

Quaker Mysticism

Its Context and Implications

Milford Q. Sibley



Quaker Universalist Fellowship

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Daniel Seeger, Treasurer
Quaker Universalist Fellowship
168 Woodside Drive
Lumberton, NJ 08048
Email: treasurer@universalistfriends.org
Website: www.universalistfriends.org

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Editor's Introduction

This hitherto unpublished essay was found among the papers of Mulford Q. Sibley. According to a handwritten note on the manuscript, it was prepared for a conference on mysticism held in 1979. Although Sibley's fields as a teacher were political science and American studies, he maintained a lifelong interest in psychic phenomena and mystical experiences.

With his wife Marjorie, Sibley was an early member of Twin Cities Friends Meeting and a guiding light among Minnesota Quakers until his death in 1989. During his long academic career at the University of Minnesota he received many scholarly honors and published several books, but he was best known and best loved as a teacher. In the early 1960s he drew nationwide attention for his unwavering stand in defense of academic freedom. Local and national publications attacked him for insisting that proponents of unpopular doctrines such as communism, atheism, or nudism should be allowed to teach, and at one point he was refused entry into Canada as a possible "subversive." An informal newspaper poll conducted in January, 2000, listed him among the 100 most influential Minnesotans of the 20th century.

Rhoda R. Gilman

QUAKER MYSTICISM: ITS CONTEXT AND IMPLICATIONS

Any account of Quaker mysticism must refer both to the meaning of mysticism in general and to its particular manifestations in the experience of that religious group known as the Society of Friends. We first remind ourselves of what mysticism is and what it is not. Then we turn to the mystical elements in Quakerism. Finally, we suggest some of the implications of Quaker mysticism for religious and social experience as a whole.

I

In the words of Coventry Patmore: “What the world, which truly knows *nothing*, calls ‘mysticism’ is the science of *ultimates*, ... the science of self-evident Reality, which cannot be ‘reasoned about,’ because it is the object of pure reason or perception.”¹ He is suggesting that the mystical experience has as its point of departure the ancient problem of the real and the unreal, the true versus the mere appearance.

Most of us have known a tension between the universe of sense experience — the world as it appears to our sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing — and our occasional glimpses of a world that seems to be beyond sense — a world, indeed, whose meanings we bring to the interpretation of sense experience itself. Many of our religious and philosophical traditions tell us that the hidden universe is the Real and the one perceived by our senses is, at best, only a kind of shadow reality. In the Platonic tradition, we may eventually reach the real world of forms through a rigorous discipline which carries from the experience of mere images to that of opinion and then to that of ultimate knowledge.

St. Paul expresses a similar notion when he says: “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.”² And much of the Eastern religious tradition speaks in like terms.

Patmore talks of “self-evident Reality,” and this is indeed an apt expression for what mystics claim to experience. How do they *know* that what they perceive is genuine “reality” rather than an imitation? The answer is that it is self-evident and that the self-evidence is so powerfully impressed on the transformed consciousness that they cannot doubt it. Possibly it is like the experience of someone who has a strong clairvoyant or telepathic vision — so “real” that the person accepts it with a certitude not to be questioned and, indeed, often proceeds to act on the basis of it.

Patmore goes on to say: “The Babe sucking its mother’s breast, and the Lover returning, after twenty years’ separation, to his home and food in the same bosom, are the types and princes of Mystics.” Here he suggests that the universe of mystic experience is our “true home”; when we attain it, we realize that it is where we really belong, just as the true lover returns to his beloved after long separation and realizes with renewed awareness that this is where he should be.

How do we “see” this world which transcends what we usually think of as normal experience? Plato speaks of the “eye of the soul,” which is as real as the physical eye and is designed to take us into the level of consciousness that we associate with mysticism.³ Through the eye of the soul we see interconnections, we transcend the universe of separate things, we experience the world as basically one, and, according to the accounts of many mystics, we even transcend the apparent separation between good and evil. In religious terms, the self is absorbed in or united with God. However briefly, we grasp our place in the scheme of things and are enlightened directly by the Supreme Being.

Stated somewhat differently, the mystic experience, according to those who have undergone it, is the “highest” level of consciousness. Psychologically, perhaps, when infants we first

perceive the world as one and do not distinguish between the “I” and the “other.” Then, very early in life, we begun to see things as separated from one another — selves from selves, mine from other, outer from inner, and so on. The separate sciences represent this level of consciousness. This is the state of awareness that we often associate with analyzing — breaking down our experiences, viewing them as discrete.

The mystic is suggesting that beyond the level of the world as discrete is a realm of experience which is once more unitive — but unitive in a sense somewhat different from that of our early childhood. In this new and higher unitive consciousness we integrate and absorb all the previous experience of division even while transcending it. Perhaps we can say that the unified consciousness of the very small child is unsophisticated while that of the fully developed mystic is a sophisticated one.

The earlier and later unity have features in common. Both, for example, are characterized by an immense feeling of awe and reverence and joy. In infancy, as Wordsworth suggests, “Trailing clouds of glory we do come, from God who is our home.”⁴ While the poet says that the “prison house” soon begins to close and that the “vision splendid” fades “into the light of common day,” the mystic would reply that this same vision can be restored and even expanded through the mystical experience.

Mystics are certain that their experiences are, as William James put it, “noetic” — providing knowledge and, indeed, the most complete and sure knowledge possible.⁵ Returning from this transcendental realm, mystics will find that they now look on the universe of ordinary experience in an entirely new light. Their intuitions about values, for example, may be transformed; and familiar objects will be placed in different contexts. The senses themselves, which once appeared so clear and distinct, may now seem to be confused: thus some mystics will “hear” colors or “smell” sounds.

From the perspective of the mystic, the experience is first-hand rather than second- or third-hand. Religion emanating from

the reports of another's experience is merely indirect or derived, not primary. An analogy might be drawn from the realm of science: teachers of science usually believe that it is important for the students to "get their hands dirty" through actual laboratory work. While they may learn from the laboratory reports of others, there is no substitute for first-hand experience. So it is with the perception of mystics: while they value the reports of others' experiences of the divine, they are never satisfied unless they, too, can have the vision.

Mysticism is *not* magic. It is not the "occult." Nor should it be thought of as antiscientific. Indeed, one can argue that in its emphasis on direct experience, it parallels certain scientific attitudes. It is not "irrational" despite what some critics may say, although it may be beyond reason, depending on how that ambiguous word itself is used. Patmore maintains that the mystical Reality is the, "object of pure reason or perception." While the mystical experience is not one of mere feeling, an emotional glow often accompanies it, just as the experience of higher mathematics is frequently said to be deeply moving.

Up to now we have been speaking as if there were few if any diversities within the admitted universals of mysticism. Yet mysticism is more than a single theme in the symphony of religious experience: there are also important variations and differences in emphasis among its historical expressions. Although there are many resemblances between the Islamic Sufi and the Hassidic Jew, diverse historical experiences provide different colored clothing for their bodies of mystical knowledge. The Franciscan is not a Hindu, even though their spiritual language may be amazingly alike. Nor can Quakers be equated with late medieval mystics. Their cultural history from the 17th to the 20th century has dyed their mystical cloak with its own peculiar tints. What are those hues? How, in other words, is the mysticism of Quakerism related to mysticism in general?

II

Scholars like William C. Braithwaite and Rufus Jones argue that Quakerism is basically mystical.⁶ By contrast, writers like Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Roberts, while not denying important mystical elements in the early development of the Society of Friends, also maintain that in some respects 17th-century Quakerism was not necessarily mystical.⁷ In part the dispute turns on problems of definition and in part on historical interpretation. A brief reference to the social and religious context of early Quakerism might put the issue in perspective.

The 16th-century Protestant Reformation was in part a revolt against the late medieval attempt, by writers like Saint Thomas Aquinas, to reconcile Christianity with the emphasis on rationality to be found in Aristotle. Saint Thomas, both Luther and Calvin appeared to say, had too much confidence in human reason. Lutheranism and Calvinism, therefore, called for a return to Saint Augustine, who best reflected Paul's emphasis on the role of sin and the extreme necessity for grace.

Salvation by faith rather than by works became the slogan of the orthodox Reformation; and the faith it stressed was commitment to Biblical teaching that was supposedly pure and unadulterated. While the early Luther, to be sure, spoke of the "priesthood of all believers," he made it clear that certain interpretations of the Bible by some of his followers could not be tolerated; and eventually he seemed to turn to the state for support in sustaining his own interpretation.

Meanwhile, the many varieties of Anabaptists had arisen, some of them rooting their beliefs in what they took to be Luther's early doctrines. They renounced the notion of the state supporting the church; they rejected infant baptism as incompatible with the Bible and with the notion of voluntary commitment to religion; and in some instances they appealed from the authority of the Bible to that of direct religious experience. Although most Anabaptists were not preponderantly

mystical, some revealed strong mystical tendencies not unlike those that were to emerge in the Quakers of the next century. And the mystical Anabaptists must have been sustained and reinforced by such early 16th-century sects as the Family of Love, which, as Rufus Jones has pointed out, anticipated many later Quaker beliefs.⁸

To what extent 16th-century continental mysticism affected the development of sectarianism and mysticism in 17th-century Britain has long been debated. Rufus Jones argued that there were more than a few Anabaptist congregations in Britain and that they must have influenced the religious atmosphere which eventually gave rise to both the Baptists and the Quakers.⁹ Many have suggested that the great German mystical writer Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) must have had some impact on the British mind, but others have minimized his influence.

The historical debate turns on the degree to which 17th-century British sects developed spontaneously. Some, like the Ranters for example, were almost wholly rooted in British soil. In general, it seems safest to say that both continental and native influences were at work. Some religious currents in Britain, mystical and nonmystical alike, had an almost continuous history from the Middle Ages, and much 17th-century British sectarianism may have been grounded in earlier movements such as the Lollards of the 14th and 15th centuries rather than in the 16th-century continental Reformation.

The debate about Quaker mysticism and its possible antecedents has been paralleled by a similar discussion as to the relation of 17th-century Quakerism to Puritanism. Some have suggested that Puritan strains in Quakerism were in tension with opposing mystical currents. Puritan moral notions were legalistic, whereas the tendency of mysticism is to seek transcendence of rigid legalism. But it is very difficult to assess what proportions of mysticism and of Puritanism existed among early Friends.

Similar to the discussion of Puritan-mystical tendencies is the analysis of mysticism and "prophecy." The 17th century

witnessed the development of many apocalyptic sects whose leaders prophesied either the imminent end of history or some dire calamity. Early Friends were not unaffected by these currents and one can discuss the degree to which their mysticism was colored (or distorted, depending on one's point of view) by prophetic and apocalyptic hues. Is there a necessary connection between mysticism and prophetic warnings, or are the two strains separable? Does mystical religious experience inevitably lead to prophetic and apocalyptic outlooks or are the latter entirely independent of the former? Obviously, much depends on one's precise definition of mysticism and on one's conception of how it is related to the individual personality and to a given culture.

In the complicated religious scene out of which Quakerism arose there were, of course, "conservatives" and "radicals." Some scholars even speak of "right-wing" versus "left-wing" Puritans, indicating by the latter a greater degree of strictness in religious principles and often a more extreme position on overthrowing and reconstructing the existing social order. Radical attitudes were encouraged by disappointment with the regime of Oliver Cromwell. From the left-wing point of view the Commonwealth government was indeed no revolution, and Cromwell's compromises often stimulated agitation for more fundamental religious and social change.

Left-wing tendencies, too, were often associated with apocalyptic views, as among the "Fifth Monarchists" of the 1650s, who deemed the Day of the Lord and the end of human history to be close at hand. Sometimes preachers tinged with apocalyptic views sought to hasten the Day of the Lord by conspiring to overthrow the government. Quakers were directly affected, since they were often confused by the general public with Fifth Monarchy advocates and other extremists.

Thus when the young George Fox began to be strangely moved by the urgings of the Spirit, he had to cope with a great variety of social and religious currents in his immediate environment. He was in part a product of his times, and it is not

surprising that Puritan, apocalyptic, Anabaptist, and social-change perspectives like those of the Levellers should have been struggling within his emerging religious consciousness. From the beginning he had strong mystical proclivities, but he is said to have resisted them, in part because of his dislike for the Ranters, with their claim to have transcended good and evil and their alleged “free love” communities.

Some scholars have suggested that it was not until Fox traveled into the northwest of England during the early 1650s that the mystical element took on importance.¹⁰ It was then that he became increasingly disillusioned with institutional forms and creeds and began to listen and follow what early Friends called the Light. Initially, perhaps, there was a modicum of fear in his attitude — possibly fear of the unknown or of what the Light might lead him to do.

Within Fox’s early religious consciousness were struggling not only the several tendencies already noted, but also two types of mysticism. One sees the soul’s union with Ultimate Reality as transcending such categories as good and evil, while the second has been termed “ethical mysticism.” In the first the accent is on a mystic vision which is “quietist” in nature and which seeks to escape the struggles involved in the life of action. In the second, the Light Within commands action in the world and supposedly gives guidance for it.

In the end the second type of mysticism triumphed both in Fox and among early Friends. By the 1660s Quakers had come to think of their religious life somewhat along these lines: All willing and action without an awareness of the Light Within is self-interested and corrupting. One’s religious experience must begin at this point and with this awareness. Once one recognizes the presence of the Light — or the Christ Within — then one has to wait for guidance, without which all human will and all action are as dust. One has, in other words, to be “open” to the Light (or to Christ) and openness suggests a purging of all desire to will and to act without inner guidance. At this point, then,

one might hope for a transformed consciousness — an illumination that comes from the heart of the universe or Ultimate Reality.

Robert Barclay, one the most articulate of 17th-century Friends, speaks of the *seed* which epitomizes the Christ Within. As he puts it:

By this seed ... we understand a spiritual and heavenly and invisible principle in which God as Father. Son and Spirit dwells, a measure of which divine and glorious life is in all men as a seed which of its own nature draws and invites us to God; and this some call *vehiculum Dei* or the spiritual body of Christ. ... Because it is never separated from God nor Christ, ... as it is resisted God is said to be resisted; and on the contrary... as this seed is received in the heart, and suffered to bring forth its proper and natural effect, Christ comes to be formed and raised.¹¹

Waiting for the illumination of Christ, however, can be a long process and entails both patience and faith. For while one is waiting, one's soul may be torn between the self-will which prevents vision and the as-yet absent union with God which goes beyond mere self. One has to be utterly empty and denuded of the ordinary self before one can become "full."

In rather characteristic early Quaker language, Stephen Crisp thus describes this waiting process, and the pain connected with it, before the Light begins to complete its work:

But then, oh the woe, misery and calamity that opened upon me! Yea, even the gates of hell and destruction stood open, and I saw myself falling thereinto, my hope and faith, and all fled from me, I had no prop left me to rest upon. The tongue that was as a river, was now like a dry desert; the eye that would, or at least desired to see everything, was now so blind, that I could see nothing certainly, but my present undone and

miserable state. Oh, then I cried out in bitterness of my soul, “What hath all my profession profited me? I am poor and blind and naked, who thought that I had been rich and well adorned... “

Crisp sought light in the “meeting of God’s People’ but it seemed in vain to sit there with such a wandering mind as mine was, while, though I laboured to stay it, yet could not as I would. At length, I thought to go forth; and as I was going, the Lord thundered through me, saying, “That which is weary must die.” So I turned to my seat and waited in the belief of God, for the death of that part which was weary of the work of God.... And many sore conflicts did I meet withal before I was able in all things to distinguish between the workings of the true spirit and power, from that which was but the old self transformed,

So the more I came to feel and perceive the love of God, and his goodness to flow forth upon me, the more was I humbled and bowed in my mind to serve him, and to serve the least of his people among whom I walked. And as the word of wisdom began to spring in me, and the knowledge of God grew so, I became as a counsellor of them that were tempted in like manner as I had been; yet being kept so low that I waited to receive counsel daily from God, and from those that were over me in the Lord and in Christ.... Being called of God and his people to take the care of the poor, and to relieve their necessities as I did see occasion, I did it faithfully for diverse years...¹²

These words of Stephen Crisp suggest the general ordering of the Quaker mystical experience: first, a feeling of spiritual need and an effort to meet it by exertion of self-will; secondly, utter misery because of the attempt, since the present self is not the self that ought to be; thirdly, a recognition that this misery

may be an opening to the Light and one's consciousness of conflict in the soul leads to a kind of passivity, in which one no longer stands in the way of the Light or the Christ — a kind of crucifixion of the "existential self"; fourthly, the Light resolves the original tension and one becomes a new Self, within the context of the Meeting of Friends; and finally, the new self reflects its experience in service to the poor.

Early Friends often spoke of good and evil and in terms very similar to those used by Puritans. But implicit in Quakerism from the very beginning was a rejection of the notion that ethics should be codified and made into a body of law. Although Quakers did not reject the Bible — and, indeed, often quoted it — they insisted that it must be read and understood only as illuminated by the Christ Within. While Friends did not always agree on how this should be expressed, in general we may say that to them, ethical and religious statements were not valid because the Bible said they were, but rather the Bible said they were because basic religious experience vouched for their validity. God was still active in the world and in human consciousness; and a Friends meeting was always open to fresh leadings, whether in religion or in social concerns.

This meant that while Quakers initially might be uncertain or merely conventional about the specific implications of right and wrong, they opened themselves to the direct experience of God in the expectation that the Light might reduce their uncertainties and either confirm or reject the conventional view. Thus in the beginning the testimony against all war was not as clear or definite as it became after the Restoration; and while initially there was no uniform testimony against slavery, there was a sure if painfully slow development of the notion that slavery was morally wrong and that the Quaker could have none of it. John Woolman's journal in the 18th century is a testimony to the way in which Quakers saw the Light working on the slavery issue.¹³

The traditional tender conscience of the Quaker was often the result of an excruciatingly complex waiting for clearness and

assurance. But an integral part of Quaker mysticism was the notion that revelation is progressive — that is, truer and more complete religious and moral insights than those of the past were always possible if individuals and meetings would wait patiently for the Light.

The Quaker meeting represented the consciousness that there is a corporate or social dimension in religious experience. The meeting constituted the framework within which Friends checked individual leadings against those of others. One of the difficulties associated with mysticism throughout history has been the problem of distinguishing illusion from truth in religious experience. Nonmystical religious movements seek through formal creeds and privileged hierarchies to assist the believer in making this distinction. But the Quaker rejected all intellectualized statements of belief and spurned, too, any priesthood or professional ministry.

The Friend sat in meeting and, in the often awe-inspiring silence, attempted to be open to whatever the Light might bring. When fellow Friends did break the silence, one would be able to measure one's own leading against that of another; and while in the end one must follow the Inner Light, still it was necessary to take seriously any discrepancies that might exist between one's own experiences and those of others. Although discrepancies did not necessarily mean that one was mistaken, still the individual owed it to fellow Friends and to the quest for Truth to ask whether and to what extent the personal vision might be influenced by pride or by the clever disguises of evil. Thus, far from being only a solitary search, Quaker mysticism was emphatically a social one as well.

Friends' experiences during the 17th century, like those of certain other sectarians, often included an element of what many might call the bizarre. George Fox had vivid visionary experiences, heard "voices," and sometimes spoke in ways that were difficult to comprehend. On one occasion he clearly heard a voice commanding him to go to the town of Lichfield and to

shout out “Woe unto you, bloody Lichfield.” Fox was puzzled by the message but followed it to the letter. He later thought that it might have had something to do with the fact that Lichfield was supposedly a center for persecution of Christians in Roman times.¹⁴

Are experiences of this kind a part of mysticism? Again, it depends on how one defines the term. We do know that those traditionally accounted as mystics have also apparently had clairvoyant, levitation, and precognitive experiences. Many of the saints are said to have floated in mid-air when lost in deep meditation. Perhaps it is plausible to suggest that while such psychic phenomena often accompany mystical experiences, they are not a necessary aspect of them.

As suggested earlier by the term “ethical mysticism,” Quakers thought of religious experience as embracing everything from initial doubts and disquietude through the waiting for leadings to the reception of the Light and action in the world. The experience of the Christ Within, while certainly central to Quaker mysticism, shares the designation “religion” with all those acts in the world illumined by the Light. Just as Friends from the beginning thought of all days as holy and no times as peculiarly sacred, so they saw no real breach between inward illumination and those acts performed under its scrutiny — such as Fox’s pleading for higher wages, the rejection of oaths, refusal to join the army, agitation against slavery, and the founding of Pennsylvania.

After the 17th century there was a tendency to quietism among some Friends, and practices such as plain dress and plain speech lingered on without a renewal of that direct experience of which they had been an expression. Their original status as symbols of equality was frequently forgotten. But quietism and withdrawal, while important tendencies in much of the 18th century and through part of the 19th, were never complete; and in certain respects — such as agitation against slavery and war — the social action based on mystic experience continued.

III

Thus far we have been treating Quaker mysticism against the background of mysticism in general and of its origins in the 17th century. We now turn from its affinities and origins to its implications and potentialities. Not all Quakers will agree with the last part of this analysis, but their criticisms will no doubt contribute much to that dialogue out of which more general and truer insights may emerge.

Broadly speaking, we suggest that while Quakerism was born as a sect in the Christian religious tradition, its genius implicitly aspires to a universalism that transcends the Christian or any other existing religious framework. By this we mean that the very nature of what we call Quakerism is to rise above the tradition within which it was born.

Consider what goes on in a Friends meeting. Friends gather and settle in for what will be either an hour of silence or a period in which the silence will be interrupted periodically by those who have been led by the Spirit to speak. A “gathered” meeting will be one in which concerns about mere temporalities will have faded and in which Friends will be open to whatever leadings may arise from the Christ Within.

By not striving for anything in particular (eliminating the element of self-will) Friends will become lamps illumined by the energy which they believe is vouchsafed by “that of God” within every person. This element of nonstriving implies, first, a concentration of one’s thoughts. One seeks then to banish discursive reasoning. At the same time, one is aware that if one strives too actively to accomplish these ends, one will be frustrated, for striving to be nonstriving is a contradiction in terms. If the mystic seeks “emptiness” too strenuously, it will prove elusive. Hence an attitude of waiting and the reduction of anxiety to the lowest possible point will be appropriate. One may never get beyond this in a given meeting, although in a sense even this state is an achievement.

If one does experience the emptiness for a moment, and the Light streams in, then one must still not necessarily expect more than a momentary illumination. The levels of mystic experience in a Friends meeting are similar to those identified by the mystics of all cultures and religious backgrounds — all the way from fleeting glimpses to more protracted joy, although it is difficult to speak in terms of time frameworks since one presumably is rising above temporal categories.

While one is opening oneself to the Light, others are doing likewise, with the same problems. Sometimes they will speak out of the Light, thus seemingly interrupting one's own openings. But often the oral expression of another Friend may respond to or comment on what the Light in one's own self is conveying. This meshing of experiences in a "good" or gathered meeting is one of the most striking aspects of Friends' mysticism.

Even if the meeting is silent for the whole period of worship, the quality of the silence may vary considerably. Friends may rise from such a meeting with the observation that it was "dry" — one, that is, in which the light was dim indeed. Yet another wholly silent meeting may evoke the later comment that it was a very fruitful period.

Is there a telepathic communication achieved in the genuinely gathered as contrasted with the dry meeting? It is a plausible proposition on the basis of the evidence. At its best — which is rarely achieved — a meeting will represent not only a unitive experience within the individual Friend but also a consciousness of deep underlying social and spiritual unity. Leadings of the Light are both vertical — God and creature — and horizontal — between and among Friends themselves. Because the highest levels of mystical experience in a meeting may be rare, they are correspondingly precious. But Friends tend to hold that any step beyond everyday consciousness is to be viewed with awe.

Quaker mysticism is characterized by an emphasis on spontaneity. One never knows where the Light or Spirit will lead

and one should therefore not imprison the worship within too much structure of either time or mode of expression. Friends who hold to the Society's early traditions are therefore suspicious of planning or "programming" a meeting beyond arranging for its time and place. There is great confidence that the Spirit Within will provide all the guidance necessary.

Because they value silence so greatly, many Friends are loath to break it even with spontaneous speech. Yet Friends' mysticism holds that speaking "out of the silence" is also valuable. The problem may be to distinguish between the Spirit's voice and that of one's own ego. Many Friends require the evidence for the Spirit to be overwhelming before they will venture to express themselves orally, and some, perhaps, suppress what may be genuine leadings. Not infrequently, however, the expressions that one has suppressed are uttered by another in the same meeting. Although early Friends tended to think of music as an impermissible external aid in worship, sometimes the Spirit may move Friends to spontaneous song or even dancing.

In part Friends' emphasis on silence, unless the Spirit moves one strongly to break it, is rooted in the general suspicion of words. Words at best transmit in a very uncertain and ambiguous way what the Spirit is saying. Just as Friends are suspicious of much "theologizing" — or attempting to place religious experience within a highly intellectual, logical framework — so they tend to think that if the Spirit does press one to speak, one should beware of elaborate phraseology and complicated sentences.¹⁵

What is the relation between the Christ Within of Quaker mysticism and the historic figure called Jesus of Nazareth? This is a question that has exercised some Friends and about which there are still disagreements. The Christ of inner experience, modern Friends continue to hold, gives his Light to all, whatever their culture or tradition. Here the great early figure of Isaac Pennington speaks, too, for contemporary Quakerism:

... the soul of the Lord holdeth forth some beams of his eternal light to all mankind, according to his pleasure, at some time or other visiting the darkest corners of the earth, and making some way therein for the scattering of that darkness which separates the soul from the light of life, and from the sweet presence and enjoyment of its Creator, which naturally flow into every soul in its believing and obeying of the light.¹⁶

But the Christ Within may be experienced in widely varying degrees and this suggests that some persons may be more “Christ intoxicated” than others. The Light — for whatever reason — flickers in some but in others glows brightly and with a steady flame. Thus many 20th-century Friends would agree with the words of William Penn:

That which the people called Quakers lay down as a main fundamental in religion is this, that God, through Christ, hath placed his Spirit in every man, to inform him of his duty and to enable him to do it; and that those who live up to this are the people of God, and those that live in disobedience to it are not God’s people, whatever name they may bear or profession they may make of religion... By this Spirit they understand something that is Divine; and though in man, yet not of man, but of God.... They call it the light of Christ within man.¹⁷

This implies, then, that every person has a measure of Christ within, including such historic figures as Jesus, Buddha, Richard Nixon, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, and Jim Jones. Thus we can speak of a Jesus Christ, a Richard Nixon Christ, and so on. But we customarily say that Jesus Christ in his life and work exhibited that of God Within far more than most others. The historic Jesus who lived in Palestine some 1,900 years ago and who suffered under Pilate was closer to Christ with greater constancy than,

for example, Napoleon. But Napoleon, too, embraced a Christ Within, and so does every man and every woman.

A provocative question which one might put to a Friend is whether Quakerism depends at all on the supposed fact that a given person by the name of Jesus of Nazareth lived on earth. Many early Quakers, no doubt, would have been shocked by such a question, for they thought of themselves as having revived first-century Christianity, with its faith in the historic Jesus. Implicitly, however, it would seem that Quakerism does not require the historic Jesus. That is to say, if it should be proven tomorrow, and beyond the shadow of any doubt, that Jesus of Nazareth never lived, the essentials of Quaker mysticism would remain. For implicitly Quakerism depends, not upon some given historical embodiment of Christ but upon the Christ who is embodied in every person at all periods of history. While these varied expressions of Christhood will be colored by their cultures and their times, within all of them will be the Light which never fails. William Blake speaks about “mercy, pity, peace, and love” being expressed in a variety of cultures—in “heathen, Turk, and Jew.” So, too, Christhood, in this interpretation of Quakerism, is both universal and yet channeled through a multiplicity of personalities and ways of life.

Like much mysticism, the special form we have been describing as Quaker is rather disquieting to those who like their religion clearly defined and predictable. Being guided by the Light is often disturbing to complacency, self-satisfaction, and ethical passivity. It is unsettling both to those who practice Quakerism and to those outside its circle. For while Friends are assured of the Christ Within, that Christ is forever making demands on the conscience that seem to imply a kind of ethical perfectionism. A John Woolman never rests in his denunciations of slavery and often unsettles the minds of whole meetings.¹⁸ An Elizabeth Fry never ceases her pleadings for prisoners. The Quaker in a gathered meeting, while aware that the meeting has its consolations for those who have suffered bereavement or

personal misfortune, is never satisfied to rest with performance of this undoubted function of religion. The life of action calls, in which evil is not to be overcome by evil but by good. The New Testament passage, “Be ye therefore perfect...” is confirmed and underlined by Quaker mysticism.

Because of this strain of perfectionism, Reinhold Niebuhr classifies Friends as “soft utopians.” That is, they are rather naive about the world, do not understand the ubiquity of power, and, as “children of light,” do not fully comprehend the depths of darkness. But the Quakers would respond that they are not naive; that it is the power politicians and those associated with them who are simplistic insofar as they seem to believe that human beings can use military violence and the compromises of power politics to produce good. The Quaker tradition is well acquainted with the reality of sin. Quakers do not believe, however, that one can attack it directly, but only by overcoming evil with good. Tenderness to all creatures, including human beings, as Woolman and others have emphasized, is far more likely to overcome evil than supposedly “tough” measures that are ostensibly in touch with reality.¹⁹

This tendency to perfectionism carries with it the peril of enormous hypocrisy. Those who stress perfection are almost certain to demonstrate by their acts that they fall far short of it. Or their very virtues may lead to vices. Thus early Quakers sought to keep their way of life simple and industrious. But their very simplicity and industry meant that their earnings were saved and invested. The result was that, in the words of Frederick Tolles, they moved from the “Meeting House” of the late 17th century to the “counting house” of the 18th and 19th centuries. And try as they might to avoid it, the counting house mentality often affected their way of life and the way they looked at the world.

Quakers have not been unaware of the dangers of hypocrisy and of the transmutation of virtues into their opposites. Their consciousness of the issue explains in part the tradition of “frank speaking,” which encourages Friends to address one another’s shortcomings rather openly.

While verbal criticisms are always to be offered in love, to the outsider the frankness might on occasion sound rather harsh. At a more formal level, the queries — sharp questions about conduct addressed to the meeting as a whole — endeavor to remind Friends that they have high commitments and that, like other human beings (and perhaps even more so), they have a tendency to forget those commitments. Thus a query might read: “Have Friends sought in every way to maintain their testimony against all violence?” Or “Are Friends so living that they take away the occasion for war?” Or “Have you expressed in your lives the testimony of simplicity in dress, manner of living, and speech?” But even with frankness in speech and the queries, the threat of hypocrisy is present in every meeting.

A healthy meeting will, of course, keep constantly at the center of its consciousness the knowledge that mystic experience can be one of the strongest sources of renewal and fresh insight. Many a meeting has been saved from desiccation and hypocrisy by the mysterious workings of the Spirit or the Light within ordinary human beings. What seemed dead has become alive; and the peculiar combination of mystical and prophetic religion that we associate with Quakerism has once more made itself felt as in the days of George Fox.

Endnotes

1. From Patmore's "The Rod, the Root, and the Flower," as quoted in Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 2 (Noonday Press, N.Y., 1955).
2. First Corinthians, XIII:12.
3. Perhaps the "eye of the soul" is also what enables us to 'see' things in such psychic phenomena as out-of-body experiences.
4. Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."
5. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.
6. See, for example, Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism and The Second Period of Quakerism*; Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion and The Later Periods of Quakerism*.
7. Barbour and Roberts, eds., *Early Quaker Writings, 1650-1700*, pp. 13-46 (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1973).
8. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, pp. 428-448 (Macmillan, London, 1923).
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 396-427.
10. Barbour and Roberts, eds., *op.cit.*, p. 25, 32.
11. Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, p. 137 (Friends' Book Store, Philadelphia, 1908).
12. "A Journal of the life of Stephen Crisp," in Barbour and Roberts, eds., *op.cit.*, pp. 203-205.
13. See Phillips P. Moulton, ed., *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1971).
14. Rufus Jones, ed., *George Fox: An Autobiography*, p. 132 (Ferris and Leech, Philadelphia, 1919).
15. See Douglas V. Steere, *On Speaking Our of the Silence* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet 182, 1972).
16. Penington, *Works*, Part 1, p. 383 (1681).
17. Penn, "Primitive Christianity Revived, in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers," quoted in *Passages*

from the Life and Writings of William Penn, p. 426 (Friends' Book-Store, Philadelphia, 1882).

18. In Woolman's *Journal*, one is impressed by the writer's earnestness, his self-discipline, and his sense of commitment to the antislavery cause. Both in meeting and privately, in conversations with other Friends, something within him is constantly urging him to speak and to agitate.
19. On an ocean voyage, Woolman observed the sensitivity of 'dunghill fowls,' carried on the ship, remarking, "I often remembered the Fountain of Goodness, who gave being to all creatures and whose love extends to that of caring for the sparrows; and I believe where the love of God is verily perfected and the true spirit of government watchfully attended to, a tenderness toward all creatures made subject to us will be experienced, and a care felt in us that we do not lessen that sweetness of life in the animal creation which the great Creator intends for them under our government." See Moulton, ed., *op.cit.*, p. 178.