

THE UNIVERSAL CHARACTER OF CHRISTIANITY

It has also been said of the Hebrew prophets that: "Theirs is the most trenchant criticism of religion ever given." (7)

The question has long been debated: Are the priest and the prophet complimentary to each other? Are religion and revelation destined to be linked together in an eternal but unstable partnership? I do not think that this is the message of the Bible. For, although the prophets found it necessary to function in a religious atmosphere dominated by the law and the cultus, they foresaw a time when God would bring about a better covenant. It was on the basis of their vision and their expectations that Jesus of Nazareth was identified as "the coming one" and the mediator of a new covenant.

Abraham is the archetype of the man of faith and the man of prophetic vision and his story underscores the tension between religion and faith. George Fox says of Abraham that he "obeyed the Lord, and went from Ur of the Chaldees, and so he left all the religions, and worships and teachers of the country of the Chaldees behind him, and followed the Lord...and...all they that follow in the steps of faithful Abraham, in the way of the Lord, and obey his voice, inherit the blessing of Abraham..." (8) Alexander Miller has observed that: "when Abraham moved out of Ur of the Chaldees ...there was a symbolic break with the religions of the world, and a new thing emerged in the midst of the world of men. For the religion of the ancient Near East was of a type with all natural religion..." (9)

The "universal religious experience" has been described "as a universal human trait of fundamental importance in man's historical life." (10) Thus religion, when regarded as a universal phenomenon, has been referred to as Adamic religion -- the religion of the descendents of Adam.

But there is another way of using the word "religion" in a universal sense, and this has been called Abrahamic religion. The starting point for Abrahamic religion is revelation "which is basically different from religious intuition or divination, and which is not a product of the human religious consciousness." (11) According to Biblical religion, revelation "enters history in the form of sovereign divine words and acts...[It is] divine self disclosure, issuing from divine initiative. This, by the nature of the case can only be initiated by itself. The sole possible response to it is, therefore, that of faith..." (12)

George Fox makes a similar distinction when he contrasts "the religion which is pure from above," with "all the religions of man's making." (13) Speaking for the Quakers, he says: "Our religion we never received from man,

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but it is pure -- above all the religions below. Our religion...which is pure from above [we] received from God." (14) In his Journal, he says: "I was sent...to bring people off all their own ways to Christ, the new and living way, and from the churches which men had made and gathered, to the church in God ...which Christ is the head of, and off from all the world's teachers made by men, to learn of Christ...of whom the Father said, 'This is my beloved Son, hear ye him!'" (15) Fox reminds the Quakers that Paul wrote to the Romans: "that they should walk in the steps of the faith of Abraham...So these were holy steps, and [these] were a holy people that walk in the steps of faithful Abraham, and of Christ, and the apostles; and these have the pure religion..." (16)

There is a universalism that belongs to Adamic religion and there is a very different kind of universalism that belongs to Abrahamic religion. In Adamic religion, it is taken for granted that God's revelation in Jesus Christ can be subsumed under the general Idea of Religion and that this general Idea of Religion is the logical starting point for thinking about the Christian revelation. In Adamic religion, it is the general Idea of Religion with its generally accepted truths that is the basis for a concept of universal religion.

On the other hand, in Abrahamic religion, there is no generally accepted system of propositional truths which furnish a standard by which Christian revelation can be measured and evaluated. In Abrahamic religion, it is the word of the Creator, who is faithful to his promises, by which we have assurance of the universal blessing of all men and women everywhere.

For the somewhat awkward term, "Abrahamic religion," we might substitute "Biblical religion." The Christian Scriptures are in two parts -- the Old and the New. The Old Part is not the book of the Old Religion in contrast to the New Part as the book of the New Religion. The Old Part is about a people whose corporate life is built around the Mosaic Law and the Hebrew cult.* The New Part is not about a new law, new cult or new system of religion, but is about Jesus of Nazareth, the deliverer sent by God, who, in his person, is a new way to answer God's call to righteousness, and a new way to a God-ruled community apart from the institutions of religion. The New Way of Christ is not a new cultus in the place of the old cultus, but it is NO cultus in the place of old cultus.

In the Old Testament, the prophets are foretelling a time in the future when a new righteousness will be possible

* Cultus or cult: a system of religious beliefs and rituals.

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apart from the Law, and a new community, under God will be possible apart from the institutions of the Hebrew religion. The Old Covenant was a covenant of limited objectives which was a mixture of Adamic religion and Abrahamic religion. The New Covenant is the fulfillment and the consummation of all God's dealings with his First Covenant people and it brings in a new religionless way to God.

There is another difference between the Old and the New in the Bible. The Old Testament is the chronicle of God's dealing with a single, holy nation -- the descendants of Abraham. It is tied to a holy land, a holy city, a holy mountain. But from the very beginning this holy nation was set apart for a purpose, and this purpose was to bring God's blessing to all nations.

The writers of the New Testament recognized in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth the point in history in which the God of Abraham was acting to fulfill his universal redemptive purpose which was to include all the nations of the earth. So Jesus, in speaking to Jews and Gentiles, issues the call: "Come, ye blessed of my father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matt. 25:34)

The aim or purpose of this seminar is to lay special emphasis on the universality of the truth of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

There is a special reason for drawing attention to the universality of the Christian gospel at this time. Today, the "everlasting gospel" preached by George Fox is being recovered and preached again. This term, "everlasting gospel," was the term most frequently used by Fox when referring to the gospel he was called to preach. It comes from the book of Revelation (14:6), where it is referred to as the everlasting gospel that is to be preached "...unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue and people."

For Fox, the Quaker movement was a movement with a consciousness of universal mission. But he was much concerned toward the end of his life that this cause of universal mission was rapidly disappearing from Quaker life. In his last days, he exhorted Friends to greater faithfulness in bringing the gospel message to the nations beyond the seas; and in his last hours, he urged Friends to send Quaker literature to distant places in the world.

But it is a fact of history that the concern for universal mission ceased to be a feature of Quaker life soon after Fox's death.

Today, the everlasting gospel that Fox preached is being recovered and preached again and because of this we cannot fail to seriously consider the question raised in the

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announcement of this seminar: Can there be a genuine renewal among Quakers today which does not include a genuine recovery of the early Quaker consciousness of universal mission?

The next two sessions will focus on the universal gospel preached by the apostles, and the universal gospel preached by the early Quakers. In the fifth session, I will give an account of how, at the present time, this universal gospel is being preached again. In the fourth and fifth sessions, I will try to show the relationship of this new preaching movement to other religious movements in the world and in the Society of Friends.

For the past 11 years, I have been traveling about continually and speaking at weekend gatherings and other opportunities. I believe I was called to go forth in 1974, and reproclaim the everlasting gospel preached by George Fox. So, if I was offered four or five sessions on a weekend, I usually planned to devote the whole of Saturday morning to the content of the everlasting gospel because this is the foundation for everything else.

In the 10-session seminar that I led here in Moorestown in the autumn of 1982, the second session was devoted to "The Everlasting Gospel that Fox Preached." But, at this seminar, I am not beginning where I usually begin, but I am stressing the universal dimension or character of God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ. I have felt the need to do this because not all of those who have received this everlasting gospel as the truth of God have been fully clear that it is a message of truth for all that dwell upon the earth. It has also been unclear in the minds of some as to what extent this everlasting gospel is distinctive and distinguishable from present-day movements for Christian renewal. If we see the gospel that Fox preached as already accessible to us through contemporary movements for Christian renewal, we will feel less strongly the necessity to recover and preach that gospel.

Another reason for dealing, at this time, with the universality of the Christian gospel is that, since 1977, there has been a growing movement within the Society of Friends to interpret the religion of the Quakers as something that is more universal than Christianity. There is now a group in England and the United States called the Quaker Universalist Group. John Linton is the principal spokesman for this group. This group's beginning is somehow related to a lecture that John Linton gave to the Seekers Association at London Yearly Meeting in 1977.

John Linton concluded this lecture with a quotation from Katherine Wilson, whom he calls "the doyenne of Seekers," which sums up the "Universalist" position. She asks:

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"Would it be true to say that Quakerism is not so much one specific sect of Christianity, or one specific religion, as the core that makes the centre of every religion? Hence the ease with which we make contact with men and women of all religions, and the impossibility of describing what our distinguishing marks are. Is it that we hesitate to claim anything for ourselves alone because it belongs to everyone by nature? Do our experiences and attitudes indeed imply that what we profess and practice is basic religion? It may be that [early] Friends did not discover any- thing new at all but only what is at the heart of all religions if freed from their cultural trappings. Although this discovery was given a Christian framework by Friends in the seventeenth century, now that we know more of other religions many Friends feel that this supporting frame is not our distinguishing mark." (17)

It may be that the Quaker Universalist Group will eventually discover that the Society of Friends is not as ripe for de-Christianization as they have imagined. I do not think that the early Quakers' witness for Jesus Christ and his gospel can ever be totally expunged from the collective memories of the Quakers. But because the Quaker Universalist Group is a fact of Quaker life today, it has become necessary to point out that the recovery of the everlasting gospel preached by the early Quakers that has been taking place in the New Foundation Fellowship is not simply another example of what John Linton calls "Christian parochialism."

It may be that for some of you (or, perhaps, for most of you) participation in this seminar may be your first encounter with Fox's revolutionary gospel. So, I am going to ask you to be patient because the content of Fox's gospel message is going to be spelled out in the second and third sessions, and also in the later sessions. I have found by experience that it is not enough to hope that people will infer the universal implications of Fox's message. This also has to be spelled out, and this is my first attempt to try to spell it out.

You know, there are actually some people who, when they are served a wedge of pie, begin to eat it from the broad end. And it has never been proven that they get less nourishment by so doing. I am hoping that there will be no bad effects from this experiment of presenting Fox's Christian message by beginning with its universality.

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