

Jnana Hodson

**RELIGION  
TURNED  
UPSIDE  
DOWN**



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# Religion Turned Upside Down



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## *Preface*

**T**HERE IS A COMMON PERCEPTION of humankind's relationship to divinity as a hierarchy. It appears across religions and cultures, typically with the Divine dwelling in some Mount Olympus or Valhalla or Heaven looking down over mankind and the rest of Creation. There is a host of variation, of course, sometimes placing the Divine within a river or deep in a sea or somewhere under the surface of the earth – but still somehow apart from humankind itself. There may likely be angels and other spirits to invoke on our behalf – saints and gurus and many who have gone before us, as well. This model can even be seen when scriptures are esteemed as holy law to be deciphered by a priestly class and obeyed if

the believer is to avoid judgment and punishment, especially eternal damnation.

In Christian convention, this is often expressed with a Father, Son, and Holy Ghost arrayed at the top, with layers of a pope, cardinals and bishops, and then priests, monks, and nuns, before we get to the common laity. Eastern Orthodox and Protestant lines would, of course, eliminate a pope from the hierarchy, but the idea is the same: ranks of individuals who are expected to be ever closer to the Divine the further we get from the general populace.

That is not, however, a universal perception. Throughout history, pockets of what I'll call bottom-up religion also emerge – practice and teaching that begins with individuals and their personal experiences and

encounters. We know of them largely to the extent they have drawn into communities of faith – circles intended to nurture and guide their experiences and relationship with the Divine. In Christian history, this appears with the Waldensians and Lolliards, women monastic mystics of the Middle Ages, and the Anabaptist streams – Amish, Mennonite, German Baptist Brethren (Dunker), and Hutterites – among others. Its leadership arises among members who share the everyday labor and concerns of the community, rather than being set apart as a separate privileged class. Often, we learn of these nuclei only because of the threat they were seen posing to the conventional religion and the general society it served, and then in the persecution they suffered as a consequence.

Still, even after four decades of active practice in one of these bottom-up traditions, I didn't clearly perceive its revolutionary foundation until two seemingly disconnected utterances arose in the midst of open worship a week apart. The first, from John 15:14-15, is where Jesus elevates his faithful followers from the status of servants and declares they are his friends. Among Quakers, it's a central quotation, giving us our formal name as the Religious Society of Friends. On the surface, it's a feel-good line of goodwill and invitation. The second message however, based on Luke 9:23-25, is one that many ministers would prefer to avoid proclaiming. Here Jesus declares that each of his followers must deny himself and take up his own cross. The content is harsh and rebuffing. There's no way to soften its directive: "For whosoever will save his life shall

lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.” It was a passage I hadn’t considered for several years, but revisiting it now came as a jolt. I wondered what was going through the minds of others in the room, especially those who had never before encountered it. My reaction came not because I was unprepared for the rawness of Jesus’ ultimatum – my approach to reading the New Testament had already shifted from seeking any comforting familiarity in the words and now attempted instead to embrace their astonishing weirdness, including the blatant challenges to any political and economic status quo. Later in the week I would chance upon a profile of a novelist that mentioned how he underwent what the Buddhists would consider a four-year death before he could be attain the wisdom that

infused his later works. I could even point to Walt Whitman's observation of Quakers in worship as appearing "as still as the grave," and recognize in our meditation in kind of death to outward activities in order to restore our own souls. But as I sat in quietude absorbing the import of Jesus' instruction, I realized that in it, he calls us to equality! We are not to take up his cross, but our own – whatever that may be. It's the task we would rather avoid, at any cost. It's a place where we will be alone and exposed, perhaps covered in scandal, as Jesus was on Mount Calvary, or branded as outlaws. And, unlike the Crucifixion, this is something we are to take up *daily*. (This teaching is also presented in Matthew 10:38-39 and 16:24-26)

When Jesus also calls us to be his friends, he again invokes an equality – one where race, ethnic identity, or

gender cannot block the way. Friendship is chosen, unlike kinship, as Jesus proclaims in choosing to be friends.

(Something his disciples could not do on their own, given the student-teacher divide.) Friendship is a matter of give-and-take, which appears attractive when we consider the blessings that may follow but suddenly chafes when we realize friends can make demands upon us, as well.

Borrowing a cup of sugar or a gallon of milk is one thing, but how do we react when our dear friend wants the car?

Maybe this appears even in my practice of writing. Could this, too, be my daily cross? As I writer, I can rarely tolerate having someone looking over my shoulder as I type – something newspaper reporters remind me when they tell me, as an editor, to go away so they can finish the story.

(Fair enough!) As I writer, I even hesitate to show drafts of

a work to anyone, especially my wife. Only after a page has undergone multiple revisions do I bring it, cautiously, into the open. But how do I feel, having Jesus stand over my shoulder while I'm working? How can I not self-censor the work? Perhaps my cross at that moment is the effort of remaining fully honest, no matter how erotic the poem at hand or the anger within the history. After all, Jesus knows anyway. Who am I trying to fool? In addition, while the practice of writing is work – often slow, difficult, pedestrian – there are times when something mysterious arises, and without my noticing, the words seem to write themselves, the characters of a story begin to speak on their own, I need to listen to what's being presented to me. I've come to recognize those moments as prayer, and cherish when the practice of writing overlaps with the practice of prayer. Like

many writers, I also treasure the experience of revisiting my work from previous years and exclaiming, “That’s brilliant! Who wrote that?” Now, maybe I can say my friend, Jesus. But I won’t blame him for all those other pages I revisit and find faulty – or worse.

This is a far cry from the view of having layers of intermediaries between me and the Divine. When Jesus calls his followers his friends and even promises that they can do greater works than he has (John 14:12), he turns religion upside-down. Rather than having the Divine looking down on us from afar, and their instructions filtered down to us through layers of clergy and teachers, we are called into close relationship with the Holy.

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I come to this not just through my participation in weekly Quaker worship, but also the everyday interactions with other Friends – who are my friends in many other ways, as well. We share in a legacy of insights and guidance and even customs from those who have come before us in this remarkable tradition. We have no way of knowing for certain how thoroughly the early Quaker leaders understood the full range of thought underpinning what they were proclaiming or how much awareness remained in the generations that followed. When the movement erupted in the tumult of mid-1600s Britain, it proclaimed itself to be “primitive Christianity restored from before the dark night of apostasy,” meaning before the orthodoxy imposed by Constantine and the Nicene Council in 325 C.E., a set of actions that eventually excluded half of the

early church as heretics. In the light of recent historical research regarding that aspect of Roman Empire history, I'm left wondering: the early Quakers could not have perceived how accurately they were reclaiming the lost knowledge and practice, could they? In the face of intense persecution and rapidly political change, the first Quakers had neither the religious liberty nor sufficient time to systematically lay out the revolutionary scope of their alternative Christianity. We do not even know how much they might have expressed in secret, if at all. What I do know is that in the centuries since, Friends, as its spiritual descendants are also known, have sensed that the first generation possessed *something* incredible that has been largely lost. For my part, over the years as I've revisited their writings and begun connecting the dots in their

expressions, I find a startling theology emerging – one that dovetails into current intellectual discovery far better than the prevalent Christian doctrines.

Thought, of course, shapes action. Early Friends emphasized spiritual practice in every aspect of their lives – something they came to call “walking in the Light.” Even those who know nothing about Quakers nevertheless benefit from this faith and its social witness: freedom of religion and dissent, insistence on racial and sexual equality, the existence of a multiparty political system with its concept of an unarmed loyal opposition, uniform pricing for all clientele, insurance policies – even chocolate-bar candy and molecular theory are among its by-products.

Many, meanwhile, associate Quakers with a cluster of anti-war protesters in blue jeans or with the radiant face

on some oatmeal products – from a company, I should note, founded by non-Quakers who simply appropriated our reputation for integrity and peacefulness as their own trademark. Likewise, Benjamin Franklin, for all of his Philadelphia connections, was never a Quaker, even while gladly profiting from those who assumed he was.

Lost is any awareness of Quakers – or more formally, Friends – as the advocates of an alternative Christianity, one in which Christ was and is present to guide them in lives of plain speech and dress, honesty, equality, pacifism, and piety. In that Presence, worship was conducted without ritual or creed, without clergy or choir, without set vocal prayer or Bible reading, without outward ordinances such as Eucharist, communion, water baptism, or foot washing.

I use the past tense because over the generations since their original outburst in mid-1600s Britain, Quakers have gradually spread across a spectrum of faith and practice, with very few retaining the distinctive dress and speech of our spiritual ancestors, and with the majority around the world conducting their worship in some semblance of their Protestant neighbors. For those of us who worship in the traditional hour of silent waiting each week, few would consider themselves to be “Bible literate” or theologically informed. We are all the weaker as a consequence. My concern here is not so much with Quaker history itself as with discerning and constructing the revolutionary religious logic underpinning it – one so radical they dared not articulate their comprehension fully or openly, even in the face of the intense persecution they

were already enduring. Nevertheless, declaring their movement to be “primitive Christianity restored from before the dark night of apostasy,” they invoked a pre-Nicene Council understanding, one eradicated by Constantine and then Augustine in the decades that followed. Pointedly, the orthodoxy from this turning point in 325 C.E. remained enshrined in Britain’s blasphemy laws, with a death penalty for offenders. As a result, in their writing and public statements, early Quakers skirted this fine, fatal line and turned increasingly to metaphor for expression. But their failure to straightforwardly communicate their remarkable vision has proved tragic – not only for later generations of Quakers, who have been left guessing about crucial aspects of the faith and leading to painful schisms in the 1800s, but for all who struggle

with the intellectual conundrums or institutional density of conventional Christianity itself.

Quite simply, I find in their trinity of the Light, the Seed, and the Truth a logical framework for engaging a range of contemporary inquiry, from psychology and quantum physics to ecology and economics, or from medieval Christian women mystics and Asian spiritual disciplines, among others, all potentially informing the conduct of our daily lives. As Zen Buddhists have insisted, right thought leads to right action, which in turn leads to right wisdom. Prudently, as Quakers concentrated their efforts on right action, the right thought was presented in fervent accusations, on one hand, and directives – including sets of queries – on the other, rather than within a sustained, unified reasoning of its foundation.

There was nothing quaint about the generation that turned a term of derision, Quaker, into a badge of honor. In their brash outbursts as the movement coalesced amid the tumultuous and rapidly shifting political, military, economic, and religious collisions of mid-1600s Britain, early Quakers also referred to themselves as Children of the Light, First Publishers of Truth, Friends of Truth, or simply Friends – leading to the denomination’s formal name, Society of Friends or, much later, Religious Society of Friends. The movement’s early decades came within one of the most remarkable upheavals in human history. For the first time on record, a monarch was toppled, arrested, and executed not by a rival for the throne but rather by an element of the citizenry. In this setting, aptly called by some The World Turned Upside Down, radical movements

arose and were dashed in succession – General Baptists (quite distinct from the Particular Baptists we encounter today), New Model Army, Levellers, True Levellers, Diggers, Seekers, Ranters, Fifth Monarchists – leaving the shattered followers to join in the growing league of Friends. Authorities rightly sensed that Quakers threatened their hierarchies and privilege, and persecution came from all fronts. The miracle is that anything of Friends survived. Within decades, however, the movement had established itself and Quaker leaders banked the fires in an unholy alliance – a detente of eccentricity and quietude, on one side, and of freedom from violent persecution, on the other. The revolutionary theology they might have proclaimed was instead politely embedded in a distinctive Quaker culture, where it grew fainter with each successive

generation, especially as Friends prospered in their economic endeavors.

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Many of the implications I find within assertions by early Quakers will likely startle their spiritual heirs in all branches of today's Religious Society of Friends. Quite simply, the implications of the Seed and the Truth, especially, were never fully pursued and the terms themselves have largely fallen from usage; even so, enough indicators remain to spur unique development in our own time. Many of the fuller meanings of the Light, meanwhile, have withered from view, covered by polite convention. Among non-Friends, meanwhile, within the original, inceptive bold expressions may be encouragement for a deepened awareness of Spirit-led life and worship or these

be outright provocative, challenging long-held assumptions. Couched within the novel heated, often convoluted language of those early Friends are hints of a radically different understanding of Christianity itself, a teaching these Quakers could not present fully in the open without becoming fully embroiled in suicidal scandal with no hope of redress.

Even so, within the richness and depth of what they did commit to writing are repeated visions that often seem more suited to contemporary fields of knowledge and religious exploration than to those of turbulent mid-1600s Britain.

Admittedly, as I initially examined their central concepts of the Light, the Truth, and the Seed, little appeared to be systematic. Nor should this surprise us.

After all, the early Quaker movement was a convergence of many radical currents, a fusion in which many individual voices contributed to its new ways and message. Out of their overlapping experiences, however, their evolving concepts led to distinctive religious practices and social reforms, many of which we take for granted today. I believe that attentive examination of their original voices reveals fertile guidelines for deepening our own faith and understanding, regardless of one's religion.

In building upon three powerful, interlocking concepts – the Light, the Truth, and the Seed – Friends established a denomination that guided direct, personal experience of the Divine, rather than repeating second-hand creeds or Scripture.

Their words – as much as their practices – invite us to join in their unfinished legacy. We have much to advance and deepen. And to turn upside down.

## *Starting from Seed*

**A**S THE MOVEMENT now known as Quakers or the Religious Society of Friends coalesced amid the theological, economic, political, and military turbulence of Commonwealth Britain, its message relied heavily on three interlocking metaphors: the Light, the Truth, and the Seed.

These Friends were hardly alone in using Light in reference to spirit, but their extended linkage of Christ with the Light led to revolutionary consequences. As they boldly proclaimed themselves to be “primitive Christianity restored from the time before the dark night of apostasy” – an assertion that can now be understood through recent research to place them in opposition to the orthodoxy imposed by Constantine as it culminated in the Nicene

Council of 325 C.E. and soon after enforced by Augustine with its rows of bishops and priests. Quakers instead organized their faith as a priesthood of all believers, in contrast to the clergy-led denominations around them.

The Truth, in turn, embraced the timeless and unchanging substance of God's universal precepts. It could also, I sense, invoke individual integrity in consequence. While Light was to be known through experience, the Truth could be declared to a congregation or a marketplace, as well as come over them or settle upon them. Thus, the Quaker practice of "speaking Truth to power" meant something distinct from a presentation of facts alone: it meant invoking the power of Christ and calling for an obedience to that authority rather than

accepting an abuse of temporal command or blindly following the customs of society in general.

Not only do the Light and Truth draw upon a range of Biblical quotations, both also appear across a range of religious faiths. By integrating them into everyday conduct and direct religious experience, however, Friends advanced a unique knowledge of each concept.

The Seed, initially, is the most problematic of the three metaphors. On one hand, it may be seen as the most original, yet it was left as the least developed of the three. Because early Quakers were hardly methodical in their usage of imagery, these concepts can be seen evolving and mutating over time, even within the writing of a single Friend. Combined with the widespread and frenzied activity of the early Quaker movement, as well as

inhibitions in the face of the Blasphemy Act, the resulting literature can often blur any distinctions between Light and Truth or Light and Seed, so that they will at times appear synonymous, while at other times quite discrete. Often, the Seed is presented as identical to the Light or to Christ. Sometimes, it might appear to be Jesus. Yet it can also be envisioned as the individual response to the Light – that is, what the Psalms call “soul.” It might even be considered as that image of God in which each person is created.

Considering today’s emphasis on individuality, plurality, and personal psychology, I believe that returning to the metaphor of the Seed holds the most potential for fertile spiritual development and guidance in our own era.

The concept of Seed as a personal place of response might be imagined as a natural outgrowth in relation to

the early Quaker proclamation of a holy inward Light available to all. Their difficulty in advancing the idea arises, I suspect, in the fact that “seed,” as such, has far fewer Biblical citations than the corresponding complementary “light” or “true” and “truth” do. Much of the early Friends’ mindset and practice relied on the ability of individuals to connect a Quaker expression to related Biblical texts. In many references in the Hebrew Bible, however, “seed” is the name for semen (which, in turn, is the Latin word for seed); here, seed is often applied to human ancestry and lineage while lacking any apparent appreciation for what we now know as the work of the fertilized egg within a woman, or, for that matter, pollen in plants. This perspective has little apparent connection with light, and does little to stabilize the dynamic of light and seed. Over the ensuing decades

and centuries, as Friends continued to express a varied awareness of the Light, they eventually inverted its meaning from a central Light pouring into the human heart; nowadays, this Light is commonly presented instead as an innate illumination from within. Regrettably, any expression of the Seed has fallen away altogether. In effect, the modern expression of “Inner Light” obscures and occupies a range of thought belonging to the Seed, while losing the awareness of *Inward* Light altogether.

The time has come to revive a Quaker sense of the Seed, exploring its dimensions through our advanced insights from fields as diverse as contemporary poetry and drama, psychoanalysis and medicine, anthropology and Asian religions, and biochemistry and advanced physics. In doing so, I would hope also to restore the corresponding

Light to its original, and more comprehensive, Quaker expression and teaching.

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Seed, in itself, is a most incredible creation.

Designed to store energy through a dormant period that can extend across years, and then reproduce its species, a seed will respond to specific conditions to release both a root and a stem and leaves, as well as flowering and replicating seed of its own. Amazingly, these kernels already know which direction to move in, no matter how the seed was implanted – one, the root, toward the heart of the Earth; the other, stem and leaf, toward the sun. The resulting plant will breathe, transforming carbon dioxide in the air to oxygen again while building organic matter within itself. Through the emerging chlorophyll, the green

wonder of our planet, photosynthesis regenerates sunlight into food, which will, in some sequence, sustain every animal as well.

The concept is mind-boggling and miraculous, yet taken for granted. Without it, though, life on Earth would not exist.

All of this is multiplied through the varieties of seeds and their related species. Some, like the orchid, are nearly microscopic. Some, such as nuts, are encased in tough shells. while others, such as fruit and many vegetables, are surrounded by sweet flesh. Some have their own means of locomotion, such as the helicopter propellers of maples or stickers and burrs or even the gastronomical tracts of roving animals.

Crucially, seed allows for a line of replication across generations, while leaving room for adaptation to changing conditions.

In the opening chapter of Genesis, seed is even presented as the basis for morality itself: “And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind, and God saw that it was good” – good here as both nutrition and righteousness. “And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; and to you it shall be for meat. ... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”

Only in the Garden of Eden, in the second chapter of Genesis, is the concept of limitations introduced, again as seed, where some fruit may prove toxic to humans. Curiously, this is entwined with ethical comprehension and an awareness of individual mortality. As they say, the plot thickens.

Or, in the words of Psalm 34:8, “O taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man that trusteth in him.” Here faith itself can be nourishing and flavorful, a source of contentment and joy.

For me, a significant breakthrough arises in envisioning *soul* not as a vehicle we ride through eternity but as the Seed. That is, the soul or Seed is perceived as an abode or agent within us where we encounter the Light – or perhaps even where the Light penetrates us. This is the

discernment I find embodied in many expressions of soul in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, in the Psalms: *my soul is sore vexed, let me tear my soul like a lion, he restoreth my soul, I humbled my soul with fasting, heal my soul, I pour out my soul in me, my soul waiteth upon the Lord, my soul thirsteth for thee, my soul refuseth to be comforted, my soul longeth, rejoice the soul of thy servant, my soul is full of troubles, my soul had almost dwelt in silence, thy comforts delight my soul, bless the Lord oh my soul, the hungry soul with goodness, my soul melteth for heaviness, my soul is continually in my hand, let my soul live and it shall praise, my soul is even as a weaned child, bring my soul out of prison, and so on ...* These are all emotional, experiential, and varied reactions somewhere deep within individual awareness and identity. In other words, while we may speak

of this as a place of soul or Seed, it is also a realm of psychology and the fine arts as much as theology – a dimension contemporary Friends already live within.

Consider, for instance, that unlike their mentor, Sigmund Freud’s two principal disciples, Carl Jung and Otto Rank, both looked increasingly to religion for insights. To what extent, then, can we draw on their conclusions to advance a deepened understanding of Light, Truth, and, especially, Seed? Jung, for instance, speaks not just of Light but more crucially “the shadow.” How do presentations of the unconscious and collective unconscious work in relation to Quaker “waiting worship” or the Inward Voice? One Friend, beginning to consider these, also adds symbolism/archetypes, masculine/feminine, and synchronicity/”as Way opens” to the search.

Here, too, we can begin to sense new ways in which we may be seen as created in the image of God. Just as each seed is patterned on a universal model of stored energy that will unfurl into root and leaf, it also carries a particular identity to replicate its own kind. Likewise, each of us displays individual characteristics and abilities as we respond to divine Light. While the opening chapter of John presents Christ as the *Logos* as well as the Light, it is possible to see the *Logos* – an ancient Greek philosophical stream that presents this variously as the principle of the universe, the means of reconciliation of opposites, the way of knowing and knowledge itself, the divine way or plan, and so on – as also working as Seed. Thus, John’s gospel could begin alternatively as, “In the beginning was the Seed, and the Seed was with God, and the Seed was God. ...

All things were made by it; and without it was not anything made that was made. In it was life ..." to be manifested in human form.

There is something organic and original in applying Seed as a spiritual metaphor. Its dimensions are fresh and striking, often in contrast to the dogma and creed of traditional Christianity. This is, for certain, quite different from teachings about the Cross, Resurrection, or Atonement.

In their writings, early Friends often seem to be surveying the potential of this concept, rather than building on a rigorous definition. Sometimes the Seed appears to be identical to Christ or the Light, while at others it stands more in line with the sense of personal response I am advocating. Sometimes it is presented as a botanical

response to Light. Other times, it is familial, aligned to human and divine lineage. (It helps to remember that in their writings, in common with their times, capitalization was often arbitrary: thus, crucial concepts, such as Light or Seed, may appear in lower-case.)

For instance, James Nayler opens his 1655 tract, *Salutation to the Seed of God*, with this perplexing decree: “Arise, shine forth, thou seed of the covenant, to which the promise is, for thy glory to come; and with judgment is the Lord arisen to redeem his chosen, and all that turn to him shall be covered with righteousness, even that which before the world was, and above all the world is, which is perfect for evermore.” The dense sentence, overlapping itself with metaphor, has more in common with contemporary poetry than it does with analytic exposition. At the outset of the

38-page tract (as it appears in the *Collected Works*), this galvanizing invocation addresses a puzzling first-person singular “Seed of the Covenant.” Covenant, of course, was a widespread theological concept of the time, often as the binding agreement between God and a community of faith, beginning with those exhibited in covenants made over the course of the Hebrew Bible; for early Friends, it could also be salvation itself. Here, though, the Seed may be taken to be a result or even a cause of that covenant, something advanced in the next phrase, “the Lord arisen” just as the Seed is urged to “arise” and “shine forth.” The hint in “shine forth” would link this Seed and Lord to the Light as Quakers understood it, but for now, the argument pushes along other lines. Nayler chooses instead to confront the widespread Calvinist doctrine of the elect – the select few

who God knew were predestined from the beginning to be saved for eternity, while the rest of sinful humanity would remain damned. Nayler, in contrast, proclaims that this arisen Seed, the Lord, comes “to redeem all ... that turn to him.” This arisen Seed or Lord *judges* “his chosen,” and Nayler turns the concept from those who are chosen by the Lord to those who themselves choose to respond to God. Nayler insists, once again hinting at Light metaphor, that those who turn to the Seed or Lord “shall be covered with righteousness, even that which before the world was, and above all the world is, which is perfect for evermore.” Covered, as in bathed with Light.

How I wish Nayler had drafted this preamble as a clearer presentation of the response to Light, rather than as a retort to Calvinist doctrine. Even so, what I emphasize

here is the emotional richness of the statement, and its sense of an intense personal experience bursting across Nayler's awareness.

Elsewhere, Nayler perceives this as active: "And this seed ... strives not by violence but entreats ... And this is the seed of eternal peace, and the eternal peace-maker ... where the hardness of heart is broken" (*Not To Strive, But To Overcome by Suffering, 1655-56*). Perhaps even as something *planted* within one, rather than innate: "And as He grows in you, and you in Him, you will feel that power arising which will make you able to answer a good conscience, and give lasting peace, and so by His resurrection shall be saved from condemnation ... following the Lamb in all his leadings ... as you become faithful thereto, you will feel the fruit of that Holy One springing in you ... and to the

comfort of His own Seed, and cross to the world ... yield to the Lord of the vineyard His fruit in due season” (*How Sin Is Strengthened, and How It Is Overcome*, 1657). It is even spiritual nourishment: “So that nothing shall hinder your prayers from coming to the throne of God, nor the dew and blessing of heaven from falling upon the seed. ... And as you come to feed on the Plant of life, you will come to know the work of the Father in His vineyard, and who the faithful laborer is, and what must be his work ... the vine may grow alone in the clean affections, and holy mind, and honest chaste heart, which is the good ground, and where the pure Plant will bring forth of itself in all, where it is not encumbered with that which is contrary to it; which contrary fruits all that mind the light may see ...” (*Milk for Babes, and Meat for Strong Men*, 1661).

Historian Rosemary Moore (*The Light in Their Consciences*) cites “a curious paper” by George Fox, which she says “is important to the understanding of the original Quaker theology. It is not in the collected edition of his epistles, presumably having been suppressed as unacceptable when these were published at the end of the seventeenth century. It was addressed to ‘Margaret Fell and every other friend who was raised to discerning’ and is dated 1653.”

Here he argued: “According to the Spirit I am the son of God and according to the flesh I am the seed of Abraham which is Christ, which seed is not many but one, which seed is Christ and Christ in you. The mystery which has been hid for ages but is now made manifest ... which seed bruised the serpents’s head. ... According to the spirit I

am the son of God before Abraham was, before Jesus was, the same which doth descend, the same doth ascend.”

Moore observes, “There is much more in the same vein, and it is by no means entirely clear, but it shows that Fox in these early days transgressed the current blasphemy law in expressing his unity with Christ, something that is not evident in his published *Epistles*” (76).

She also explains: “Seed’ was another favorite word also used in letters rather than publications during the first years. Fox generally linked it to Genesis 3:15, where the ‘seed of the woman,’ meaning Christ, is contrasted with the ‘seed of the serpent,’ or to Genesis 24, where the seed of Isaac is contrasted with the ‘seed of the bondswoman,’ or Ishamael. Other writers were more likely to introduce echoes of the Parable of the Sower, as when [Edward]

Burrough wrote to Fox, 'Here is a precious seed, but deep in the earth, rocks and mountains, and the cursed earth that brings forth briars thorns and thistles are standing above – O how I have been pressed under for the seed's sake.' There is a similar use of 'precious seed' in the letter from Elizabeth Hooton" (82-83).

As Moore ponders these passages, she concludes: "The use of 'seed' in these passages is ambiguous. It is not clear if Nayler meant Christ or human potential. Nayler was approaching a fusing of the two concepts, putting forward a theory of human perfectability, and Fox, retaining as much as possible of the language of union with God. The phrase 'body of Christ' is likewise ambiguous, perhaps deliberately, in that it could refer to both the human body of Christ and also to the Church" (105).

Mary Fisher (1623-1698), meanwhile, envisioned the Seed along the lines of “that of God in all persons” when she wrote, “There is a royal seed amongst them which in time God will raise ... though they be called Turks, the seed of them is near unto God, and their kindness hath in some measure been shown towards his servants.” Her awareness of personal response becomes clearer when we note that Fisher, one of the “Valiant Sixty” who set forth in itinerant public ministry, was a household servant when she joined Friends.

Isaac Penington (1616-1679) felt the Seed as divine love, “the sweet, tender, melting nature of God, flowing up through his seed of life into the creature, and of all things making the creature most like unto himself, both in nature and operation.” He advised others to “sink down to the seed

which God sows in thy heart and let it be in thee, and grow in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee ... ”

William Penn in 1677 wrote of “this Seed of light and life, which is the Seed of the Kingdom; yea, it is Christ, the true and only Seed of God, that visited my soul even in my young years,” revealing his sins and leading into “this state of the New Man [where] all is new; behold new heavens, and a new earth!”

Repeatedly, this Seed is connected to Christ, though curiously, not to the name Jesus. Despite the range of their conceptualizations of this Seed, what is clear is that it represents an intense, profound, and life-changing encounter for each individual. While they point us toward it, they do not tell us precisely how to experience it

ourselves; we are left instead with the vague instruction to turn toward the Light.

We are left to wonder why subsequent generations of Friends did not sharpen and advance the Seed metaphor, rather than let it drift into oblivion. Did they perceive something too controversial in its open proclamation? I wish the early Quakers had attempted to bridge the botanical and zoological concepts of seed, as well as distinguishing between seed as closed potential in contrast to its active flowering. As it stood, they did not clearly connect their sense of Seed with the all-important measure of “walking in the Light,” their standard of Quaker practice. I wish, too, they had explained how the “seed is not many but one,” in Fox’s formulation, could have so diverse a range of appearances; my own response would hold the

universal concept of seed, on one side, with its many varieties and species, on the other. We may find that “seed that is not many but one” embodies what is universal in all people – the desire to love and be loved, the common appeal and appearance of babies, the need to be fed, clothed, and sheltered, and so on. Nuanced expressions, such as “the Flowering Seed” or “the Walking Seed” or “the Eternal Seed,” may also help in teasing apart the many strands of thought within their original presentations, while helping bridge the concept to the individual responses I see in the Psalms and elsewhere.

Crucially, Jesus tells two parables based on seed – one, of the sower whose grain was cast variously along the pathway, on rocky ground, amid thorns, and in good soil (Matthew 13 and Luke 8), and the tiny mustard seed, a

stubborn weed that can open to small-tree proportions (Matthew 17, Mark 4, and Luke 13 and 17). We could add to this many of his parables that speak of yielding good or evil fruit, found in Matthew 7, 12, 13, 21, and 26; Mark 4, 11, 12, and 14; Luke 6, 8, and 13; and John 4, 12, and 15.

From this vista, being created in the image of God involves an ongoing dynamic. Here, Seed embodies potential and active response. It also acknowledges the individual nature of each variety and place, as well as the universal process of photosynthesis reacting to a common source of Light. If early Friends were imprecise in their definition of Seed – whether it was Christ or grace or the body of believers or even the Light, for instance – they were insistent on a personal experience of this transforming

force. “Hast thou been fruitful?” was a common greeting among Friends.

To understand Christ as Light, as early Friends did, also allows another connection, a parallel construction: Jesus as Seed, the most perfect embodiment of response and human potential, an example for all to grow in.

The metaphor of Seed additionally invokes the process of maturation. In the springtime garden, it is often impossible to tell the sprouting weeds from what we have planted; only after they’ve revealed more of themselves can we decide which to pluck out and which to encourage. We know, too, of the miraculous individuality appearing by stages as an infant grows into a toddler and then toward adolescence. (At age seven, my younger daughter and her

best friend looked like beautiful twins; a decade later, all traces of that resemblance had vanished.)

The concept of Seed also allows us to explore our spiritual experiences within a dynamic, especially in regard to the Light. I have long sensed in Quaker faith a double-helix, something that largely unraveled in the separations afflicting Friends organizations in the 1800s. For a long time, this double-helix impressed me as an experience of the Spirit, on one side, and of Scripture, on the other.

Drawing on Sigmund Freud's disciple Otto Rank, I now also see it as an awareness of our immortality, or spirit, on one hand, and our mortality, or *knowledge* that we will die, on the other. (Rank argues that our denial of our awareness of our mortality is the central struggle of human lives, rather than sexuality, as his teacher did.) I could even see the

double helix as a stand of Christ as the Light alongside a strand having Jesus as the embodied Christ, or even as Quaker faith alongside Quaker practice. This double strand appears, too, in the Light/Seed connection. In terms of modern science, if one is energy, the other is matter. If one is *Logos*, the other is Incarnation. If one is the unity arising in wisdom, the other is the chaos of discovery and exploration. Rank argues that our greatest insights arise when we span the two strands of awareness, leaping from one to the other and back, and I find that true in our spiritual practice as well, when our abstract faith is tested by everyday challenges.

One aspect of the predominant Light metaphor is how deeply it is embedded within and even underlying other lines of argument, both in Scripture and in historic

Quaker writings. The sharpest descriptions of the Light and its workings frequently appear not as independent and complete declarations but rather as support for other arguments. More revealing is the fact that early Friends never fully tried to say precisely what this Light is; that exercise has been left for our own times, as Sam Caldwell and Newton Garver have demonstrated. (The latter's definition of Light, incidentally, comes as an aside while examining the Quaker concept of "speaking Truth to power" – again, Light is seen as intrinsic to faith and practice instead of something abstract and theoretical.)

For me, then, coupling this Light to an awareness of Seed provides a richer sense of faith in action.

For instance, the idea of our sprouting, individually, in response to the Light frames a much different

understanding of salvation than is typically argued in Christian circles. Rather than a one-time burst of accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, and then being liberated from sin throughout life, the metaphor of Seed reflects patience and long-term development. Even a mature plant needs water, fertilization, and weeding. A plant increases in response to light. From this perspective, turning to Christ is a lifetime process that carries a person through many seasons, with crucial support at each stage of development. We can see other believers as gardeners as well, helping to bring our own Seed to fruition, as we in turn do the same for still others.

Seed might also help us to answer why some people do not seem to display “that of God in each person.” The metaphor, as I perceive it, has the growth being in God’s

image or the “New Adam,” rather than in what early Friends would have termed the ways of the world or “natural man.”

The sense of this relationship is enhanced when we consider the nature of Seed. There are certain qualities all plants arising from seeds possess in common: the work of photosynthesis in response to sunlight, for one, and some form of rooting. Yet each seed is also true to its own nature, whether it be a sequoia or a strawberry vine. As our own lives unfold in response to the divine Light, our personal and unique qualities also come into play and are to be encouraged. This stands in stark contrast to a more conventional teaching that would have each of us becoming a miniature Jesus as we take up a cross in imitation of his suffering. Instead, we are drawn toward the Light – as both

Christ and *Logos* – and have life in consequence. In this relationship, we are created in the image of God.

Over the course of its history, the Society of Friends has emphasized its metaphors of the Light while those of the Seed essentially withered. Beginning with the establishment of the Second-Day's Morning Meeting in 1673, which discouraged and curbed the “enthusiasms” and other emotional expressions, Friends moved increasingly toward a distinctive and refined culture where anger was rarely voiced, though a raised eyebrow across the dining table could be just as hurtful. If the trembling and weeping that had accompanied the early Quaker movement were largely the responses of women and children, now individual emotions, feelings, and moods – the work of the

Seed, or soul – were instead submerged. Something vital was lost in the process.

Acknowledging the Seed can also be useful in transforming the somber and melancholy passageways in our own lives; the reality is that spiritual growth occurs in the dark soil and a midnight as well as in the noontime sun. Seed, after all, gives forth roots as well as leaves and flowers.

While many of the journals of Friends do tell of long periods of what we would now call psychological depression before they found their grounding and voice, I find little sense in their writings of an appreciation for the importance of this dimension of spiritual growth and deepening perception – that is, the opening of Seed in response to the Light. Quakers in general have often been

described as a dour and colorless people, as we might expect when emotions and sensual pleasures are repressed. The sweet gentility we associate with them came at a heavy price. Rather than deny the existence of depression and doubt in our journeys, we can embrace them as part of the process – yet another double-helix, this time conjoined with joy and peace, and a healthy sense of balance.

In the Seed, we are made in the image of God. Paradoxically, as we become aware of the existence of the Divine Presence, and those moments of the Seed bursting open, we also make God in our own image. Our knowledge and vocabulary are limited. We turn to the metaphors and language at hand. In Quaker tradition, this has appeared as Light and Seed. There is always more.

All of this stands as more than conjecture. We are free to ask how Seed and Light fit our own experience or diverges from it. When I first began meditating, the goal was to transcend mundane awareness, and return from a realm of bliss with knowledge of one's purpose and past lives. These days, I find myself instead focusing on sinking to the Seed, in Isaac Penington's phrase. Either way, there's a letting go of the ordinary mental activity and personal identity. If some meditators begin by focusing on Light, as I used to do, gazing at a candle and holding that image in my Third Eye, others begin by concentrating on their breath or some point deep in the body. The techniques and explanations vary, but a transformation happens all the same. As mundane scampering thoughts and perceptions fall away, I find my body settling into worship. A shell slips

away, and I become more permeable. I, who dwell so much in my intellect, begin reconnecting to my emotional side. Thinking itself becomes more balanced. Intuition is given its due. Sometimes, released from constraints, lingering mental puzzles are solved, or, as has been said, “Some of the best barns in Rhode Island were designed during Quaker meeting.” For other worshippers, with their own distinct personalities, the rebalancing will happen in other ways. I can present this in terms of Light and Seed, of course, and see them working together in the hour of worship.

When we have a particularly gathered meeting for worship, with deep sustained silence and few vocal messages, I often feel somehow akin to a plant basking in sunlight. There’s a renewed patience and calm, a balance

and flow, a receptivity and a radiance from within. My week, however troubling, recovers a moment of high summer.

Sinking to the Seed can be felt as passing down through time, to your origins or source. Seed opens silently, usually unseen, over a period. In the stillness, it can be felt as sprouting, perhaps repeatedly, like a burning bush without extinction. Seed can be the gift of life itself. If you enter into that Seed, you may find a place of calm, patience, nourishment, protection. The Seed itself miraculously expands, surrounding your physical body. From this perspective, I keep coming back to Meeting for Worship to continue this growth and awareness.

The final chapter of the New Testament returns to an expression of Seed – in a multiplicity of varieties, at that:

“and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits ... and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse ... Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have a right to the tree of life ...” In a flash, the Bible leaps from the Garden of Eden to the end of Revelation through the imagery of two trees and their fruit.

Emphasizing Seed, more than the emerging plant or person, returns us to its inherent potential – not just in this particular generation, but in those to come, as well. Energy is stored and released across time and place, to work transformation and healing. The Seed metaphor intensifies a comprehension of the Light, and provides a unique and organic identity of faith for the Society of Friends. In seed,

ultimately, the cycle of life remains unbroken. Here we may consider the Alpha and Omega, indeed.

## *Seeking After Truth*

“And as we see with that which is eternal, so we judge ... only those who mind the light of the spirit, discern and own our testimony, and receive our witness and his power who is true, and so become willing to follow that truth that leads to freedom.” – James Nayler, *Salutation to the Seed of God*

“... I came into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice.

“Pilate saith unto him, What is the truth.” – John 18:37-38

**L**IKE THE SEED, the early Quaker exposition of the Truth remains unfinished and open for expansion in the context of contemporary fields of intellectual inquiry. We are left with an invitation to investigate ways their thinking fits into our own cognition and measures of authenticity. I am interested, especially, in insights that advance an understanding of the Truth as a metaphor, with

overlapping layers of experience and vision. While Pilate raises the question, “What is truth,” he makes little effort to look beyond the immediate issues of maintaining public order – and his position as imperial governor. In the Matthew 27:24 telling of the story, in fact, he washes his hands in public – absolving himself, he supposes, of any moral consequences of his ruling. The events that follow, of course, prove otherwise.

Any consideration of Truth in relation to spiritual experience and thought invokes a paradox. How can anyone test and evaluate what is by definition ethereal and immeasurable? Muggletonians, the one other radical group originating in the upheavals of mid-1600s Britain that survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, accused Friends of being self-deluded, since there could be no independent

verification of our experiences of what we have claimed to be Christ and the Light. (Mugletonians also formed the one radical group that was not, to any degree, assimilated by Friends.)

Yet Truth was a central element in the early Quaker message and its practice, with dimensions that once more promise great potential of contemporary relevance, exploration, and application.

First, though, we must acknowledge some other reasons an assertion of Truth proves especially problematic to the modern mind. We live in a skeptical age, one infused by scientific method based on hypotheses and theories, on one side, and irony and posturing, on the other. We find it much easier to admit what we don't embrace than what we do. "It's all relative," we typically shrug, with a casual or

even slipshod acknowledgement of Albert Einstein, who nonetheless held to the absolute of the speed of light. We value diversity and tolerance, or at least claim to, in certain circles. It may well be that our evolved education has left us, as individuals, to harbor a deep-seated aversion to the very possibility of absolutes. We find ourselves uncomfortable – even excluded – in the presence of people voicing spiritual experiences or concepts we do not share, even when they try to welcome us by searching for a common – presumably lower – denominator. Or we are deemed infidels and ostracized by leaders and cells of followers who insist they alone possess a Truth the rest of us cannot, even when we all too often see the ravages they inflict. We could even be the ones who insist we have an exclusive hold on Truth, and be blind to any harm we

inflict. We legitimately find ourselves perplexed and revolted by fanatics and lunatics voicing religious decrees, especially those who claim “God told me to do” maim or kill or abuse the weak and vulnerable.

Without a clearly delineated presentation of what we consider to be of an authentic (or true) spiritual nature, however, we allow a vacuum to form that will be filled by something or someone. We will also have difficulty countering patent falsehood, much less fostering healthy growth in ourselves as individuals or as communities. I agree with those who argue the only way to reverse bad religion is through good religion. We can start by acknowledging that everyone has a theology – a range of assumptions about values and ethics, the ultimate meaning of life or the ultimate good, whatever we worship or praise,

no matter of whether we include a deity in our cosmos of divine truth or not; after all, even agnostics and atheists possess an impression of the god or gods in whom they do not believe. Thus, we may even perceive ways consumerism, with its pursuit of pleasure, comfort, self-identity, and social status through material purchases, becomes a theology. The awareness of the range of personal theologies also permits astute followers of Judeo-Christian disciplines to unmask idols – the false gods or lesser gods – in their own lives and social settings. In their attempts to understand spiritual truth, or “that which is eternal,” early Friends emphasized close scrutiny of their own experiences and learning, eschewing any vacuous repetition of creeds, prayer book passages, or conjecture. As Margaret Fell remembered hearing George Fox preach in 1652, “You will

say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say?" Quakers have long insisted on melding spiritual truth into all dimensions of personal daily action and awareness, with an ideal of producing lives of integrity instead of lives of expediency.

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At the outset, Truth would not appear to be an animated partner in the Light/Seed dynamic. A basic impediment to perceiving the three as an integrated system at all arises in a discontinuity within the terms themselves. While Light and Seed can both have visual parallels, allowing them to be consciously applied as metaphor, Truth brings no image immediately to mind. Thus, it is technically a concept, even though I now sense that Friends applied it as metaphor, with its host of overlapping and

compressed meanings and experiences. In addition, while Light and Seed can be discussed as complementary workings – one as energy and the other as matter, for example – Truth initially appears to be inert, sitting motionless somewhere outside of that orbit. While Light and Seed can be applied as either nouns or verbs, Truth remains a noun or, as “true” and “truly,” a modifier – but crucially, never a verb, much less taking action on its own. One can easily wonder if Truth needs to be included in the Light/Seed dynamic at all, much less why early Friends so vociferously proclaimed it.

To frame their comprehension of Truth, Friends built from and within Biblical quotations. From them, we can begin to perceive a range of meanings of Truth, as well as an evolution over the course of history within the Bible.

Here, too, Truth appears variously, as my Concordance relates, as “what is opposed to falsehood, lies, or deceit,” “fidelity, sincerity, keeping promises,” “opposed to hypocrisy, dissimulation, or formality,” and is often conjoined with *mercy* or *kindness*. We also have “in truth,” “in the truth,” “thy truth,” “word of truth,” and even “walking in truth,” which sounds very much like the Quaker insistence on “walking in the Light.” Crucially, Christians have Jesus appearing as the embodiment of Truth – “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Without being named as such, Truth works as a unifying element in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-14). At first blush, it would appear in the instruction, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor,” with all of the puzzling possibilities of intent: was this meant only

for statements of a courtroom nature or made under oath, or was it limited to interactions with people in one's own community? That interpretation, however, would allow a "dual sense of Truth," in which people be free to lie at all times except when under oath or among their own kind; Quakers instead insisted this demanded a universal witness to Truth, one applicable at all times and in all places. While this commandment is placed in the second half of the ten, the tablet relating to actions with other people, it has a parallel in the first five, the individual's relationship with the Divine: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain." Many of us, growing up, were told this prohibited the use of "Goddamn," "Damn it," "Jesus," or "Christ" as curse words – and that was it. Even to a child, though, that seemed to be a rather thin item to be placed in

the ten major orders Moses carried down from the summit; even so, it was quickly skipped over. A closer look, however, suggests something entirely different. Everett Fox, for instance, translates this as “You are not to take up the name of YHWH your God for emptiness, for YHWH will not clear him who takes up his name for emptiness,” and the New Jerusalem Bible renders it as “You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not leave unpunished anyone who misuses his name.” We should remember, too, that in biblical usage, *name* can mean *power* as well as one’s appellation; moreover, the use of YHWH/Yahweh in this verse is a reminder that this is a God whose identity is above labeling at all. Rather than being concerned with cursing, this commandment addresses our engagement with God – our words and

actions are to be based on experience, what we *know* to be true, rather than empty speculation, or worse, false claims. Critically, this commandment comes between the prohibition against worshipping idols and the admonition to keep the Sabbath – that is, actions rather than words. Taken in this light, this injunction also instills questioning, that in matters of faith, our words and actions of faith be neither empty or misused. Pointedly, these commandments are second-person *singular*: each individual’s responsibility, no matter what everyone else is doing.

Drawing on Matthew 5:34-37, where Jesus forbids his followers from swearing oaths and orders them to keep their “Yea, yea; Nay, nay,” without further elaboration or graying of black and white, Friends made scrupulous honesty a central practice of our daily faith and conduct;

emphatically, too, Friends have refused to swear oaths, even in the courtroom; “I affirm” has become the widespread alternative.

Implicit in the commandments against murder, theft, adultery, and envy or desire is an understanding that such actions and their related emotions typically require secrecy, the first cousin to falsehood. In fact, in plotting them and covering up afterward, an individual and any collaborators entwine secrecy, deception, and lies, invisibly divorcing the perpetrators from the divine and the rest of society. Even in the commandment about fathers and mothers, one can find an obligation to act *honestly* – aboveboard, openly, and respectfully.

Observing a period of Sabbath, meanwhile, requires ceasing one's daily duties and frees one for a renewed perception and appreciation of spiritual Truth.

Finally, we can see that in the first three commandments, as Moses reveals a monotheistic system, God in effect asserts there is but one universal Truth. It has led the Hebrews out of captivity and is present with them; they are to serve it – and, by extension, we as people are to live in relation to it. In his jealousy, God warns against the consequences of following or embracing lesser presentations – especially the chaotic cosmos of polytheistic rivalries. Nor is God to be cited for a false purpose: God, the Infinite, is not to be subservient to any man's pretensions, nor are those who claim to be God's followers permitted to be slothful, smug, self-serving, or

egotistical in daily practice. Warnings against lies and deceit are laced throughout the Bible.

The nature of truth and its opposite, falsehood, has also been debated by philosophers and scholars throughout history – many of them reasoning against an absolute Truth. Their struggles remind us that some essence of Truth is larger than human reason; their questions and rebuttals demonstrate the folly of anyone’s monopolizing the Truth, or of reducing it to a formula or equation. The Great Questions remain, by definition, those whose answers are always incomplete, complex, nagging, engaging.

In this case, maybe it is as simple, as Heidegger would have it, of Truth being the unconcealed, the disclosed. But how, then, is God disclosed? Or is Truth just

letting be what is, with Heidegger echoing Exodus 3:14, “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” (Some commentators have suggested a better translation would be I AM WHAT I AM BECOMING.) In the Hindu view, moreover, the material world is not simply an illusion, but also a temptation; in this tradition, Truth is to be perceived through the Third Eye of meditative practice. Likewise, Jesus speaks of a single eye: “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body will be full of light” (Matthew 6:22 and repeated with slight variation in Luke 11:34-36). Or is Truth an ocean we leap into and swim upon, or one where we sail or draw fish – something we know from limited encounters, storms and calming, and charts and

tide tables? Many scientists, meanwhile, perceive a symmetry throughout the universe, from the orbiting within an atom to the orbiting of solar systems and galaxies.

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For Friends, Truth is not a matter of idle speculation. Rather, it is a principle of daily preparation and application. At our best, Quakers find this arising not in a statute code of what is allowed or forbidden in the letter and form of Scripture, but rather in the broader relationship of what we once described as the Light and the Seed. Traditional Quaker interpretation of Scripture, in fact, would have been informed first and foremost by experiences of the Divine Presence.

While each of the three central terms shaping the early Quaker movement of “primitive Christianity restored” is complex and compounded, Truth can be seen as providing a backbone – and even practicality – to what might otherwise become the mystical and individualistic wanderings of the Light and Seed in the varied lives of believers. As we listen to early Friends invoke their concept of Truth, we often also hear them amplify on their experience of the Light and the Seed and strengthen the connection of the three. Thus, the concept becomes essential in comprehending the range of the Quaker message and potential, then and now. It also opens ways for us to answer those who ask today just what we as Friends believe. Moreover, the tenacity of early Friends in the face of intense persecution, a response that often both inspires

and perplexes us now, can be seen as an expression of their embracing and being embraced by what they knew as Truth.

Listen to George Fox, for instance, describe his early ministry: “And I was to turn them to the grace of God, and to the Truth in the heart ... to know the spirit of Truth in the inward parts”; “I spake to them what the Lord commanded me, of the Truth”; “and the Truth came over all”: “this principle of Truth”; “I was moved to go from a meeting in Nottinghamshire to a steeplehouse, and when the priest had done, I spake to him and the people; and the priest went away, but the people stayed and heard the Truth declared to them till it was within the night”; while in a separate incident, “And when priest had done I spake to him and the people of the Truth and the light and the day

of the Lord, and of God's work in them, and the Truth in them, and the Spirit and the teacher within them"; "that with the spirit of Truth they might be led into all the Truth of the prophets', Christ's and the apostles' words"; I "declared the word of life and the everlasting Truth to them"; and so on. Here the Truth is presented as something other than a set of concrete, verifiable facts: it is an experience, a principle or ideal, a means of understanding, a spirit, a teacher, an everlasting standard. It can be a refutation or critique of practices, as well as an ideal to uphold.

Sometimes it might seem to be the Light itself, as it does when Fox speaks "of the Truth and the light" or notices "the Truth came over all," as Light would. In his 1672 memorial to Elizabeth Hooton, he observes she

“received the Truth several years before we were called Quakers ... declaring the Truth ... She was a godly woman and had a great care laid upon her for people to walk in the Truth that did profess it, and from her professing the Truth she never turned her back on it, but was fervent and faithful for it till death.”

The Truth can now be seen giving the Light a dimension of permanence. As Margaret Fell explains, “The Truth is one and the same always, and though ages and generations pass away, and one generation goes and another comes, yet the word and power and spirit of the living God endures for ever, and is the same and never changes.” That linkage is underscored in the historic Quaker peace declaration to Charles II in 1661: “The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as

once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move into it; and we do certainly know, and testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.” Interestingly, recognizing the public nature of the document, Friends used the term “the spirit of Christ” rather than “the Light,” clearly steering away from any possible misinterpretation of their cause.

In other Quaker applications, the Truth seems to be more a description of the way the Light or the Seed works, “to open our hearts to one another in the Truth of God,” as London Yearly Meeting advised in 1668 or asked in 1682, “How the Truth has prospered amongst them since the last yearly meeting, and how Friends are in peace and unity.”

Sometimes the Truth is the practice itself: “Let all nations hear the word by sound or writing. Spare no place, spare not tongue nor pen, but be obedient to the Lord God and go through the world and be valiant for the Truth upon the earth; tread and trample all that is contrary under,” as George Fox wrote in 1656 in a widely quoted passage that ends, “Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.”

Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting in 1678 advised Friends “to serve the Truth and one another; having an eye single to it, ready to sacrifice every private interest to that of Truth, and the good of the whole community.”

Such service had other implications, as Elizabeth Bathurst argued in 1685: “As male and female are made one in Jesus Christ, so women receive an office in the Truth as

well as men, and they have a stewardship and must give an account of their stewardship as well as the men ... “ Or when William Dewsbury counseled meetings in 1653 to select elders, “one or two most grown in the Power and the Life, in the pure discerning of the Truth.”

Their understanding of the Truth can be seen operating in three passages from the Gospel of John: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32); “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6), where Jesus becomes the embodiment of the Truth; and “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, *that* shall he speak: and he will show you things to come” (John 16:13), where

the Truth is to be experienced in the heart as well as the mind.

The encounter was so profound and widespread that the early Quaker movement was often referred to as First Publishers of Truth, using the Biblical sense of “publish” as “to make known or announce publicly; promulgate; proclaim” rather than “to print.” For now, I’m at a loss as to their reasons for calling themselves “First,” however; perhaps it reflects their sense of reclaiming what they saw as the faith of the first followers of Jesus, even as “original” or “newborn”; or it may arise in their sense of sending forth the Valiant Sixty, their first wave of traveling ministry, with the expectation that many more would follow.

Another component shaping early Quaker understanding of the Truth can be traced to the Seekers –

circles of individuals who had withdrawn from established churches and worshipped instead by silently wait for Christ's coming and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. When the Quaker movement spread into the north of England in 1651 and 1652, many of these Seekers – especially in Westmorland – united with Friends. Or maybe, and more accurately, the small band of Friends that now included George Fox, united with *them*. From their efforts, though, we have come to value an identity of being “Seekers After Truth,” which became yet another name for early Quakers, with its suggestion that Truth is infinite and ongoing, rather than a commodity to be possessed. Repeatedly, the Truth invokes daily practice, cultivation, and apperception. Indeed, one more early name for Quakers was Friends of the Truth.

This outlook would have also instilled a sense of kinship with the New Testament Bereans, who “searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11), squaring both their lives and the Biblical texts against experience.

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No matter the intensity or momentous insights of their encounters, however, their exhortations remain second-hand impressions for us, at best – a call to each of us to similar experience.

To consider Truth as a concept raises a multitude of questions about what and how we know. We could begin with language and all of its limitations, including lies and other falsehood. A Wikipedia entry on Truth, for instance, notes “language and words are essentially ‘tools’ by which

humans convey information to one another. As such, 'truth' must have a beneficial use in order to be retained within language. Since truths are used in planning and prediction (such as scientific truths being used in engineering), the more reliable and trustworthy an idea is, the more useful and potent it becomes for planning and prediction. Those ideas that can be used anywhere and anytime with maximum reliability are generally considered the most powerful and potent truths." From a Judeo-Christian perspective, however, what is being considered here is an *understanding* of truth – "only so much as God chooses to reveal," as one Bible dictionary notes in its two-sentence definition of truth: "correspondence of the known facts of existence with the sum total of God's universe." Here an assumption of Truth also reflects a monotheistic faith: one

God and one wholeness to the universe, rather than conflicting and combative deities and their chaos. The expression, “Well, you have your truth and I have my truth,” has no place here: the difference is instead in our divergent *perceptions* of the one Truth. This, incidentally, is why Friends can sit in deliberations of meeting business and wait to find unity after initially holding conflicting positions on an agenda item: we know an acceptable answer exists and is waiting to be uncovered, one that will be stronger than any of our original choices. One, in other words, that is closer to Truth than where we began.

To acknowledge divergent perceptions points us toward the Seed, or soul, as a spiritual ground of response. Individually, as we seek to perceive a unifying Truth within us, we can discover internal conflict – reasoning versus

intuition, emotions versus motor-function “thought,” selective memory versus facts recalled by others, buried cravings and wounds versus stated ideals – and then work to bring these into oneness. In our personal religious practice, this may require the assistance of a psychotherapist, spiritual director, elder, minister, or guru who keeps returning us to the very questions or issues we subconsciously but stubbornly keep trying to deflect or deny. In our pursuit of Truth, we need to acknowledge as well the varied lenses of expectations, training, and so on that filter our interpretations – even changing our instruments, if we can, to enhance the vision. We can even apply the “judge not, lest ye be judged” commandment (Matthew 7:1 and Luke 6:37) more accurately as “pre-judge not, lest ye be prejudiced” – to be more open to letting the

facts speak for themselves. We can also acknowledge differences in the objective of the quest. Mathematical truth, for example, is a different exercise from the quest for historical truth, scientific truth, legal truth, or the realities of emotional or bodily states as well as those of the mind.

The pursuit of Truth requires humility and receptivity, the necessity of seeing and admitting, “I was wrong; we were wrong.” We can value our mercurial thoughts and feelings – the flash of blind emotion or intense dream – even when we differentiate their changeable excitement from eternal Truth. To the extent that we perceive a unifying Truth among us, we can also appreciate the richness of our individual encounters, skills, and situations. We can turn to each other to enlarge our comprehension and practice.

Imagine, for instance, going to a museum with a circle of friends that includes a weaver, a chemist, a historian or geographer, a gardener, and a nurse. Each of you will encounter the same objects differently – as you will discover in conversation – regardless of the kind of museum you choose. Each will be inspired in different ways, too. In a mundane way, this parallels our Truth/Seed dynamic, especially within a spiritual community.

Within that community, I suspect we would profit from openly discussing our individual ways of seeking after Truth – professionally, in the laboratory or courtroom, for instance; in our classrooms, offices and factories, markets, clubs; in our relationships. Are there ranges of Truth we experience in our bones as well as our minds? How do our practices strengthen us, and how do they limit us?

For many generations, for example, we Quakers “only read true things,” which meant banning fiction along with a host of related “superficial entertainments” such as theater, music, dance, and most visual arts. While this likely diverted much of Friends’ intellectual activity to mathematics, science, engineering, medicine, and industry, over time it also stifled artistic imagination and led into a tedious conformity. Learning of this part of Quaker history, by the way, comes as shock to many modern Friends – our meetings are filled with accomplished, often professional, artists of all types who pursue Truth in their individual disciplines. Here again is opportunity for discussion and mutual encouragement.

While spiritual Truth cannot be subjected to scientific method, there will arise times when it can be put

to a test. For instance, a Friend may feel a spiritual “leading” to address a specific concern. The effort may bear visible results. When it doesn’t, we may admit that the timing was off or, as critically, that the leading mistaken.

In one period of personal turmoil, I was also undergoing significant spiritual growth and awareness. One Sunday morning, on my way to worship at one Friends meeting, I felt a leading saying, “Go to Gunpowder Meeting, Charles will be there.” It seemed crazy, but I turned the car about at the next intersection, mumbled something to my girlfriend at the time, and headed a dozen miles north. If I was wrong, Charles wouldn’t be there. He was, by the way, somebody I’d met only twice before but felt deep kinship toward. As it turned out, we were the first to arrive. Charles

was the second. The meeting, by the way, is named for a nearby river.

Maybe it was intuition. But Charles, who lived an hour north of Gunpowder, said, “I can’t explain it, but I was almost at York this morning and felt something pulling me to come here.”

No, I can’t explain it either.

But there have also been enough experiences of being about to speak in worship when somebody else gets up and delivers the message I’d been feeling or using the Scriptural text I was contemplating. Once, during the silence, a Friend rose and spoke in glossolalia – the babbling often called “speaking in tongues.” As he followed with an English version, I thought, “That’s not what he was saying.” While leaving afterward, Charles, my traveling

partner, turned to me and without prompting said, “Jnana, thee knows that what he translated is not what he had been saying” – thus confirming my initial impression.

Being faithful to a leading can even appear ridiculous. Once, Kenneth Morse, an old-style Quaker who had some fluency in several dozen languages, rose in a meeting for worship and delivered his message in Polish, not knowing there was a visitor from Communist Poland in the room – someone who had never before heard the Gospel preached.

Such testing sharpens one’s perception of spiritual Truth and its working. Over time, such testing also requires others who experience it in their own lives. They not only confirm what we have felt, they can also help us guard against delusion and self-deception. In the circle of a faith

community can come the confidential discipleship that demands honesty and faithfulness. Friends have traditionally trusted other Friends to join in discerning what is true and what isn't. "And as we see with that which is eternal, so we judge," James Nayler insisted, acknowledging that "only those who mind the light of the spirit [will] discern and own our testimony, and receive our witness and his power who is true, and so become willing to follow that truth that leads to freedom."

While Truth can exist independent of people, it appears to call forth individuals and communities repeatedly over the course of human evolution. Crucially, in pushing aside "all other gods before me," the conventions of wider society, Judaism emerged as a counter-culture people – as Quakers, Mennonites, Amish,

Church of the Brethren, and many others would later.

Truth is not a matter of social agreement – as prophets throughout Judeo-Christian history demonstrate.

Group discernment of the Truth is seen not just in a traditional Quaker business meeting, waiting for unity on the action to choose. It is also seen in the circle of scientists, who don't vote on truth and declare a majority winner.

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Even so, as I reflect on the three central Quaker precepts, I keep sensing that the Truth feels more distant and abstract than either the Light or the Seed does. It lacks the sensations of touch or taste or even a visual component that delights. It also presents itself as more absolute, as black or white, even though our encounters in daily life

often come as half-truths, ambiguities, evasions, or shades of gray. It easily slips from righteousness into self-righteousness – a Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, as my younger daughter would say. I keep wondering where the emotional response is. Or the mystery. Instead, what we examine appears artificial, with nothing raw or open for exploration. On top of it all, with this Veritas – to use its Latin name – we face the impossibility of verifying what essentially cannot be proven empirically, because we are in the realm of the spiritual. In a way, in looking at Truth, we are left with nothing to cling to, nothing to *love*, which becomes a major shortcoming.

Another drawback comes in the capacity for each metaphor – Light and Seed – to be extended and deepened, encouraging spiritual growth, connections, and identities.

With the Seed, we can turn to DNA – the chromosome instructions for the replication of various species. With the Light, we have the prism and measurable frequencies. Truth, on the other hand, seems to depend upon itself.

All the same, I do sense an upwelling of authority in “speaking Truth to power,” as Friends began urging in the 1950s. From there, I leap to the opposites of Truth: lies, Satan (the “author of lies”), discord, disorder, untrustworthiness, chaos – and unexpectedly embrace so much I hold dear, in harmony, structure, reliability, and order. How often, too, do Truth and worldly power appear to be in an inverted relationship! I cheer for the underdog to bring political or economic injustice to bay. In short, I uncover a buried passion for Truth.

The permanence of the Truth contrasts sharply with our increasingly tentative existence: marriages, jobs and careers, neighborhoods and communities are all in flux. What can we rely on? What can we trust? What can we do to restore continuity?

We can turn to those who have recovered from what might have been terminal illnesses, to see what is truly important in their lives. In that perspective, we can pursue ways to make this universal Truth *personal*. Just what are our deepest priorities? Or most heartfelt desires?

My quest for an image for truth leads me to a clear-cut diamond – the hardest of rocks, yet clear enough to transmit light and consisting of highly compressed carbon, which in turn was once seed. Then I remember that diamond is also used as a metaphor in Buddhism. This is

not, however, a substance of everyday encounter, unlike seed (as food, especially) or light. In my quest for an appropriate image, I can also turn to a Friend who is a carpenter and see his continual reliance on his metal squares, his tape measure, and the bubbles in his level, and the connections soon follow. Or look to a musician, with a tuning fork, as well. Or a knitter or weaver, counting the strands. There are many other possibilities for images of Truth.

The closest I then came to an appropriate image appears to me as a verse:

*a set of canning jars*

*sparkling in sunlight*

*waiting to be filled*

*from the harvest.*

It is not an ancient, timeless image along the lines of what I would prefer, but it is personal. The canning process demands purity; any contamination will multiply, either spoiling the contents or poisoning the end users. Likewise, the jars, lids, and sealing must not be cracked or uneven. Canning reflects work, too – possibly from the time of ordering seeds and then planting all the way through to the gathering of mature fruit and vegetables. The jars often are embossed with measurements, one more means of assuring accuracy or fidelity to the directions. The image also stirs thoughts of domesticity and feminine skills and wisdom – not just a garden and kitchen with its pantry, but a home, filled with cooking aromas, at that.

Taking this one step further, I look at a Pyrex measuring cup. Are we getting closer?

By itself, Truth may be seem inert. Or is it more of a storehouse of energy, a powder keg awaiting a spark – a sturdy glass jar ready to open and eat? I see Truth as potency, set to spring into action within relationship, through deeds and words. To consider the True Light or True Seed, for instance, establishes a standard for each. To acknowledge that one thing can be truer than another or the truest of a lot addresses quality, degrees of perfection, and opportunities for improvement – as well as humanity and growth. Thus, we can appreciate the reasons Friends have not proclaimed themselves to be “seekers *of* Truth,” as if it were some hermetically sealed object, but instead insist on being “seekers *after* Truth,” where integrity is revealed in the ongoing motion of people and events at hand. Here Truth becomes mysterious, miraculous, universal, even

flowing and advancing. And, along with the Light, leading, as a guide.

As I consider these matters in relation to contemporary society, I want to argue that religion is important, rather than peripheral, to individual and societal advancement. In framing the argument, however, I realize there is a huge difference in saying “religion is important” versus “true religion is important”: the former embraces many teachings and practices I find dangerous, misleading, or downright false; the latter invites and even demands inquiry and discernment.

In this regard, let me suggest considering the Truth as faithful religious practice itself – what we do, and are doing, spiritually in our daily lives. Not any religious practice, but one stripped of superstition, rote ceremony,

and vacuous custom – the targets of the prophetic stream in the Judeo-Christian heritage – and thus engaging the deeper Source. A Quaker perspective would hold this in relation to Light/Seed and find ways the Truth unites them. (I am reminded here that a similar “union” is the underlying definition of “yoga,” again returning the image to practice itself.) This sense of Truth as daily conduct is demonstrated in the life of Jesus, when he declares, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), or in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter when he discusses “the Spirit of truth” which “will guide you into all truth,” or the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, where he proclaims to his followers, “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,” countering the bookish claims of his argumentative opponents with his broader authority based on relationship, “And because I tell you the

truth, ye believe me not.” As he stands before Pilate, he boldly declares, “I came into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice.” Again, the Truth is embodied in action (witness) and practice. It communicates or finds communion with others who have also submitted to the discipline of putting it into practice.

The early Quaker understanding of the Truth within a religious spectrum also frees faith from a conundrum facing Christians and Jews who base their faith largely on perceived events in history: an *experience* of Truth will not be undermined if the dates and places of antiquity are found to be in error. That is, spiritual Truth might not necessarily be factual but based in some other coherence.

One of my favorite ways of engaging pre-teens and teenagers in Bible stories is by taking a text and asking them, “How would this work as a movie?” What could have been a lecture suddenly takes off along many lines of thought and experience that are familiar to them, now resurrected in a timeless context. There is an actor’s truth, after all, in creating a role and moving across a stage or in front of a camera.

In invoking Truth, I also hear the echo of betrayal, “Why can’t you be true?” Its many implications of infidelity and unfaithfulness, of withering and darkness, or torment and loneliness all draw a line in the sand. At its most personal level, then, the Truth is a choice – and continuing set of choices – each of us makes. It asks us what and who we love most. Again, it is revealed in active practice.

From this, let me also suggest viewing Truth as an ideal or a goal, an acknowledgement that there is always more we, as humans, can strive toward in our relationship with God and then, in consequence, with our fellow beings. (Seeking after Truth, where we face it.) It demands we come to see ourselves clearly as we are, candidly admitting our failings and defects, as well as the opportunities before us. It also invites us to a state of grace, maturity, and fellowship. Rather than being a static entity, this Truth compels a dynamic series of encounters on our way in the New Adam and the New Eve in the New Eden and New Jerusalem – the perfection or maturity that early Quakers insisted are within our reach.

Endeavoring toward the ideal, we will often feel embattled, dashed or wounded, even defeated. There is

much we do not understand, from physical illness to meteorological catastrophe to economic inequalities and injustice to oppression and cruelty to petty crime and deceit. Evil exists when individuals attempt to be something other than they were intended to be, in God's image – that is, when they move out of the Light, when they attempt to hide from God, to evade the Truth. I cannot say *why* these things happen or exist.

But as Friends have repeated, "Truth will out."

## *Sowing Light, a Confession*

“The Light of Christ within, who is the Light of the world, and so a light to you that tells you the truth of your condition, leads all that take heed unto it out of darkness into God’s marvelous light; for light grows upon the obedient. It is sown for the righteous and their way is a shining light that shines forth more and more to the perfect day.” – William Penn, *A Brief Account of the Rise and Progress ... of the Quakers*, 1694

“Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart.” – Psalm 97:11.

**T**HE EVIDENCE SAT IN FRONT of me for years – much of it drawn from others who had crucial insights but hesitated to proclaim what now appears obvious. Still, the conclusion comes as a shock: Christ and Christianity can be defined and experienced independently of Jesus as the Incarnation or the events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

I could point to opening verses from the Gospel of John, to passages in the epistles of Paul, or to writings by early Quakers, or to historians who openly remark that these Quakers never adequately resolved the differences between their experience of the Inward Christ against conventional theology based on the manger in Bethlehem or the Cross on Calvary. My booklet, *Revolutionary Light*, delves into the details of their understanding of Christ as the Light, as well as its dimension as *Logos*, usually translated as “the Word.” Since its publication, I have also seen similar lines of argument based on the so-called Gnostic scriptures discovered after World War II.

The historic Quaker understanding of Light expressed an external energy pouring into the human heart – an *Inward Light*, in stark contrast to the modern Quaker

expression of Inner Light. Crucially, this Light was counterpoised by a concept they called the Seed, which has since fallen from Friends discourse altogether.

For me, the biggest challenge comes in trying to understand what this vibrant lore means for individual faith in action. While I approach this as a practicing Quaker of four decades now, the implications reach across many religions and spiritual practices; after all, a crucial turning point in my spiritual path came while dwelling in a yoga ashram in Pennsylvania, where I first experienced divine Light arising within our daily communal meditation. To perceive this metamorphosed and amplified in what I now know as the religion of my ancestors was totally unanticipated. Indeed, one of the things I've come to appreciate about the Judeo-Christian stream is how much it

reflects common people and their all-too-human struggles. Bible characters are not people who wind up with elephant heads, for instance, or are playful monkey deities; instead, they are presented as individuals and families who too frequently fail to live up to their spiritual potential. Maybe we Christians could use some of the playful fantasy or exalted bliss found in Hinduism, but the fact remains, as early Friends insisted in their practice, “We only read true things” – and fiction and theater were summarily banned. While modern Quakers read and even write fiction, cherish movies and theater, or even perform in front of a camera or live audience, our embrace of mysticism comes with a strong practical streak. Still, to visit early Friends is to be reminded of how passionately they experienced this Light, how deeply it transformed them, and how much they

encountered it in the characters and events of Scripture. I, too, like my saints with flesh attached. I prefer the Light to become earthy and good, as in good to eat and nourishing, rather than hypothetical or vaporous.

When the Quaker movement, or Society of Friends, first burst forth in the British Isles in the mid-1600s, its followers initially called themselves Children of the Light, adapting a term found in four places in the New Testament. Like children, they were at liberty to question and to explore their world with new eyes and ears. For them, this was no abstract physical light but rather Christ itself; unlike the modern teaching of Inner Light, this was a universal manifestation they could either welcome or turn their backs on, yet if they submitted, it would come pouring into their innermost existence to reveal their sins and transform

their lives. Often this experience was accompanied by weeping, fainting, and trembling.

In using the pronoun *itself* to refer to Christ, I repeat a slip William Penn made in a 1673 publication. Indeed, let me urge you to notice that many of the early Friends generally use *Christ* rather than *Jesus* in their writings, or, when the two words occur together, we typically find *Christ Jesus* rather than the more familiar *Jesus Christ*. This is more than a quaint usage. Only by asking whether the context refers specifically to the historic person of Jesus or to something else instead does the distinction become clear. Because the public would assume *Jesus* is synonymous with *Christ*, most people would likely interpret Quakers as saying one thing even as Friends could find that passage conveying another meaning altogether.

This ambiguity could be a necessary precaution, considering the blasphemy laws of the era and the penalties it carried. Indeed, historian Rosemary Moore observes that by 1654, many Quaker writers were no longer referring to Christ at all but instead using Light as their central expression of faith.

This is not to say that these Friends systematically rejected conventional Christian premises. They frequently drew upon its images and language, so infusing their arguments with Scriptural quotations that it helps to have a Concordance of the Bible at our side when we revisit their writings today. They could speak of the Garden of Eden or Calvary, often with a sense of its being present in their own time and lives. No matter that as they applied their understanding of Light, a new form of worship and a

unique organization of church emerged, something that may also be seen as an alternative Christianity; even so, much of their thinking still moved through and against traditional Christian arguments, complicating our attempts at understanding them today. In addition, the turbulence, violence, and fast-moving societal changes afflicting the first decades of the Quaker movement left no room for refining the implications of their message. Even without the cloud of blasphemy convictions or the later self-restraint of respectability, they would have found any clear articulation of their underlying theology a controversial matter.

The heart of the conflict can be seen in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John, where the Greek term *Logos* is often translated as *Word*. The use of *Word* suggests applied language, commandments, stories, and text. *Logos*,

however, refers to a philosophical stream that predates Jesus by at least five centuries; here it becomes not just knowledge or wisdom, but also the activity of knowing or relationship; it becomes the reconciling principle of the universe, the union between opposites, reason, the plan of creation, and so on. The first seventeen verses of John emphasize this *Logos* as Light, before applying it to the person of Jesus.

Historically, Friends have always insisted that the Word is not the Bible, as many Christians assume, but something that has lived among us. In terms of practice, *Word* leads to books, definitions, dogma and creed, vocal prayer, and preaching. Light, in contrast, embodies experience, service, discovery, reflection, observation, and revelation. One is public, hierarchic, and doctrinaire; the

other, mystical, communal, and experimental. *Logos* is both the activity of knowing as well as knowledge itself; it is reconciliation and the relationship of opposites; it is the principle of the universe; and so on. Crucially, Light connects what is revealed to a source of illumination, and draws the perceived environment into a whole and fuller perception.

To have Christ be the Light and the embodiment of *Logos* is a much different from Christ being Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. Light, I contend, leads to a much more direct faith and experience than does the speculation about a heavenly throne. Early Quakers never quite stated that understanding so openly or clearly, but instead left that part of their message veiled.

Modern Friends look to the first Quakers for many reasons. One is an attempt to find a root identity that might explain our wide and diverse spectrum today. Another is an admiration of their intense commitment, the willingness to preach boldly or to lose everything or even be imprisoned for years in consequence. Many look to their radical impact on general society, the legacy of sexual and racial equality, right to an independent jury, two-party politics, one price for all, and so on. For me, there is also a sense of something left incomplete and not fully voiced in the underlying teaching, despite of their immense output in print.

Since the divisions of the 1800s, especially, many Friends have avoided systematic theology. Others have insisted Robert Barclay in 1674 effectively wrapped it up for

Quakers. Both arguments are wrong. Barclay, especially, left much unsaid. Besides, to paraphrase a Buddhist precept, right teaching points to right practice, which in turn points to right results or wisdom. Let me emphasize my belief that early Friends are important not just for what they did back then, but also for what they have left us to further develop and advance. Far from being finished, Quaker theological insights and practices stand on the threshold of exciting opportunities and new challenges. In other words, theology provides a common map for our spiritual exercises, exploration, interpretation, and dialogue.

In their passionate and often seemingly chaotic outbursts, early Quakers relied on metaphor, piling images and concepts atop each other to convey a sense of the

quality of the Light. Admittedly, their prose can be dense and strenuous for modern readers. For that matter, Christian language itself can be difficult today, as Kathleen Norris details in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. Still, an awareness of early Friends' use of Light metaphor in its many variations can lead to revolutionary conclusions. Even when they use the Cross, the Lamb, the Blood, Truth, or other images and concepts, their meaning usually fits within an awareness of the inward and experiential work of faith, rather than the more conventional interpretations. Light is the unifying key and a means of decoding the early Quaker writings.

While their exploration of divine Light originates in many Biblical references, and its identification as Christ and *Logos* can be reconstructed from a variety of sources,

they also suggested a complementary innovation that warrants further development. Early Friends often countered their Light metaphors with something they called the Seed, a metaphor where modern Friends may fuse many insights from our own times. Seed, after all, allows for darkness as roots and stems take shape in soil. Seed responds to Light and gives it substance. It allows for our periods of depression and struggle, while welcoming hope and nurture. While the opening chapter of Genesis is infused with Light (“Let there be Light” and a voiced plan, along the lines of *Logos*), the parallel creation story in the second chapter of Genesis is its complementary opposite. Where the first is infused with liquid, the second is dust-filled; where the first places people toward the end of the narrative, the second begins with the creation of a single

human, from the dust, and later a female companion to fulfill the passionate yearning: here, the humans and their struggles are front and center in the story. Moreover, in terms of metaphor, the Garden of Eden would have been a place of Seed, including the seed in the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Consider, too, the overlap and compression of metaphors I quote at the opening of this chapter: the concept of *sowing* Light found in Psalm 97 and then amplified by William Penn. In a flash, Light takes root! Or, from another perspective, the growth happens over time, patiently, as the Light continues to grow, and not simply shine, on the righteous. Again, the idea that Light can germinate mirrors a plant flowering from Seed. A wholeness underlies and is implicit in the message.

We come to worship as an occasion for being renewed in that universal Light, together – with its hints of a new garden.

I love, too, Alexander Parker's 1660 instruction for Quaker meeting for worship: "The first that enters into the place of your meeting ... turn thy mind to the Light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord; and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn to the same Light, and wait in the Spirit; and so all the rest coming in ... sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the Light ..."

Again, it's one Light, rather than personal lights arising from each individual and multiplying within the room. Pointedly, the metaphors turn, Light is also God is

also the Lord is also the Spirit. The gathered Friends sit like plants in a garden, with a spiritual photosynthesis making each one strong. Parker continues, “It is good to be here; and this is the end of all words and writings – to bring people to the eternal living Word.” That is, the *Logos*, the principle or plan of the universe, the essence of reconciliation of opposites, or, in mystical religious language, the Way itself.

I find the concept of *Logos* especially helpful when sitting down to a Quaker meeting for the conduct of business. In our tradition, we never take a vote but search for a sense of unity on the agenda item. When the process works, it’s heavenly, and I find myself wishing business meetings in non-Quaker circles could function this way. But when we have sharply drawn divisions and cannot

come to unity, the process can be excruciating. Then I sometimes wish we'd just put it up to a vote, knowing full well that would create a minority among us. The problems usually arise when we put too much emphasis on our own individual agendas or desires. We know, from our past, that sometimes the one person who is quietest may be the one listening most carefully to what we should, as a group, be considering. To enter the room with an awareness of *Logos* is to have an appreciation that everything we need to decide already has an appropriate answer; we simply have to open ourselves to it. In other words, all of our business has already been decided. This is a much different sense from trying to solve a problem on our own.

Metaphor and silence are ways of confounding or shushing the normal activity of thinking or the bondage of

moods and emotional turmoil. When we experience a sense of refreshment or fruitfulness, to borrow two favored terms of early Friends, we span far across the two spheres Otto Rank presents.

Thinking in metaphor also encourages synthesis and interrelatedness, rather than hair-splitting and separation. As early Friends speak of Light, they pile similarities on top of each other, expanding the awareness of its appearance. They encourage individual experience, rather than repetition of second-hand accounts or rigid observance of commandments. As metaphor reflects relationship, flexibility and response are acknowledged within those principles that are eternal.

While I've focused on Quaker practice, other traditions enter this state of awe and silence through

chanting, repeating a mantra or a set prayer or rosary, supplicating and petitioning from the heart, either in one's vernacular or in the glossolalia of Pentecostals, singing in four-part harmony or in the circling praise songs, dancing as Sufis, Native Americans, or some Jews do, or even drumming. Each of these applies an overlap between Light and Seed; each is filled with vibration (energy) and perhaps directing us to the depths within our hearts more than our rational thoughts.

Moreover, an understanding that links Christ more to what we know as the Holy Spirit than to the man we know as Jesus has run at whatever risk within mystical Christian history. How else can we interpret these lines from Symeon the New Theogian (949-1022):

We awaken in Christ's body  
as Christ awakens in our bodies  
and my poor hand is Christ. He enters my  
foot, and is infinitely me.  
I move my hand, and wonderfully  
my hand becomes Christ ...  
Do my words seem blasphemous? – Then  
open your hearts to Him ...  
we wake up inside Christ's body ...  
... radiant in His light  
we awaken as the Beloved  
in every last part of our body.

(translated by Stephen Mitchell)

In a powerful insight, Rhode Island Quaker Job Scott  
(1751-93) takes this another step, calling Christ the door.  
“Christ is the *door*. Is there a door of entrance into the  
kingdom in our hearts? If so, it is *Christ in us*; there is no  
other door,” he writes. It’s a multidimensional image. In a  
typical Colonial house, as in many dwellings around the  
world, the doorway would have been the principal aperture

for light. So Christ here brings light into the otherwise dim room. But the door also connects the interior with the universe without, and with a light source off in the sky. Yet Scott also turns this, so that the Light coming into our hearts brings Christ as well, perhaps echoing Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” In the compressed metaphor, Christ not only comes through the door, but simultaneously brings Light and communion into the room. Or, to extend the metaphor, the room is also our Seed, our innermost thoughts and feelings.

Again, a faith based on personal experience of a universal Light invokes relationship. If Christ comes into

our hearts to dine with us, the open doorway also invites us outside, to others who are revealed and illuminated.

The sense of relationship is also enhanced when we consider the nature of Seed. There are certain qualities all plants arising from seeds possess in common: the ability of photosynthesis, responding to sunlight, for one, and some form of rooting. Yet each seed is also true to its own nature, whether it be a sequoia or a strawberry vine. As our own lives unfold in response to the divine Light, our own unique qualities enhancing the *Logos* also come into play and are to be encouraged. This stands in stark contrast to a more conventional teaching that would have each of us becoming a miniature Jesus as we take up a cross in imitation of his suffering. Instead, we are drawn toward the Light – both

Christ and *Logos* – and have life in consequence. Perhaps in this relationship, we are created in the image of God.

Acknowledging the Light as universal and eternal, rather than arising within ourselves, also diminishes the Ranter impulse – the danger of seeing ourselves as the center of existence and free to do whatever we wish. In the Quaker understanding, as William Penn wrote, “light grows upon the obedient” rather than the unruly. Early Friends repeatedly denounced the Ranters, a rival movement that also claimed personal experience of the Light. Friends, however, insisted the Light was unchanging, so as not to lead us to do one thing at one time and the opposite at another. Quakers have admitted that our perceptions of the Light are limited and changing, but the Light itself is not. Knowing our own limitations, Friends have turned to both

Scripture and communal discipleship to test the leadings or insights we sense arising in response to our experience of the Light.

When early Friends claimed that their movement was “primitive Christianity revived” from “before the dark night of apostasy,” little did they know how accurate their description was. When Irenaeus, Augustine, and Constantine codified Christianity, culminating in the council of bishops in Nicaea in June 325, most of the expressions of Light and *Logos* experience were purged. Only their rediscovery in Nag Hammadi in December of 1945 suggests that what Friends perceived in and gleaned from the surviving New Testament texts was the ancient alternative Christianity itself. Significantly, a faith dependent on individual experience of the Light cannot be

dictated; it cannot be directed by priests or other officers, since “the wind blows where it will,” as do Spirit and Light. Light dawns upon those who will receive it, regardless of their status. And this poses a threat to emperor, cardinal, and general alike.

In considering the combined Light/Seed metaphors as an alternative definition of Christ and Christianity, we must also ponder their relationship to conventional theology. Historically, there have been attempts to fit the Light/Seed model into so-called orthodox teaching, but I think this has it backward – the classic case of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. The fact remains that much in conventional Christian theology requires intellectual contortion and leaves many followers baffled: virgin birth, trinity, salvation, justification, sanctification, the blood, and

so on. The convoluted arguments are often difficult to embrace or understand; perhaps they would be better viewed through the Light/Seed dynamic, than the other way around.

The Light/Seed model is, to my mind, simpler and more direct. Isaac Penington (1617-1679) turned the argument boldly and clearly: “He that knoweth the light of God’s Spirit knoweth Christ ... and he that knoweth it not, nor believeth therein, neither knoweth nor believeth in Christ.” (This, after Friends were vetting their publications to avoid scandal!) Here, to be Christian is not a matter of accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, but rather of embracing the Light of Christ.

To say Christ is the Light, rather than Jesus, is revolutionary. As Elaine Pagels asks pointedly, “What is

*wrong* with seeing Jesus as if he were simply ‘one of us?’” (147). Or, for that matter, as the most perfect embodiment of the Light? Either way, I find my appreciation and wonderment of Jesus deepened and brought nearer. (And yes, given the opportunity to give an altar call, it will be as a “come to Jesus” moment rather than a more diffuse “welcome the Light” – I still find comfort, as the hymn says, resting safe on his gentle breast; some mornings I sink into worship silently praying, “Come, Lord Jesus, come,” and am comforted.)

Rather than being out on a limb, as an extension of radical Protestantism, as it’s often perceived, Quakerism can now be seen as actually standing at the heart of Christianity, as early Friends believed – that is, before the constraints imposed during Constantine’s reign. No other

faith is so well positioned to re-embrace the dimensions of *Logos* or the wildly differing Gnostic scriptures, and to reach out to other mystical streams or other Judeo-Christian traditions. Rather than being a faith living in its own shadow, contemporary Friends can be challenged to embrace the opportunities before us, to more fully explore the holistic dimensions of the Light and the Seed as they work together in personal and communal faith and practice, bringing us “more and more to the perfect day.”

The metaphor of the Light, as an expression of the *Logos*, also carries us to the very beginnings of the universe. In *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*, Lewis Thomas observes, “The world began with what it is now in fashion to call the ‘Big Bang.’ ... It could not, of course, been a bang of any sort, with no atmosphere

to conduct the waves of sound, and no ears. It was something else, occurring in the most absolute silence we can imagine. It was the Great Light.” With parallels to the first chapter of Genesis, he continues, “We say it had been chaos before, but it was not the kind of place we use the word ‘chaos’ for today, things tumbling over each other and bumping around. Chaos did not have that meaning in Greek; it simply meant empty.” And cosmos, it notes, is “a word that simply meant order.”

In a flash, we are presented with suggestions for linking an underlying principle of the universe (“turning everything into one thing”) with scientific and moral order – to bring all of our knowledge from emotions and aesthetics to economics and ecology to theology, or more broadly, all knowledge and discovery into the mix. It’s more

than any one person can comprehend, of course: it's a task to be shared.

Here, then, seeing that Christ, as the Light, the Seed, and the Truth, has come to teach its people itself, we are invited to join together as that people.

## *Thinking in Metaphor in Quaker*

### *Experience*

**I**N EARLY QUAKER USAGE, metaphor performs far more extensively than its definition as a figure of speech would suggest. Their central overlapping images – especially Light, accompanied by Seed, which are then linked to an active Truth – advance a complex logic grounded in the experiences of many individuals. Given the limitations imposed by the blasphemy laws of their time and the subsequent self-censorship that followed, as well as the turbulent conditions in which these expressions were first presented, when we examine their tracts and letters we should not be surprised to find wide variation, irregularities, and possibly even public equivocation when we try to form clear definitions of their intent.

Nevertheless, their use of metaphors at the least suggests the dimensions of their growing awareness as it was presented in ways that skirt violating the political and social taboos of their era. Today, of course, freed of those constraints, we may more openly consider the implications embedded in their logic of metaphor, and in the process come to both a clearer understanding of the ways it differs from ways of reasoning employed by others and an admission of why their teachings were so baffling and threatening to non-Friends.

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines metaphor as a “condensed verbal relation in which an idea, image, or symbol may, by the presence of one or more other ideas, images, or symbols, be enhanced in

vividness, complexity, or breadth of implication.” The entry then continues for more than five pages of amplification.

The definition introduces other concepts. Image, for one, which is typically but not exclusively visual (sound, such as the ringing of church bells, or taste, such as a ripe fig, might be used as images) and symbol, for another, where one thing can stand in for something else (Jacob’s ladder, for instance, goes from being a simple ladder to a pathway to the Divine). While simile compares two things side-by-side, metaphor overlaps and compresses them. Love is no longer like a rose but rather becomes a rose, fragrant and blooming.

These elements are all essential to my work as a poet and novelist; their application is so deeply ingrained I’m seldom conscious of their presence as such. Over time, I’ve

also become aware of how central they are to Judeo-Christian prophecy in its fullness. This becomes surprising, considering how many times we hear references to the “poetic language” of a passage, as if praising only its beauty, or of attempts to define a sequence of symbols as a kind of equation that adds up to a simple commandment for living, while simultaneously disdaining symbolism itself as a somehow more feeble form of communication than exposition, exhortation, or a quasi-mathematical equation. Moreover, this points to a crucial division between those who read Scripture as a set of regulations and guidelines, that is, in a legalistic approach delimiting what the follower may and may not do, and those who read Scripture as attempts to record and convey more profound human encounters and insights within an emerging stream of

prophetic history. Examining Scripture through the eyes of modern science, history, mathematics, legal systems, or strict logic can enrich or clarify our understanding of the text, but each of these disciplines carries its own limitations in addressing personal experience. Without an awareness of metaphor, however, we are likely to miss entirely the emotional depths of a passage. Consider, for instance, Isaiah 55:12, “and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands”; anyone who has been astonished by the sound of wind passing through leaves immediately recognizes the message, while those who want to insist the trees have suddenly sprouted fingers and hands (which, after all, God *could* do) cannot relate the image to their own living experience.

Full comprehension of this order requires recognizing when metaphor is being applied as a system of thought on its own and not just as a rhetorical device within another logic. Scientific method, by way of contrast, relies on measurable observations and actions that can be predictably repeated; history turns to individuals, places, and events that can be independently verified; legal systems invoke contracts, rights, obligations, and prohibitions; or mathematics, the arts, athletics, and Aristotelian logic operate according to their own strict decrees and procedures. Metaphor, on the other hand, attempts to make sense of what is essentially ungraspable. It begins with personal experience – mental thoughts, emotions, sensations revealed as taste, sound, smell, touch, even autonomous muscular movement – and brings them

into awareness in some way that might be recognized by other people. At its most basic level, metaphor gives voice and validation to an otherwise incoherent episode. In its broadest application, metaphor may encourage and direct others to seek a similar experience and grow in it; here, metaphor may even lead to mutual action, societal change, and group identification.

Observe, for instance, as writers attempt to review a meal, a bottle of wine, a musical performance, a work of art, or an athletic event, and notice what happens as they edge beyond the verifiable facts and into the experience itself; to be convincing, they cannot rely simply on declarations of “exciting” or “disappointing,” but must instead relate their feelings to something else – preferably something that brings a clear impression to mind: “smoky,” “stony,”

“starry,” “snowy,” or “Olympic,” for instance. This is the enterprise of metaphor.

As such, metaphor is especially well suited as a form of thinking for advancing both poetry and religion. To the point, let me suggest that poetry and religion spring from the same source, the unending mysteries of creation and origins, life and death, birth and sexuality, family, disasters and abundance, and so on – the great questions that are so central to the human condition – as well as the realization that the experience they engender cannot be related, except through comparison. Any attempt to explain a mystical encounter already reduces it, from an overwhelming, multi-dimensional mind-spirit-emotions-body engagement, casting it instead as a flat representation that can be related in words. Words, of course, will prove inadequate to the

experience of such heightened awareness, even when offered by a great storyteller. Relating even simple experiences, such as eating a meal or traveling through a landscape, prove elusive: a menu or a recipe cannot convey the taste and satisfaction of the food itself, and even the best maps have errors and fail to convey what will actually be seen and traversed; and while maps are essentially drawings, they are also meaningless without words and some element of measure. Food and a landscape, moreover, are observable and material, and can be readily shared with others. The very subject of religion, on the other hand, is invisible and intangible, beyond comprehension, inexhaustible – the descriptions continue, seemingly without end, which is the reason for returning to metaphor.

This conflict is ancient and longstanding. Today we see it embodied by fundamentalists, on one side, and mystics, on the other – two descriptions that can fit scientists, historians, mathematicians, lawyers, or logicians as much as literary writers or religious practitioners, all depending on their personal perceptual framework. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Calvinists and their rival Jesuits, especially, contested each other within one half of this dynamic, where the Inquisition had marched earlier; in the other half, we might place religious mystics, Anabaptists, Renaissance humanists, and scientists breaking free of the conventional tenets of their fields as they insisted on direct knowledge, rather than rote repetition.

This conflict is reflected in the emergence of Quakers in England in the mid-1600s. More formally known as the Society of Friends or simply Friends, this was a radical Christian movement that emphasized direct spiritual experience, on one hand, while rejecting dogma and creed, on the other. Central to its teaching were two related, extended metaphors – *Light*, especially as the *Inward Light*, and the *Seed*, often as variants of the *Seed of Christ Within*. More than simple images, these two expressions and their many varied appearances point toward an alternative understanding of both Christ and Christianity, a theology early Friends never articulated fully in the face of extended persecution.

Crucial to the Quaker metaphor of Light is its bearing in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. There, the

Light is presented as an aspect of Christ and of *Logos*, which is commonly translated as the Word, losing its reference to a system of Greek philosophy predating Jesus by at least five centuries. By definition, *Logos* variously appears as the underlying connection between opposites; the soul of the universe; the divine plan; an active rational and spiritual principle that permeates all reality; the intermediary between God and the cosmos; both the agent of creation and the agent through which the human mind can apprehend and comprehend God; and, in some early Christian applications, Christ.

Regardless of whether early Friends were fully aware of this philosophy (it's possible some had encountered it through neo-Platonists or alchemy), they nonetheless sensed its working in what they voiced as Christ and the

Light. As Rosemary Moore observes, “In the first years of the Quaker movement, ... [George] Fox was mainly concerned with the unity between Christ and the believer, for which he was several times charged with blasphemy. When he spoke of ‘the light,’ sometimes he used the phrase as an equivalent to Christ and sometimes he meant the way Christ made himself known. It may be that ‘the light’ developed into the characteristic Quaker phrase because it was a safe alternative to ‘Christ,’ to be used with less risk of blasphemy charges” (81).

One quality of metaphor is its ability to convey multiple meanings, with the reader or listener responding from individual experience. It may simultaneously embrace a number of images and corresponding ideas, to be applied at will; light, for instance, may be seen as the sun, a

rainbow, a ray or beam, a flame, a wood fire, a forest fire, a neon bulb, a house ablaze, or even a specific frequency somewhere between infrared and ultraviolet, each with its own set of personal associations. Light, alone, remains abstract and flexible, as does Seed. In addition, the metaphors Friends used were drawn from and built upon Biblical passages that would have been widely recognized at the time. Their metaphors also directed action and shaped identity. This is not to say that Quakers wouldn't have their legalistic dimensions – they would, living under church discipline – but these would arise as a consequence of these metaphors, rather than in their place.

Still, the very imprecision of metaphor allowed Friends some wiggle room. As Moore explains, “It was perhaps the experience of several trials for blasphemy, and

possibly the advice of such people as Judge Fell, that persuaded Quakers to adapt their language. The more extreme language describing union with God or with Christ is confined to letters, while material for publication was more cautiously expressed. Apart from inviting prosecution under the Blasphemy Act, such language risked encouraging Ranterish behavior, and the many exhortations to Friends not to go beyond their measure, and to pay attention to the light in their consciences, indicate that the leaders of the movement were well aware of the risk.” (78-79).

Where Moore finds “that Quaker teaching about ‘the light’ was very confused” (102) and “Quakers were not consistent in the ways they used the word ‘light,’” I instead see individuals experimenting with various formulations

within the metaphor to best express their intense experience, as the metaphor moves from one manifestation to another. Rather than bringing clarity and unity to their array of expressions, however, the Society of Friends instead veiled it under the gray garb of later respectability.

But the situation lingered, as Arthur J. Worrall suggests while discussing Job Scott (1751-93) in *Quakers in the Colonial Northeast*: “He carried to extremes the beliefs which critics had always maintained were basic to Quakers and which Friends had in some fashion or other denied publicly for a century.” I suspect that Scott was on the verge of presenting some of the implicit logical deductions clearly and attempting to advance them just when his life was cut short by smallpox.

For whatever reasons, in the second half of Quaker history, which erupted shortly after Scott's death, the two central metaphors fell from understanding and use. In their place we have in some branches, but not all, a concept called *Inner Light*, carrying a much different set of characteristics, along with an emphasis on "that of God in all people." In effect, they dropped the metaphor of Seed altogether and imposed many of its potential meanings onto Light, which then lost its connection to Christ and *Logos*. Other Friends turned increasingly toward accepted Protestant theology and worship.

Early Quakers were not alone in using extended metaphor in religious thought. In Judeo-Christian circles, the "Word of God" has been much more widely applied, initially as a substitution for YHWH or the unspeakable

name of the Divine in the Hebrew Bible, or in the New Testament for “Christ”; later users have then reduced it to be a synonym for the Bible and its teachings. Blood is another metaphor, gaining widespread American usage after the Civil War. I would argue that concepts derived from Scriptural texts but not directly found in them can also be viewed this way – Trinity, for example, or the Roman Catholic teaching of Immaculate Conception. Others, like the Mennonite vision of *gelassenheit* or yieldedness, may also fit as both metaphor and a guideline to practice.

Admittedly, metaphor can be slippery in its application and have limitations. Too much light, for example, would blind or kill. On the other hand, any light in darkness can be helpful. At some problematic points,

shifting to one of the metaphor's overlapping concepts can be helpful: moving "too much light" to "too much life," for instance, animates the underlying thought again. Metaphor can also be misunderstood. The Light is not the same as a measurable range of energy to be studied in physics. The Blood of the Lamb is not the same as lambs' blood. Silence is never empty. Even so, adeptly applied, an extended metaphor may lead its faithful followers, as Zen Buddhists observe, from right thought to right action to right wisdom.

*In Leaping Poetry: An Idea With Poems and Translations*, Robert Bly also sees a connection between poetry and religion. "In ancient times, in the 'time of inspiration,' the poet flew from one world to another, 'riding on dragons,' as the Chinese said. Isaiah rode on those dragons, so did Li Po and Pindar. They dragged

behind them long tails of dragon smoke,” Bly contends. “In many ancient works of art we notice a long floating leap at the center of the work ... from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown and back to the known.” He sees, too, the authors “make the leap in an instant” and “the unknown part of the mind lies at the very center of the work.”

This sounds, too, like the intense religious experiences reported by early Friends, except that I would argue their encounters plunged not only into the unknown parts of the mind (or, as Bly explains later in the volume, the three different regions of the brain) but also into intuitive, emotional, and even muscular and tactile awareness. Rather than dragons, we could say they were

riding beams of Light, sometimes bouncing with reflections, sometimes opening through prisms into rainbows, sometimes burning away debris.

Bly, however, opens another line of argument: “As Christian civilization took hold ... this leap occurred less and less often in Western literature. Obviously the ethical ideas of Christianity inhibit it. From the start Christianity has been against the leap. Christian ethics always embodied a move against the ‘animal instincts’; Christian thought, especially Paul’s thought, builds a firm distinction between spiritual energy and animal energy, a distinction so sharp it became symbolized by black and white.” Bly adds: “Christianity taught its poets – we are among them – to leap *away* from the unconscious, not *toward* it.”

These are serious charges. They may also explain some of the controversy surrounding early Quaker exhortation, albeit in prose form. Jackson I. Cope, in a pivotal essay titled “Seventeenth-Century Quaker Style,” examines the period of 1650 to 1675 and admits that despite “the incalculable human distance between George Fox and William Penn – this evangelistic group cut across all social and educational distinctions, even dimmed the dualism in the roles of the sexes. Yet when the Quakers pour forth their heart’s belief and hope, they do so again and again in the same modes of expression, modes only approximately and infrequently appearing in the sermons and tracts of non-Quaker contemporaries like Everard and Saltmarsh.” Cope presents a sample passage from Fox and remarks, “although the universe of spirit might smell of heavenly

flowers, or might glisten with holy light, spiritual food was no staple of his religious imagery.” Instead, with “his actual practice of eating and drinking is in the front of his mind, [this] is evidencing a tendency to break down the boundary between literalness and metaphors, between conceptions and things.” What emerges across the literature is a “relationship of language to experience in the early Quaker mind.” Indeed, Cope “finds the distinction between metaphoric and literal expression wholly obliterated on occasion” or even “metaphor has transcended its normal function, and instead of merely indicating a point of resemblance between two differentiable entities, it has totally merged them.” Cope continues with more examples of Quaker language leaping between specific experiences and metaphor. In one, he finds, “What had begun as

warning, instruction, or exhortation becomes, through the hypnotic utterance of divine names, a vision of beatification for the Children of the Light. [Another name for the early Quaker movement.] The incantation of the 'Name' has undercut the progression implicit in grammar because it has revealed the heart of a world above time." William Penn apologizes for what "might sound uncouth and unfashionable to nice ears," but Cope finds similar "incantatory" passages from other more highly educated Friends as well. Again, "there is no logical progression, but working the word 'faith' into a texture of Scripture phrases, Margaret Fell's grammatical structure progressively disintegrates ... weaving herself into a web of her own incantation." With the highly educated John Swinton, he finds similar results: "He is a man absorbing the Scripture

for himself, with a personal eye.” Cope deduces, “This ‘incantatory’ style is ubiquitous in early Quakerdom.”

A central quality that so baffled and alarmed critics was the absence of orderly progression in these Quaker utterances. Rather than moving logically from point A to point B to point C in syllogistic exercise, Friends simply jumped in at C. One reaction Cope quotes comes from the Franciscan apologist John Vincent Canes, who in 1661 found in Quaker books “sincere honesty” and “words so strangely jumbled together, that every line has good sens in it, but altogether none,” “som dreaming conceits,” “endless tautologies, and no connexion.” Rather than having a beginning, a middle, and an end, the Quaker message erupted at the middle. While this has much in common with modern micropoems and flash fiction, it also returns

us to Bly's insights on leaping poetry. "The loss of associative freedom showed itself in form as well as content. In content the poet's thought plodded through the poem, line after line, like a man being escorted through a prison. The 'form' was a corridor, full of opening and closing doors. The rhymed lines opened at just the right moment and closed again behind the visitors." This is, of course, also a description many well crafted sermons or homilies, rather than a prophetic message arising out of the silence of a traditional Quaker meeting for worship, where the speaker must be faithful not to say more than is given at the moment, and then to sit down before crafting a conclusion or running beyond the inspiration.

Cope observes, "The 'incantatory' style is an epistemological tool: it appears when Christ is speaking

within the Quaker, and showing forth the Word which is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end of understanding the runes of eternity.” His point becomes clearer once one recognizes how, in the Quaker metaphor, Light serves as another name for Christ and the Word or *Logos*. That is, the Light speaking through the individual brings enlightenment. In a similar compression, the passage from Genesis could also be turned: “God emitted light and it sounded good”; the sequence of events becomes one overlapping wholeness.

The application of metaphorical theological thought is not confined to early Friends. Its influence on our own practice often appears without our being aware of the influence. In an edition of *Quaker Religious Thought* (May 2007) devoted to the Friends’ expression, “Speak Truth to

power,” Shannon Craigo-Snell of Yale University examines metaphor and then brings the Light into the equation with Truth. Her “Empowering the Truth” observes: “The various traditions of Christianity over the centuries have used many metaphors to describe the power of God. God is Father, Mother, potter, king. God is Son, the way, the door, the vine. God is Spirit, breath, light, wind, fire, and seed. The multiplicity and fluidity of these images prevent us from reducing God to something we can grasp, while the comparison to familiar things acknowledges that we think about God with minds formed in mundane reality.”

Turning specifically to Quakers, she continues: “Friends have embraced biblical metaphors that help us understand God in a non-mainstream way, such as Light and Seed.

While these images have implications for how we

understand God's power, they do not address issues of power directly. For example, the metaphor of Light, so vital to Quaker theology, was actually a fairly common image used in discussions of epistemology in the early modern period during which Quakerism arose. ... The Quaker affirmation of the Inward Light has ramifications for understanding power – religious authority cannot be confined to an elite few if all persons can know God in and through the Inward Light – yet it is primarily an epistemological term.”

In an imaginative and contemporary twist, she then develops a metaphor of virus and infection to express a vision of God working from the bottom-up, rather a top-down version typically preached. In this vision, we spread it

among the populace, one person to another, rather than by commandment from hierarchical authorities.

In the same edition of *Quaker Religious Thought*, Newton Garver's "Speaking Truth to Power" examines the Light metaphor as an equivalent of Spirit:

To my mind there are four essential aspects or manifestations of Spirit or Light, and none of them requires that this Spirit be either a material cause or an agent in history. They are as follows: 1) It is eternal, beyond being and non-being, one and the same for all peoples at all times, though appearing differently at different times and to different people because of our varying backgrounds and circumstances. 2) It manifests itself through love, hope, joy, truth, and peace, and thereby always represents a force or power for unifying rather than dividing people. 3) It is equally present or accessible to everyone everywhere, but never fully disclosed or manifested at any one place or time and never to be identified with any one person or institution. 4) In spite of being a power, it is also in a way impotent, for it depends on our hands, our feet, and our tongues to bring it to fruition in the material world, where it constantly encounters the opposing force of darkness.

Garver's systematic description, reflecting his experience both as a member of Buffalo Monthly Meeting and as a professor of philosophy emeritus at SUNY Buffalo, probes the Light metaphor from the perspective of Spirit, rather than Christ, and thus avoids discussion of Jesus in his third point. Would early Friends have embraced his definition, or instead quibbled with it? We do know that in the 1800s, Joseph John Gurney also equated the Light with Spirit and came to conclusions that shunted Friends toward a quite different understanding. Tellingly, Garver says little of what this Spirit or Light is, per se, yet focuses largely on what it does or how it acts.

The reality remains that Light is a mysterious and powerful metaphor. For that matter, from a scientific

perspective, light itself is a mystery. Seed, while much more of a work-in-progress among early Friends, may hold the potential for greater development in our own time as we apply insights from growing fields of knowledge, such as psychology, or new understanding through the Psalmists or contemporary literature of the Soul.

The very difficulties that Moore details may bring heat and energy to the investigation. Where Bly argues that the apostle Paul leads away from a leap into the unconscious, early Friends, often applying quotations from Paul's epistles, found quite the opposite. Paul, after all, had been knocked to the ground by a flash of light and become both blind and speechless; he was taken in by the very man he was about to have executed. The associative freedom in the narrative turns everything on its head, as does the

active image of light that blinds, silences, and knocks one to the ground.

Bly's caution about Christianity acting to inhibit the wild associative leaps, however, soon strikes in the early Quaker experience. Even before passage of the Toleration Act in 1689, Friends were moving toward respectability. The establishing of the Second-Day's Morning Meeting in 1673, to pass on Quaker manuscripts submitted for publication led, Cope observes, to "curbing extravagancies" in exchange for a long list of pardons for imprisoned Quakers. "It was soon apparent that the leaders were determined to stamp out everything which smacked of 'enthusiasm,' and this included "wholesale alterations of manuscripts." Pointedly, "The Meeting particularly repressed Jeremiads (in which the 'incantatory' style had been so prominent), apocalyptic

papers, and anything chaotic in expression (as certainly the ‘incantatory’ style must have seemed to a later generation).” The consequence, according to Cope, is that “Quaker style henceforth was to be distinguished only by a few pathetic anachronisms of diction.”

That’s not all that became lost in the transition.

Cautious about offending the wider public, Friends failed to use their new freedom as an opportunity to fully and openly present the theology implicit in their metaphors of Light and Seed. The wild confrontations of the first generation of Quaker enthusiasm now gave way to polite gentility, and the emphasis shifted from religious zeal to solidifying a distinct culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

Today, however, we are free to reclaim the early “enthusiasms” and, through the lenses of contemporary

literature, the essential vitality in those early Friends and their seemingly peculiar language. In many of our daily activities, the orderly answers of rational argument fail to satisfy in the onrush of information overload: we have radio, television, Internet, even cell phones all running as we go about other activities, and the result is a clash of messages. For us, “Mind the Light” now means listening in a different context. Here, the Seed – not the ear – will hear and respond. “To listen” is restored to its meaning of “to understand,” and in sequence, “to stand under and follow.” In the embrace of metaphor, then, we may find ourselves enjoined with ancient voices of eternal wisdom we welcome into our presence.

Erroneously, many contemporary Friends and observers believe the teaching of Inner Light was

widespread among early Quakers. It was not. I believe that restoring the early metaphors of Inward Light and the Seed to their centrality in Quaker practice would strengthen the Society of Friends and offer a clearer definition of the faith in contrast to other Christians, on one side, and other mystical teachings, on the other. By laying open the early Quakers' understanding in its revolutionary vision, Friends may lay claim to an alternative proclamation and embrace of the Good News at a time when much of the Christian message is being relegated to the sidelines throughout Western society.

## Truly, Truly

**I**N OUR INVESTIGATION OF the three central metaphors of the early Quaker movement, I've come to appreciate the Light as an universal energizing factor, and the Seed as our individual, highly personal arrays of spiritual experiences and responses. But the Truth continued to elude a clear sense of wholeness until I linked it to "troth," which we know from the marriage vow, "I pledge you my troth" – that is, "good faith, fidelity, truth, verity," even *promise* itself. Linguistically, *truth* and *troth* share the same Old English root, *treowth*, "truth; faith." Faith, in turn, points toward *trust*, which we know quite well as a verb as well as a noun.

*Promise*, curiously, invokes a future. In a marriage, for instance, neither party knows how their future will

unfold, yet their mutual promise enjoins their actions in ways they cannot foresee – no doubt in ways that will surprise, challenge, and even trouble. Yet the promise both unites them and instills standards in their pursuit of their values and life's goals. A promise is true, or it is broken – that is, proves untrue, or ultimately no promise at all. As a verb, it becomes much more than speaking or signing a document: it acts repeatedly in ways that fulfill and advance the vision. Promise is also the potential within each person, or even the image of God to be made manifest.

In *Apocalypse of the Word* (page 195), Douglas Gwyn notes something similar. Early Quaker use, he says, “had the biblical meaning of ‘truth’ in mind. It is not a matter of right doctrines or methods. As the Hebrew word for ‘truth’ is the same for ‘faithfulness’ (*’amun*), so the true Church is

the gathering that subsists in the unsublimated reality of its relationship with Christ. And as the most literal meaning of *'amun* is 'solidity,' the faithful, responsive relationship with God is more solid than any rock or foundation on earth; it cannot be shaken."

What comes into focus is the linkage of Truth to relationship – both an individual's relationship to the Divine and an individual's relationship to others in a family and a range of overlapping communities. Somehow, from this perspective, I find the Truth becoming less remote and restrictive and more flowing and nurturing. I think of one Friend, Christine Cameron, who compares the act of sitting in Quaker worship as one of letting sunlight fall on an ice cube, which then melts and flows. The liquid, of course, can be used to sustain a plant – returning us to the Seed

metaphor. Look again, and liquid also gives us a different explanation of the Truth: the flowing water has the same chemical composition as ice but is liberated to move and act in new ways. The flowing water may even unite us or reshape us as it goes.

Relationship also appears as another Friend, Rose Ketterer, attempts to find verb action: her suggested “Truth you!” and “Truth out a person” both reach out to others, even exhorting them to their more ideal potential. It demands an accounting of actions, pro and con. Something solid and faithful is invoked.

The television satirist Stephen Colbert applies a term, “truthiness,” something in the nature of an object or situation, instead of *truth* itself. At times, this seems to

suggest that something merely appears to be true on the surface, but deeper examination may find otherwise.

Moreover, while *truth* as a straightforward verb keeps eluding our grasp, a close variation does appear as “trued” or “truing,” which means to bring into conformity with a standard or requirement, or to form or adjust, as with geometrical precision – to *true* a frame. Here I sense an action befitting the range of Quaker applications. Indeed, there is even an implication of degrees of truth – depending on how close a situation conforms or adjusts to a standard or requirement. Thus, an action can move something ever closer to the Truth, which in turn can even be an ideal remaining beyond actual fulfillment, the way a straight line is a mathematical conception solely. Continuing with the metaphor, some water is purer than

others; some statements are truer than others. In the end, we want the purest and truest.

Here, then, we may see opportunities for making something true, in the sense of creating order out of chaos, as God did in the first chapter of Genesis. “Let there be light” takes on a new dimension, especially when we hear the echo, “and God saw the light, that it was good.” The opening chapter of the gospel of John, as we’ve seen, expands an understanding of the Light, linking it with both Christ and the Greek concept of *Logos*.

Rosemary Moore (page 82) observes that in early Quaker pamphlets, a reference to “this ‘light’ was often identified with Christ.” But, “If the light really was Christ then it could not err. The stage was set for a theological battle, in which the Quakers were required to define their

terms and explain, exactly, what they mean by ‘the light,’ for theologically minded opponents thought that Quakers were writing about the light of conscience, which God had given to everyone, and which had nothing to do with the work of Christ.”

When early Friends, drawing from the opening chapter of John, linked the Light with Christ and the Greek concept of *Logos*, they found an alternative understanding of Christian faith itself. Presenting it openly was another matter.

As Moore continues: “Most early Quaker pamphlets and letters, however, did not use conventional theological language, but described a remarkable experience and a continuing consciousness of the presence of God. Quakers had an idiosyncratic use of some words ... ‘Truth’ is one

such word.” Here, by applying the term to their emerging spiritual awareness in daily life, they employ it as a metaphor, compressing layers of emotional and mental encounters into a single term. In addition, in early Friends’ application, Moore finds that Truth “is an alternative word of ‘Gospel’ derived from the New Testament, and was in general use. ... For Quakers it developed a special resonance, describing their personal faith and its realization in their lives.”

*Gospel*, in turn, has a broader meaning for early Friends than it would have among other Christians. Rather than the four New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus, “we again find [George] Fox’s insistence, following Paul, that the true gospel cannot be received by human traditions and authority but only God’s direct revelation,”

as Douglas Gwyn observes (page 195). More pointedly, Fox declared, “and now the gospel of God is known, the power of God.”

And so, as Truth is conceived along the lines of this Quaker understanding of gospel, we recognize Truth as the power of God in action. To “walk in the Truth” is to move in the very animation of God; to “proclaim the Truth” is to call up the jurisdiction of God; to “speak Truth to power” is to declare the ascendancy of God over mundane authorities. In their hands, the statements of early Quakers invoke lightning and thunder. This is scary, indeed, and exhilarating.

Yet we are left with the challenge of determining whether our faith and practice are true or are self-delusion instead. Here, I sense, is where the dynamic of Truth as

relationship returns. As we face the danger of “running ahead of our Guide” or drifting out of the Light, our actions and awareness may lessen by degrees from the Truth: we need to true our course, to return to our promise. Here, too, we come to trust others in a circle of faithful community as they reveal to us our shortcomings and urge us to greater fidelity. One term for this is discipleship. Indeed, here is where those who claim to have “my own spirituality” that stands independent of any religious group will fail: they will be untested in their claims, unguided at their critical alternatives, and unsupported in their periods of trial. It is said that there can be no Quaker apart from a Meeting; I have seen this confirmed in finding records of Friends who willingly served the Confederacy during the American Civil War, and then saw they lived far from the

nearest Quaker community: they were no longer accountable for their actions in relation to their professed religion.

As the Quaker movement gained ground, it organized into a structure of three concentric circles intended to help Friends discern Truth and live in its unity. Outwardly arranged by its schedule of deliberative sessions as the local, or monthly, meeting, which was in turn aligned to a somewhat larger quarterly meeting which in turn joined into a larger, regional yearly meeting, the Quaker establishment and unique manner of conducting business were often described as Gospel Order.

But, as Lloyd Lee Wilson explains, Gospel Order springs from a much deeper comprehension. He defines this as an awareness of “the order established by God that

exists in every part of creation, transcending the chaos that seems so often prevalent. It is the right relationship of every part of creation, however small, to every other part and to the Creator.”

In other words, *Logos*. Here, then the goal of Quaker organization is to enhance our ability to live in accord with the principle of creation, the plan of the universe, the realm of reconciliation of opposites – to act with Christ and Universal Love in every aspect of our daily life.

In one workshop, as we sought to find a suitable image for the metaphor of Truth, Christine Cameron envisioned a vast, invisible trellis reaching out toward the cosmos. Here, as the Light and Seed metaphors come together, the faithful grow in an orderly and sustained manner, trusting in its support and guidance. Yes, I love the

image – even the fact that it’s paradoxically an invisible image. How fitting!

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Still, as we consider the ways our lives intersect with others, we realize few of us live largely within Quaker community and its related values. Even in times and places of the most flourishing Quaker culture, such as the Holy Experiment of Pennsylvania in Colonial America, few found home, family, workplace, school, politics, and worship to be neatly contained in an all-Friends environment, much less one that could be neatly informed by the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting structure. There were always, for instance, those non-Quaker neighbors to deal with.

At the least, this disjunction is bound to create identity problems as we attempt to live out our daily roles.

In our daily employment, for instance, how much of us is “Quaker” and how much is “doctor,” “nurse,” “teacher,” “boss,” “banker,” and so on? More commonly, the contrasting values of these varied realms are likely to create friction between what Friends would understand as the Truth in contrast to the frameworks employed by others. At the same time, we carry back into our Quaker circles the perspectives and practices we’ve encountered elsewhere, sometimes leading to unanticipated discord.

How, then, are we to reconcile our big-picture understanding of the Truth with our small, daily interactions?

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For Friends, this insistence on “the right relationship of every part of creation, however small, to every other part

and to the Creator,” creates a tension in everyday life. Many Christians, drawing on Augustine’s argument that governing an earthly city permits actions that would be forbidden in its heavenly counterpart, often separate their faith lives from their economic and social activities. Not so for Quakers, at least in theory. Historically, Friends often withdrew “behind a [protective] hedge,” to create alternative households and communities, at least to the extent their numbers and incomes allowed. Thus, while maintaining a distinctive lifestyle and witness, Quakers could operate their own independent school systems, manage an innovative global financial and economic network, litigate disputes between members without resorting to lawyers and courtrooms, and stand firm against participation in war.

As our membership has declined, however, we find ourselves increasingly at the mercies of the greater society. The old organization of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting imposes less direct discipline – and direction – over our lives, and our values are rapidly being marginalized. Just where do we fit? And just how do we live out the Truth, our vision of Gospel Order, in these conditions?

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Hearing me discuss the interlocking scope of the Light/Seed/Truth metaphors, my wife replied that it seemed to mirror a line of contemporary intellectual inquiry known as complex systems organization. Originating in several different disciplines, this perspective attempts to understand the actual requirements and

behavior of an individual organism or ecosystem in operation, rather than limiting its placement to a linear explanation, traditionally often viewed as a top-down hierarchy.

One of its threads springs from attempts to understand how biological systems actually work, once scientists slowly began to recognize the need to look at the interactions of many parts and not just a straight-line chart. A food chain, for instance, may be seen as linear, but many other things may be happening within and around it – a single species typically relies on multiple sources of nourishment, and not just one. The word *ecology* itself, in fact, was coined only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the importance of these interactions dawned on scientific thinking, and even that basic recognition was a long time coming.

Another thread emerges from cybernetics and the related research in computer design in trying to draw parallels in human thought methods and to design ways that would mimic human thought processes. That is, how do we as individual humans and human communities react as we encounter change, learning as we go? How do we adapt? How do we learn and then teach others?

The Society of Friends, of course, has long functioned as an interactive structure, in which any hierarchy remains closely connected with the individual members. It has also emphasized experience over ideology, and encouraged personal growth and ongoing spiritual revelation.

One of the central tenants of complex systems is the concept of nesting. Each organism places itself in a set of

polycentric nests, while simultaneously having other sets of nests within itself. Thus, one system never exists in isolation but rather nests within other systems and has other systems nested within itself. Consider the organs of the body, each having specialized cells within it, yet each organ can be damaged or destroyed by pollution outside the body. Much depends on the scale being observed or in operation. The missing key is seeing how each part interacts with others. Here several basic principles come into play. In feedback loops, for example, as a system operates, information is steadily returned to the system itself, in turn giving direction. In non-mechanical processes, one cannot predict how the input of an event will point the system, not when so many factors – many of them unknown – come into play. An organic system,

however, possesses an ability for self-organization. As biological systems mature, they become more complex. Within the system, the individual parts become more specialized and make more efficient use of the available energy by finding their own niche, a better fit in that environment. As the components adapt to each other, some of them no longer compete directly with each other, because direct competition wastes energy. Owls and hawks, for example, hunt for the same prey, but at different hours of the day and night. By divvying up the resources, as it were, energy inefficiency is reduced.

The emerging organization allows each part to relate better to the others. Adaptation of each niche also results in a more resilient overall organization – if one component is eliminated, there are others that serve a similar function.

Remove the owls, and the hawks will still keep the rodent population under some control.

While the scientific understanding of complex systems intends to observe what is happening without imposing any scale of “good, bad, or neutral” values, I still see parallels to the ancient Greek concept of *Logos* here, especially with its sense of a plan or principle of Creation, as well as its awareness of the continuum existing in what would otherwise appear as opposites and the opportunity for reconciliation in conflict.

Each species in a complex system has a goal, to optimize its survival, which in turn means optimizing the beneficial functions of the larger system. In practice, this becomes akin to dancing around a mean as a goal is pursued. You can think of a sailor steering and watching as the

current pushes the boat to one direction while the wind pulls toward the other, causing him to drift off course.

Relying on visual feedback, he continually tacks to correct his course. Likewise, self-regulating feedback is seen in all living organisms as they attempt to stay on course.

On the other hand, self-reinforcing feedback makes a system ever more distinct, moving it away from an equilibrium. As air pollution increases, for instance, polar ice sheets begin melting; where they had been white, reflecting sunlight, additional pollution is turning them darker, and they now absorb more sunlight, increasing the rate of melting and then exposing underlying rock, which is also darker than snow and more absorbent of warming from the sun. Self-reinforcing feedback makes a system increasingly more extreme, until it ultimately becomes not

sustainable. When the system can no longer function as it has, a bifurcation occurs.

Observers also look for emergent properties, unanticipated branching off from the system but that are not part of the main thrust of the system itself as it functions. These can have good, bad, or indifferent consequences in the overall scheme, complicating an already complex calculus.

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Perhaps this is no more mind-boggling than what we already have in action in our application of a Light/Seed/Truth metaphor of spiritual awareness. For starters, physical light functions as the ultimate source of all life in a biological universe, while light in the sense of enlightenment informs the thought system itself. Seed, as a

response to spiritual Light, gives us the diversity of adaptation throughout, including the emerging niches we inhabit. And the Truth expresses the essential relationship of each part to the others, including the vital corrections along the way.

No matter how much I might yearn to dwell within a simple society based on a monthly meeting and its neighborhood extending into a quarterly and yearly meeting, and have many of my social, economic, and even political activities stream through that system, the reality is far more complex. Indeed, it is possible to view the breakdown of American Quaker unity in the early 1800s as a consequence of self-reinforcing feedback leading to a bifurcation event we refer to as the Hicksite Separation, soon followed by the Wilburite Separation.

As I've reflected on the insights of complex systems analysis, I sense parallels within the operation of our Quaker bodies of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. Ideally, each of us serves a niche that enhances the whole, while in turn being sustained and enhanced. In addition, I see our meetings as organisms essential for our survival as spiritual individuals within larger systems. Rather than living within a relatively small set of communities "behind a protective hedge," Friends today are dispersed throughout the larger society. To the extent we can function in that scattered setting, we can also see ourselves as having opportunities to influence a range of feedback loops toward more morally responsible ends. Our Quaker tradition of testimonies or unique witness as ways of life rather than mere words can now stand in a wider stream of actions.

Our declarations of “Truth you!” or “Truthing out” a situation become healthy corrective actions for an entire system, however complex. Just where we find our niche in the surrounding environment remains in question, but nonetheless critical to our survival and, I believe, the larger structure as well.

Here, then I find comfort in applying the image of Truth as an invisible, cosmic trellis connecting along many planes each of us may faithfully follow as we serve and grow.

## *God Through a Mirror or a Minute*

**A**BOUT THE TIME I became a formal member of the Society of Friends, I remember hearing guest speaker John Yungblut entreat North Pacific Yearly Meeting to do *personal* theology. As I recall, his message perplexed many – especially its foundation word, *theology*, which left some Friends fearing that we were being pushed toward a hidden orthodoxy or creed.

There are a number of reasons for the unease.

For one thing, many of the individuals who are drawn to quietist Friends Meetings, like North Pacific's and the others where I've practiced, come as "religious refugees" in search of a safe zone for spiritual experiences. Many carry hurtful childhood memories of religious intolerance, and any mention of specific religious words – especially

“Christ” or “Christian” – can be emotionally painful. They find comfort in quietist Friends’ unwillingness to indoctrinate or to proselytize, at least as they’ve known it. They may identify with Quaker testimonies on sexual equality, international peace, ecological sensitivity, or some other social front without perceiving the underlying theology. The reality has been that few people become active in any congregation these days primarily because of its theology; Friends Meetings are no exception. The quality of a group’s fellowship, in fact, may be the overriding factor in any decision to affiliate, and that measure may extend to how successfully the group addresses the needs of children.

In addition, the history of Friends in America – especially its separations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – demonstrates what can happen when words and phrases are applied as a

litmus test. Recognizing that people can recite dogma or creed – or even voice a metaphor – without understanding what the words mean or living by their rule, Friends have traditionally preferred to speak from individual and communal experience, expressing what they sense to be true. As Quaker humor observes, the reason Friends mumble while singing unfamiliar hymns is because we’re trying to decide whether we agree with the lyrics. This demand for authenticity rather than empty words is a logical outcome of early Friends’ insistence on “primitive Christianity revived” and the Truth.

More difficulties arise with the definition of theology itself. “The study of religion, culminating in a synthesis of philosophy of religion; also, a critical survey of religion, especially of the Christian religion,” as my Funk & Wagnalls

edition says, before adding: “A body of doctrines as set forth by a particular church or religious group.”

Quietist Friends, at least, immediately object on several fronts. As the *Journal of George Fox* demonstrates, the Quaker movement emerged out of a direct spiritual experience of what Friends came to identify as Christ, commonly calling this the Light or many variations.

Outwardly, Friends came together after their penetrating religious questions could not be satisfactorily answered by the learned ministers and philosophers of early 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, Europe, and North America. The Quaker movement, in fact, often appeared to be an irrational outburst, one that taunted intellectual conjecture about Christianity as a chase of mere “notions.” In rejecting creeds, Friends could point instead to their own life-

changing epiphanies; for them, actions truly spoke louder than words.

“The problem of theology,” Kathleen Norris writes (*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*), “is always to keep it within its bounds as an adjunct and response to a lived faith. In the early Christian church, we can see how quickly the creeds, which began as simple statements of faith made at baptism, and were local in character until the early fourth century, became tests of orthodoxy as the church established itself as an institution. And as such, they could be, and were, used to include or to exclude people from the Christian fold.”

Even so, I’ve been taken aback by the assessment that finds Fox lacking in “systematic theology” or that admits shortcomings in Robert Barclay’s *Apology*. Looking

closely at Quaker use of Light as a metaphor, however, does find its definitions become slippery, even as they point to some experience of Christ; early Friends united in their certitude, even as their representations varied. In Fox, Light is a force that searches our souls and demands a response; for Barclay it is communion. Modern quietist Friends commonly regard this Light as a pervasive cosmic goodness, but provide little specificity by way of elucidation – rarely is it connected to an experience of Christ.

At the other end of the current Quaker spectrum, Evangelical Friends show no inhibition regarding theology, yet they, too, encounter problems in trying to make sense of the early Quaker message, at least in terms of mainstream Protestant teaching.

Nonetheless, once our ears attune to the language of early Friends, it is easy to feel their passionate and fertile conviction urging us on in our own exercises and perceptions. In their pages are outlooks that add sharp, refreshing contrast to contemporary spiritual discussions. Their arguments, I find, often provide a footing for our own times and conditions.

As Yungblut knew, few quietist Friends are “trained” in theology (I’m no exception), yet theology is something we all “do,” however disjointedly. Any deep spiritual encounter affects our heads as well as our hearts. A life-changing experience demands we find ways of speaking about and from our new perspective. Arising as radical Christianity, Quakerism manifested a radical theology as well.

“But the best definition of theology that I know of,” Kathleen Norris explains, “comes from Evagrius of Pontus, who said, ‘If you are a theologian, pray truly; and if you pray truly, you are a theologian.’” She then turns to church history and points out “a curious tension between Semitic storytelling, which admits a remarkable diversity of voices, perspectives, and experience into the canon, and Greek philosophy, which seeks to define, distinguish, pare down. It is the latter most people think of when they hear the word ‘theology,’ because at least in the Christian West, it is that tendency that has prevailed.” At a heavy price, as she adds, quoting theologian Margaret Miles: “The history of western Christianity is littered with all the silent figures of Christians who found themselves excluded by each increment in verbal theological precision.”

Imprecision, in fact, is something that empowers metaphor and its manner of thinking.

The Semitic legacy, then, would ask about our praying – our concerns and our language, our conversations and our attainments, our joys and our frustrations. This legacy also connects to the contemporary voicing “my truth” or dimensions of “spiritual intimacy” in hearing each other speak of matters that ultimately remain beyond language. In other words, theology and practice are inseparable. I find that quietist Friends, especially, need a language for praying together; what do we do, exactly, when asked to “hold someone in the Light”?

Rural Wilburites in Ohio impressed on me their recognition of the limitation of words, even as their elders demanded precision in language and meaning. As a

journalist and poet, I appreciate the paradox encountered using language of the soul, something Norris also acknowledges: “As a poet, I am devoted to imprecision. That is, while I try to use words accurately, I do not seek the precision of the philosopher or theologian, who tend to proceed by excluding any other definitions but their own. A well-realized poem will evoke many meanings, and as many responses as there are readers. Like a ritual, a poem is meant to be an experience, and only as it becomes incarnated as experience does it reverberate with more meaning than intellectual categories could convey.”

Looking back on the Hicksite Separation of American Quakerism, we can perceive this Semitic/Greek dichotomy at work. The well-educated visitors from England, with their demand for verbal theological

correctness, imposed on their American brethren the prevailing tendency of Western Christianity. Elias Hicks and his partisans, in contrast, embodied a remarkable diversity of voices, perspectives, and experiences – a “primitive Christianity revived” and thus, in some ways, stood outside of historical dimension.

At that session of North Pacific Yearly Meeting, what John Yungblut was actually asking us to do was something quite different from any theorizing many Friends would find odious. He was inviting each individual to look deeply into the thoughts, values, assumptions, desires, and so on that shape very personal decisions and actions. In contemporary America, there are many gods and many myths, though few people recognize these as idols or even their presumed supernatural dimensions. “Elvis sightings”

and Graceland (just notice the theology implicit in *that* name!) are simply a microcosm of the interlocking secular theology of consumerism, advertising, Hollywood, professional sports, Wall Street, the Pentagon, and so on that shape much of our lives – even for those professing to be faithful followers of monotheism, “one God” – the strands of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Here, then, even an atheist may have some structure of spiritual belief; the questions involve its orientation, its practice, its ethics, and its consequences. For the monotheist, at least, the demand is that the unacknowledged gods be unmasked and subordinated: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3).

In this perspective, the call becomes a matter of liberation from all the unrecognized gods that enslave the believer – and to reorder one’s priorities and focus. It’s another way of asking us to name what’s most important in our lives – how we see our life’s work and our place in the cosmos.

“As for theology,” Norris decides, “it has to be content to tag along. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, commenting on John 14:6, wisely says, ‘To me, ‘I am the way’ is a better statement than ‘I know the way.’””

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In this approach, theology begins to resemble human psychology, at least the variety that occupies the public’s eye: emotions, aspirations, motivations, relationship (couples, families, communities), birth,

sexuality, death and dying, and so on. The one difference, of course, would be in the focus of the inquiry: God, in theology, and the self, in psychology. Among Friends, the shift to “Inner Light” usage, especially in appearances with a sense of “my” Light or “my” insight, appears to parallel the rise of modern psychology: Sigmund Freud was already in this thirties when the Ohio Gurneyites denounced the doctrine of “Inner Light” in 1878, surprisingly the first reference I’ve been able to find among Friends to the term as such. Certainly, as psychology has challenged basic assumptions of human nature, much thinking about God and life has also been reshaped, often without a corresponding awareness of the influence. Vocal ministry arising in Friends Meetings worship, in both the quietist or evangelical branches, sometimes serves more as

psychotherapy than holy worship; this is not to dismiss personal experience, but rather to call attention to times when the balance tilts from a sense of the Spirit or Christ, presumed to be present during the hour, and instead has worshippers in a “me-first” stance. On the evangelical side, this may appear as sermons that “sell” ways the love of Jesus can increase personal happiness and fulfillment, rather than a call for heightened discipleship and service. On the quietist side, this may erupt as egocentric “popcorn” vocal messages that crowd into each other, rather than a deepened communion with the Source. Other widespread and often unacknowledged influences on contemporary thought include science, in general, high culture, mass entertainment such as professional athletics and cinema, the language of warfare, professional sports, and corporate

business. The universal reliance on the Internet and personal computers is also influencing thought patterns and orientations. In all of these come demands for reinterpretation of timeless truths for new generations, without becoming trapped in faddish and soon outdated notions.

Ideally, these are opportunities for an expanded vision of theology and spiritual relationships. Across the Quaker spectrum, the challenge through all of this includes keeping God first in individuals and communities of integrity, no matter their surroundings.

The Semitic legacy of storytelling allows for a variety of theological expression and voices. In quietist Meetings, where a tension often exists between those who label themselves as “universalists” and what’s usually a minority

identifying themselves “Christocentric,” a renewed awareness of this Semitic stream, especially with its emphasis on action rather than speculation, might be applied to permit the construction of alternate theologies. That is, within each camp, stories about holy encounters may be told and heard, and then shared with others. As I’ve listened to similar stories from early Quakers, I’ve concluded that their awareness of Christ was far more universal than most Friends today know or appreciate. Expressed as *Logos* or Light, this awareness erases the distinctions between universalist and Christocentric. To get to that understanding, of course, individuals need to acknowledge where they are in their own perspectives.

For Evangelical Friends, this might begin by recognizing the ways Jesus embodies Light and *Logos* and

then appreciating the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit of Christ, from New Testament times down to our own. For quietist Friends, this might run in the opposite direction, by recognizing Light and *Logos* first in our own times, and then seeing it illuminated in the life of Jesus and the early church.

For those universalists unable to appreciate the Christ as Light and *Logos* understanding they see framing early Friends' faith and practice, I suggest an alternative approach. The universalist stream often appears to take an "ABC" stand – "anything but Christ," meaning, I sense, "Jesus" – while claiming to be open to inspiration from all religions. This stance presents an internal contradiction, of being open to everything yet not open to everything. One negative consequence is that individuals who consider

themselves advocates of religious tolerance can be seen as intolerant of Christian viewpoints. To get around this and similar perceptions or misconceptions, I suggest that universalist Quakers attempt to articulate a theology that avoids reference to any world religion and concentrates instead on trying to compose an independent expression that dovetails into some central Quaker positions. For example, taking the early Quaker argument that this Light is not the same as physical light, a universalist perspective might then define it as love or as the agent of Creation or in some other way; similarly, since early Quakers insisted that the Inward Light was not identical to conscience or intuition, a universalist perspective might then define it as the impulse to selfless love or a yearning for perfection, maturity, or the like. Until such a logic is attempted in a

sustained way, universalist Quakers will remain beholden to the New Testament *Logos* theology of Friends' history, no matter how much they object to its existence. On the other hand, we may find that such an exploration may uncover that using "Inner Light" language has unconsciously pointed to aspects of a yet-to-be-articulated powerful thought system that I see hinted at in the early Quaker metaphor of Seed. In addition, such an attempt might also remove blinders from some historic Quaker statements, placing traditions in a larger, fresher context. Another universalist approach might compare and contrast Light-imagery across religions, to clarify ways that make the Quaker understanding and practice unique.

Christ-centered Quakerism, of course, lays claim to historic Friends' teaching, with Barclay's *Apology* as its

essential reference. In this stream, however, I would argue for greater distinctions between Christ as *Logos*, which I see as the basis of a Quaker Light-based theology, and either the Jesus of history or the Messiah tradition with its Judaism foundations. In other words, Christ-centered Quakerism may cover a broader spectrum of expression than its critics might suppose, and many of its central expressions may differ sharply in meaning when individuals explore their own interpretations and experiences.

I will also suggest an alternative Christ-centered metaphor to consider, one I've touched upon as the Living Jesus. Without realizing it, I believe, many Christians cross over into metaphor in their presentations of faith. To speak of God the Father, the Cross, or Calvary, or to sing of being "safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on his gentle breast," often

moves from historic event or person and into expression of personal, even momentous experience. In all of my argument for understanding Christ as *Logos* or Light, I have no intention of diminishing any appreciation of the profound sense of personally encountering and loving the Living Jesus. With this dialogue, we may ask how these other encounters differ from an experience of Light – and how they resemble it. Notice that I am saying “experience,” rather than “teaching.” We may then ask whether accepting Jesus as a personal Lord and Savior differs from turning to the Light and Seed of Christ, and how. For some, who prefer having “saints with the flesh attached” – this presents something specific and anchored rather than abstract or universal.

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Either stream, universalist or Christocentric, however, ultimately must return to questions regarding the person of Jesus, especially those surrounding his crucifixion, resurrection, and atonement. As many others have insisted, traditional Quaker theology fails to adequately reconcile the discrepancy between a *Logos*, or Spirit of Christ, existing from before Creation and available to each person who enters the world, and a history-changing metamorphosis at Calvary.

Bluntly speaking, nowadays the Light and Blood concepts of Christ aren't mixing. I believe this comes as much as a consequence of different approaches to thought – one based on metaphor, the other on law – as it does from their basic foundations. Matters that are deemed essential in one stream may be viewed as inconsequential by the

other, or at least with a much different interpretation. Virgin birth (rather than “maiden” or “unmarried birth” in other translations), Lord and Savior, sin, salvation, and so on fall into this divide. We may also add the range of inquiries about the very person of Jesus, as a spate of recent research and best-selling books demonstrates. Other questions drive the issue deeper: why should the crucifixion and resurrection, so essential to Evangelical Friends, matter to Light-based quietist Friends? Such questions impart emotional as well as intellectual responses and soul-searching. Does a response to the Spirit of Light engender a committed sense of urgency in the same way that accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior can?

During the persecutions and apocalyptic fervor accompanying the early Quaker outburst, the Spirit of

Christ as *Logos* and the sacrifice on the cross jointly provided sustenance; Friends were filled with an awareness of both in their hearts, and that was good enough for them, even if it baffled their critics. Later, Evangelical Friends addressing this dichotomy wound up recasting Quaker theology in a way that, in effect, substituted “Jesus” for “Christ” and the “Holy Spirit” for “Light.” Liberal quietist Friends typically have their own difficulties, beginning with concepts of sin and redemption, which are rarely mentioned in Meeting, if at all.

Here, again, looking to early Friends may lead to revolutionary breakthroughs for our own times. Sin, for instance, can be seen addressing questions of who we are individually, what we may become, and how we fail to fulfill that potential. Early Friends were severely castigated

for their teaching on perfection, insisting on the perfectibility of people, at least when they were faithful to the Light.

The prevailing doctrine of Original Sin apparently went unquestioned by the early Quaker movement, probably as a consequence of the very real threat of blasphemy convictions. Friends did put their own twist on the teaching, saying that by dying on the cross, Jesus liberated humanity from the curse placed on Adam and Eve and all of their descendants; after this, according to Friends, people could choose to live in a new relationship with God, sin-free with the New Adam (Christ) and presumably, New Eve, as well, or they could choose to dwell in the darkness of sin. This did not, however, explain how individuals in the centuries before the crucifixion were

able to experience Christ, which was something Quakers insisted had happened as a consequence of their New Testament Light-based reasoning – Christ being from the beginning of creation, as the opening of the Gospel of John explains.

Although Friends insisted that Christianity had fallen into a “dark night of apostasy” by the time Constantine declared it the state religion of the Roman Empire, they appear to have been largely unaware that the doctrine of Original Sin was formulated by Augustine a few decades later. An alternative interpretation of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, one held in some Jewish teaching, sees the eating of the forbidden fruit as a positive act, one in which humanity accepts the freedom to make choices, good and bad. At first, this view would seem to

make the death on the cross even more problematic, for there would be no Original Sin requiring compensation.

Modern critics, meanwhile, raise their own objections, ranging from the cynical “Why should Jesus die for my sins? Who asked him? Who asked me?” to the equally cynical “What kind of God would bring his own son into the world just to slay him?”

Shifting the focus to Light metaphor does, curiously, open this to the question, “How else can God reach out to us to reconcile us into right action?” Now the weeping and groaning of those early Quaker Meetings has meaning. How many times in our own lives do we need to be saved from our own words and deeds?

Missing from much of the discussion about Calvary has been a comprehensive awareness of the historic Jewish

practice of sacrifice, originating as a substitute for human sacrifice to appease the gods and evolving into tithes and offerings to help the poor and the priesthood. Somehow, in the Temple sacrifice of rams or doves, there must have been a heightened mindfulness of the fragility of life and of the dual nature of humanity itself, with its mortal animal nature that will someday die and its spiritual mental attributes that aspire to live forever. Sacrifice, too, is seen in some way to facilitate a relationship between the petitioner and the deity, and to symbolically acknowledge payment for any offenses committed. The purpose, then, is to restore the faithful to forgiveness and grace. In this perspective, we can see the underlying meaning of sacrifice as one of “making sacred” rather of forfeiting a valued possession.

The Jewish concept of atonement (“at-one-ment” or reconciliation, “restoration of harmony,” outlined in Exodus 29-32) originates in gratitude “as a reminder to the Israelites of the ransom given for your lives,” a symbolic repayment to God for rescuing them out of slavery. Leviticus 16, establishing the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, adds an admission of personal responsibility for sin as part of the repayment: “because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins.”

In the mysterious role of mediating between the petitioner and the deity we can glimpse a parallel between the animal sacrifice given for appeasement and the *Logos* working as an agent of reconciliation throughout the universe. In its return to human sacrifice – in fact, the

ultimate sacrifice – the Lamb of God fuses these two in a way that rebuffs any easy answer. Here, God reverses the direction of the plea: instead of humans petitioning the deity for reconciliation, God now appears almost desperate to demonstrate how deeply he yearns for humans to accept the relationship that is available – or, from a Quaker perspective, that has always been available. The choice becomes graphically clear: in allowing humans the freedom of moral choice, sin has meant separating ourselves from God and God’s love, yet all the while God has been hoping to see people freely choose, in the Quaker expression, to walk in the Light of his love. It is an emphatic repetition of 1 Samuel 15:22, “To obey is better than sacrifice,” with its desire for the intimacy of relationship rather than formality of ritual.

Early Quaker texts, where the individual has the choice of accepting the Inward Light or rejecting it, reflect this understanding. Some Friends, like William Penn, place this as a cross in our heart.

An upside-down understanding of atonement even opens the possibility that God now asks *us* to forgive any offenses and shortcomings on his part, perceived or real. This is a much different portrait than the one we see in Eden, the Great Flood, or the confrontation with Job. In relationship, both sides move to reconciliation.

In examining the historical crucifixion, questions arise about the sacrificial offering itself, whether Jesus is born incarnate and fated to Calvary; whether he is born as a clean soul, without negative baggage; whether he becomes so Light-infused, or filled with the Spirit of Christ, that he is

perfectly obedient to this end; whether he represents the ultimate human rejection of God's love and direction; or whether he presents, in a humanist view, nothing more than a martyr who provokes the consequences. Some of these are points of dogmatic insistence, especially from a legalistic reading of Scripture. Others reject that and lean instead on other reasoning. To some extent, our emotional response will be based on the extent of our embrace of a Light or a Blood metaphor.

Even the martyr's motivation can be reexamined, with some dying as a soldier in support of a movement, while others die because of their love for God and humanity. A telling account of the latter is the story of Dutch Mennonite Dirk Willems, who in 1569 was fleeing across the ice when one of his persecutors fell through;

rather than permit the man to drown, Willems returned to save the man's life, knowing that doing so would lead to his own torture and execution. In instances arising from selfless care, we can ask whether the believer, in responding in love, is also becoming so Christ-filled that the crucifixion is, in some way, reenacted. I suspect that early Friends, as they encountered rounds of persecution, perceived this to be so.

Another dimension typically missing from discussion of the crucifixion, resurrection, and atonement of Jesus has been a fuller understanding of the messianic strand of Judaism. Although the term "Messiah" does not appear as such in the Hebrew Bible, passages in Isaiah [9:6-7], Ezekiel [34:22-23], and Daniel [6:26-28 and 9:25-26], especially, anticipate a descendent of King David who

would be anointed as a prince and, like his celebrated ancestor, establish his throne in Jerusalem to rule over an autonomous Israel. One side of this theme – amplified in the First and Second Books of Maccabees, part of the Apocrypha found in some but not all Bibles – reflects the discernment, two centuries before Jesus, that preserving Judaism would require political independence from pagan rulers who defiled the Temple and ordered Jews to violate their religious principles. As oppression from the colonial governors increased, some Jews concluded that freedom to worship and to live by the Laws of their ancestors would require the restoration of an observant high priest in the Temple and a Jewish king to the throne. Although various parties differed on how this was to be accomplished, and their controversies would continue through the uprising

against Rome and the destruction of the Temple in 66-70 C.E., the fierce, uncompromising armed resistance of the Maccabees, 167-151 B.C.E., did achieve political independence and the purification and rededication of the Second Temple. Significantly, one strand of this thinking would see in the leaders of resistance, such as Judas Maccabaeus, a succession of messianic leaders, so that the concept of Messiah rested not in a single person but in a role. Pointedly, Maccabees served both as high priests and as kings.

While much of the Maccabean story concerns armed exploits, one thread records the importance of unarmed resistance as well. The story of the seven brothers and their mother, II Maccabees 7, who were murdered one by one in the presence of the others as they refused the pagan

king's orders to eat pork is particularly telling. The eight candles of Chanukah, the festival celebrating the rededication of the Temple that came shortly after this incident, are traditionally explained as an aspect of re-lighting the sacrificial fire, having only enough oil for one night but finding it provided for eight; more convincing, to my mind, is having the eight candles represent the seven sons and their mother, and the eight successive nights on which another family member perished for maintaining Jewish dietary Law. I prefer the image of Light as a symbol of faithful life, even with its gory undertone here, rather than as a memory of a lamp-oil miracle.

Because the gospel of Matthew, especially, puts an emphasis on "Jesus the Messiah," Christianity has largely seen Messiah as a single person, rather than as the

alternative possibility of a messianic succession. The glimmer into the latter comes, curiously, in references to “false messiahs,” with little explanation of their motivation or social placement.

The possibility of a messianic succession, however, has led me to a mental leap that may be helpful in reconciling the crucifixion, resurrection, and atonement with a Quaker Light/*Logos*-based theology. The key involves viewing Messiah as an *office* of Christ. That is, rather than perceiving “Messiah” as a Hebrew equivalent to the Greek “Christ,” this views it as one of many ways that Christ, or the Light of Christ, functions – as Lamb of God or Prince of Peace, for instance, among many others.

Here, Messiah becomes actions more than a person, a response to religious and political oppression on behalf of

the Jewish Law – or, in our own time, on behalf of the invisible Kingdom of God.

Just as Calvary reversed the dynamic of sacrifice, so that it becomes God reaching out to humanity rather than humans' petitioning God, so too does it reverse the model of armed victory. To have a king captured and executed is the ultimate embodiment of defeat. Historically, within decades, even the apparent objective of this Messiah is obliterated when Jerusalem and its Temple are plundered and demolished. What kind of Messiah is this?

What quickly happens, however, is that Jewish Law and practices quickly spread throughout the known world, often as part of Christian teaching and, in time, Islamic practice. Admittedly, there are tensions between the

faithful scattered Jews and the newer monotheistic offshoots.

Even so, through the office of Messiah, the Kingdom of God is unleashed in previously unimagined ways. It is no longer just the Kingdom of Israel or its subsequently two divided nations. Armies do not hold this country together; indeed, its dominion ignores political boundaries. Its throne – like the law of the New Testament – is established in human hearts, as it likely had been all along in the Hebrew prophets and other faithful believers. Painfully, too, the Jewish people – the “keepers of the flame” for so many centuries – are now scattered to serve as an ethical conscience throughout the world.

Calvary and the fall of Jerusalem connect to the suffering and testing both of individuals such as Job, in

antiquity, and in modern history, Etty Hillesum (*An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-43*), a balm in the entrails of hell. All along, God has been present and waiting.

The question returns: if the *Logos*, the Light of Christ, has been available since the beginning of creation, why does it wait until the moment of Calvary to reveal itself so fully?

In an unanticipated spin, much of the responsibility may fall on humanity itself: there simply weren't enough people ready to accept this message or its responsibility. If the road from the Garden of Eden is one of unending decisions, with goodness on one fork and evil on the other, it has simply taken humanity this long to be ready to accept the Light. The Maccabbees represent the price one must be

prepared to pay for the freedom to uphold the truth of one's convictions. The Romans, in their own curious service to this cause, built the roads that carried this movement across Europe, Africa, and the Far East.

In dying on the cross, then, Jesus appears as the intermediary between God and humanity, a *Logos* active in many simultaneous dynamics to bring people into Light-saturated living. Here, the upside-down Kingdom of God is unveiled with God inverting the direction of sacrifice and with a king whose power is unleashed only by his being toppled by armed force. Little wonder, centuries later, that the Quaker movement emerged in another turbulent time, which was also recognized as “the World Turned Upside Down.”

As the crowning touch, we have the aspect of Calvary that garners the most attention: resurrection itself, with its reversal of the perception of death.

With these perspectives, the concepts of justification and sanctification – how Christ purchases human freedom from the bondage of sin and how individuals are made holy – can also be reconsidered. From a *Logos* point of view, “receiving the Light” is the answer to both.

In the Light/Seed dynamic, Jesus can also be seen as Seed, receiving and revealing the Light in its fullest human expression. He becomes the standard and means of measure. He is the counterweight to Ranterism or delusion. The abstract and universal become particular and real. In him, Christian understanding of Spirit now differs from, say, Buddha nature or Atma in Hinduism. In the

crucifixion, Jesus carries the Light fully into darkness to emerge again, somehow transformed, enriched, and released. The “necessity” of Cavalry, from this understanding, comes precisely in the ways it draws individuals toward the Light as defined through the resurrected Jesus. The Light becomes explicit and empowered. Thus, when we are one with the Light, we may experience atonement – and, through it, the gift and grace of Jesus.

While Friends insisted that Christianity had fallen into a “dark night of apostasy” through many of the intervening centuries, we can acknowledge ways the Light of Christ guided pockets of an underground church: through the centuries, the persecuted Waldensians, in their varied names and appearances, and medieval mystics,

especially the women whose language of an interior experience of Christ so foreshadows the Quakers, come especially to mind.

Again, we have examples where an awareness of the Light of Christ has dramatically shaped actions. My hope is that by renewing this knowledge, we may also be led in revolutionary ways.

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In doing my own personal theology, then, I find myself conversing with individuals across the centuries to whom I'm deeply indebted. They can speak to me of sin, and remind me of places in myself where I resist the Light. Continuing with the Light metaphor, I ask why the Light of Christ must summon forth the image of God in which I'm made – in effect, why the Light must call forth the Light –

and I find myself again at Calvary, as God petitions every person for intimate relationship, the kind Jesus expresses as a Father-Child love. As I think of Light as a metaphor, I'm repeatedly impressed by the fact that we really don't see light, but rather what it reveals or perhaps also its source; in this way, the Light of Christ points both toward its source in God and to its revelation in creation.

I wonder, too, what happens in the night and am reminded, from the first chapter of Genesis, that night, too, is provided with Light: the moon and stars. The Inward Light, then, may be extended to times of illness or depression as well as times of good health and joy.

Curiously, in perceiving Christ as a timeless *Logos*, I also appreciate Jesus all the more as a thoroughly human person, one who could be available to that Light as no other

ever has. The recorded words resonate as conversations from a friend should.

I appreciate the Apostle Paul, who never met the historic Jesus and can yet claim intensely personal encounters with Christ.

I have no idea how the universalist theology I've also proposed will develop, how it will approach topics such as sin, whether it will address the question of why there is evil in the world. Is the Light adequate for leading? Or is preparation helpful? If so, what? I'm not even sure if it will help us find a language for praying together comfortably.

What I can say is that none of what I've written here after mentioning John Yungblut's challenge to do personal theology would have been part of my thinking at that time.

For that matter, none of this has been in response to his challenge. The Light leads to unanticipated places!

In other words, God waits for the appropriate moment. The Garden of Eden does reappear, however fleetingly, in a new guise: now, however, the importance is not on avoiding the forbidden fruit as much as in anticipating opportunities for epiphanies in the cool of the afternoon. The New Adam and New Eve are to care for the rest of humanity, not just the plants and animals of their little mountaintop hunting preserve. This, of course, is an example of salvation and its call.

Another example: a typical modern reaction to the story of Noah and the Ark begins to accuse God of abandoning the rest of humanity. Turn the perspective, however, to a contemporary environmental or nuclear

holocaust warning, and the eradication of humanity becomes a natural consequence of accumulated human irresponsibility. (And how may we apply that as a definition of sin?)

So what were the practices of the original Friends? Prayer, fasting, study of Scripture, plus the soup of other currents that fed into their theology – the political, social, and economic upheaval of an extraordinary chapter of world history. There are also the successive generations' backing off from that, ultimately into earthly riches (that capitalist twist). From Levellers and Diggers came descendants who wound up as Whigs and Republicans. And on to our own mix – the New Age or the undefined generic religion, with its own response: how can we stand with something sustained and unique? (Friends can

acknowledge those who left Quaker Meeting for Zen sitting or Catholic orders or the Eastern Orthodox down the street, where – they’ve said – they found something more concrete.)

I see, too, how often we settle for conformity rather than consensus or deep unity. How often, as well, we forget to be loving – even Light-hearted.

In all of this, though, I acquire a deepened appreciation for Quaker *process* – the way we do business, listen beyond the words spoken, carefully sense unity and minute our decisions. Here, especially, we manifest our desire to “walk in the Light.” Which really is a matter of doing personal theology.

## *Bigger Than Jesus*

**W**HEN EARLY QUAKERS PROCLAIMED their faith to be “primitive Christianity restored” from the time “before the dark night of apostasy,” they had no reason to suspect just how accurate their proclamation was. It’s easy to see their enthusiasm in the face of severe persecution as mirroring the first decades of the early church. But what is more remarkable is how closely they apparently recovered and embraced a powerful and wide-sweeping understanding of Christ that was crushed by the hierarchical drive of the Nicene Council in 325 and followed by Augustine, only to be lost in the centuries after. In establishing one strand of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, Constantine had only the previous year moved to suppress

the “heretics and schismatics” who comprised an estimated half of the Christian movement. In the process, the “dark night of apostasy” fell upon the institutionalized faith, leaving only remnants as a clandestine, underground believers’ church throughout Europe.

Because of the severity of the blasphemy laws that constricted early Quaker expression, we’ll never know for certain how close they may have been to an open recognition of the radical logic and practice they were pursuing – or how much was essentially intuitive. Still, in their writings I find enough hints to sum up their revolutionary but largely undelineated theology in five words:

***Christ is bigger than Jesus.***

Let me repeat that. ***Christ is bigger than Jesus.***

If that's accurate, you can see why early Friends were so intensely persecuted. Even without laying out their premise as baldly as I just have, the implications have been there all along. Even today, the statement, "Christ is bigger than Jesus," challenges conventional Christian teaching to the core, as well as a host of assumptions. And, I must confess, it startles me, too, even after years of examining the texts.

To understand what is meant here, we need first to see that *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. While "Jesus" derives from the Greek word for "Joshua," *Christ* has meanings more akin to "blessed" or "anointed." And so, when we hear the phrase used in its inverted order, as often happens in early Quaker writings, we come closer to the richer understanding: Christ Jesus, meaning Blessed Joshua.

The opening chapter of the Gospel of John, especially, enlarges the concept of Christ from a blessing or an anointing. Crucially, John infuses Christ with an ancient Greek philosophical teaching called *Logos*. Briefly, *Logos* expresses a principle of creation, a divine plan, a reconciliation of opposites, a way of knowledge as well as the knowledge itself.

All of this gets lost in translation, unfortunately, when John's term, *Logos*, is instead rendered as "the Word."

John's opening verses also equate Christ with another concept, the Light. This connection proved so central to the emerging Quaker movement that its earliest name was Children of the Light, quoting a phrase found four times in the New Testament – a name that could as

easily be understood as Children of Christ, suggesting the intimacy of the relationship.

Read their writings closely and you'll find that an underlying comprehension of *Logos* accompanies their expressions of Christ and Light. Most of the time, the application of Christ invokes something quite different than the historic person of Jesus.

For early Friends, this Light was *never* an Inner Light – the modern idea of something akin to a candle of conscience within each person. Instead, the Light is instead a powerful beacon that burns into our darkest recesses, if we would allow it, and probes and transforms us – and rarely for early Friends was the process comforting. As Margaret Fell wrote in 1656, “Let the eternal Light search you, and try you for the good of your souls for this will deal

plainly with you. It will rip you up and lay you open, and make all manifest which lodgeth in you the secret subtlety of the enemy of your souls, this eternal searcher and trier of will make manifest. Therefore all to this come and by this be searched and judged and led and guided, for to this you must stand or fall ...”

This is Christ coming into a person’s very being – and reconstructing the individual. It is what we find Paul proclaiming in Romans 8:10, “And if Christ *be* in you”; in 1 Corinthians 2:16, “But we have the mind of Christ”; 2 Corinthians 13:3 “a proof of Christ speaking in me, ... which is mighty in you”; Galatians 2:20 “Christ liveth in me”; Galatians 4:19, “until Christ be formed in you”; Ephesians 3:17-18, “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to

comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height ...”; Philippians 1:21, “For to me to live *is* Christ”; Colossians 1:24, “Christ in my flesh”; or Hebrews 3:14, “For we are made partakers of Christ.” Together, these born-anew people became – and become – the means for establishing God’s kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven, or spirit.

As the Light, Christ is available to all persons, bypassing the constraints of political, military, industrial, financial, educational, governmental, or even religious institutions or authorities. As such, it challenges the very foundations of society, yet holds the potential for instilling justice, regenerating, and bringing healing throughout all.

The consequences of a faith based upon Christ as the Light or *Logos* are immense, and quite different from those

arising from a set of laws constructed around the life of Jesus. A Light-based Christianity is based on direct personal experience of some holy wonder acting upon us as we turn our attention inward. This is visceral rather than theoretical or speculative. It draws on our feelings and emotions and much as our thoughts – on our hearts as much as our minds. It reconciles and harmonizes, rather than split hairs in argument.

Traditional Quaker worship holds the expectation that the Light, or Christ, in our presence, will *reveal* something. (A fitting description, light *revealing*.) Perhaps, too, this Light will open something, much as seeds in the springtime react to sunlight. This Light may even erupt in prophetic utterance as vocal ministry. This Light is to

energize us and make us fruitful, much as sunlight does to plant life.

This Light is also meant to be a Guide in our daily lives, in all of their varied complexity. Historically, Friends saw their faith as a matter of “walking in the Light” and of “minding the Light.” To keep us faithfully on that path, we apply questions rather than creeds – so that the search within will lead us ever deeper into its richness and wisdom – and then join that to our collective discernment and discipleship.

Quaker history stands as a witness to what happens to when a people stand true to these principles – and what happens when they don’t.

A faith based on the Light alone also has its drawbacks. For starters, it can become so ethereal and

diffuse that it loses its substances. And a practice based on personal experience still needs guidelines for aspirants, as well as a common language.

And so to propose that “Christ is bigger than Jesus” will sooner or later bring us to the question of just who Jesus was – and is.

For all of their revolutionary comprehension of Christ as the Light, early Quaker leaders were also adept at drawing upon a more traditional presentation of Jesus as the Incarnation. While this allowed them, in effect, to cover their tracks in public presentations, it also gave their *Logos*-based perspective a grounding. Here Jesus stands as the fullest embodiment of Christ, *Logos*, or the Light – the model of what faithful response can be.

Countless discussions and arguments swirl around just who the historic figure of Jesus was, even before we get to the theological issues of Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Messiah, and so on. This approach is complicated by questions about the historical validity of portions of the data, as well as inherent contradictions among the four canonic gospels. Explanations built along these lines are vulnerable to external challenges; for instance, those scholars who find no evidence that Rome ever called for a general census, much less Herod's massacre of the innocents, would suggest the Nativity story is fatally flawed. Others cut away the contradictions in the texts, looking for some essential common denominator.

Approaching Jesus as the embodiment of the Light, however, opens a much fuller appreciation. What I listen to

here is the *experience* of those who were exposed to one man's life of Light, and the ways it illuminated theirs. Yes, our encounters and perceptions will vary; here, the differences among the gospels are revealing, rather than contradictory. I am free to embrace their range of vision. What they report becomes a standard for each of us in our own walking in the Light. Often, when Jesus speaks in John 14:6-7, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," I hear him speaking as the Light: "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him and have seen him."

For those of us who claim Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, I would urge us to find in that as well a direct experience of Christ as the Light, opening out into a world of both great need and great glory.

For those of us who are baffled by the tenants of traditional Christianity, I would urge us to find in our experience of the sweet mystery of the Light the essence of Christ and then to look for that in the life of Jesus, being free to savor what fits our own encounters.

Either way, the plate is full. “O taste and see that the LORD is good,” as Psalm 34:8 instructs.

As we ponder and pursue the power of the Light as *Logos* and as Christ, let us listen to Jesus in John 14:11-12, 20: “Believe me that I *am* in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater *works* than these shall he do ... I *am* in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you.”

How amazing, and even frightening, that to the extent that we allow Christ to be *in* us, we may together do greater works than Jesus did!

## *Just Sitting*

**M**IND THE LIGHT, QUITE SIMPLY, is the answer to my question of how Friends independently discovered the practice of meditation so common in Asian religious traditions. What Asian practice calls just “sitting” is, curiously, what quietist Friends do – we “sit” in Meeting for Worship!

“Mind the Light” answers the question, “What are you supposed to *do* in the silence?” The phrase guides one’s worship; it’s an alternative to concentrating on one’s breathing or transcending the body or similar directions in other spiritual practices. Instead, we’re also told, “Sink to the Seed.” The two work together. This is more than mere reflection; this is opening oneself to the universe. Follow the Light, then, to the Seed.

The pathway includes deep self-examination and transformation; it opens out on new perspectives of the world and each other. As we return, repeatedly, to “mind the Light,” we also find rest and renewal and “that which is eternal.”

In doing so, we may also hear George Fox quoting his favorite verse, Galatians 2:20: “Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.”

In doing so, we also keep returning to the question, just what is this Light – and how have we experienced it? In the depth of worship one morning, I sense an answer: the Light is also Divine Love! More than any common understanding of “love,” for sure – this is beyond the desire of flesh or attraction, or romantic turmoil, or even family affection and loyalty. Even to speak of this as love, as such,

risks opening it to cheap talk and verbal hijack. Nothing spoken, then, but deep feeling. In the beginning was This Love ...

Even so, This Love – similar to Light – pours into our hearts. Those who open themselves and admit this infusion subsequently become the object of This Love. A lover gives to the beloved, regardless of response. Building on the ancient Quaker metaphor, the Light transforms the Seed as the object of This Love. Awakened, the beloved completes the circle.

I see this awareness suggested in 1 John 4: “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. ... If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby, know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. ... God is love, and he

that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect.” In the course of John’s epistle, we can substitute “light” or “give light” for “love” without losing of meaning – although “love” does direct action more fully than “light” initially does.

Feeling myself a recipient of This Love, I leave the hour of worship, wondering if I can sustain this awareness in something as mundane as trimming the hedges later in the day, to say nothing of the interactions with my wife and children. How challenging it becomes! To pray without ceasing now makes sense as a matter of acting totally within This Love. To be perfect means to embody This Love completely.

This is rarely proves easy. We are too readily distracted or flustered. We trip over our own anger or ego.

We unintentionally hurt others during the week. The list quickly grows. Our own efforts prove insufficient. Thus, I return once more to sit in worship. “Centering,” as we also say in Quaker circles. To sink to the Seed and welcome the Light. Nothing could be more basic, or essential.

## SOME SUGGESTED RELATED READING

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In responding to the question of just what the Society of Friends believes, Jnana Hodson remains astonished by the depth and unity of the theological framework that the early Quakers comprehended but dared not voice fully. Having encountered many modern Friends who openly shy away from theology itself, he is convinced of the importance of reclaiming the vision of the "First Publishers of Truth," as the movement once called itself in emphasizing firsthand experience over secondhand accounts of spiritual insights. He feels it's a perspective with a potential to propel Quaker theology to the frontiers of contemporary intellectual exploration, perhaps even as a unifying paradigm, if we're attentive.



## ALSO BY JNANA HODSON

### Non-Fiction

- Embracing Eden
- Revolutionary Light
- Seasons of the Spirit

### Novels:

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- Hometown News
- Promise
- Peel (as in apple)
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- Daffodil Sunrise
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- Hippie Love
- Subway Hitchhikers
- Third Rail
- With a Passing Freight Train of 119 Cars and Twin Caboose
- Ashram

## Poetry:

- Blue Rock
- In a Heartbeat
- Johnny Badge
- Harbor of Grace
- Waves Rolling Too
- Returning to the Table
- Elders Hold
- Winged Death's Head
- Green Repose
- American Olympus
- Over the Mountain
- Back Pack
- Susquehanna
- Riverside
- Rust & the Wound
- Long Stemmed Roses in a Shattered Mirror
- There Is No Statuary in Our Garden Except for the Plastic Spacemen Occasionally Surfacing
- Home Maintenance
- Rat-Tat Oscar
- Fiddler Crab in the Score
- Six Partitas
- Motets and Psalms
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