

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM OF GEORGE FOX

In this seminar we have aimed to focus on Fox's actual teaching as revealed in his writings. The ten specific subjects were chosen to cover his basic teaching, with special emphasis on the gospel message that he preached. Today this message is not only being recovered by research, but it is being preached again, and it is reaching to the witness of God in people as it did in the seventeenth century. This seminar was set up in response to the concern of people who have been reached by the everlasting gospel and want to become involved in the work of preaching it again.

The last two sessions of the series, on the Holy Spirit and universalism, are really a kind of appendix to the rest of the material. They are included because anyone who goes out to bring this message to people today is going to run into questions about holy spirit religion and about non-Christian universalism.

I want to remind you again that the work of recovery and reproclamation of the everlasting gospel that Fox preached is not very high on the official agenda of the Religious Society of Friends. However, there is a movement among Friends to build again on the same gospel foundation that was laid by Fox and the early Friends. This movement has been growing *only* because the gospel has been preached and people have been convinced by it and received it and come into obedience to it. There are not historical forces either inside or outside the Society of Friends that are responsible for the growth of this movement. It will keep growing if there are people who continue the work of preaching the gospel, and it will stop growing if we fail to go on preaching it.

When I began to concentrate my studies on all the writings of George Fox more than forty years ago, it was during the period of Quaker history that might be called the "high tide" of the mystical interpretation of Quakerism. And when I had first encountered Fox's *Journal* just fifty years ago, I was not a professing Christian. If I had any bias when I read the *Journal* for the first time, it was in the direction of hoping to find in Fox the "perennial philosophy" of the mystics. But as I continued to study Fox I became convinced that the great work on which he labored so faithfully all through his life was to preach the good news concerning Jesus Christ and how he saves people, and I became convinced of the truth of this gospel message.

Melvin B. Endy, writing in *Quaker History*,⁵¹ points out that Geoffrey Nuttall's *Holy Spirit in Puritan Thought* (1946) marks the beginning of a shift in Quaker scholarship. Thus for 36 years we have seen a concerted effort by Quaker scholars to shift from the mystical theory of Quaker origins toward the Puritan theory. Melvin Endy maintains that the time has now come to review both theories and to correct and revise some of the more extreme expressions

⁵¹ *Quaker History*, Vol. 70, No. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 5ff.

of each. He seems disposed to revise Quaker historiography in a direction nearer to that of Rufus Jones than of his critics in the last generation. Although he agrees that Jones's claim of *historical* links between the mystics or spiritual reformers and the Quakers is not supportable, he feels that there is a spiritual kinship and similarity that needs to be recognized.

In addition to historians like Melvin Endy, there is an articulate minority that has been fighting what might be called a rear-guard action in support of Rufus Jones's interpretation of Quakerism. But some bold spirits have attempted to carry certain of his ideas to their extreme logical conclusion. The exponents of the mystical interpretation of Quakerism have always been interested in the mystical element in the "great religions of the world," and this has led to speculation as to whether "mystical Christianity" is simply one cultural form of a universal mystical faith that appears in a variety of such cultural forms. It is then only a short step to conclude that the cultural forms are secondary, and that there is a core of mystical truth behind all of them. If we follow this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, we reach a point where it appears that the maximum understanding of this central core of mystical truth is arrived at by minimizing the secondary, cultural forms or eliminating them altogether.

At the present time [1982] in England there is a Quaker Universalist Group, at least some of whom are dedicated to eliminating the Christian content from Quaker thought and experience, on the grounds that this content is secondary and therefore expendable, and I have no doubt that there will be Quakers in the United States who will make a favorable response to this concern. In my own yearly meeting in New York it became a matter of policy a few years ago to accept into membership applicants who make no profession of faith in Jesus Christ, so that there is now a sizable number of members who are not professing Christians. The yearly meeting has been busily engaged in recent years in revising its book of Faith and Practice so that it will serve the needs of both its Christ-centered members and its non-Christ-centered members.

In addition to this extremist movement to expunge the Christian content from Quakerism, there is also an effort to preserve the mystical interpretation while at the same time keeping Christ at the center of Quaker faith. The chief exponent of this Christian-*cum*-mystical Quakerism is John Yungblut and the central feature of his mystical interpretation is his doctrine of Christ. For John Yungblut the term "Christ" or "spirit of Christ" is reserved for the universal spiritual reality that is believed to lie behind all authentic religious experience. Jesus of Nazareth is the historical human figure who was most completely filled with the spirit of Christ.

John Yungblut is a great admirer of Rufus Jones and believes that his interpretation of Quakerism is consistent with Jones's thought. While there was never a time in Rufus Jones's long life when he was not a professing Christian, his mind ranged widely in the realm of speculative religious thought,

and there is much in his writings that lends support to this interpretation. Thus he had written, "The apex, so far revealed, of the Eternal Gospel in history, the highest revelation of God in history, is the coming of Christ. It is the breaking in of eternity into time."⁵² Again, he wrote that "Jesus seems to us in the western world to be the supreme revealer of the highest values of religion ... [He] has seemed to many the most adequate expression of the nature and character of God that has been made to the world."⁵³

Rufus Jones also maintained that for early Friends "Christ ... was primarily the eternal Christ rather than the historical Christ of Galilee and Judea."⁵⁴ My researches haven't supported this view. Fox certainly does not separate "Christ" or "the spirit of Christ" from Jesus of Nazareth. Thus he says that there are many people among the uncovenanted nations "that do not profess Christ in words outwardly; yet they will confess to his light, that doth convince them of sin and evil ... [They] that deny him outwardly and confess to the Divine Light within though they do not obey it, if they did they would see Christ."⁵⁵ Even more clearly,

Believers in Christ Jesus and the apostles and disciples ... preach Christ the covenant of light among the Gentiles, and so bring them from the darkness to the light, from the power of Satan to God ... and brought them inwardly to the light that shines in their hearts, to give them the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.⁵⁶

Four years after Fox's death, George Keith charged that the object of the Quaker faith was not Jesus Christ who dwelt in Galilee and Judea and was crucified, buried, and rose on the third day. So some of the most trusted ministers and leaders of the Society of Friends at that time prepared a statement in 1694 entitled "The Christian Doctrine of the People called Quakers Cleared," etc. In this document they stated that

Any whom God hath gifted and called ... to preach faith in the same Christ, both as within and without us, [this] cannot be to preach two Christs, but one and the same Lord Jesus Christ ...

True and living faith in Christ Jesus the Son of the living God has respect to his entire being and fullness ... as all power in heaven and earth is given unto him; and also [with] respect to the same Son of God as inwardly making himself known in the soul ... The Son of God cannot be divided ... nor is the sufficiency of his light within set up by us in opposition to him, the man Christ, or

⁵² Rufus M. Jones, *The Eternal Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 85-96.

⁵³ R.M. Jones, *Re-thinking Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935), pp. 24-25.

⁵⁴ R.M. Jones, "The Quaker Conception of God," in *Beyond Dilemmas: Quakers Look at Life*, ed. S. B. Laughlin (New York and Philadelphia, 1937), p. 35.

⁵⁵ Fox, Headley MSS, Cat. No. 10, 34F, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁶ Cadbury, AC, Cat. No. 115E, pp. 134-135.

his fullness, considered as in himself, or without us ... nor exclude him, so considered, from being our complete savior.⁵⁷

In the short history of the Quakers that Fox wrote in 1689 he reported that he had sent evangelical epistles to the heads of “the house of Austria, and to Holland, and Germany, and to the King of Spain, King of France, and King of Portugal, and to the Pope and Prester John and to the Mogul of China and the Tartars, and to Jews and to the most part of the world, [telling them]how that God was come to teach his people himself by his Son, etc.”⁵⁸ In fact he wrote to many more heads of states than are listed in this passage. During Fox’s lifetime the Quaker community was essentially a movement with a mission to all the inhabitants of the earth. It had not yet become afflicted with the denominational-mindedness which we find everywhere in the Society of Friends today.

The recovery of the everlasting gospel that Fox and the original Quakers preached will not leave this denominational-mindedness intact. The everlasting gospel challenged all the Christians of England, right across the wide spectrum of religious opinion that we find during the Commonwealth period, and it will surely challenge people again today. The power in the early Quaker movement was in the gospel they preached, in what they said about Jesus Christ and how he saves men and women. They were proclaiming that Christ, who is present in the midst of his people in all his offices, is the means that God has provided to save not just the Jews, or the Christians, but all people, all nations. The need today is for more men and women who are prepared to go forth and proclaim this gospel to Quakers, Christians, and people of all faiths, or none. “It is a wonderful thing to be called to the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

⁵⁷ William Sewel, *History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers*, 2 vols. (New York: William Sessions, 1844; copied from second English edition, 1725), Vol. 2, pp. 350-351.

⁵⁸ Cadbury, *Narrative Papers of George Fox*, p. 19.

Appendix

Firbank Fell Sermon

In [the] first essay, Lewis Benson refers to Fox's 1652 sermon on Firbank Fell as the most important of his career, and "the one that had the most far-reaching consequences." In his *Journal*, Fox tells us that he preached on this occasion for about three hours, to more than a thousand people.

Fox wrote or dictated two summaries of this sermon, both of which were prepared quite a few years after the event. The first such summary was written around 1675 but was not published until after Fox's death, when Thomas Ellwood incorporated it, with some rearrangement, into the first edition of the *Journal*, which appeared in 1694.

The second summary was written by Fox in 1689 for a book called *The Memory of the Righteous Revived*, prepared by Thomas Camm in memory of his father, John Camm, who had been convinced at Firbank Fell and had become a leading Quaker preacher. This version was reprinted in 1972 in *Narrative Papers of George Fox*.

Most editions of the *Journal* give the sermon summary as rearranged by Ellwood. However, in 1911 the original manuscript was published verbatim, with editorial notes by Norman Penney, thus restoring the order of Fox's own description. This order is followed in the 1952 edition [of the *Journal*], edited by John Nickalls, from which we reprint Fox's complete summary:

I was made to open to the people that the steeplehouse and that ground on which it stood were no more holy than that mountain, and those temples and "dreadful houses of God", (as they called them) were not set up by the command of God nor Christ; nor their priests as Aaron's priesthood; nor their tithes as theirs was. But Christ was come, who ended the temple, and the priests, and the tithes, and Christ said, "Learn of me", and God said, "This is my beloved Son, hear ye him." For the Lord has sent me with his everlasting gospel to preach, and his word of life to bring them off all those temples, tithes, priests and rudiments of the world, that had gotten up since the apostles' days, and had been set up by such who had erred from the sprit and power the apostles were in; so that they might all come to know Christ their

teacher, their counsellor, their shepherd to feed them, and their bishop to oversee them and their prophet to open to them, and to know their bodies to be the temples of God and Christ for them to dwell in.

And so I opened the prophets and the figures and shadows and turned them to Christ the substance, and then opened the parables of Christ and the things that had been hid from the beginning, and showed them the estate of the Epistles how they were written to the elect; and the state of the apostasy that had been since the apostles' days, and how the priests have got the Scriptures and are not in the spirit which gave them forth; who make a trade of their words and have put them into chapter and verse; and how that the teachers and priests now are found in the steps both of the false prophets, chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees, such as both the prophets, Christ, and his apostles cried against, and so are judged by the prophets', Christ's and the apostles' spirit; and all that were in it could not own them. And so turning the people to the spirit of God, and from the darkness to the light that they might believe in it and become children of the light, and turning them from the power of Satan which they had been under to God, and that with the spirit of Truth they might be led into all the Truth of the prophets', Christ's and the apostles' words.⁵⁹

John McCandless

⁵⁹ *George Fox, Journal of*, ed. John Nickalls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p 109.

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