a prince wise enough to govern in accordance with the way of Truth. Failing to find any, he ultimately retired to a cave hermitage, and there wrote a concise scripture of a mere 5,000 Chinese characters which subsequently became the basis of a great civilization.

One can also think of the travels of the Indian prince Gotama, now known as the Buddha, who, upon reaching adulthood within an artificial paradise fashioned by his parents so as to protect him from all knowledge of evil, accidentally encountered victims of poverty, sickness, and death. Sorely troubled in spirit, he left his protected paradise and wandered across the face of India in the most strenuous of spiritual searches. Finally, he was enlightened by a great truth, and thereafter gave of himself unceasingly to yet further travels, challenging and uplifting multitudes with the power of his teaching.

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Or one thinks of a young, itinerant rabbi in Galilee, one who was what we could be, one who miraculously transformed sinners into saints, social outcasts into public benefactors, common fisherfolk into fishers of women and men. How many spiritual journeys were set in motion by faith in the Truth which Jesus of Nazareth revealed to humankind! A mere handful of disciples in Galilee, Jericho and Jerusalem spread to Egypt, to India, to Corinth, to Ephesus, to Rome, and to the entire world. We remember the peregrinations of St. Francis of Assisi and his followers, who travelled the earth to spread the good news; or we remember St. Augustine's Confessions, in which the author frequently likens the course of his life to a journey from darkness to light. Nor must we forget the travels in ministry under Christian inspiration of more recent times, such as those of George Fox, John Woolman, and Lucretia Mott.

And yet, sadly, we have come to a juncture in the road where it is possible for reasonable people to wonder if all these many journeys, at long last, will be abruptly ended together. For we see now that the good earth, in spite of its ice ages, floods, droughts, and volcanic eruptions, all of which have tried human capacity for survival over the many millions of years of these journeys, is indeed a paradise in comparison to the infernos we can create through our own spiritual lapses. Thus, in this great human journey it seems to be our own destiny to come face to face with the very worst that evil can do.

One of the many things which all people of faith have in common, no matter which it is of the world's great spiritual traditions which nourishes them, is their approach to this great challenge of our own times. People of faith know that human beings can never succeed in structuring a family, an institution, a social order, or a world community which exceeds in wisdom and goodness the degree of wisdom and goodness they themselves have a grasp of within their own hearts. They understand that the first step in rendering service is the spiritual preparation of those who would serve; that social transformation depends upon spiritual transformation. With Meister Eckhart they know that only if we within ourselves are as we should be will our works give off a beautiful light. It is thus on the inner drama of each human being's journey in search of Truth that the unfoldment of the outer drama of history ultimately depends. People without faith, or with a kind of faith which is inadequate to humankind's new responsibilities, will not be able to build or to hold on to the new world order without which we will perish.

Such a world order cannot be the work of people whose only vision it is to impose their particular scheme on everyone else, a foible which some Communists and some Christians have in common. Rather, the problem is for us all to learn to live together with our different traditions, and to live not only without bloodshed, but in genuine peace, which implies some sort of mutual trust and active sympathy. It is of no use to talk about loving our neighbor while at the same time dismissing as inferior or mistaken his most cherished possession, his religious faith. Indeed, it is the transforming power of religious faith which offers the only hope out of our present impass, and so a significant aspect of the great task before us is to come increasingly to discover how the world's faiths can nourish each other, and how we can collaborate with all people of faith in the challenge we face together.

Clearly we live in a world which is inevitably pluralistic as far as religion is concerned. After all, just as an example, two millennia of Christian evangelism has left the Hinduism of India largely intact. Moreover, with the shrinking of the world community into a global village, we have the unprecedented experience, not merely of hearing about Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems and Taoists in tales brought back by occasional Marco Polos, but, at least in a place like New York City, where I come from, we actually drink coffee and run peace demonstrations with them every day.

There is a new world that is waiting to be born out of the exciting interaction and religious pluralism which the modern age makes possible. But the situation is not without its dangers. The most obvious, of course, is that the encounter among people of different faiths, rather than providing each with nourishment, may simply provide another excuse for strife and conflict. One can scarcely contemplate the recent news from the Punjab or from Lebanon, nor the trials of Judaism throughout the Christian era, without recognizing that religious pluralism can indeed be an explosive mixture. Even to observe a diverse group of Quakers reacting to each other's theology can be sobering!

If strife and conflict is avoided there is another result which is sometimes produced which can be counter-productive. The universalist spirit can sometimes degenerate into a sort of amiable, broad-minded relativism, wherein Truth is simply drowned in camaraderie. It is not true universalism casually to accept the diversity of religious cultures and religious loyalties simply because one feels that no religious culture and no religious loyalty is ultimately valid, that nothing is inherently worthwhile. Such modern

relativism is a sophisticated kind of cynicism. It is not a proper understanding of the diverse faiths of humankind to develop an explanation of them which simply makes fundamental nonsense of each.

A corollary of this is that a true universalist does not find it surprising or peculiar that people in western civilization who earnestly hunger after Truth find great nourishment in the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth, anymore than it is surprising to find devotion to the four noble truths and to the eight-fold path in cultures influenced by Buddhism. Nor need it cause a universalist any surprise or dismay if people come to regard the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as so perfectly fulfilling the leadings of Truth that this person is identical with the highest concepts of Truth in the universe, indeed with the very creative principle of the universe itself, and that this manifestation is so powerful that it can reverbrate through the centuries, calling people everywhere to an awareness of their own true nature as creatures in whom there is something which corresponds to this same great and true principle. Somewhat analogous attitudes are identifiable in other faiths regarding manifestations of great Truth, and to be phobic about Christian references within the religious life of the Society of Friends, for example, while seeking to cultivate openness to other religious traditions, is obviously not an adequate expression of universalism, or at least so it seems to me.

Genuine universalism is very demanding of its practitioners. For it is true, as has often been said, that a religion can only be understood from the inside. One has only to read the section of the Encyclopedia Britannica on Christianity to realize that an objective account of a religious tradition, however accurate, will never reveal the essential spiritual experience enjoyed by those who are convinced of it. We must learn to contemplate other people's faiths not only without a chip on our shoulder, but also in quite a different frame of mind than that with which we regard an oddly shaped sea shell. Moreover, the transforming power of any religious tradition which enables its adherents to achieve a new level of life, to be born again, and to exist in a new and different way, is not something which is achieved by a casual visit, by dabbling, or by Way-hopping. Indeed, it is necessary to go so far as to say that, while exceptions are always possible, the most likely path toward an understanding of a multiplicity of religions is to encounter deeply the experience of one religion, preferably the one closest at hand, which for most of us would be Quakerism and its Judeo-Christian heritage.

It is true that the universalist sensibility tends to clash with those members of the Christian communion who insist that people who do not recognize Jesus of Nazareth as their Lord and Savior are ipso-facto inferior in spiritual realization. But a true universalist, before becoming agitated unduly over this lapse from the true Christian spirit among Christians, recalls that the phenomenon is not unique to Christianity. Something akin to it is a major theme in Islamic, Shinto, and Jewish experience, with Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism being more successful at incorporating a more generous and true-spirited universalism, although there are lapses in practice among people of these faiths, too.

Christian universalism began with Jesus of Nazareth, who rebelled against the kind of lawyer-like focus on doctrines which tends to divide people into chauvinistic spiritual camps. Jesus was much less interested in orthodoxy, in right doctrine, than he was in ortho-praxis, right living or right practice. With the simple statement that the Sabbath exists for people and not people for the Sabbath, he disposed of stacks of learned treatises on what was and was not permissible on the holy day. Jesus repeatedly refused to be separated from Samaritans, regarded as the spiritual outcasts, as the heathens, of his own day, and taught that a Samaritan could surpass even a Levite in goodness and truth.

In their commitment to rediscover and to practice the essential Christianity of Jesus and his Apostles, our Quaker forebears also rediscovered and practiced essential Christianity's universalism. Contemporary Quakerism will not realize its true destiny if it retreats from this to a narrow kind of Christian sectarianism, or if it fails to attract, to admit into membership, and to cherish non-Christians; but neither can it survive, I think, if there develops within Quakerism a climate which permits only such theological discourse among ourselves as might be admissible in a public school classroom. While the theology of individual Friends may vary widely, Quakerism's extraordinary vocation in the common human task of our era can be carried out only if our Religious Society as a whole can muster the magnanimity and devotion to be both Christian and universalist, and not merely one or the other.

If we can let our imaginations loose just for a minute, let us suppose that Lucretia Mott, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Mohatma Gandhi could meet each other. Would they not recognize a deep kinship? Certainly, they would be clear-minded about their diverse

devotional practices and doctrinal concepts, and even about their very different philosophies of social change. Yet we would hardly expect any spirit of alienation, or of disownment, to arise among them.

The essential unity which universalism sees in the various religious faiths is not one of doctrine, nor of manner of worship; rather the point of convergence is in the quality of the human person, the quality of spirit, which the sincere and selfless devotion to any of these different spiritual paths can produce. For spiritual wisdom is not something we know, but it is something we are, it is a quality of being. Our minds cannot contain or comprehend knowledge of God; for we cannot contain what contains us nor comprehend what comprehends us. We can embody spiritual truth, but we cannot adequately articulate it. Indeed, the longer the radius of our vision, the wider the circumference of mystery. Those who have a grasp of this never engage in debates about doctrine. 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.

Thus, the unity among such spirits as Mott, Gandhi, and Francis is beyond words and beyond concepts. We will experience it directly, and increasingly frequently, as our shrinking planet brings us closer to more and more people of sanctity from other religions. In this encounter we will not be creating a new unity with them. Rather, we will be discovering an old unity. We will discover that we have always been one with them but have only imagined that we were not.

We are told that in the beginning there was but one Word, a Word which is the Mother of all things, a Word of grace and truth. This word abides within each and every one of us, and within every human being ever called to life. Existing in the beginning before all other things were made, this primordial, saving Word was uttered out of silence, and to silence we must return if we hope to hear it again. People of faith everywhere are engaged in a common journey, a pilgrimage, to discover within themselves this Word, and its revelation of the universal and eternal things upon which all right living and true peace is based. There are many paths possible on this journey of search, and one of them always opens up to those who selflessly seek after it. For it is one of the characteristics of Truth that those who thirst after it eventually come to partake of it and to express it, as if the price at which Truth is bought is the sincere and pure longing for It itself. This is why we are promised that those who seek will surely find. Let us, as Friends, then,

share with all other people of faith the confidence that, having already found something that is supremely good, there is something more of inexhaustible measure which, together with them, we have yet to achieve.

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