

Universal WHAT?

By Lynne Phillips

When I first saw “universalist Quakers” in the Marketplace of Ideas, I thought: Here’s another contender for the Oxymoron of the Year contest! Universalist seemed so pretentious — like the Americans and their World Series as if no one else on the planet played baseball. Quaker seemed so specific and, well, ambitious, to be described as universal, given that Quakers are a nanospeck in the eyes of our planet. Nevertheless I was intrigued, so I stuck it on my mental shelf for recreational contemplation.

Gradually the concept came alive for me as I read more widely in the field of theology and religious scholarship. Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Sallie McFague — to name a few — echo in one way or another the insight of William Penn (1693): “The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers. The world is a form; our bodies are forms; and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit; for the more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit.”

It’s ironic that, although more words have been spilled about God than almost any concept that our minds are capable of, we can say NOTHING about the true nature of God beyond an echo of the words from Meister Eckhardt: “God is.”

That’s it, folks. So why have uncounted numbers of wise and devout thinkers wasted pounds of clay tablets, tons of rocks, thousands of papyrus reeds, millions of trees making images and words about God? William Penn implies the answer: we have bodies made of flesh, which have been shaped by a world of rocks and trees and animals. We can experience God but we can’t express our experiences except through words and images from our world.

When I surface from the deep mystical experience of the Divine, I need a talisman, something to sustain me in this world. So do many others, which is why we search for models, that is, powerful metaphors that endure over time (Sallie McFague: *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological,*

Nuclear Age). Jesus is such a talisman: that wise Jew who was a sage, a healer, a wisdom teacher, a lover, a social revolutionary. Buddha, Mohammed, Lao Tzu, Caridwen, Creator, Isis, Mary, George Fox — all of them have become metaphors of earthly guidance and wisdom to help us express and put into service that ineffable experience of the numinous. Penn got it partly right: “the more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit.” But I think Penn overlooked the clamour of our earthly inheritance. Humans have feelings about God. We need to talk about God. We need answers to the perennial questions. Where did we/the universe come from? How will we/the universe end? Why are we here? What is the right way to live?

A universalist Quaker seeks to experience God in the particular tradition of Quakers. I practice our manner of worship because it is a powerful source of energy, which opens me to the Divine. I value the Quaker way of doing business and giving service because it is a spiritual laboratory for building and sustaining communities. As universalists we are sometimes accused of being spiritual tourists because we honour not only our own Christian metaphors, but also those of other faith traditions. We learn from other religions, unite with them in common causes, and join in their rituals if invited. As Quakers we follow the practices of our own wisdom teachers because their centuries of experience with rituals for worship, devotion, and service teach us how to practice active compassion. My journey in Spaceship Quaker 350 gives me protection, companionship, and direction while allowing me to float freely within the limits of its tradition. Karen Armstrong: “If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving kindness, this was good theology.” Quakers have given me good theology. I can say from experience not only “God is,” but “God is Love.” ☺

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