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Quaker Universalism In A World Religions Setting

By Paul Alan Laughlin

The central theme of Universalism is that spiritual enlightenment may be achieved by everyone everywhere. It may be experienced in the teachings of all the great religious systems or in the personal and private experiences of the individual seeker who may have no religion at all.

Ralph Hetherington¹

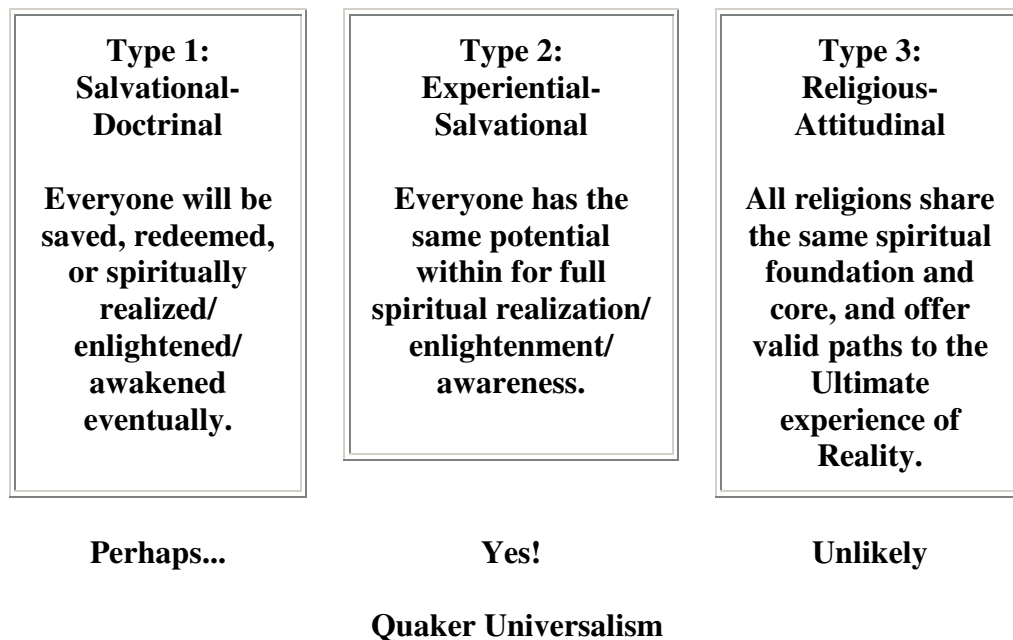
One of the primary benefits of studying the world's religions is that the unfamiliar and sometimes strange phenomena encountered in them can help us clarify our own religious experiences and beliefs and lead us to new insights about them. For example, in the course of teaching religious studies, I have had many Catholic and Protestant students tell me they had never noticed, much less appreciated, the dynamics of their own faith until they had seriously engaged Hinduism and Buddhism. I believe the same beneficial results can accrue to entire religious movements and groups: by examining themselves against the larger backdrop of the world's religious traditions, they will attain a sharper focus on their own spirituality and thereby arrive at a deeper self-understanding.

My specific intention here is to clarify the notion of Quaker universalism by discussing the concept of universalism in the larger context of the world's religions. I undertake this task as an outsider with respect to the worldwide community of Friends, but also as a Christian mystic long at odds with all types of orthodoxy, and therefore a very sympathetic observer. When I peruse the various postings on the Universalist Friends website² from that perspective, I notice the term *universalism* often being used equivocally. Such equivocation is surely unintentional and probably unconscious; and it is certainly understandable, for the word *universalism* is used in three distinct ways within the context of the world's religions (see figure 1). Each of these meanings is discrete, so it is entirely possible to be a universalist in only one or two ways. It is difficult to imagine, however, that anyone well informed about the diverse religions of the world could be a universalist in all three senses of the word.

Universalism as a Doctrine about Salvation

The original meaning of the English word *universalism*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* says dates back almost exactly two centuries, is the theological or doctrinal one. In that historical context, it was naturally framed in Christian terms and denoted the conviction that everyone will obtain salvation and redemption from sin and damnation eventually.³ The idea behind this salvation-oriented doctrine is much older than that, however.

Fig. 1 Three Types Of Universalism In The World's Religions



Indeed, some see this sort of universalism in the writings of Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (New American Standard Version). It can also be seen in Ephesians, a New Testament epistle attributed — probably incorrectly — to Paul, in which verses 7-10 of the first chapter affirm God's grace and redemption as leading to "the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth." (1:10b, NASV) The same idea appears nearly two centuries later in the notion of *apokatastasis* (Greek, *restitution*) promoted by Egyptian Christian theologian Origen and others. That was their term for their doctrine — never widely held, much less made a part of Catholic orthodoxy — that eventually all sentient beings would be redeemed, including even lost souls and devils. This was the sense upon which the Universalist movement was founded in England in the mid-eighteenth century, most of whose American followers merged some two centuries later with the Unitarians.

Universalism of this sort is found not only in Christianity, but also in many of the world's religions, and it is always rooted in the idea of divine (or quasi-divine) grace, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Pure Land Buddhism, for example, is a very popular devotional sect that contradicts the historical Buddha's commendation of self-reliance in spiritual matters by counseling its adherents to trust in an eternal, celestial Buddha named Amida, whose compassion will carry them when they die to

paradise in the western sky where he abides. Formally speaking, such a teaching is identical to that of evangelical Christianity: faith in a powerful but gracious redeemer resulting in an eternal heavenly reward. The difference is that Pure Land Buddhists tend to believe that the compassion of Amida is infinite, and therefore all people — including non-Buddhists and even the non-religious — will eventually be received into his celestial abode. Accordingly, they would consider utterly foolish those Christians who affirm a God whose very nature their own scripture defines as love (1 John 4:8), but who nevertheless is responsible for a system of eternal damnation and punishment. After all, if love or compassion is truly infinite, sooner or later it must touch everyone. A minority of Christians in mainstream denominations would agree.

Universalism as a Belief about Spirituality

In a different but not unrelated sense, universalism is the belief that everyone equally shares the same capability of attaining the highest spiritual experience, awareness, or level regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, or religion. This shared potential may be the result of a divine gift bestowed upon everyone by a transcendent God — a kind of supernatural add-on to human nature. This is a monotheistic view held by a minority of Christians, who may or may not believe that this boon will finally and inevitably come to fruition for all who possess it. (If they do, of course, they are universalists in the salvational sense.) But this sort of universalism is much more common in religions (mostly Eastern) that teach that all human beings have an innate, inherent, and indelible spiritual essence that serves as their true identity and that differs from the Christian soul in that it is non-personal and truly eternal (rather than merely immortal into the future).

In Hinduism, for example, everyone (and, finally, everything) has *atman* (a kind of spiritual energy-essence) as his or her most genuine inner identity or self, and this *atman* happens to be both eternal and identical with *Brahman*, the Supreme Spirit or Ultimate Reality that is immanent-but-hidden in the cosmos, and therefore in all the natural world, including each individual human. This essential identity is one's true self, concealed only by our ego-bound ignorance. Because *atman* is eternal, its return to the Source — the One with which it has always been one — is inevitable. Buddhism complicated the picture with the philosophy of Nagarjuna in the second century C.E. and its identification of the human spiritual essence as *anatman* or the "no-self" (and Ultimate Reality as *Shunyata*, "Emptiness"), and a few centuries later with the rise of the ever-practical Zen tradition, which virtually ignored references to essences and focused on the cultivation of a particular kind of awareness. Still, even this radical brand of Buddhism, no less than its Pure Land counterpart, maintained a continuity of process from lifetime to lifetime.

Indeed, both Hinduism and Buddhism assume reincarnation or spiritual transmigration as well as the importance of *karma* (deeds and their inevitable spiritual consequences) in that process. Such beliefs allow an eternity for the inner essence — or, in the case of Zen, inner awareness — to be realized. What keeps folks from that goal and stuck in *samsara* (that is, the everyday world as well as recycling in and out of it) is a combination of *karma* and ignorance of one's true nature; and the debilitating effects are so severe that a single lifetime is hardly enough for anyone to, as it were, see the Light.

Universalism as an Attitude about Religions

As if life and religion were not complicated enough, the word *universalism* can also be used to indicate a particular opinion about the various religions of the world within a spectrum ranging from exclusivism at one end to relativism at the other (see figure 2).

Fig. 2. A Spectrum Of Religious Attitudes

<u>Relativism</u>	<u>Universalism</u>	<u>Pluralism</u>	<u>Inclusivism</u>	<u>Exclusivism</u>
Skeptics & Cynics	Progressive Christians		Evangelical Christians	Fundamentalists, Dogmatic Atheists

Note: As with all typologies, each seemingly fixed position actually defines another mini-spectrum. That is, a person may be more-or-less inclusivist, more-or-less universalist, etc. The term "Progressive Christians" is the increasingly preferred alternative to "Liberal Christians," and covers a broad range of attitudes.

At issue is whether any religious Truth or truths exist, and if so, where and how they are to be found. The range of views could hardly be greater.

At one extreme of this continuum (call it the right wing) is *exclusivism*, an attitude that says, "There is only one religious truth, true religion, or truth about religion — mine." (I have never run across an exclusivist who says, "There is one right religion, and — rats! — it's hers, not mine.") Christian exclusivists, for example, herald their "straight and narrow path" that leads to eternal salvation, and contrast it to the numerous "broad and crooked" ones that lead to everlasting damnation. They typically try to instill fear with a panoply of threats and quote scriptural verses that seem to support their position, such as Jesus' alleged "no one cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6 KJV). The exclusivist attitude is typical of fundamentalists, both Christian and Islamic. And oddly enough, although it is typical of monotheistic faiths, doctrinaire atheists also fall into this extreme category because of their certainty that religion is groundless. Clearly, exclusivism produces strange bedfellows!

Only slightly to the left of exclusivism on this spectrum (although it sounds as if it should be at the other extreme) is *inclusivism*. This is the notion that while one (mine!) is the purest, truest, or only really effectual religion, others may contain some truth and perhaps even some useful tidbits of spiritual belief and practice. A little further to the left stands *pluralism*, the idea that some, many, or even most religions contain religious truth and are vehicles to the ultimate spiritual reward. The position of universalism as a religious attitude is, then, a little to the left of pluralism, for it declares all religions to be well-founded and valid. Just to the left of universalism, at the far left extreme of our attitudinal spectrum, is *relativism*, which in this context holds that within or behind any religion is to be found not truth, but only opinion. This, of course, is the stance of skeptics and cynics, and the reason why some Quaker universalists have wisely identified that extreme option as a clear and present danger to their own stance.⁴

Universalism in Quakerism

Given the three ways of understanding universalism just described — the salvational-doctrinal, the spiritual-experiential, and the religious-attitudinal — the clear impression one gets from reading Quaker universalists is that their understanding of universalism reflects primarily and sometimes exclusively the second. They are universalists because they believe all people everywhere can attain the most profound spiritual experience.

Yet, an interesting difference of opinion arises among these Quaker universalists. One camp holds that people possess an Inner Light either as natural part of human nature (non-theistic view) or a supernatural addition to it (a theistic view).⁵ These — and especially the non-theists — are the Quakers inclined to equate their Light with the Hindu *atman* (inner spiritual energy-essence). The other camp prefers to think about the Inner Light in a non-metaphysical and non-substantialist (and thus a more existentialist or Zen) way — that is, not as a component that people have by nature or as a supernatural gift, but more as a capacity that everyone possesses either for a certain kind of spiritual experience or awareness. Either camp may see this Light as a power for moral transformation.⁶

Whichever spiritual-experiential position is taken, whether or not all people will actually discover their Inner Light or achieve their potential spiritual awareness is a point of disagreement. The quotation from Hetherington cited at the beginning of this article, for example, emphasizes the word *may* when it comes to the achievement of spiritual enlightenment. Those who express a more Eastern understanding of the Inner Light as *atman*, Buddha-mind, or the Tao,⁷ however, thereby raise the question of whether It, like Its Eastern counterparts, must eventually be realized precisely because it is none other than everyone's spiritual core and essential identity. If it is that, then at some very deep level everyone is already enlightened and merely awaiting the inevitable total awareness of that fact — what Zen calls *satori*.

This latter group of Eastward-leaning Quaker universalists would probably have to entertain or even embrace some notion of reincarnation as their Hindu counterparts do, for the very idea that the Hitlers, Stalins, bin Ladens, child molesters, and serial murderers of the world either did or inevitably will realize their spiritual potential in a single lifetime despite their heinous crimes against humanity is perhaps absurd and certainly repugnant. The possibility that such dim Lights might repeatedly return to work off their enormous karmic debt and realize the brightness of their divine Inner Luminescence would seem to be both just and palatable.

In any case, a Quaker who affirms both the universality of the Inner Light in all people and the inevitability that this Light will bear fruit in everyone embraces a distinct version of our first, salvational-doctrinal meaning of universalism along with the spiritual one. It would not, of course, be framed in such traditional Christian terms as *salvation* or *redemption*, which presuppose a much more negative view of human nature, focused on sin and depravity, than Quakers today are inclined to hold. For a Quaker universalist so inclined, universalism of salvation would be understood instead as a *self-realization* or *self-awareness* that all people must eventually achieve. Other Quaker universalists, however, might consider the question of inevitability a moot point, especially if they regard spiritual experience as being strictly about embracing and expressing the Inner Light or coming to full spiritual awareness as quickly and fully as possible in the here and now of a single lifetime.

From that perspective, those who persistently hide their Light under a bushel of depravity would simply lose their single chance to realize their potential illumination.

The Limits of Quaker Universalism?

Both Quakers who are universalists in the root, spiritual sense alone and those who might incorporate some salvational sense as well might find themselves something less than universalist in the third sense discussed above, that is, when it comes to the question of whether all religions have at their core the experience of the Inner Light. This is a common claim in Quaker universalist literature and is reflected in Katherine Wilson's rhetorical question: "Would it be true to say that Quakerism is not so much one specific sect of Christianity, or one specific religion, as (it is) the core that makes the centre of every religion?"⁸ She clearly believes it is. But to substantiate such a sweeping assertion, one would need to study all religions or at least a fair enough sampling (a hundred, perhaps?) to discover an invariable pattern. Some Quaker universalist writers (like Hetherington in the opening quotation) prove a bit more circumspect in specifying that the experience of the Inner Light is the heart or core of the "great" or "major" world religions, but thereby beg the question of what qualifies them for that lofty status.⁹

As a scholar of the world's religions, I am suspicious of sweeping generalizations about them. Are Shinto, Baha'i, and Confucianism major world religions? Most knowledgeable people would say so. Is the Inner Light at their core, despite the fact that they have never exhibited any sense of a mystical dynamic? I have my doubts. Is the Inner Light the heart of Islam, a faith tradition that teaches no such thing? Its *Qur'an*, in fact, claims to have been dictated by an external angel rather than inspired by Muhammad's Inner Light; and it aims to instill submission (the meaning of the Arabic word *islam*) to a profoundly other and outer God. On top of that, most Muslims treat the mystical Sufi minority of their faith, who come closer than any other adherents of Islam to experiencing and expressing an Inner Light, as deviants and heretics.

Conclusion

In summary, then, I suspect the common ground for all Quaker universalists lies in the spiritual sense that everyone everywhere possesses the Inner Light or the capacity for spiritual awareness, although there might well be some disagreement about whether all were destined to realize their full spiritual potential. But I truly doubt that many of them would embrace universalism as an attitude toward religions, for they would find themselves having to reconcile the Inner Light with animal and human sacrifices, Satanic worship, necromancy, ritual prostitution, *jihad*, *hara-kiri*, and other religious beliefs and practices that seem to have no spiritual illumination behind them. In the face of such phenomena, pluralism would seem closer to the genuinely universalist spirit of Quakerism: that is, the affirmation that some, many, or maybe even most (but not all) of the world's religions are grounded in the Light, particularly those with a clear mystical inclination. That, of course, opens another can of worms: What is mysticism? But that question must be addressed another time.

For now, Quaker universalists might do well to clarify in precisely what sense or senses and to what extent they are universalists. This would be advantageous not only for their own self-understanding as individuals (which is important enough),

but also for conversation among themselves and with those outsiders who express interest in their movement. Some Quakers will undoubtedly dismiss such theorizing as useless and distracting, but it is that only if it draws attention away from the primary or root phenomenon of both Quakerism and all genuine religion: spiritual experience.

Notes

1. Ralph Hetherington, ed., "Readings for Universalists" on the QUF website at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/readings.html> (emphasis his).
2. I am grateful to Patricia Williams, a friend of a friend and now a fellow Fellow of the Westar Institute, for bringing to my attention Quaker universalism and the Quaker Universal-ist Fellowship website (www.universalistfriends.org).
3. The on-line version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://dictionary.oed.com/>), s.v. "universalism."
4. For example, see Larry Spears, "Quakers and Universalism," in *The Journal of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship* (no. 40, Spring/Summer 2004), under the heading "Dangers of Relativism and Civil Religion," accessible on-line at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/uf040.html>.
5. Patricia Williams, in the draft book manuscript she graciously shared with me, asserts that "the Light is not natural" (p. 31), but rather "the face God turns toward humanity" (p. 33). Such language, of course, evokes traditional theism and its supernaturalism. Yet she also appears to lean in the direction of a more Eastern, immanent (indwelling) Ultimate as well, for she immediately equates that "face" with the terms *Tao* and *Atman*, which are not faces at all, but non-personal (and in the case of *Atman*, neuter) names for none other than the pure, undifferentiated, intra-natural Absolute One in Taoism and Hinduism, respectively.
6. I am most grateful to David Boulton of the British Quaker Universalist Group (and to my friend, Tom Hall, for putting me in touch with him) for critiquing a draft of this paper, and for alerting me to an apparent difference of opinion among Quaker universalists on this score. He points out (in an email to me dated June 17, 2005) that the mission statement of his group speaks only in terms of a "spiritual awareness" that "is accessible to everyone of any religion or none," with no mention of an Inner Light or anything like it that can be possessed. Patricia Williams, by contrast, states, "Quaker universalists believe that everyone has the Light." (p. 135) In a June 18, 2005 email to me, Mr. Boulton suggested that the reason for this apparent difference of opinion may be "that QU in Britain is less wedded to Quaker language, less specifically theistic, and more diverse (in welcoming non-Quakers and humanists, for example)." He added that such theoretical differences seem to matter little among Quaker universalists when it comes to actual spiritual practice.
7. An example of a Quaker universalist who does this is Jim Pym, cited in Williams's manuscript, p. 135. For an example of a Quaker universalist who sees clear connections with Eastern religion, see Rhoda Gilman, "Thoughts from a Quaker-Buddhist," in *The Journal of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship* (no. 40, Spring/Summer 2004), accessible on-line at <http://www.universalistfriends.org/uf040.html>.

8. Katherine Wilson, cited in Hetherington, *op. cit.*, section "V: Universalism in Its Historic Quaker Setting."

9. The fullest explication of the notion that an important common denominator in the world's religions is the experience of and belief in some sort of a Divine Within that is identical or very similar to the human soul is Aldous Huxley's classic, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York, et al.: Harper & Row, 1944/5). Huxley — who, by the way, includes George Fox as an exemplar of his theory — wisely restricts his purview to "primitive" (i.e., tribal-animistic) religions and "every one of the *higher* religions" (vii, emphasis mine). One suspects, of course, that what makes them "higher" in his view is the presence of his focal notion, and the mystical spirituality and practice that yields it.

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