

# **The Boundaries of Our Faith**

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### **THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP**

...is composed of seekers, mainly, but not exclusively members of the Religious Society of Friends. QUF seeks to promote open dialogue on its issues of interest. It writes in its statement of purpose:

While being convinced of the validity of our own religious paths, we not only accept but rejoice that others find validity in their spiritual traditions, whatever they may be. Each of us must find his or her own path, and each of us can benefit for the search of others.

In the selection of both its speakers and manuscripts, QUF tries to implement those ideas.

We at QUF feel privileged to be the publisher of this timely and important document. It is clear to us that this is only one person's perspective. But we also feel that that one person is well qualified as a listener to all points of view and feeling. Dan has gifts, as well, of being a careful observer and reconciler. This is being offered to fellow Friends as helpful background information and not as promoting any particular set of beliefs.

## **THE BOUNDARIES OF OUR FAITH**

### **A Reflection on the Practice of Goddess Spirituality in New York Yearly Meeting From the Perspective of a Universalist Friend.**

It is one of the defining characteristics of our era that the boundaries of our 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, 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 other people will actually 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, this writer has 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 people to whom they minister.

Simultaneously, with all this interpenetration of cultures and the resulting intensification of sectarianism and nationalism, of spiritual eclecticism, of religious conversions, and of the sharing of gifts from one spirituality to another, there is also developing a new global network of technologically adept and financially privileged people from all comers of the world whose essential identity is rooted in commerce, in a certain style of international consumerism, and in the practice of rationally exploiting the earth and its people. This new international culture is completely unrelated to any of the historic spiritualities in which human traditions of ethics, compassion and meaning have been rooted. This phenomenon is probably the most seriously disturbing aspect of the present situation.

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.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, interest in these alternative spiritualities is definitely a vigorous modern phenomenon. There is growing interest in telepathy, psychic healing, past life regression, crystals and spirit stories, Tarot cards, spells, spirit guides, magic, the use of magical tools and ritual instruments, anointing oils, powders, incense, sacred sites and energy vortexes, tantric yoga, Rastafarianism, and other *esoteric* concerns.

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

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.

The New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends has had constituted within its Witness Section a Women's Rights Committee. While the lodging of the committee within the Witness Section suggests that its main work would be to translate traditional Quaker testimonies about the equality of the sexes into the sphere of politics and social change, the committee's activities have actually

been broader. It began as a part of the Yearly Meeting's Nurture Section and has very recently been returned to the care of that Section. Thus, an interest in pastoral concerns and spirituality need not be considered unusual for this committee.

In the early part of the 1980's there began to be interest among some Friends in alternative, or "New Age" religions, particularly in witchcraft and in spiritualities focused on Goddess imagery. This interest eventually found its way into the portfolio of activities of the Women's Rights Committee, although it is a little difficult to trace exactly when and how this occurred. In any event, the Women's Rights Committee continued its interest and activity in other fields and did not become exclusively concerned with Goddess spirituality.

The Women's Rights Committee organized a weekend retreat on "Images of the Goddess" at the Yearly Meeting conference center, Powell House. This took place in April of 1990. It has been difficult to reconstruct exactly whether this April 1990 retreat was an innovation or whether such retreats had been scheduled as a matter of course previously and only got noticed in the spring of 1990. Some Friends have the opinion that these activities have occurred over a long period of time; others believe they are new and innovative. It seems likely that at least one previous weekend retreat devoted to this or a similar subject took place at Powell House and that both the earlier weekend and the one in April of 1990, while participated in by Friends, also drew into participation people interested in alternative spiritualities but with no particular connection to Friends.<sup>2</sup>

A member of New York Yearly Meeting, Carolyn Mallison, who makes herself available as a resource for people interested in magic and Wicca, wrote about her explorations in these fields in an issue of the Yearly Meeting newsletter, *The Spark*. This article caught the attention of

some members of the Clintondale Friends Meeting, one of the programmed meetings within New York Yearly Meeting, and when, subsequently, the meeting received the routinely circulated announcement of Powell House activities and noted the inclusion in the schedule of the workshop entitled “Images of the Goddess,” the members felt called to raise a concern within Clintondale’s Committee on Ministry and Counsel, and then in its monthly meeting for business.

There occurred a series of communications and meetings, some informal and unofficial, among people connected to Powell House, the Women’s Rights Committee, and Clintondale Friends Meeting. Copies of some communications were sent to the Yearly Meeting Committee on Ministry and Counsel. One result of these consultations was that two women members of Clintondale Friends Meeting registered for the April 1990, weekend on Goddess-oriented spirituality. Participants in the weekend undertook some chanting exercises at the opening session on Friday evening and, apparently, the two members of Clintondale Friends Meeting, responding to their sense that an evil spirit was being evoked, said the Lord’s Prayer aloud and left the weekend, in distress.

Thereafter, Clintondale Friends Meeting, at its May monthly meeting for business, adopted the following minute to New York Yearly Meeting:

Clintondale Friends Meeting rejects the teachings of Goddess Worship and their correlates of paganism and witchcraft and calls upon New York Yearly Meeting to do the same. Paganism and witchcraft have no place in the life and teachings of the Religious Society of Friends.

At the annual sessions of the Yearly Meeting at Silver Bay, New York, during the week of July 22-28, 1990, the

minute from Clintondale Friends was read at a plenary business session. Little preparation had apparently been done, perhaps because of shortness of time, by official Yearly Meeting bodies by way of exploring with Clintondale Friends the nature of their concerns, or exploring with Women's Rights Committee the nature of their practices, so as to define for the Yearly Meeting the outstanding issues and propose either a solution or a series of procedures which might lead to a solution. Rather, the Clintondale Meeting minute was presented directly to the gathered plenary session. There followed a discussion which might fairly be termed agitated and difficult<sup>3</sup> at points, with little light generated. There was even difficulty in reaching agreement about procedural next steps.

Immediately following this initial discussion, the pastor of another Friends meeting, Josh Brown of Adirondack Friends Meeting, left the Yearly Meeting campus and sent a letter resigning from all his Yearly Meeting offices and appointments.<sup>4</sup> This letter of resignation was read at the plenary session the next time the matter of the Women's Rights Committee practices came up. There was more difficult discussion, during which Dan Whitley, and perhaps some other Friends, felt compelled to leave the room. Nevertheless, the testimonies by some Friends about their spiritual experiences and their experiences of oppression began to enable the body as a whole to gain perspective on the issues. Dan Whitley was later able to rejoin the group and expressed regret for having left. The clerk of the Yearly Meeting Committee on Ministry and Counsel outlined an order of procedure its members might follow in exploring the controversy further in the weeks ahead. Later that same day, at the last business session of the Yearly Meeting, the clerk of Yearly Meeting allowed time for further reflection about the issue of Goddess-oriented spiritual practices,



encouraging those who had not yet had the chance to speak to offer ministry if they were genuinely led, and encouraging Friends to cherish the spirit of worship and the silence out of which spoken words should both arise and to which they should be allowed to return. Additional centering messages were able to find expression during this special session.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, when all was said and done, the issues remained unresolved at the close of sessions at Silver Bay, with a serious exploration of them yet to be begun. It was clear that many Christ-centered Friends, who had responded enthusiastically to the opening worship with which Yearly Meeting began, as well as to the keynote speaker who had offered a message the next day, wound up at the end of Yearly Meeting feeling quite disheartened and emotionally drained, having faced in recent years considerable difficulties over the issue of same-gender unions<sup>6</sup> and also over an appropriately Christian definition of the Religious Society of Friends itself. Some at least were inclined to feel that the issue of witchcraft, which to them smacked of a willful violation of the very first of God's commandments, reached a degree of apostasy that could not, like the other difficult issues, be attributed to simply moral weakness or theological confusion. Liberal and universalist Friends, for their part, were deeply troubled to find their Yearly Meeting apparently so close to schism, with so little warning and with so little opportunity to have sifted through the issues.

### **Universalism**

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. The purpose of this written reflection is to explore how the tradition of

Christian universalism can illuminate the present controversy over Goddess-oriented spirituality as practiced by some Friends functioning under Yearly Meeting auspices.

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 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, that person's 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 broadminded, to free ourselves of fanaticism, and to avoid rushing to judgments 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.

### **Diversity Among Friends**

The generous and open-minded spirit of universalism has been manifested in the life of the Religious Society of Friends in many ways. For example, the writings of such

notable Friends as Douglas Steere, Rufus Jones, and Howard Brinton are sprinkled with appreciative references to the spiritual experiences and writings of members of the Christian community outside of the Religious Society of Friends. Moreover, this writer knows of several contemporary Friends who readily undertake spiritual retreats in zendos, in Catholic monasteries, or in ashrams. Some Friends have reported meaningful experiences in Native American sweat lodge ceremonies. Many contemporary Friends are devoted readers of the works of Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and Carl Jung. The very day during which our Yearly Meeting was exercised about the practice of Goddess spirituality by some of our members, we heard read a memorial minute for a Friend who had distinguished himself both within our Religious Society and in the broader community and who, in addition to being a Friend, had also become a Buddhist layperson. My own monthly meeting has admitted into membership Friends who are not Christian in a traditional sense. Some of this non-traditionalism among our membership grows out of a profoundly universalist spirit, some out of past experiences with Christian malpractice. Some members of my meeting wish to be regarded as Jewish Friends and to incorporate that heritage into their spiritual life as Quakers in ways not precisely analogous to the way Christian Friends integrate into their lives the Jewish roots of their faith.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of Friends practice is the respect our Quaker ancestors showed for the spirituality of Native Americans. George Fox, as we know, regarded the Light as abiding in everyone regardless of his or her religion, nationality, culture or race. In an incident reminiscent of Socrates drawing wisdom from an unlettered person through his questioning, Fox, by questioning a Native American during one of his trips to the New World, demonstrated to a doctor in one of the colonies that the

Indian possessed the “Light and Spirit of God.”

John Woolman journeyed far and visited Native American communities at great personal risk during a time of warfare between them and American settlers. Yet, in spite of the polarized attitudes that warfare commonly generates, Woolman testified 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 understand the spirit of the life in which the Indians lived, “hoping to receive some instruction from them,” and to discover 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 gives account of how, when he took his leave of the Indians, one 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.”

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 traditions and their vocabularies and metaphors, it does not counsel the neglect of one’s own tradition, which should be practiced with full

conscientiousness.

Nor can we assume that such an authentic, modern universalism was fully available to early Friends, who did not have the experience and perspectives available to them about other religions that twentieth century people have. For all their generous-mindedness with respect to Native American spirituality, early Friends would probably have insisted that it was the Light of Christ which illumined the experience of their Indian friends, and would probably have maintained the hope that the Indians would eventually acknowledge Christ as the power that guided their lives. Such an approach would probably discomfort many of today's universalist Friends. For a fuller discussion, which is still a summary treatment, of Quaker universalist thought in the past and the present, see an earlier essay by the present writer.<sup>7</sup>

In any event, it is important to remember that the sympathetic attitudes of George Fox and John Woolman described above took place at a time when Christians, almost without exception, were condescending at the very least, or militantly hostile at worst, toward the religious life of Native Americans and others whom they regarded as "pagans" and "heathens." In this sphere, unfortunately, Christian piety has been guilty of many sins against charity.

As has been mentioned, words such as heathen, pagan, witchcraft and idolatry bring with them out of the Judeo-Christian sources of our culture a very heavy freight of negative connotations, as do references to the devotion of ancient peoples to figures such as Isis, Astarte, and Athena. There are probably many different, yet defensible, philosophies among Friends about how we orient ourselves toward, and benefit from, the scriptural texts we have inherited and the centuries-long tradition of which we are a part. However, it is probably not reasonable to assume that

our spiritual forebears' accounts of rival spiritual communities, as they have left them to us, are accurate or balanced ones. In fact, this is true as well with regard to the alternative Christian movements that were ultimately obliterated by the official Church. This is not to say that these alternative spiritualities were necessarily always valuable or healthy; it is only to say that in most cases we have to look further than the conventional wisdom really to know.

### **Women in the Church**

Regarding our own Judeo-Christian tradition, however, we know much, and one aspect of this tradition, its visualization of the relationship between the sexes, is increasingly regarded as problematic by modern people.

As was pointed out by several Friends at the 1990 session of New York Yearly Meeting, 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 also 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. "Hierarchical" and "liberationist" interpretations of the same biblical texts can be given by different parties. Clearly, there are many scriptural passages that do indeed claim divine sanction for the subordination of women to men; there are a few others that contradict these and that counsel equality; and there are a great many scriptural passages that seem to be able to serve as a kind of mirror reflecting the interpreter's ideology back to her or to him.

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 that much twentieth century struggle has only just begun to erode.

Faiths and practices of Christianity have, throughout its history, been extraordinarily diverse and have constantly been subjected to processes of evolution. Eventually, Christianity has always overcome the confinements of culture-bound traditions and scriptural teachings, as larger visions of justice and compassion have become persuasive. 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 seek spiritual nourishment from non-Christian sources when they find that these better meet current needs. Even Friends, with their relatively advanced testimonies and practices regarding the equality of the sexes, cannot completely escape the male-dominated imagery and theological conceptualization of the mainstream Christian Church, and that fact, combined with Friends greater open-mindedness about theological venturesomeness, makes interest in Goddess-oriented spirituality among us seem unsurprising to this observer.

### **Monotheism, Polytheism, Anthropomorphism, Idolatry**

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 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. This writer 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, and anthropomorphism.

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.

Just as it is true that those whom the Hebrew people and the Christian Church have been prone to regard as "idol worshipers" did not see the same thing in their idols that the Jews and the Christians thought they saw, so too polytheistic religions are often not 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 inner needs of those who worship Him or Her. Thus Shiva, Krishna, Rama, Ganesha, the Divine Mother, Brahman, Kama, and so forth, are understood in Hindu philosophy as some of the thousand names for the one Source. It is true that, just as is the case with Western religion, what happens on the village level often



is not true to the insights of the greatest sages of the religious tradition. There may indeed occur a kind of forgetfulness that all these deities are not separate entities, and people may, in effect, wind up worshiping different and even rival gods. But it is important to recognize that what we often take to be polytheism, and what might often even actually deteriorate into polytheism, is not necessarily polytheistic in its original intent or essence. There is one form of every religion that might be considered to be its most perfect aspect as it comes to us directly from heaven, arrayed in its native purity, but there is also another, more melancholy aspect with which we must deal – the inevitable mixture of error and corruption affecting all great religions long resident upon earth among human beings, with their foibles and weaknesses.

In the ancient pre-Christian world of the Mediterranean and the Near East there apparently 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 they worshiped as their own. To be respectful of each other'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 from this mutually tolerant communion of humankind, and while claiming the exclusive possession of divine knowledge, should come to disdain every form of worship except its own as idolatrous.

Again, it is important not to over-romanticize spiritualities alternative to those of the Hebrew people and the early Christian Church. Some people are apt to assume too readily that cultures based on Goddess worship would automatically nurture societies of peace and love, a happy state that 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 considerable evidence that people who worshiped female deities were quite capable of aggression and cruelty.

Jews and Christians were apt to regard the deities of Hellenistic civilization as nothing more than the personification of human list and foibles. Yet to modern readers the Yahweh of many of our own scriptural passages seems little better, with his jealousies, fickleness, rages and vengefulness. While the Bible itself often likens the apostasies of Israel to the actions of a harlot who forsakes a true spouse, some modern readers, in contrast, have gone so far as to liken the relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people to that between a battering husband and his spouse-victim, in terms of its quality and dynamics!<sup>8</sup>

Many religious traditions have been keenly aware of the perils of physical depictions of deities, and even of human leaders. The dangers perceived are somewhat analogous to Friends reservations about credal statements. We can begin to worship our own creations, notions and conceptions. We can 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. On the other hand I have been in a Roman Catholic basilica in the Philippines where members of the faithful stroked humanly made images of Jesus and of the saints with handkerchiefs, which were then placed upon parts of their own bodies needing healing. These practices were conducted with such piety and fervor that it would be difficult to argue that the images and rituals were *deadenig*.

The Buddha, who did not consider himself to be a deity and who was quite explicit in his antipathy to idols, clearly commanded his followers never to make a graven image of

himself. For several hundred years after his [the Buddha's] death no images of this great spiritual leader were produced. During this period he was often symbolized by a wheel, one of his most important teaching metaphors. Later he began to be represented by a footprint, often with the symbols associated with his teaching inscribed on the toes. Ultimately his proscription of pictorial imagery broke down altogether, until today gold plated statues of the Buddha are the first things that come to mind when we think of Buddhism and its culture.

At New York Yearly Meeting's 1990 session one Friend testified to us about the help he felt he received by attending a worship service in a mosque and hearing Islamic teaching about the dangers of physical depictions of the deity. The Jews, too, share this same perception and always have forbade the representation of the person of God in graven images. We are told repeatedly in Jewish and Christian scriptures and in our tradition that God is a spirit, without body, parts or passions, a pure being, that, when offering a self description, said only, "I Am That I Am."

The Jews have faithfully adhered to their avoidance of pictorial metaphors. Images of Jesus were forbidden in the very earliest days of the Church, but this idea soon broke down as Christianity sank its roots into a Hellenized culture where images 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, particularly in Eastern or Orthodox Christianity. I am also told that in Western Christianity the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, usually represented by a dove, has occasionally been depicted as a female figure. I believe this is quite rare, however. Jesus portrayed himself in feminine terms as he wept over Jerusalem. Perhaps other Friends can remind us of other attributions of womanly qualities to the deity in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

At any rate, 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.

Even within the Christian tradition there is evidence that women and men have hungered for a more gender-balanced characterization of holiness and sanctity. Male and female saints have been venerated, probably in somewhat equal numbers and with the same high esteem, regardless of their sex. Of particular interest in this connection, something quite beyond the devotion to a variety of saints, is the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which has flourished within the Roman Catholic tradition and which seems to do so much to roil relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations, whose members are apt to regard Roman Catholic Mariology as a form of "idolatry."

Although Mary the Mother of Jesus is quite a shadowy figure in the Gospels, there developed in Medieval

Christianity an enormous enthusiasm for her veneration, an enthusiasm that seems to have continued quite unabated even into the twentieth century, the century during which Pope Pius XII, speaking *ex cathedra* (that is, speaking infallibly) declared it a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church that the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed bodily into heaven at the time of her death. Moreover, the Blessed Virgin Mary herself continues to appear to human beings here on earth, as at Guadeloupe in Mexico. At least two twentieth century apparitions are officially recognized by the church – one at Lourdes in France, and one at Fatima in Portugal. Right now there is a world-wide flurry of excitement about another apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia. Although there is worldwide enthusiasm among some Roman Catholics for the apparitions in Yugoslavia, the Church has yet officially to pronounce them genuine.

What is interesting about all this in the light of our present considerations of Goddess spirituality in New York Yearly Meeting is that it might be said that the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary represents a centuries-long expression of hunger within the Christian Church to overcome the exclusively male character of metaphors for God. To be sure, the Roman Catholic Church always insists that the Blessed Virgin Mary should never be worshiped as God. Nevertheless, even in official Church pronouncements about the mother of Jesus an ambiguity about this can be detected, as she seems to occupy a place quite different from other human saints in relation to the Godhead. In terms of actual practice, again, our more austere Protestant friends have been quite certain that they detect idolatry in the way vast numbers of the faithful give expression to a sense of devotion to the Blessed Virgin.

Further consideration of the two official and the many unofficial occasions when it is claimed that the Blessed Virgin

Mary has appeared to earthly mortals (and perhaps usurped the office of the Holy Spirit in so doing) can be instructive. Although the Blessed Virgin Mary does not appear only to women, perhaps 90 percent of those who have seen her are indeed not only women but poor peasant women. Apparitionists are, in short, drawn from the lowest and most oppressed stratum of the social ladder in the societies where these phenomena have occurred. The Blessed Virgin, by appearing to these women, sets the patriarchal ecclesiastical order of things on its head, as poor peasant women suddenly have a direct avenue to celestial regions, an avenue which is independent of the male dominated Church magisterium.

Not surprisingly the local monsignors and bishops are usually as skeptical about and hostile towards these apparitions as are the village atheists. Nevertheless, in spite of the protestations of church leaders, hordes of the faithful, men and women alike, desert the churches to kneel in the muck and the rain of rural fields listening for signs and messages from heaven over which the local bishop has no control. Although the whole phenomenon of Mariology is usually considered quite foreign to Quakerism, there might be some similarity, at least, between the two, inasmuch as in our Friends tradition, too, a lowly and peasant people claimed to have found that they had openings to divine things that did not require the mediation of learned clerics.

Another aspect of the mother of Jesus that bears thought is the image of sanctity she represents, which is at once fully human and thoroughly immersed in the world, yet also capable of giving birth to divine things. Jesus himself, in contrast, was a God-man. He walked on water and raised people from the dead. In these respects he can sometimes seem very distant from anything we could hope to be or even to understand. He spoke of his Kingdom as being not of this world. Through the ages the sanctity

inspired by Jesus has often been characterized by withdrawal from human affairs, by a certain remoteness from the ordinary pain and struggle of life as it must be lived by most members of the human race. Mary, in contrast, was a householder and a mother, a not unengaging image of piety for people like Quakers who try to give expression to the divine Word through activism in the world of human affairs.

At the same time, there are aspects of the cult of the mother of Jesus that are inevitably disquieting to a Friend's sensibilities. The first of these, of course, is the peculiar emphasis on the idea that, contrary to the evidence that scripture seems to offer, Mary remained perpetually celibate. This leaves little explanation for the origins of the Lord's brothers, to whom the New Testament alludes. Concern for the celibacy of Jesus's mother expresses a world view called spirit-body dualism, that is, the attitude that all fleshly things are corrupt and all holy things are entirely spiritualized, which many Friends regard as a very destructive aspect of Christian tradition. Secondly, Mary's very minor and somewhat shadowy presence in the Gospels seems to suggest an all-too-familiar womanly role of subordination, of patient and self-effacing ministering unto men.

Whether or not Jesus himself promoted a patriarchal outlook or was rather a liberator of women is an enormously complex subject that is 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 also 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 seemed extraordinarily fond of male images of 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 the feeling of closeness to God, rather than to hammer home a masculine image of the deity.

Jesus's relationships with women 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.<sup>9</sup> Some contemporary Jewish commentators complain that feminist Christian theologians try to claim Jesus as one of their own by setting his rather ordinary relationships with women, as described in the Gospels, into a Jewish social context whose patriarchal qualities they exaggerate and distort so as to make Jesus look good by comparison. According to this perspective, by the time of Jesus, Jewish life had evolved in much more pro-feminist directions than Christian theologians interested in claiming Jesus as a liberator give it credit for.

We live in a time of great ferment in the Christian Church. In many ways the versions of Christianity that we inherit from our forebears have completed their tasks for civilization and are now exhausted. The Christian movement is struggling to redefine itself so as to be able to address the new challenges that are laid before us. The rethinking of the implications of Christian Scripture, Christian tradition and contemporary Christian practice regarding the relationship between the sexes and regarding the respective roles of women and men in spiritual, family, and community life has only just begun, and yet it has yielded much that is riveting and illuminating. A similar field involves the theology of religious pluralism. How does the contemporary Christian Church, in spite of the burdens of its history, come to account for, and adequately to respect, non-Christian religions as authentic expressions of the Divine salvific plan?



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 experiences of others, and which has uncovered and exploited genderless metaphors for the deity that 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 done their best to practice gender equality in all aspects of church life, in the family, and in commercial activity. If there are some Friends who wish to add some female metaphors to the preponderantly male imagery that has characterized the Jewish and Christian faiths, in addition to Quakerism's traditionally genderless ones, it would not seem that this is in itself a pernicious thing. What is crucial is that in every case we remember that these are metaphors and that we not mistake them for that to which they so inadequately allude.

### **Prayer, Magic, Ritual, Sacraments**

On each First Day my monthly meeting conducts two unprogrammed gatherings for worship. The first occurs at 9:30A.M. and tends to attract early risers and members who prefer smaller, more intimate and quieter periods of worship. The 11:00A.M. meeting is generally regarded as the “main” one.

Some years ago one of our members who regularly attended the 9:30A.M. meeting for worship went traveling among Friends in England and over a period of many weeks had the opportunity to attend First Day meetings for worship in a number of rural and urban Quaker meetings there. When she returned, she shared with other members of our meeting her sense that the worship in which she participated

in England was in general more gathered and centered than the worship she was used to experiencing at home. In wondering why this was so, she remarked that the Friends participating in these gatherings in England seemed not very much different from ourselves. But she did notice, without exception, that there was a nicely arranged bouquet of flowers in the meeting-for-worship room, and also a copy of the Bible left in a place that was a natural point of visual focus.

Friends who attend our 9:30 A.M. meeting, being experimental by nature, began placing a flower arrangement and Bible in the center of the open square of our meeting room. I think it fair to report that this practice does have a beneficial effect on our worship. The making of the flower arrangements is a responsibility that is passed around among the members, who serve on a volunteer basis. The fact that someone cares enough to come early and make these arrangements so that the room is, in a sense, prepared and “presented” to arriving worshipers, rather than being merely unlocked at the last minute, builds a sense of sharing and community in the group. The sight of a volume of Scripture turns the mind toward those things seen as important by people of faith through the ages. The beauty of the flowers wakes us up to the present moment, helping us to shake off the cloud of preoccupation with sundry objects of busyness back at home or at the office. Inner silence is the quality of being present. The sight of the beautiful flowers, created objects which are complete in themselves and quite beyond our calculations and schemes, has the effect of settling the spirit.

At any rate, Friends in the 9:30A.M. meeting for worship began leaving their flowers and Bible behind to be shared by Friends at the 11:00A.M. meeting. But this produced objections almost immediately. It was clear that some

Friends who attended the 11:00A.M. meeting for worship regarded the presence of the flowers and the Bible as the first step in a long slide down toward the hireling ministry and toward the serving of bread and wine. Now we dutifully remove these objects at the end of the 9:30 A.M. meeting for worship so as not to cause offense.

Friends Seminary, a Quaker school that shares our monthly meeting's premises, uses our meeting-for-worship room as its auditorium. At Christmas time the Seminary decorates its auditorium, i.e., our meeting-for-worship room, with boughs of holly and garlands and branches of fir. This is always pure, unadorned greenery, with no bright red ribbons, brass bells, or tinsel. Nevertheless, it will usually inspire the vocalization of misgivings on the part of a few meeting members concerned about the loss of the testimony that every day is equally holy, about the lapse from simplicity which "decorating" represents, about the ritualistic character of the annual adornment of the worship room, and about the pagan (Druidic) origins of the practice and the implications of its adoption by Quakers who number the days and months rather than using names of pagan origin.

Shaking hands at the end of meeting is another kind or ritual or symbol. Quaker weddings contain what is, for us, much ritual: a the reading of the certificate, its solemn circulation from committee member to committee member for signing, the good natured stampede by all present to affix their signatures at the rise of meeting. The certificate itself becomes a kind of totem object. Like most totem objects, it is usually on display at the entrance to the encampment or abode - the foyer - and serves to remind members of the tribe or household itself, as well as the visitors who curiously scrutinize the fading signatures, of their origins, beliefs, and place in the chain of being.

As has been mentioned earlier, different Friends have testified that they have found participation in Native

American sweat lodge ceremonies to be meaningful; others value the various spiritual exercises and rituals to be found in Eastern monasteries and ashrams. This writer has often allowed his home to be used for the celebration of Roman Catholic Masses. But in spite of all this he 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!<sup>10</sup> It would seem that there is something of a difference between honoring another tradition's spiritual practices, and even personally exploring them, on the one hand, and actually introducing these practices into the official life of the Religious Society of Friends, on the other.

This writer has met 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 a truly inward baptism and communion. In high church practice, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, especially, can take on the characteristics of magic. A specially ordained company of people with esoteric

knowledge are solely qualified to cast a spell that turns bread and wine into something else. 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 truth only, and not with outward symbols.

The entire subject of prayer, magic, spells, healings, sacraments and rituals is too vast to enter within the scope of the present consideration. Two points do seem relevant, however. The first is that most practices ordinarily derided as "pagan" or superstitious have very close analogies within Christian tradition. Most often, however, these pagan/Christian practices are ones to which Friends, out of their experience, have explicitly taken exception, as they have to outward sacraments.

For example, Native Americans and contemporary people interested in New Age spirituality have an interest in sacred sites and hallowed grounds – special locations on the earth where it is claimed there exist concentrations of spiritual energy, which provide benefits of various kinds to those who visit them. Sedona, Arizona is one of these sites, as are various other places either within Native American reservations or on land under dispute. Similarly, pilgrimages to sacred places have a long tradition within Christianity. Sometimes these places are understood to be of essentially historical interest. In other cases, however, spiritual power is deemed to be present at these sites. I have spoken to people who are quite certain that they have experienced such power at Lourdes, for example. In other traditions, the Ganges River is sacred to Hindus, and Mecca and Medina are sacred to Moslems. Special properties are attributed to holy water in Roman Catholic and Hindu practice. Relics of saints are honored by Catholics and are thought to have healing properties. Buddhists have established stupas

containing relics of the Buddha all over the world. So, the first principle to be kept in mind is that 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.

The second point that deserves attention is that 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 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 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 called into activism, but our activity will be designed by God rather than fashioned as an expression of our human egos.

This is not to deny that there is a spiritual dimension to physical healing, and that we can help ourselves and others by prayer, by attention to the quality of our reconciliation to the natural order of things, and by stimulating morale.

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 and useful for the 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 that looks as if it is intended to stop earthquakes and floods, that 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 that 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.

Carolyn W. Mallison has written “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.”<sup>11</sup>

All of these practices capable of producing salutary effects also have a dark, or shadow, side. People can use rituals to arouse unhealthy and counterproductive emotions as well as useful ones, or they can evoke spiritual states that are evil. Oddly, magic is reappearing in our own highly technological society, and when it does so it seems very often to take demonic forms, perhaps reflecting the character of our civilization. We read of the suicides of teenage people provoked, at least in theory, by cults and magic. Friends who have served in mission fields abroad have testified about the harmful effects of magic practices when they are employed with an intent to do harm. On the block where I live one occasionally stumbles upon evidence that one of

my neighbors from Caribbean cultures seeks to harm another (with whom there presumably has been a quarrel) through the use of magic. Many parents are concerned about the bad effects of a popular game called “Dungeons and Dragons,” which apparently draws on the culture of magic and satanism for its “thrills.” This may be an instance where modern people employ spirit-laden symbols for their own economic, entertainment or political purposes. The widely respected Soviet film-maker Sergei Eisenstein often employed Christian symbols to summon up and to depict satanic spiritual states. Today, Hollywood often employs and abuses the symbols of non-Christian spiritualities in seeking to project violent and sensational qualities of being.

To the extent that interest in Goddess spirituality within New York Yearly Meeting’s Women’s Rights Committee has involved magical practice, this writer, although not having participated in the programs, feels it is entirely reasonable to assume that these practices are of a positive, uplifting kind. I have not spoken with the two Friends from Clintondale who participated in the opening of the Powell House weekend, but other reports I have heard certainly have tended to bear this out.

But as revealed at Silver Bay in 1990, and by the above examples, there is a range of attitudes among Friends regarding practices that can be termed ritualistic or magical. Some Friends are inclined to regard such practices merely as an innocent form of auto-suggestion, akin to any number of helpful, or at least reasonably harmless, modern therapies.<sup>12</sup> At least some Friends interested in participation in the Women’s Rights Committee’s 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 realm



inhabited by a variety of spirits, and they seemed to credit the Women's Rights practices with an ability to elicit responses from esoteric powers which many in the group itself would probably scarcely have assumed themselves 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.

This returns us to the fundamental question of what all this means in the life of New York Yearly Meeting.

### **Goddess Spirituality and New York Yearly Meeting**

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 to this writer that eventually some Friends would discover and develop an interest in that body of spiritual lore which Carolyn Mallison describes as "Old Religion, Nature Worship, Witchcraft, Wicca, or Magic." This natural rising of interest is underscored 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 that 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 relatively unexplored territory, to be sure that what we undertake is truly an enlargement of spiritual horizons and not a regression.

Moreover, regardless of its theological content, this alternative spirituality involves ritual practices of the type from which the Religious Society of Friends has historically sought to purify itself. This aloofness may be breaking down among Evangelical Friends, but a large body of sentiment in New York Yearly Meeting is inclined to value and to preserve it. The reaction of this writer to reports about the practices of Goddess-oriented spirituality and magic among New York Yearly Meeting Friends is not that we are being plagued with something outrageous or bizarre, but that, as is the case with some of our Evangelical Friends, we might be in danger of sliding into something which too much resembles everyday religion-as-usual.

Mention has previously been made to the historic openness of Friends to the authenticity of other religious paths. Friends have always been willing to learn from others. As of the date of this writing, the most recently published Pendle Hill pamphlet, Number 291, is entitled *Prayer in the Contemporary World*. It is a reprint of a series of meditations by Douglas Steere first published in 1966. In the course of his valuable reflections Douglas Steere cites Martin Luther, Alfred North Whitehead, the Hasidic Master Rabbi Susya, Carl Jung, Martin Buber, the Baal-Shem Tov, Sir Thomas More, and others. Most prominent among Douglas Steere's

citations are Roman Catholic masters of the life of prayer: Ignatius of Loyola, Francois de Sales, Teresa of Avila, and Pope John XXIII. As a person who has received much nourishment from the writings of Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen, I can well appreciate why other Friends might draw from the spiritual insights of Roman Catholics.

But this is a different thing from actually suggesting that Roman Catholic masses be celebrated at Powell House under the care of a Yearly Meeting committee. Whether we are borrowing from Catholicism, Buddhism, or Wicca, we are presumably being selective, identifying insights from these other sources to reinforce an essentially Quaker charism. We are not simply blurring all distinctions between Quakerism and other spiritual practices. While I would not want to propose that it is inconceivable that Yearly Meeting might some day want to sponsor Roman Catholic masses, it would be something I would expect to receive very careful reflection and to be thoroughly grounded in a sense of the meeting, rooted in the body as a whole, before being undertaken. Without prejudging any of the Women's Rights Committee's practices related to Goddess spirituality and witchcraft, 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.

It might be useful to reflect briefly on the governance structure of the Religious Society of Friends and on the respective roles of the monthly and yearly meetings. Why does it occur, for example, that a monthly meeting can celebrate same-sex unions before there is unity in the yearly meeting about this, while the suggestion here is that the practice of Goddess-oriented spirituality ought to occur within a context of yearly meeting unity?

The writer is assuming that the Religious Society of Friends understands itself to be a decentralized “congregational” form of church policy. In Quaker history, George Fox settled the monthly meetings as the Society’s executive institutions immediately upon his release from three years imprisonment at Lancaster and Scarborough jails in 1666. While there were annual meetings of some Friends equally early, the yearly meeting as we know it today did not fully evolve until 1760. Howard Brinton implies, in his study *Friends for Three Hundred Years*, that with the gradual development of the yearly meeting there did not develop the implication that the larger group exerts authority over the smaller groups within it. Rather, the larger group is intended to undertake common tasks regarding which the constituent members feel it useful to unite because by so doing they can accomplish such common tasks more successfully than they could acting individually.

On the other hand, Michael J. Sheeran, a Roman Catholic whose study of Quaker decision-making practice, *Beyond Majority Rule*, is widely respected by Friends, while acknowledging that in the beginning care was taken to define the pronouncements of superior meetings as only advisory to monthly meetings, implies that eventually in practice the assumption grew that the yearly meetings (of elders) had more authority than that. He cites an example in 1735 when the Meeting for Sufferings admonished York Quarterly Meeting for its “independent and irresponsible action” – an action affecting, in the view of the Meeting for Sufferings, the relationship of Friends to Parliament, a very vexing matter at the time. Sheeran’s view, in contrast to Brinton’s, seems to be that the yearly meetings gradually achieved hegemony over monthly meetings, although he reports this change with an air of regret at the loss of the free movement of the Spirit which to him, it implies.<sup>13</sup>

It would seem that in contemporary Friends practice the Brinton view is operative, at least in New York Yearly Meeting. And just as monthly meetings, therefore, celebrate same-sex unions in advance of the ability of Yearly Meeting to approve their doing so, it might be assumed that some would sponsor or otherwise support explorations into Goddess-oriented spirituality before all Friends throughout the Yearly Meeting felt comfortable with such a mode of spiritual expression.<sup>14</sup> The difficulty in the present instance seems to arise, procedurally, because the activity is taking place in the name of the Yearly Meeting as a whole, since it is being conducted by a body of the Yearly Meeting, i.e., the Women's Rights Committee.

The Religious Society of Friends somewhat miraculous balance between order and spiritual resilience has been enhanced in recent times, it seems to this observer, by the development of special interest groups which, if they are conducted in the proper spirit, need not be the divisive threat that some Friends seem to fear. Friends for Economic Democracy, Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, the New Foundation Fellowship, the Quaker Universalist Fellowship, the Friendly Vegetarians, and other groups make a positive contribution to the life of Quakerism by providing an avenue through which concerned people can explore the relationship between their Friends faith and some other deep interest without roiling the life of the Society of Friends as a whole. Such groups can be a source of inspiration to the larger Society as their explorations result in clear leadings that can be shared with monthly and yearly meetings for further thought and study. Is it not possible that there could be founded a group to study and practice Goddess-oriented spirituality, Wicca, Old Religion and witchcraft, which is Quaker in character yet need not be burdened with the oversight of a yearly meeting, or at least not until the

appropriate threshing has been done?

In any event, it would seem clear that any activity being conducted by a committee officially established by the Yearly Meeting ought to be regarded as accountable to the Yearly Meeting, which operated through the sections it has established to oversee its work. No matter what the activity, whether it be in the field of social action, spiritual development, or youth work, it should be expressive of the leadings of the body as a whole. To lapse in this discipline would be to call into question another belief very basic to Quaker spirituality, that is, our view that the will of God is knowable 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. This does not mean that every activity need be approved at plenary sessions. Most committee work is of the sort that is clearly within established guidelines and expectations. But the role of the sections is to take note of those occasions when the activity of one of their constituent committees has become venturesome, is testing boundaries, and therefore requires broader consultation, and perhaps, eventually, carefully prepared review on the floor of a plenary session.

What was surprising about the situation in the 1990 sessions of New York Yearly Meeting, at least for this Friend, 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 thus 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.

Perhaps much had taken place behind the scenes that simply was not apparent to Friends sitting in plenary session. But there was no report from the Witness Section about

how it had reviewed the activities in question with a view towards their import for Friends testimonies, perhaps seeking the consultation of the Ministry and Counsel Coordinating Committee, or the Nurture Section, if the matter raised issues of faith and practice that seemed beyond the scope of the witness Section's ordinary agenda. I recognize that Friends aversion to "hierarchy" may have resulted in some breakdown of accountability practices, particularly where an issue of women's spirituality is concerned. But it seems to me that the experience we had at the 1990 session serves to warn us that oversight is an active responsibility that must be conscientiously carried out if the health and unity of the Yearly Meeting is to be preserved. The goal of oversight is not at all automatically to weed out the venturesome, but to seek the guidance of the Spirit in discerning constructive from destructive evolution, and to assure that change is of such a sort that all in the Yearly Meeting can keep pace with it.

In this process a creative tension is to be expected. Small groups can legitimately be in the vanguard of a larger body, which might tend to be less insightful about the field of endeavor in which a small body is specializing. Thus, the seeking and the giving of oversight is a service to the Yearly Meeting as a whole – at least, it is to the extent that all involved are creative in seeking to close any gap in understandings and perceptions that may have opened up.<sup>15</sup>

It would seem inevitable that the specialized committees of the Yearly Meeting – Women's Rights, Prisons, Human Relationships and Sexuality, and others – would tend over time to gather into their membership, despite the efforts of the Yearly Meeting's Nominating Committee, like-minded people who reinforce each other in traveling in a direction which may be shared among themselves, but which strays from the center of gravity of sentiment in the Yearly Meeting

as a whole. There is nothing strange or sinister about this. But if, in spite of the Nominating Committee's best efforts, each of our specialized committees fails to incorporate into its membership Friends who represent the broad spectrum of perspectives that exist in the Yearly Meeting, and if the oversight of the more representative section coordinating committee is weak, we, in effect, are left with a Quakerism without definition. Small groups of people could then venture down strange paths, and launch novel activities which, once started, would require unity to stop. We would thus be left with a Quakerism without any boundaries. We would become a kind of supermarket religion, which stands for nothing in particular and offers a little of everything to everybody.

Quakerism offers us an austere spiritual practice, at once simple and awesome. In its laying aside of the creeds, trappings, icons, rituals, and magic that 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 level somewhat less than we could or should be doing.



Seeking an enlivening of spirit in novel places at such times is 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 us 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.

Regardless of how appropriate our Yearly Meeting as a whole comes to deem specific activities that have taken place at Powell House, I am confident that we have much to learn from Goddess spirituality. Certainly, our awareness of the damage done by religious imagery that 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 heritage of the equality of the sexes and of 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.

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 whenever 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. Immanuel Kant saw two awesome realities: the “starred heavens above” and the “moral law within.” But these are not separate realities. 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.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Two Friends who are especially sensitive to the Christian roots of Quakerism and who read an earlier draft of this paper felt the description given above of the import for Christian people of matters such as witchcraft is greatly understated by the use of the terms like “denigrated” and “negative feelings.” One Friend proposed substituting the word “condemned” for “denigrated.”
2. Part of the difficulty in reconstructing the history of this concern within New York Yearly Meeting is that there have been a variety of activities in different Quaker contexts which may blur together in people’s recollection. For example, there have apparently been activities focused upon witchcraft and Goddess spirituality at Friends General Conference Gatherings for many years. Within New York Yearly Meeting itself, it seems that, short of actual weekends at Powell House, there have been interest groups at Silver Bay devoted to some aspect of Goddess spirituality or witchcraft for most of the sessions during the decade of the 1980’s.
3. Some Friends who read an earlier draft of this essay felt

that the characterization above of the Yearly Meeting session in question is an understatement. Each had one or more recollections of comments that were made or incidents that occurred during the discussion that seemed to them so extraordinary as to require a stronger description than is rendered here.

4. To some Friends at Yearly Meeting this action by Josh Brown may have seemed precipitous. Josh Brown has explained to the writer that it was a prepared, deliberate and painful decision. He has been concerned about enthusiasm for Wicca within Yearly Meeting for several Years. He has been reading about it and listening to Friends and discussing the matter with them. He has also followed closely the concerns raised within Clintondale Friends Meeting, and by Clintondale Friends Meeting among other Yearly Meeting Friends and committees.
5. This discussion may make it appear that concern about the matter of the “Images of the Goddess” weekend was confined to Clintondale and Adirondack Friends Meetings. After sharing an earlier draft of the present material with a few Friends I was informed that the circulation of the Powell House invitational flyers aroused concern in other meetings as well. I do not know the extent or depth of this reaction, however.
6. At least one Friend asked me to indicate that although, from his Christian perspective, he is concerned about the practices of Goddess spirituality, of magic and of Wicca in New York Yearly Meeting, he does not feel disheartened by trends regarding same-gender unions. There may be more Friends who do not fit the generalization in the text, or perhaps this correspondent may be a minority of one! Still another Friend points out to me that from his Christian perspective our concern

- ought not to be only about same-gender unions, but should be about the broad matter of a Spirit-led testimony on issues of sexuality and on family life for all of us.
7. Daniel A. Seeger, *Universalist Quakerism: A Ministry Among Friends and in the World*. Offered at the 1988 Annual Meeting of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. Available by writing to Dan Seeger, Pendle Hill, 338 Plush Mill Road, Wallingford, PA, 19806.
  8. See especially Gracia Ellwood's *Batter My Heart*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 282.
  9. This is true as far as surviving Gospel accounts are concerned. Many scholars now claim that in the early church women took prominent leadership roles, and that if this is the case it could only have been because of the influence of Jesus. This theory posits a kind of expunging of the record by later generations of churchmen.
  10. It should be noted that this is not the general practice among Evangelical Friends. While the discipline of most yearly meetings in the Evangelical Friends International allows the practice of water baptism and the Lord's supper, they also make it clear that in Quaker tradition outward sacraments are not regarded as necessary.
  11. Carolyn W. Mallison, "On the Goddess Within." *Friendly Women*, Winter 1986. Volume 7. Number 5.
  12. There seems to be a variety of attitudes regarding the invocations and rituals practiced in connection with Goddess oriented spirituality among those who participate in them, as one would naturally expect. I know one participant for whom the activities seemed like a camp song or an exercise in fun, akin to other lighthearted community building exercises. Others take a more serious view, and would regard any denigration of the solemn spiritual import of the activities as a form

- of condescension or disrespect. The analogy with the Roman Catholic mass which appear later in the text, while inexact, seems on balance to provide a useful opportunity for clarifying thought about procedures.
13. It could be that over the years Friends have used a variety of ways of achieving unity on major issues. In some instances movement may have bubbled up from the grass roots, in others it may have occurred through threshing in larger bodies. Also, there are certainly examples in Quaker history when quarterly or yearly meeting officials “labored” with constituent monthly meetings when they appeared to be going astray, or “ranting.”
  14. Whether it is truly wise for a local meeting to proceed in new directions on any issue which many other Friends cannot understand is a matter that should always be considered very carefully. To what extent ought unity with Friends beyond the monthly meeting be regarded as a value? And to what extent is a monthly meeting making a witness for the Society of Friends at large, whether it intends to or not, when it publicly engages in novel action?
  15. As an example of this kind of creative tension, one Friend has drawn to my attention the fact that the worship meetings for healing at Silver Bay and the healing weekends at Powell House were initially regarded skeptically by many Friends, since much that occurred in these healing meetings seemed unfamiliar to those of orthodox views. The activity gradually gained acceptance, however. There are probably many other examples of committees that were able to broaden the view of Yearly Meeting as a whole.