

# **Speaking About G-d: Some Dilemmas**

By Daniel A. Seeger

A Reflection on the Interest  
of Some New York Yearly Meeting Friends  
in Goddess Spirituality

It is one of the defining characteristics of our era that the boundaries of faith communities are under constant test. With the ease of travel and the globalization of commerce and communication, the interpenetration of political ideas, cultures and spiritualities is intensifying in an unprecedented way.

This novel phenomenon is having varying effects on faith communities. Some individuals and groups recoil when encountering alternative spiritualities, feeling themselves fundamentally threatened in their identities. So along with "globalization" we are also seeing intensified feelings of secularism and nationalism, with some people seeming to work ever more arduously to erect barriers between themselves and others. At the other extreme individual people, and even whole communities, can become so enchanted with the alternatives which have come into view that they can become completely detached from their roots as they sample various fragments of different cultural styles and spiritualities. Still others will settle into and take quite seriously a traditional spiritual path other than their own. Thus, in the United States, there are thriving communities of Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists which are comprised of otherwise ordinary Americans. Meanwhile, Christianity continues to grow dramatically in such places as Korea and in many African nations.

Another approach to this globalization of spiritual life might be called "the sharing of gifts." In this case, people remain rooted in the religion they have inherited but enrich it with borrowings from other traditions. For example, I have been in a Roman Catholic monastery where the monks practice Zen meditation. And, as is well known, liberation theologians have borrowed from Marxist thought in their attempt to deepen Christianity's relevance to the conditions of life of the people to whom they minister.

In this time of cultural tumult and exploration it is not surprising that many have developed an interest in the spiritualities of native peoples--spiritualities encountered in relatively recent times by Christians when European civilization engaged in colonial expansions in Africa, the New World and Asia. Related to this has been an interest in the spiritualities of the early civilizations which were contemporary with that of the ancient Hebrews, including peoples whom they encountered in their wanderings in search of the Promised Land. All of these diverse spiritualities are denigrated in Hebrew scripture and in Christian tradition, so that terms such as shamanism, Goddess worship, witchcraft, paganism, heathenism, and idolatry, even to this day, are apt to evoke strongly negative feelings on the part of many Christian people. Nevertheless, interest in these alternative spiritualities is definitely a vigorous modern phenomenon. There is a growing interest in telepathy, psychic healing, past life regression, crystals and spirit stones, Tarot cards, spells, spirit guides, magic, the use of magical tools and ritual instruments, anointing oils, powders, incenses, sacred sites and energy vortexes, tantric yoga, Rastafarianism, and other esoteric matters.

Many of these alternative spiritualities incorporate female deities in their pantheon, if they are polytheistic, or discern a God who has female characteristics, if they are monotheistic, or else focus upon the womanly characteristics of a polymorphous Godhead.

Although the Hebrew and Christian scriptures can be interpreted as a liberating resource for role-oppressed women and men, as some contemporary Bible scholars attempt to do, the fact is that over the long centuries of the existence of the Christian Church the Bible has traditionally been used to justify a way of life in which women are expected to be subordinate to men in the home, in the church, and in society. It is not surprising, therefore, that spiritually-oriented people interested in the reconstitution of relationships between the sexes might look with interest to some of these alternative spiritualities, which seem more enthusiastically to esteem womanly values and characteristics.

In the early part of the 1980's there began to be interest among some Friends in New York Yearly Meeting in alternative, or "New Age" religions, particularly in witchcraft and in spiritualities focused on Goddess imagery. This interest has been manifested in different ways and in various activities throughout the decade just elapsed. As is always apt to be the case among Friends, there was a fluidity about these explorations, with different people approaching them from various perspectives and in different styles. Not all aspects of the movement outside of the Society of Friends which has been concerned with exploring esoteric religion, witchcraft, or Goddess spirituality were necessarily reflected in the interest which existed among Friends, who in this, as in other things, exhibit a tendency to approach things from a unique, or "peculiar," point of view.

Friends around the United States are probably aware by now of the great difficulties which occurred at the 1990 sessions of New York Yearly Meeting when the issues of Goddess spirituality and witchcraft reached the floor of the plenary sessions. Space does not permit a recapitulation of how this occurred here. In retrospect, it seems unsurprising to me that interest in these subjects should arise among Friends, given the historical trends described above. But it also seems clear that such matters raise important questions about the nature of Friends' spirituality and the boundaries of our faith community. Approaching them constructively, therefore, requires our most conscientious adherence to Friends' practices of discernment. To the extent that this issue as experienced in New York Yearly Meeting has troubled the unity of Friends both within the Yearly Meeting and outside of it, I believe the problem is due not so much to anything intractable or outrageous about the issues themselves as to Friends' lapses in adequately seeking and then waiting upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit when challenged to define true faithfulness. In short, there was a breakdown in our practices of discernment and governance.

There are several important matters to keep in mind regarding our experience

as a Religious Society as we approach an issue like Goddess spirituality or Wicca. These are: the blending of Christian and universalist insights in the experience of the Religious Society of Friends; the rapidly developing body of feminist perspectives on Christianity and on spirituality in general; the balance which needs to be struck between tolerance and generosity in the religious field and mere formless relativism; and the significance of metaphor, imagery, icons, idols, and rituals in religious experience. In one way or the other the interest of some Friends in Goddess spirituality and Wicca raises these various issues.

## **Christianity and Universalism in Friends' Experience.**

While the Religious Society of Friends originated as a branch of the Christian Church, it has been, in many ways, "Christianity with a difference." One of the unique aspects of Quakerism has been its spirit of universalism. Since the Divine Word, or Logos, is innate to the structure of the universe, and since there is that of god in everyone, Friends are not surprised that the sound of Truth reverbrates in many cultures and faith traditions.

A person with a universalist spirit tries to remain open-minded about alternative spiritualities. He or she hopes that the spiritual traditions of humankind can be enriched if their members develop an active sympathy with, and a willingness to learn from, other kinds of spiritual paths. The universalist spirit seeks to sympathize with all people of faith, comprehending the special idiom of spirituality which each represents, the better to interpret each to 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, a sensible universalist resists the temptation to fall into an indiscriminate relativism, into a total unwillingness to judge some things bad or good, or better or worse, than other things. While there is a need to be broad-minded, to free ourselves from fanaticism, and to avoid rushing to judgements merely on the basis of our own inherited religious or cultural biases, we must, after humble and careful searching, be prepared to resist the shadow side, or destructive side, of any particular religious practice or tradition, including that of our own. It would not be an expression of an authentic universalist spirit for us to accept uncritically whatever practice some of our co-religionists might seek to introduce into the life of our Religious Society.

Some people mistakenly identify as universalism a certain vagueness, formlessness, and lack of discipline which has tended to characterize some contemporary Quaker faith and practice. Others try to identify a sort of fragmented eclecticism as universalism. True universalism, while recognizing the authenticity of different spiritual paths, does not seek to advance a minimalist religion in which

issues of faith do not count for very much. While true universalism proposes a deep pondering of the richness of spiritual traditions and their vocabularies and metaphors, it does not counsel the neglect of one's own tradition, which should be practiced with full conscientiousness.

## **The Feminist Critique of Christian Culture.**

A second matter we should keep in mind when approaching a matter such as the interest of some Friends in Wicca or in Goddess spirituality is the burden the Christian tradition places upon modern people, including the most devout members of the faith, as they seek to realize mature and just relationships between the sexes.

Throughout the long centuries of Christian culture, the Church has tended to nourish social arrangements under which women were not only relegated to inferior roles, but under which they were often abused and exploited in cruel ways. Whether this patriarchal pattern is innate to a Christian world view, or whether it is simply a distortion of Christianity, has become a subject of intense debate. "Patriarchal" and "liberationist" interpretations of the same Biblical texts can be given by different parties. Clearly, there are many scriptural passages which do indeed claim divine sanction for the subordination of women to men; there are a few others which contradict these and which counsel equality; and there are a great many scriptural passages bearing on the subject which seem to be able to function as a mirror which reflects the interpreter's ideology back to him or her.

Whether or not Jesus himself promoted a patriarchal outlook or was rather a liberator of women is an enormously complex subject the details of which are beyond the scope of the present consideration. Some point out that by insisting on monogamy Jesus greatly enhanced the rights and status of women, as he did in the famous Mary and Martha story, where he approved Mary's "higher" contemplative pursuit over Martha's kitchen stereotype. On the other hand, Jesus often employed male imagery for the deity, referring again and again to the Creator as a "Father." (Most readers of the Gospels probably concur that the point of this for Jesus was to emphasize a feeling of closeness to God, rather than to hammer home a masculine image of the deity). Jesus' relationships with women, as portrayed in the Gospels, seem at once close and respectful. Yet Gospel descriptions of his interaction with them appear limited to the sphere of the domestic responsibilities through which they ministered to him. He never seems to suggest that women ought to teach men or exercise spiritual authority over them. Some people question whether surviving Gospel accounts are accurate in these respects. Many scholars now claim that in the early church women took prominent leadership roles, and that if this was the case it could only have been due to the influence of Jesus. This theory posits a kind of expunging of the record by later generations of churchmen.

What cannot be denied is that in its long history, as well as in much modern practice, the Christian Church has expected the subordination of women to men, a deeply entrenched pattern which much twentieth century struggle has only just begun to erode.

Christian faith and practice has, throughout its history, been extraordinarily diverse, and has constantly been subjected to processes of evolution. Eventually, it has always overcome the confinements of culture-bound scriptural texts or religious traditions. To the extent that altered social roles for women and men prove to be truly liberating, as in Quaker experience they have been, we can expect the rest of the Christian Church to "catch up," regardless of tradition or scriptural difficulties. But this is a long process with many uncertainties, and we should not be surprised if many people sensitive to feminist concerns seek spiritual nourishment from non-Christian sources when they find that these better meet current needs, better express abiding Truth.

### **Monotheism, Polytheism, and Toleration.**

It is reported that exercises in Goddess spirituality conducted under the sponsorship of the New York Yearly Meeting Women's Rights Committee have involved the affirmation of the qualities and attributes of ancient deities not associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. It has also been reported that such deities have been invoked for blessing, health, inspiration or support through the employment of a chanting practice. I did not participate in the exercises in question, and knowing the tendency of word-of-mouth reports to distort truth, must caution readers that these reports may indeed not be true. However, since the reports, whether true or false, have entered the discussion, it does mean that we as Friends are challenged to think once again of the issues of monotheism, polytheism, anthropomorphism, tolerance, diversity and faithfulness.

It is usually taken for granted by people in the mainstream of Western religious thought that monotheism represents a great advance in humankind's spiritual pilgrimage over polytheistic ways of looking at things, which are usually regarded as being "primitive." It is the conviction of the present writer that this casually made supposition is, in a general way, true, but it is also important to realize that the matter is not quite so simple as our dogmatism about it might imply, and it is useful, while acknowledging our own predilections about this, to think through some of the implications of alternative approaches.

Often so-called polytheistic religions are not quite what Jews and Christians take them to be. For example, Hindus believe that since no human conception can completely describe the infinite, their attribution of many forms and shapes to the Godhead is simply a way of understanding that the same Source appears in many

guises designed to meet the different inner needs of those who worship Him or *Her*. Admittedly, there may occur on the village level a forgetfulness that all these deities are not separate entities, and people may, in effect, wind up worship different, and even rival, gods. But it is important to realize that what we often take to be polytheism, and what might often deteriorate into polytheism, is not necessarily polytheistic in original intent or essence.

However, it also seems to be true that in the ancient pre-Christian world of the Near East there did flourish many genuinely polytheistic philosophies. What is interesting here is that often people from different sectarian groups afforded honor and respect to each other's deities, while being especially devoted to the one or more whom they considered to be their own. To be respectful of another's deities was considered to be a mark of an advanced degree of civilization. Ancient people often had great difficulty understanding why one group should separate itself out of this mutually tolerant concord of humankind, and while claiming exclusive possession of divine knowledge, should come to disdain every form of worship except its own as idolatrous.

It is important, however, not to overly romanticize spiritualities which represented alternatives to those of the Hebrew people and the early Christian Church. Some modern people are apt to assume too readily that cultures based upon Goddess worship would automatically nurture societies of peace and love, a happy state which was crushed out of existence by the jealous Yahweh and his monotheistic and marauding followers. It is necessary to remember that patriarchy existed in many other places besides Hebrew society, and there is also considerable evidence that people who worshipped female deities were quite capable of aggression and cruelty.

## **Images and Metaphors.**

Many religious traditions have been keenly aware of the perils of the physical depictions of deities, and even of human leaders. The dangers perceived are somewhat analogous to Friends' reservations about creedal statements. We can begin to worship our own creations, notions and conceptions. We become entrapped in deadening habit. We can forget the ineffable, wondrous, stretching and challenging aspects of spirituality as we become "hooked" on a settled image or mode of thought.

The Jews have faithfully adhered to their avoidance of pictorial imagery (as have Islamic peoples). Images of Jesus were forbidden in the very earliest days of the Church, but the idea soon broke down as Christianity sank its roots into a Hellenized culture where pictures and statues of deities were commonplace. Moreover, both Jews and Christians seemed not to be able to avoid representations of God in *verbal* images, if not in physical ones. God walks in the Garden of Eden. He is said to

stretch out his arm. His voice shakes the cedars. Indeed, some have argued that if we were forbidden to talk or think about God in visual metaphors it would be impossible to think about God at all.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition almost all of the metaphors used in verbal visualizations of god are masculine. A few of these metaphors might be said to be genderless, particularly those metaphors associated with the Holy Spirit. The quality of holy wisdom, *Hagia Sophia*, is often given a female characterization. Jesus portrayed himself in feminine terms as he wept over Jerusalem. But in any event, the overwhelming preponderance of male imagery in the Jewish concept of Yahweh, as well as in the Christian concept of the Trinity, which, with its patriarchal Father who gave forth an incarnation in human form as a male Son, combined with a genderless Holy Spirit, offers a very stark contrast to many other religious traditions where womanly qualities are more generously employed in metaphors about the deity.

Friends have made an extraordinary, if insufficiently noticed, contribution through their development of a Christianity which is universalist in nature, which honors and respects the spiritual experience of others, and which has uncovered and exploited genderless metaphors for the deity which have remained underutilized in the Christian tradition, metaphors involving such concepts as the Light, the Word, the Seed, and that of God in everyone. They have sought to practice the equality of the sexes in all aspects of church life, in the family, and in commercial activity. If there are some Friends who wish to add to the preponderantly male imagery which has characterized the Jewish and Christian faiths some female metaphors, or "Goddess" language, in addition to Quakerism's traditionally genderless approach, it seems difficult to regard this in and of itself as a pernicious thing. What is crucial is that in every case we remember that these are indeed metaphors, and that we not mistake them for that to which they so inadequately allude.

## **Prayer, Magic, Ritual and Sacraments.**

Carolyn Mallison, a member of New York Yearly Meeting who makes herself available as a resource person for people interested in magic, Wicca and Goddess spirituality, has offered the following observation: "Something had been missing for me in Quakerism as I experienced it. I discovered the missing dimension to be that of sacred ritual, and its correlate, observance of natural rhythms and events, a central part of ancient religions. Early in our history Quakers rejected what was seen to be empty, meaningless ritualism. We were right to abandon dead and deadening ritual, but what I discovered through the Goddess Within was that ritual is like an empty vessel which may be filled with meaning, a source of aliveness." (Carolyn W. Mallison, "On the Goddess Within." *Friendly Woman*, Winter, 1986, Volume 7, Number 5).

Carolyn Mallison is by no means the only Quaker who has found meaning in one or another of the ritual practices which flourish outside of the Religious Society of Friends. Some Friends have testified to the spiritual import that native American sweat lodge ceremonies hold for them. Others value the various spiritual exercises and rituals found in Eastern Zendo and ashrams. Still others repair readily for retreats in Benedictine or Trappist monasteries, participating in the canonical hours, in the prayers and chants, and even in the daily Eucharist. I myself have often allowed my home to be used for the celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass.

On the other hand, one often meets Friends who regard it as improper to recognize special days like Thanksgiving, Easter or Christmas, because every day should be approached as equally holy, and because our spirits should respond to reality as a whole, including the birth and continuing presence of Jesus, at all times. One should, in a sense, have Christmas thoughts all year long. However, most Friends, while content to celebrate in some special way anniversaries like Thanksgiving and Christmas, are extremely reluctant to take bread and wine in a solemn way in commemoration of the Lord's Last Supper. Turkey and cranberry sauce are acceptable, while bread and wine are not.

Undoubtedly, this disinclination occurs in acknowledgement of George Fox's insight that, in Christian history, outward symbols like bread, wine and water became barren physical signs which got in the way of truly inward baptism and communion. In high church practice, especially, the Sacrament of the Eucharist can take on the characteristics of magic. A specially ordained company of people with esoteric knowledge are solely qualified to cast a spell which turns bread and wine into something supernatural. These special powers, historically, have been employed by an ecclesial-political complex so as to oppress and tyrannize common people. Fox's corrective was to insist that worship must be offered in spirit and in truth only, and not with outward symbols.

Often people will regard the magic-like practices of another culture as strange without realizing how close those practices are to ones with which they are so familiar that they scarcely perceive them as anything extraordinary. And just as there are high and low forms of prayer, there are also high and low forms of magic. Clearly, there are good Christian people who think that by praying certain sequences of words, or by putting an icon on their automobile dashboard, they can ward off danger or compel success. Others pray hoping to change God's mind so that the deity will do what the pray-er wants, as if God were a sort of cosmic bellhop. Higher forms of prayer emphasize surrender, and are akin to inner silence. Such prayer or silence seeks a state which is without personal desire, which is satisfied with whatever God provides and allows to happen. It is devoid of stubborn grasping or mental agitation. In higher prayer we seek to change ourselves so that we want what God wants, so that we "let go and let God." This is not passivity, in that we expect to be aroused to the active pursuit of duty, but our activity will be designed by God

rather than fashioned as an expression of our human egos.

Magic, too, at its lower levels is simply a kind of false engineering, a vain attempt to control nature. Higher magic, in contrast, seeks to generate in the practitioners emotions that are necessary to the useful work of living. Peasants whose crops fail frequently blame the weather. If a rain dance arouses emotions and cures idleness, there might be nothing to blame the weather for. To an outsider, magic which looks as if it is intended to stop earthquakes and floods, that is, which looks like a kind of mistaken science, when examined more closely might be seen as a way of producing in people the capacity to bear these phenomena with fortitude and hope. Many religious activities--hymns, ceremonies and ritual acts--are intended to evoke and re-evoke feelings which are useful if discharged in everyday life. Religion is usually much more than magic, but most religions incorporate magical activities, and much of what is commonly called "practicing" a religion is practicing its magic.

Pursuit of their interest in Goddess spirituality has apparently involved some New York Yearly Meeting Friends in magic-like or ritualistic practices. As revealed in the annual sessions in 1990, there is a range of attitudes among Friends regarding activities which can be termed ritualistic or magical. Some Friends are inclined to regard such practices merely as an innocent form of autosuggestion, akin to any number of helpful, or at least reasonably harmless, modern therapies. At least some Friends interested in participation in magic-like activities seemed to approach them with this attitude. On the other hand, paradoxically, some of the more theologically orthodox and Christ-centered of the Friends with whom I spoke testified to their very profound belief in a supernatural world inhabited by a variety of powerful spirits. They seemed to credit the Goddess spirituality group with an ability to elicit responses from esoteric and supernatural powers which many in the group would probably scarcely presume to have. Along with this deeper sense of the reality of cultic powers among these Christ-centered Friends was the related belief that absolutely any magic-like practice not undertaken in the name of Jesus was, ipso facto, satanic in import.

The entire subject of prayer, magic, spells healings, sacraments and rituals is too vast adequately to deal with within the scope of the present reflection. Several points seem relevant, however. The first is that most practices ordinarily derided as "pagan" or superstitious have very close analogies within Christian tradition. Often people will regard the magic-like practices of another culture as strange without realizing how close those practices are to ones with which they are so familiar that they scarcely think about them as anything extraordinary. Yet it would seem that there is something of a difference between honoring another tradition's spiritual practices, and even exploring them through personal participation, on the one hand, and actually introducing these practices into the official life of the Religious Society of Friends, on the other. As previously mentioned, I have often allowed my home to

be used for the celebration of Roman Catholic Masses; yet I would scarcely propose that the yearly Meeting sponsor Roman Catholic Masses at its conference center. I admit that I was not a little startled, when among Friends from the evangelical branch of our faith community, to find that a number of our co-religionists practice water baptism and, not completely satisfied with the total spiritualization of the Lord's Supper common among unprogrammed Friends, actually conduct communion services! It seems to me that those Quakers interested in Wicca and those interested in water baptism ought to be sensitive to the fact that they are advancing spiritual practices of the type from which the Religious Society of Friends has historically sought to purify itself. While this aloofness may be breaking down among Evangelical Friends and Friends interested in Wicca, there is, nevertheless, a large body of sentiment in New York Yearly Meeting which is inclined to value and preserve it. My own reaction to reports of the practices of Goddess-oriented spirituality and magic among New York Yearly Meeting Friends is not that we are being plagued with something outrageous and bizarre, but that, as is the case with some of our Evangelical Friends, we might be in danger of sliding onto something which too much resembles everyday religion-as-usual.

## Summary

Given the nature of the times in which we live, when human activity in all fields is becoming globalized, and when there is an unprecedented degree of interpenetration of religious cultures and philosophies, it seems unsurprising that eventually some Friends would discover and develop an interest in the body of spiritual lore which Carolyn Mallison describes as "Old Religion, Nature Worship, Witchcraft, Wicca, or Magic." This natural rising of interest is reinforced by our developing consciousness of the ages-old sexist practices of the Christian Church, its history of intolerance of alternative spiritualities and its persecution and slander of them, and the fact that the alternative spiritualities alluded to in this somewhat catch-all body of lore were often practiced by women and focused on womanly qualities of spirit.

Equally unsurprising, it would seem, is the fact that this field of exploration would inspire severe disquiet among many Friends. There are many reasons for such disquiet. One is the obvious one that there is a tradition of skepticism about this field which is very strong in Christian tradition, and some Friends might reasonably be expected to sympathize with this ages-old misgiving. Nor is it possible simply to assume that such Christian skepticism is merely an expression of unjustifiable intolerance. Every spirituality, every religious phenomenon in human experience, has had its shadow side, and it cannot be assumed that Goddess spirituality and Wicca represent any exception to this. There is certainly a need, when we venture into this territory which is so relatively unexplored by Friends, that we be sure that what we undertake is truly an enlargement of spiritual horizons, and not a regression.

Without prejudging any of the activities which have been undertaken by New York Yearly Meeting Friends under the sponsorship of its Women's Rights Committee, it would seem that at the very least they have approached a boundary of our faith in a way which, as an activity of an official Yearly Meeting committee, merits more threshing in the body as a whole than the matter has thus far received. No matter what the activity, whether it be in the field of social action, spiritual development, or youth work, if it takes place within or under the sponsorship of an official Yearly Meeting body, it should be rooted in a spiritual unity expressive of the Yearly Meeting as a whole. To lapse in this discipline would be to call into the question another belief very basic to Quaker spirituality, that is, our view that the will of God is discernable through the disciplined practice of a search for unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a meeting for worship with a concern for business. What was surprising about the events at the 1990 session of New York Yearly Meeting for me was that such a seemingly foreseeable set of difficulties had advanced and deepened so far without, apparently, the mediating influence of the Yearly Meeting's governance structure, the concern for and against Goddess spirituality having arrived in a relatively provocative and undigested state on the floor of a plenary session only in response to a complaint having been lodged after a controversial event had occurred.

Quakerism offers us an austere spiritual practice, at once simple and awesome. In its laying aside of the creeds, trappings, icons, rituals, and magic which characterize most religious culture, it seeks to focus directly on the inner essence of the holy relationship of human persons to God and to each other. We know from our experience that our simple silence, the shared inner silence of our hearts and minds, can open us up to divine Truth, a Truth that is in us and around us and always seeking to make Itself known to us. When we hear this Truth, each act, each moment, is an occasion of magic and wonder. Such hearing and obeying allowed our spiritual forebears to act prophetically in the arena of human affairs with an impact scarcely imaginable for a group of their small numbers.

The Society of Friends has not been a tightly knit spiritual community since the time we know as the Quietist period. But the years since the 1960's seem to have generated a certain additional loss of cohesion within our spiritual fellowship. We are in a state which probably many of us recognize as incomplete, we are subsisting at a spiritual level somewhat below what we could or should be doing. Seeking an enlivening of spirit in novel places at such times is perhaps not unnatural. In fact, the infusion of insights from other traditions can often be renewing at such moments, but only if judiciously employed so as to refocus on the core of our life in faith together. There is so much that remains to be explored, so much yet to be realized, in terms of the practice of our specifically Quaker worship and social witness, that undue wandering in other directions can become simply a postponement or distraction. It is to be hoped that Friends will increasingly be drawn to perfecting the gifts of our own heritage. Without abandoning all our universalist-minded

respect for the wondrous and diverse family of spiritual traditions, it is still possible to affirm that the world urgently needs what a perfected Quakerism could offer it in a time when civilization itself is in deep crisis.

I am also confident that we have much to learn from Goddess spirituality. Certainly, our awareness of the damage done by religious imagery which has been one-sidedly male can alert us to the limitations of all metaphor in spiritual communication; we can find a new creativity in our daily lives from the equal interplay of the feminine and masculine; we can value anew our Quaker testimony of the equality of the sexes and our rich, gender-neutral vocabulary for allusion to divine things; we can learn to savor the many faces of the one God. We can understand that no created thing is a dead thing, that nothing is without spiritual significance, for the earth, the fire, the air and the water constantly speak to us, out of the silence, of the One who made them. We can acknowledge the rhythms, forms and patterns of the universe, and renew ourselves through this acknowledgement. We can know that whatever we eat, or drink, or breathe, we are in communion with this great cosmos which is our home and of which we are an integral part. Whether expressed through silence or through ritual and sacrament, it is the abiding intuition of Spirit-led people everywhere that there is that of God in everyone and everything, and that therefore the inner order of the self in alignment with the Holy, and the outer order of the universe as an expression of the Holy, are, in the end, one and the same ultimate reality.

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