

Universalist Friends

The Journal Of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship

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Quaker Universalist Fellowship



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The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our conversation with all who search sincerely. Our mission includes publishing and providing speakers and opportunities for fellowship at regional and national Quaker gatherings.

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In this pamphlet, Lakey divides the strategic use of organized nonviolence into three applications: 1) to achieve social change, 2) to defend existing institutions or situations from outside forces of change, and 3) third-party intervention in cases of conflict. The last application may take at least four forms. Although these are an integral part of the discussion of strategies, they are, oddly, buried in a final endnote. They include accompaniment of endangered people by outsiders; physical interposition of nonviolent protesters between conflicting forces; observation or monitoring of events where violence may erupt, such as trials or elections; and the simple presence of nonviolent observers in tense confrontations. Examples of the applications and strategies, many drawn from Lakey's personal experience, give the analysis vitality and connection with the real world of power and politics.

The pamphlet seems to be an almost literal transcription of the taped Michener Memorial Lecture. Those of us who know George Lakey can sympathize with the desire to preserve the dynamic quality of his oral presentation—the movement, body language, pace, and intensity. But, sadly, the result on the printed page is far from satisfactory. Each medium—be it personal presence, voice, print, film, or computer screen—has its own strengths and demands, and in the art of communication they must be respected. That is what editing is all about.

From The Editor

Currently, I find three areas of concern in Quaker universalism. They are internal, external, and historical. This issue of *Universalist Friends* addresses the internal and the historical.

The internal issue is the relationship between Quaker universalism, Christ-centered Quakerism, and nontheism. "Draft Minute: Theological Diversity within Twin Cities Friends Meeting" explicitly addresses the issue of theological diversity, especially regarding nontheism. The personal essay by Rhyannan of her experience of the goddess, it seems to me, raises in a wonderful way the question of what we are worshiping in Meeting for Worship. With some translation, her experience may represent the experiences of many of us. But, what of the nontheists among us? Is something more than traditional theism being rejected (that old omni-God in the sky who keeps track of whether we are naughty or nice)? I would delight to receive essays on the concept of God the nontheists among us reject—personal essays, one's particular rejected God.

Eric Thompson, an expert on the Hebrew Scriptures, addresses a historical issue. When did the Israelites arrive at a single God for all people—a universal God? Moreover, his concerns have long worried me. A single, universal God easily becomes a rallying cry for forced conversion or murder. In contrast, rather than going to war polytheists add their neighbors' gods to their already resplendent pantheons and join the feasts in their neighbors' temples. I am currently seeking essays from other scholars to complement Eric's contribution to the biblical origin and depiction of universalism.

Finally, the external concern. I wonder how relevant to the world Quaker universalism is and whether someone might

The mission of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is to foster the understanding that within everyone is a directly accessible spiritual light that can lead people to equality, simplicity, justice, compassion and peace.

QUF Steering Committee, November 2005

SUBMISSIONS

We are seeking articles from 500 to 3,000 words. These may be essays on personal experience of arrival or maturation in Quaker universalism or of worship or they may be scholarly works focused on Quaker universalism, history, biography, sociology, scripture, and theology, both Christian and non-Christian. We also welcome book reviews, poetry and letters. Use inclusive language. Please send your submissions by U.S. mail on diskette or CD in WORD to Patricia Williams, P.O. Box 69, Coveseville, VA 22931 or as WORD attachments to email to theologyauthor@aol.com. Please put UF in the subject line. Deadlines January 15 and June 15. We do not accept anonymous submissions without very good reason.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The Elizabeth Ann Bogert Memorial Fund for the Study or Practice of Christian Mysticism, administered by Friends World Committee for Consultation, is offering a grant of up to \$1,000 for proposals. The deadline is March 1. Grants are given annually. Email queries to muccidem@verizon.net. A brochure is available from Friends Center, 506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

Patricia Williams will give a paper titled "Sunday Morning among the Quakers: Experiencing the Latter Reign," to the Westar Institute meeting in Miami Lakes, Florida, March 2-4 and will speak on the 5th at the Miami Friends Meeting on "Quakerism Meets the Historical Jesus."

PAST EVENTS

The Steering Committee met November 12-13, 2005, at Sandy Springs, MD. All ten members attended. Dan Seeger served as clerk, Pat Williams as recording clerk. Other members were George Amoss, Richard Barnes, Rhoda Gilman, Sally Rickerman, Chris Roberts, Jim Rose, Susan Rose, and Larry Spears. Several items were discussed; a new mission statement was approved.

The committee will meet again in the fall, with Dan remaining as clerk.

Book Review

By Rhoda Gilman

New Theory, Old Practice: Nonviolence And Quakers; George Lakey; Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends; 2004; \$6.00.

This is the 34th pamphlet in the Michener Memorial Lecture series and is available from SEYM, Box 510795, Melbourne Beach, FL 32951.

Nonviolence has been a formal testimony of Quakerism since 1660, when Friends decisively rejected violent opposition to the restoration of the British monarchy. Before that the use of arms was not universally eschewed, as David Boulton has pointed out in his essay on Quaker associations with Cromwell's New Model Army, which is reprinted in the most recent QUF pamphlet. Nevertheless nonviolence was often practiced when Friends waged "the Lamb's war" in the 1650s, and it became known as a common tactic of Quakers, especially in such situations as confronting the Puritan theocracy of New England. It is these examples that George Lakey cites as "old practice."

Lakey's real emphasis, however, is upon "new theory." This evolved in the 20th century, and the power of nonviolent civil disobedience along with the commitment of those who practice it, displayed in places like India by Hindus and Muslims and Vietnam by Buddhists, as well as in the American South, has influenced many Friends toward greater universalism in their religious beliefs. It has also turned Friends toward studying the strategies of nonviolence and has produced at least one organized effort to disseminate the knowledge thus gained. That effort is embodied in Training for Change, an organization which grew out of earlier groups led by George Lakey, including A Quaker Action Group (AQUAG) and the Movement for a New Society (MNS).

In our discussions of spiritual and theological diversity, we are perhaps too quick to search for commonalities, for that which transcends the differences between us. This is a worthy effort, but it should not get in the way of our understanding what those differences are. To love genuinely is not to care for people despite their individual peculiarities, nor to ignore those peculiarities, but to care for the person wholly, in full light of those blessed peculiarities. The beauty and richness of human community derives from difference as much as it does from similarity. What could we possibly learn from each other in a world where everyone had the same religious beliefs, political persuasions, family background, or ethnicity?

Similarly, it is not enough to be tolerant of our differences; we need to bring those differences to the surface, rising above our fear of offending or being offended. Speaking in Meeting for Worship requires discernment, to be sure, but this does not mean that we should withhold a message for fear that others might be made uncomfortable by our theology. We do not rightly discern a leading to speak by reflecting on how friends might receive that message, but reflecting on the quality and power of the impulse to speak, and remaining faithful to spirit as we experience it. There are messages and ways of speaking that may be inappropriate in Meeting for Worship, but again, we do not make this distinction according to our agreement or disagreement with the message. It is one thing to deliver a message that expresses the light of our faith that we might kindle such a flame in others; it is quite another thing to proclaim ours as the only true light, or to berate others for being faithful to their own light. This means there is a place in our midst for evangelism in the best sense of that word—an evangelism that might be rooted in Jesus, Buddha, God or Goddess, nature, the hunger for scientific knowledge, or simple human love and compassion.

address this issue or the problems themselves from a universalist perspective. Our world has many violent spots— Hamas has just been elected to rule incipient Palestine, Iran may be seeking weapons of mass destruction, the Balkans remain restless, and terrorism stalks the globe. Economic issues loom as China and India become increasingly big players while Haiti and sub-Saharan Africa house failed states, illegal immigrants crowd into developed countries, and in the United States war debt, health care, and an aging population may combine to wreak havoc. In religion, advocates of intelligent design attack the public school science curriculum while some Mullahs study the Qur'an and find a flat Earth. Meanwhile Christian charismatics convert many, especially in the developing world, to their brand of fundamentalism whose certainty and emphasis on a better life after death have great appeal there. Should Quaker universalists be evangelical—or do we consider our version of religion/worship/compassion worth perpetuating?

Patricia A. Williams

A Note On Elizabeth Watson

By Rhoda Gilman

At last summer's FGC gathering the Quaker Universalist Fellowship formally initiated its series of Elizabeth Watson Lectures with a presentation by Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. The occasion was made doubly memorable by the presence of Elizabeth Watson herself. Recovered from a heart attack that kept her from traveling for several years, she is still quietly radiant at the age of 92. In a recent talk to Quaker women in Minnesota, she spoke of how much the experience of visiting with Bishop Spong and of having her name associated with his lecture had meant to her. It left her, she said, "ready to write four more books."

Why Elizabeth Watson? In giving her name to the series, the steering committee of the QUF recognized that she has consistently championed the purposes and principles of our Fellowship throughout her many years as a leading member of the Society of Friends. In books, pamphlets, lectures, workshops, and years of traveling ministry she has spoken up for universalism and diversity of beliefs along with feminism, environmentalism, and the contributions of gay and lesbian Friends.

Beginning with the years 1972-80 when her husband George served as head of Friends World College, the couple traveled widely. In a lecture (later a pamphlet) co-sponsored by QUF and Pendle Hill in 1991, she identified her journeys throughout the world with her "Journey to Universalism." From India, for example, she says: "I carry the experiential knowledge that there are many paths to God, and that among those who are truly seekers, there is no barrier to communication at the deepest level, though we may not speak the same language or worship in the same way."

Draft Minute:

Theological Diversity Within Twin Cities Friends Meeting

Friends have traditionally rejected the use of creeds, largely from a conviction that no statement of belief can accurately describe or reflect divine reality. There is another compelling reason for us to reject creeds. Over time the spiritual and theological diversity among Friends has become far broader and deeper than early Friends could possibly have imagined. Twin Cities Friends Meeting has fully and joyfully embraced Friends from a great constellation of religious beliefs and traditions. Our community includes Christians, Jews, Buddhists, pagans, atheists, agnostics, and others, along with an even greater diversity of Friends who neither claim nor desire a label to describe their distinctive individual views of whatever is within and beyond us.

Such is the diverse reality of our community. The purpose of this document is to express our gratitude for that diversity and to affirm explicitly that differences along the full range of theological belief, including unbelief, are no barrier to membership, nor to full participation in our beloved religious community.

This is not to say that beliefs, theological or otherwise, are irrelevant to our community, or to the process of becoming a member. On the contrary, one of the great blessings of serving on a clearness committee for membership is the opportunity to understand better the deepest beliefs and spiritual passions of a potential member. What's more, a discussion of such beliefs might in some cases reveal that an applicant does not feel sufficiently drawn to the ways of Friends to become a member. The barrier in such cases is not belief per se, but affinity with our way of being together in religious community, while seeking along our own spiritual paths.

In Quaker tradition, quaking is the sign that a ministry has found that resonance and is to be shared with the Meeting community. Could it be that this quaking is the Shimmering in-filling us at the bodily level in order to “rev” up the energy required to give birth to a message of “truth” in the spoken word? For many Friends, the quaking may occur both before and after, or only after, the message is given. When it does, or when the message we have given leads us ourselves to even deeper/further understandings during the rest of the Meeting for Worship, the truth-value of the message has been confirmed, and we are assured that we have “caught” something of its Universal resonance.

She is “that which is attained at the end of desire” (end of the Wiccan “Charge of the Goddess”): She is the Home of our souls, where we find not only rest and renewal, but re-connect to, and re-integrate with, that Divine Wholism. When a Meeting for Worship has truly been cradled by the Silence, touched by the Shimmering, and given birth to new Light (internally, or outwardly in the form of spoken ministry), there is a sense of deep satisfaction and calm as it comes to a close.

No, we have not solved all of the world’s problems, or even our own, but there is a sense of having come home (which can be described as re-connecting to the deepest sense of “belonging-ness”)—not in spite of, but rather because of it, our spirits feel prepared to venture out into the world again and meet its challenges with an open heart, a clarified mind, and an embracing soul.

Rhyannan is the pen name of Pashta MaryMoon, member of Victoria Monthly Meeting

Is The God Of The Bible Ever Universal?

By Eric M. Thompson

When I was ten years old, I drew a picture of God. I depicted a face only, filling the sky and gazing down upon a world of people. My God singularly lacked condemnation, was both female and male and included a patchwork of every human skin color I knew. I was expressing that God did not belong to a tribe, or race, or creed or gender, but embraced all humanity in love. I thought it was a good idea, the artistic merit of the piece aside, and showed it to my mother who could not hide her chagrin. I thought I was in alignment with her liberal, inclusive values, so I was surprised that she disapproved of my God. I realized later that I had violated a household taboo. My parents were militantly secular. They protected us as far as possible from any exposure to any religion whatsoever. That I was showing a penchant for theology at age 10 was cause for great alarm.

Later, at 17, I became a “born again” fundamentalist. (My father would tell me he had rather I had become a heroin addict.) I thought I had found a relationship with a universal God, adumbrated in my childhood reflections but now realized in fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. After a few zealous years as a Pentecostal, I embarked on a career in Biblical scholarship, which gradually withered my fundamentalist faith. During the course of my studies I shifted my academic focus from the New Testament and Christian theology to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). In hindsight I realize that my choices were governed by a quest for a truly universal God, one who, like my childhood drawing, transcended chauvinistic particularity.

I would discover that the Hebrew Bible contains diverse theological ideas. It was composed over several centuries, through a long process of selection, editing and transmission.

Critical analysis of the Bible reveals not only a variety of God-beliefs, but perhaps an evolution of those beliefs through time. Tracing this history is a favorite pastime these days (note many recent books with titles like *A History of God*, *God: A Biography*, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, etc.). Some are more popular, some more academic, but most seem to agree on some broad conclusions, like the fact of theological diversity and the historical moment of the emergence of monotheism, though they have differing personal responses to these conclusions. Assuming that my readers are not necessarily intimately familiar with the Hebrew Bible or Biblical scholarship, I will give a brief introduction to these as they relate to the quest for a universal God. I will focus on a recent article by Andre Lemaire in *Biblical Archaeology Review* because it concisely states the case of where in history scholars locate the origins of monotheism and thus universality in the Biblical tradition. Its title, “The Universal God: How the God of Israel Became a God for All” is aptly stated as a thesis to test: Is the God identified in analyses like these universal in a sense that is useful for us?

As edited, the Bible tells a more or less coherent story. God creates the world, people disobeyed him, and he drowns everyone except Noah and family. The survivors repopulate the earth (Genesis 1-11). God chooses one family, promises them land not their own (Canaan) and progeny. They multiply and end up in Egypt (Genesis 12-50). 400 years later they are a nation of slaves. God chooses Moses to lead them out, revealing to him God’s proper name: Yahweh. They leave after 10 plagues, wander in the desert for 40 years receiving commandments, developing a special contractual relationship with God (a “covenant”), and experiencing many miracles (both blessings and punishments). Yahweh kills lots of people in this part of the Bible, usually for 1) failing to obey him; and 2) for challenging Moses’ absolute authority. The “covenant” between Israel and Yahweh stipulates that Israel will worship no other

space. Meeting for Worship is an instance, a time/space pocket, of “Shimmering-full” existing within and without each individual and the Meeting as a whole.

She is the Womb in which Her Spirit/Light son is born; the World He is born into; and the Tomb that He must return to in order to transform—for the Spirit is alive, and being alive means change and transformation: and the Spirit, which we understand as moving us within a Meeting for Worship, is the spirit of the “perfectly transformable,” that which is eternally “resurrection” to new Light. Ministry, whether held within or spoken, is a Light that is drawn into the “discernable” from the Darkness, a movement (of soul/heart/mind) that is activated within the Stillness, a message that is given shape within the “in-describable.”

Ministry is born from Silence: He is Her child, Her Son, for the Son is that which carries the Silence’s gifts to the world of Light—the world of shapes and boundaries, and words. When ministry “speaks” to/for the worshipping community, immediately or over time, it is Her Son “guiding voice”—carrying us through the death of old boundaries (personal patterns, cultural paradigms, etc.). It is the transformation within the tomb/womb of the All-Soul (the eternally creating Silence/Darkness) and the resurrection into new understandings and paradigms, commitment to “out-picturing/living” them in our world. Thus, Meeting for Worship, as an intentional pocket of Shimmering-full, is the womb which gives birth to “new Light,” and the leadings of the Spirit. *Her Shimmering reveals Truth, for illusionary and superficial trappings fall away in the intentional presence of that Universal vibration.* Truth is often described as being “naked.” I would suggest that this is intended to imply that it has been stripped of all of the conflicts and confusing choices that a time/space reality insists upon. Truth is not a thing that can be grasped in a hand, or shaped into words: rather, it is a quality, that which finds resonance with/in the whole of the Universe.

separated into directed instances of “doing.” She is that which cradles and infuses the Meeting for Worship with the power of Divine Potentiality. The true implication of worship for me, is opening one’s self to this power.

She is that which draws us, individually and collectively, deeper and deeper into the “well” of Meeting for Worship, fed from Her own Being. Here we are not only nurtured and re-newed/vived, and share nurturing with one another, but our own mundane boundaries, like rivers, flood outwards to merge with the oceans of the World Soul. This Presence/Power has no shape/form—nothing that we can grasp by hand, sight, or word. She is utter Darkness – the Darkness that held all creation before its birth, that surrounds and in-fills the Universe and to which all this Universe’s denizens will return when Its particular “story” has been told. In the depth of the Silence in Meeting for Worship, our hearts and minds may flood outward to embrace not only all that has ever been, is, or will be, but its very source.

She is that which we can “know,” when we open ourselves to be “touched,” in an embrace to which “inner” and “outer” become irrelevant. In Her, Deep calls to Deep, for She is the Soul of our souls. This Presence/Power is that whose “centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere”; whose Shimmering penetrates all that has shape/form and all that does not. We have no words to describe this Connectedness that extends to the elusive edges of Deep Space, so we hint at it through terms like “waves” and “echoes.” And paradoxically, it is the sense of echoes, even of stillness “bouncing” back from the elusive edges and wrapping like living waves around and through us that sings the deepest of all lullabies: “you are not alone: never alone.”

We should not be surprised. This Shimmering is the essential paradox from which the Universe is created—galaxy, star, planet, and all living beings—in which Maya, the necessary illusion of shape and boundary, enfolds pockets of this Shimmering-full “empty” space; enfolded and nested always, themselves, by that (ever-volumer) Shimmering-full, “empty”

God and in turn Yahweh will bless, enrich, empower, and protect them (see Deut. 28). They end up on the brink of the “promised land” (Exodus-Deuteronomy). Moses dies. His successor, Joshua, leads the people into the “promised” land, where they had been commanded to consign the indigenous populations to absolute genocide (Joshua). Canaanites must not be permitted to live because they will tempt the Israelites to serve “foreign gods” (Deut. 7).

The occupation of the land turns out to be messy because they didn’t have a king (Judges). So they appoint a king and are a unified, powerful nation for a short time (I & II Samuel). Then they split into two nations. The one, Israel in the north, lasts about 200 years, then is destroyed by the Assyrian empire because they worshipped other gods (II Kings 18:11,12). The other, Judah to the south, lasts for about 340 years before Babylon destroys them and their Temple (II Kings 22-24). The political and religious leadership of Judah is taken into exile in Babylon. The “Babylonian Exile” lasted not quite 50 years, 586-539 BCE. The story continues in Ezra-Nehemiah, and in the prophetic literature, telling about the return of the exiles to reestablish life and religion in Judah (now the Persian province of Yehud). These survivors of Judah give us the term “Jew.”

Through most of this story the deity seems confined to, and only interested in, Israel. During the exile, however, prophets claim to have communications from this God in a foreign place—Babylonia!—and universal themes emerge: God uses other nations as tools in dealing with his chosen people. All nations will come to Jerusalem to learn torah, Yahweh is the only God, others don’t exist. This prophetic monotheism is read back into the pre-exilic situation by Biblical editors and by centuries of Jewish, Christian and Islamic interpretation. The scholarly story, on the other hand, from the data of archaeology and finer methods of analysis, tells of polytheistic “debris” in the Bible and of monolatry rather than monotheism

as the religious situation before the exile. Monolatry is the demand to *worship* one God exclusively though others exist. So a true monotheism seems to emerge for the first time during and as a result of the exilic experience. But is this monotheism a step down the road to universalism? Are they the same thing? I think it's important for understanding Biblical monotheism to understand a bit about biblical polytheism and monolatry. I'll give a couple examples of each of these before discussing monotheism. Note: all Biblical references are my own translation from the Hebrew text, but should correspond recognizably to published English translations.

At many points the divine world envisioned in the Bible is very similar to the divine family of the Canaanite pantheon—the culture that forms the matrix of Biblical Israel. At the head of a divine council was a couple, El and Asherah. Their numerous children were collectively the “sons (children) of El,” the chief of whom was the storm god Baal, known to Bible readers as Yahweh’s principle rival in Israel (I Kings 18). Variations of phrases that refer to this polytheistic divine world are abundant in the Bible: the council of El, the council of the gods, the sons of the gods, the sons of El and so on (Job 1:6, 2:1; Gen. 6:1-4; Psalm 29:1-2, etc.). Deuteronomy 32:8-9 in the traditional Hebrew text reads:

When Elyon (“Most High”—an epithet of El) divided their inheritance to the nations, when he divided the sons of humanity, he established the boundaries of the peoples by the number of the sons of Israel. For Yahweh’s portion is his people; Jacob his allotted share.

What does that “*number* of the sons of Israel” mean? Israel/Jacob had 12 sons (tribes). There are a lot more than twelve nations. The Dead Sea Scrolls (ancient manuscripts containing the earliest copies of the Bible yet found) contain fragments from this section of Deuteronomy 1000 years older than the

Silence, the emptying of inner busyness so that our psyches are freed to resonate with the Silence that enfolds us. Nature (physical or psychic) abhors a vacuum: as we empty ourselves of our internal busyness, Silence rushes in to fill us with Her Presence. Thus are we touched in the most intimate and all-inclusive of ways—similarly, but more profoundly than sex. When Silence truly “in-fills” and “touches” the Meeting for Worship, all present are re-connected in a way that may exist deep below conscious awareness, but can be felt.

It is She who “gathers” a room full of diverse individuals into a “gathered Meeting.” Within a Meeting for Worship, Silence weaves a tapestry of our thoughts, feelings and very lives, which goes “beyond the veil” of Maya (the necessary illusion of separate things/beings and actions); a liminal space in which we are able to become “re-solved” beyond mind; the net/web where we are able to “in-fuse” beyond self. As we open ourselves to Her Presence within, we also become aware of how deeply we are within Her. The sense of this tapestry, this Presence, can become almost tangible when a Meeting for Worship is truly gathered.

She is with/in us, as if an unspeakable calm wisdom saturates our very souls; as if the ocean of this blue planet and the depths of deep space sing within every atom of our being. We cannot speak of Her except in metaphors—“as if”—for Her very nature defies all lines, edges, boundaries, and therefore, definitions. Silence is the deep penetrating song of the Uni-verse—a Shimmering vibration—from which all melodies arise like ripples on the surface of the ocean. We mistakenly define silence as “not sound”: true Silence is pre-sound, the “beyond” which engenders and gestates sound. Likewise, we are mistaken—in our human bias towards that which moves—about true Stillness, which is not “not movement,” but pre-movement; the potentiality for all movement, Shimmering. Thus, we also tend to degrade pure Presence, as “not power” and therefore, not active: Presence is Power Being, Shim-mering—Itself, and all of Itself, rather than

ripples, or “the Divine which we are IN”—is rarely used, and the infinitely rich “darkness” retains its patriarchal value of evil/bad/mistaken/de-pressed/devouring. Still, I was not looking for the Goddess Herself in Quakerism.

Until one day quite recently, I noticed that I had heard Friends repeatedly state that “the Silence is not the point, only the medium.” Although I understood what they meant, my soul cried out “Mother, will this always be Your fate—to be degraded to the “mere vessel”? This cry returned during a Meeting for Worship, and I realized that I had found Her, probably (albeit unknowingly) at the very beginning of my journey within Quakers. I hadn’t recognized Her, because of my own inner obsession with the wa/onderings of Her Spirit/Light son. Her name is The Silence.

She is the deep soothing cradle that I (attempt to) settle into when Meeting for Worship begins. Silence is not merely an absence of noise, but a sense of deep and infinitely volumer Presence—one that cannot be defined by, or limited to, “thing-ness” (noise, or otherwise). Even nothingness empties itself into No-thing-ness; not a lack of Presence, but rather ultimate Presence, where the illusionary “lines” of thing-ness—of distinctive object, thought, concept, outer senses—dissolve. For me, worship begins with a dissolving into the Silence, allowing Her to cradle me, making it safe for me to loosen myself from the boundaries of daily/mundane concerns.

She is the Soul of our souls that embraces us, individually and collectively, in-filling us with the infinite potentiality She enfolds; allowing us to loose the fetters of the matter-ized time/space where all becomes possible. John Punshon, in “Encounters with Silence” states (rightly, I believe) that “Silence is defined from the outside, stillness from within” (pg 8), but goes on to declare that “Silence is simply a preparation for being still, the means of worship, not the worship itself” (pg 11). I disagree (although I admit that the disagreement may be mostly semantics). Stillness, to my mind, is the means by which we attune to the

standard text. One DSS fragment reads “according to the number of the sons of El” (instead of “sons of Israel”). Another fragment has, “according to the number of the sons of the gods.” This reading corresponds to ancient Greek translations as well. This older reading suggests a picture of the divine world like the Canaanite one. It appears that the Hebrew text was changed by scribes to avoid the polytheistic implication, which is that Elyon (El), as head of the council, divides peoples into nations corresponding to the number of his divine sons, like an emperor divvying up the provinces to relatives and cronies. Yahweh is one of the sons of El, whose portion, i.e. jurisdiction, is Israel.

Elsewhere in the Bible Yahweh stands at the head of the pantheon of “sons of *elohim*.” (*Elohim* is the most frequent Hebrew word translated “God.” It is plural in form, literally “gods,” but it is frequently singular in meaning.) One Psalm seems to depict his hostile takeover of the divine council:

Elohim stations himself in the council of *El*; In the midst of the *elohim* he judges . . . I say, you all gods (*elohim*), sons of *Elyon* all of you; surely like a human you all will die, and like one of the chiefs you all will fall.

Psalm 82:1, 6, 7

One of many artifacts found in Israel is worthy of mention in this connection. A pot, dating from the late Judean monarchy, found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, bears a drawing of two half-human/half-animal figures, (some see lions, some bulls) and a woman playing a harp in the background. Both lions and bulls were common symbols of deity in the ancient near east. The inscription in Hebrew reads in part, “I blessed you to Yahweh of Samaria and to his Asherah” (Zevit 390-392). Clearly in the minds of some ancient Yahweh worshippers, including some who contributed material that found its way into the Bible, Yahweh was one member of the divine council and had a wife.

Now, a couple examples illustrating monolatry.

Yahweh is a man of battle! Yahweh is his name.

Who is like you, Yahweh, among the gods?

Ex. 15:3, 11

I am Yahweh your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . you shall have no other gods beside me . . . for I Yahweh your god am a jealous god . . .

Deut. 5:6-9; Ex. 20: 2-5

The first pair of quotes comes from a context in which Yahweh has defeated the Egyptian gods (Ex. 7-14). The second illustrates that the nature of Yahweh's covenant with Israel is like a marriage contract (a metaphor repeatedly invoked by the prophets): exclusive sexuality (worship) but not *ontological* exclusivity. Biblical monolatry perhaps finds its quintessential expression in the religious reforms of Josiah (640-609 BCE) in which, on pain of death, Yahweh was not only to be worshipped exclusively, but worshipped only in one single place: the Temple in Jerusalem (II Kings 22-23; Deuteronomy 12). If Yahweh was to survive as Israel's God, something had to change in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction.

Clear monotheistic statements find superlative expression in "Second Isaiah." The book of Isaiah consists of 66 chapters. Because of differences in style, themes, and, most especially, historical references, scholars divide the book into three distinct works from three different contexts. Isaiah 1-39 belongs to the pre-exilic situation, Isaiah 40-55 ("Second Isaiah") to the end of the exilic period, and Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66, to the post-exilic period.

Thus says Yahweh, king of Israel and his redeemer,
Yahweh of armies:

I am the first and the last, and apart from me there
are no gods.

A Goddess Called "The Silence"

By Rhyannan

When I started coming to Meeting for Worship 31 years ago, I was not looking for a Goddess—or even a God, for that matter. It was enough to "feel" the Silence, the deeper meanings of the ministry for me (no matter what religious "Mother Tongue" it was given in), and the Spirit working within me.

I knew, even younger as I went to Bible study class (against my parents' wishes), that I was not a Christian. This "older brother" named Jesus had deep personal significance for me, but not as a Christian "god," or even the "son" of one. It wasn't until 7 years later that I discovered that I was Wiccan—a personal spiritual path that I can now trace back to my earliest memories. At that time, there were almost no books, no available established traditions. I had to work out what being Wiccan meant on my own (and with the help of a few friends). Just as my childhood relationship with this "older brother" called Jesus—and my "other mother," the Moon—never caused any sense of division or conflict in me, neither did my being Wiccan and Quaker; although I did keep silent about my more Wiccan perspective in Meeting for Worship (that is, I often refused to minister against the quaking because of what I knew I would say). Still, I wasn't consciously attempting to find the Goddess in Quakerism. It was enough that "God-language" was not overly used, and I understood what it meant to be moved by the Spirit.

Over time however, I did become disquieted about the more subtle bias towards male-principle symbols in Quaker language. The Spirit, the Light, "moving/guiding/leading" us, "the voice within," "that of God within us all," the way forward, "leadings"—all of these words/phrases imply attributes of the God (note: "the God," not "God"—the polaric equal of the Goddess). The language of the Soul—"shaping/molding/in-filling" us, the wholism/ocean on which we are the surface

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Is there a god besides me?

There is no rock (= god), none I know.

Is. 44:6,8

So how did the exiled Judeans, at least the prophets among them, develop the concept that Yahweh was the only God, a God Universal? As Lemaire explains, many other kingdoms, for example the Philistines, were also exiled by Babylon, and were assimilated. Typically in that historical and religious context, a defeated people, especially if they were forced to live in the conquering culture, would consider their deities defeated by the stronger ones of the victors. They would likely shift their worship to those stronger deities. Judah survived as a people, whereas the Philistines did not, precisely because of its theological innovation. Yahweh had been tied to the land and the Temple. All that was now destroyed. But among the Judean prophets and religious leaders, Yahweh reveals himself in visions and continues to communicate. "Yahweh is active everywhere his people reside. He is in the process of becoming a universal God" (Lemaire 59).

In addition to the belief that Yahweh was active outside his holy land, the prophets allege that Judah's ill fate was not the result of Yahweh's impotence, nor of the superior strength of Babylon's gods, but is the result of Yahweh's punishment of Israel for (mostly theological) sins. Yahweh's tools are other nations, so he controls them. Another factor is that monotheistic statements are almost always in a context of polemic against idols. Divine statues were everywhere; moreover they symbolized Babylonian dominance and Judean defeat. Prophetic arguments against the *reality* of gods made of wood and metal, with heavy doses of satire and ridicule (Is. 44:9-20) were rhetorically powerful and provided an ironic reversal: those boastful Babylonians foolishly believe their gods helped them defeat an insignificant nation like us; in reality, our God is the only God who is using them like pawns. The evidence? Their gods are made of sticks and stones! Ha! They

can't even walk, but have to be carried. (Lemaire 58; Smith 179-194).

Some scholars add to these factors the production of scripture: a *written* word of God, also a significant religious innovation: “. . . the rise of written prophecy and written Scripture more broadly, aided various exilic and post-exilic Judeans in their religious quest to understand the God of Israel. (Accordingly we might even say that the text substitutes for land)” (Smith 194). So, “Yahweh is no longer connected to the territories of Israel and Judah and to his Jerusalem Temple, but is now a God living among his people even if they are in exile. Soon, he will no longer be exclusively God of Israel, but a universal God for all the peoples. In this way Yahwism adapted to the conditions of the Judahites exiled in Babylonia” (Lemaire 59).

The sky is my throne and the earth is my footstool;
where is the house you will build for me?

Is. 66:1

But is Yahweh, in this scenario, becoming a God for all? I am uncomfortable with this conclusion. For one thing, Yahweh's retains his jealousy and penchant for slaughter of non-conformists. From III Isaiah:

I have trampled the peoples in my anger and made them drunk in my rage.

Is. 63:6

But you are those who reject Yahweh, who forget my holy mountain; who prepare for Gad (a deity) a table; and fill up for Meni (a deity) a libation. Therefore I will number you for the sword and you shall all bow down to the slaughter; because when I spoke you did not answer . . .

Is 65:11,12

and the book happily closes with

. . . it shall happen . . . that all flesh will come to prostrate themselves before me, says Yahweh. And

they will go out and look upon the corpses of the people who have transgressed against me; for their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

Is. 66:23,24

The difference between monotheism and monolatry seems to be that Yahweh's demand for exclusive worship, on pain of death, now extends to all nations whereas before he only cared about Israel's faithfulness and only punished its failure.

Furthermore, this move to monotheism, it seems to me, creates a thoroughgoing supersessionism. The immediate consequence of Yahweh going universal is that his religion supersedes, and nullifies, everyone else's. A truly universal God would be the source of, and celebrate, human diversity rather than violently demand conformity.

Many in the Western traditions assume that monotheism is a good thing. This religious innovation in Babylonian exile is the foundation of the “Abrahamic” faiths, which are uniquely “Peoples of the Book.” The trajectory of this monotheism proceeds to Jewish supersessionism of Samaritans, Christianity of Judaism, Islam of Christianity and Judaism and so on. Universalism or successive religious imperialisms?

These observations lead me to wonder if the former polytheistic situation wasn't actually better from a universalist point of view. At least it seems more conducive to tolerance of diversity. This brings me back to my childhood drawing in which I tried to comprehend unity and diversity together. And it brings me to the Quaker tradition of locating God's revelation not “in the letter [scripture] which kills, but in the Spirit which makes alive.” It also brings me to a scriptural statement from a different tradition that ends all scriptural statements:

Just as a reservoir is of little use when the whole countryside is flooded, scriptures are of little use to the illumined man or woman, who sees the Lord everywhere.

Bhagavad Gita 2:46, (trans. Eknath Easwaran)