

THE GOSPEL AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Man's religious quest has taken different forms in different ages. In the Middle Ages people were haunted by the spectre of death. Wars and plagues of all kinds made life short and uncertain. What was sought from religion was confidence and assurance in the face of the universal enemy--death.

In the Age of Reformation the religious quest changed its direction. Instead of preoccupation with death, the man of the Reformation was preoccupied with sin and the consequences of sin. Religion that promised to wipe out the debt to God incurred by sin made a strong appeal.

The twentieth century saw the culmination of a mass assault on the problem of death. The resultant problem of matching resources to increasing population has been met by making mass production a major aim of society. The new man, "mass man," is shaped by this aim. He has become a cog in the wheel of the machinery of mass production. He does not know who he is, he does not see purpose in life beyond keeping the machinery going. Within this faceless mass of humanity, there are signs of revolt against the suffocating sameness of mass existence.

Another feature of twentieth century life has been the concentrated attack on the ideas of sin and guilt. The evil that people do has been dissociated from a God who calls them to righteousness and holds them responsible for what they do. The wrong-doer is now regarded as sick and in need of a doctor. Psychiatry, as an extension of medical science, attempts to deal with the disintegration of personality resulting from feelings of guilt. This is accomplished by denying the presence of real guilt, thus reducing the sense of guilt in the patient. Where this process is followed, there is a reduction of tension to the point where the disturbed person can resume more or less normal living. But reintegration of personality does not result from this kind of treatment.

Cut off by the Freudian illusion from any real deliverance from a guilty relation to God, the burdened souls of today mistakenly believe that they are cured, when by this means or that they deafen themselves to "the rumble of the distant drum." And so the world has become filled with relaxed people who have closed their ears to the voice that filled them with divine discontent. These swell the numbers of the lost.

These are some of the features of twentieth century life that have made the religious quest of man today a quest for *identity*. If medieval man was preoccupied with death, and reformation man was preoccupied with sin, man in the nuclear age is preoccupied with his lostness.

There is something religious about this search for individuality in the age of mass man, but this search seldom flows along established religious channels. It has a strong antipathy for traditional religion and often is a search for identity outside of religion and outside of God. Quest for identity is not peculiar to the twentieth century, but it has emerged as the salient feature of the religious consciousness of our time.

The purpose of this paper is to compare some modern philosophical approaches to the problem of self-knowledge to the prophetic Christian understanding as exemplified by George Fox.

One modern attempt to deal in a systematic way with the problem of self is based on the ideas of George Gurdjieff (d. 1949). The appeal of this philosophy is primarily to the sense of lostness that has become so acute in modern man. Since Gurdjieff's ideas are not very widely known, I am going to quote from parts of Gurdjieffian literature that describes the problem of selfhood. Later I will refer to the Gurdjieffian answer to this problem along with some of the better known answers.

The Gurdjieff system begins with the assertion that man as we know him "cannot have a single I." His I changes as quickly as his thoughts, feelings, and moods, and he makes a profound

mistake in considering himself always one and the same person; in reality *he is always a different person*, not the one he was a moment ago. P. D. Ouspensky, the official interpreter of the ideas of George Gurdjieff in England in the '30s and '40s, sets forth the problem in the following way:

"Man has no individual I. But there are, instead, hundreds and thousands of separate small I's, very often entirely unknown to one another, never coming into contact, or, on the contrary, hostile to each other, mutually exclusive and incompatible. . . .

The alternation of I's, their continual obvious struggle for supremacy, is controlled by accidental external influences. . . . There is nothing in man able to control this change of the I's, chiefly because man does not notice, or know of it; he lives always in the last I. Some I's, of course, are stronger than others. But it is not their own conscious strength; they have been created by the strength of accidents or mechanical external stimuli. . . .

[Each] separate small I is able to call itself by the name of the Whole, . . . This explains why people so often make decisions and so seldom carry them out. A man decides to get up early beginning from the following day. One I, or group of I's, decide this. But getting up is the business of another I who entirely disagrees with the decision and may even know absolutely nothing about it. . . . It is the tragedy of the human being that any small I has the right to sign cheques and promissory notes and the man, that is, the Whole, has to meet them." ⁽¹⁾

"[A] great many of our I's . . . are divided into certain groups . . . by circumstances of life . . . [which] manifest themselves as roles that a man plays in his life.

[Each role] corresponds to one set of conditions . . . man himself seldom notices these differences . . . sometimes they are better hidden or even played only inside without any external manifestations. All people, whether they know it or not, whether they wish it or not, have certain roles which they play. This acting is unconscious . . . or . . . one persuades oneself that one is doing it on purpose. . . . In reality the change is always controlled by circumstances."⁽²⁾

Closely allied to the problem of identity is the problem of "will." Where is true freedom to be found? How can the man of today find release from the forces that would captivate him? How can a being who does not know who he is say, "I will this?"

The Gurdjieff system asserts that there is a real I in every man and that there is a method or technique by which this I can be developed. It is the product of continuous conscious effort and intentional suffering. Will is the ability of this I to use and control the entire human mechanism of which it is the conscious self. Thus, self-knowledge and real will are achieved by methodology alone. Further, man's quest for self-consciousness and his labors to attain it are motivated by self-interest. Man must believe in the Creator-God, but he need not love or fear him. Man is independent of God and God is indifferent to man.

There is no ought or should in the Gurdjieff system. The self-conscious person, like God, "orders all things according to the counsels of his own will." Everything that increases self-consciousness is good, and everything that decreases self-consciousness is bad. Fellow human beings are regarded as a means to be used for the development of one's own consciousness. This does not lead to a sense of unity in community as a redemptive force in history.

Some other approaches to self-knowledge that could be considered include the Socratic approach and classical western mysticism.

The Socratic approach begins with the assumption that lack of knowledge of the self is simply a form of ignorance which must be overcome in the same way that every other form of ignorance is

overcome--that is, by replacing ignorance with knowledge. "The soul . . . suffers itself to be dominated by the things of sense and the objective world and be drawn by them into the illusory reality of flux and finitude. . . ." ⁽³⁾ The soul must be recalled from the many to the one and this is done by the exercise known as "recollection." "The soul . . . must be cross-questioned out of its ignorance and into itself." ⁽⁴⁾ This is clearly an act of self-redemption because self-knowledge is accessible without recourse to divine help.

In classical Western Mysticism, the real self is understood in terms of the metaphysical proposition that the soul of man is essentially one with the soul of the universe. The only genuine realization of selfhood comes through a movement away from all personal selfhood and towards mystic absorption of the particular self into the soul of God or the soul of the universe. In all mysticism of this sort the "problem of sin as a moral disjunction between God and man made actual by an act of defiance and disobedience was effectively sublimated into a metaphysical problem." ⁽⁵⁾ The presence of this kind of mysticism in the history of Christianity is due to the influence of Plotinus and Neo-Platonism on the medieval Christian mind. We call it "Christian" mysticism because it appeared among Christians and is a chapter in the history of Christianity, but the source of this kind of religion lies outside the Bible and the Christian revelation.

This is not to claim that there is no possibility of experiencing this kind of self-knowledge, but it does not lead to a greater understanding of the meaning of life or of the world.

The Christian approach to the problem of self-knowledge takes as its starting point the view of man that is set forth in the Bible: that people were not created to have a self-conscious existence independent of God. It is the Creator who reveals what is good and what is evil. Man's life is characterized by his dependence on God. When this relationship is broken, the primary law of man's being is broken, and his life becomes a deformation of the life intended for him by the Creator.

Emil Brunner says: "The final ground of personality is not to be found in self-consciousness, nor even in the act of will; to begin there means to desire to understand man severed from God as person, and that means, to fall a prey to that primal misunderstanding about oneself . . . the right religious self-consciousness of man is this: Man becomes conscious of himself in the Word of God. The isolated self-consciousness, the 'cogito ergo sum,' is the result of apostasy." ⁽⁶⁾ Sartre's existentialism is the ultimate of this "isolated self-consciousness." When each man builds a universe of meaning that is valid for himself alone this is Babel. This is insanity.

Self-knowledge from the Christian standpoint is only a possibility where the relation of dependence is experienced. This is an experience of hearing and obeying. Brunner says, . . . self-knowledge can only be complete when God really speaks to man." ⁽⁷⁾ "Man, who cannot avoid desiring to understand himself, . . . can only understand himself truly and realistically when he understands himself in the light of faith in the Creator revealed in Christ ⁽⁸⁾ ". . . faith is a definite experience of self-knowledge; . . . we learn to understand ourselves in the light of God and in his revelation." ⁽⁹⁾ "From the point of view of Christian faith, personality is not something given, which only needs development, but it is a relation. Personality is rooted in the relation to God. It is that "self" of man which is called into existence by the divine "Thou." Its center is responsibility, understood as the response to God's call." ⁽¹⁰⁾

In the seventeenth century, George Fox experienced all the terrors of those who know themselves to be guilty in God's sight, but he found a way through to peace with God without

denying the reality of his guilt feelings. He came through the gate guarded by a flaming sword.(Gen. 3:24) It is no accident that the device he choose for his personal seal was a flaming sword.

Fox sees the problem of self-knowledge entirely in terms of the relation of man to his Creator. He, like the Bible writers, speaks of the "Light," God's Word to us which is Jesus Christ. Fox experienced this "light that enlightens every man . . ." (John 1:9) as God's son speaking to God's people. He says, "With the light man sees himself, which light comes from Christ."⁽¹¹⁾ Self-discovery through the light of Christ is experienced as obedience to the call for righteousness.

Righteousness is the right behavior that God calls for and it often appears in conflict with right behavior according to human standards. The call of God is not only to do the good rather than the bad, but to do the good that God requires rather than some other kind of good.

Fox sees the light of Christ as a revealer and teacher of a new righteousness. Not only deeds that are manifestly evil but deeds that arise from our attempt to live a moral life outside of God and Christ are brought under condemnation by the light. He says that "the light lets you see your deeds . . . whether they be wrought in God or no."⁽¹²⁾

The light of Christ also requires that "self be denied." What is this "self" that must be denied? The self that Fox is drawing our attention to is that self that is gradually formed in us as we attempt to find ourselves outside of God and God's word to us. He says that they that turn from the light of God in them, take on the nature of brute beasts,⁽¹³⁾ but that the light will throw the searchlight on these sub-human features in us. In every case, Fox tells us that human personality is a deformation of what God intended and is the result of turning from the light of God and God's good spirit and the consequent loss of God's image.

To Gurdjieff, personality is a kind of shell which man has acquired in the course of his life and which becomes thicker and harder with the passage of time. It seldom has any vital connection with the true potential or "essence" of a person. This essence can be actualized only through conscious cultivation.

To depth psychology, essence is perceived as a seedling that has a life and destiny of its own that will unfold and grow to maturity if it can be reached and freed from the hampering domination of false personality. In either case, natural growth or conscious cultivation, essence has a life of its own. It is the true self or real I, as opposed to counterfeit self or false personality.

For George Fox this essence is neither a potentiality that is to be cultivated nor a seedling that can be brought into natural growth. "What is that," asks Fox, "which the . . . children of disobedience are disobedient to? . . . Is not this something of God that is disobeyed? Is it not that which is of God manifest in them, which God hath shown them, which lets them see God's judgements are upon such when they act unrighteously?" (Romans 1:18-19)⁽¹⁴⁾ "Mind that which is pure [in you] which keeps you in the fear of the Lord God."⁽¹⁵⁾ Further, he says, "Dwelling in that which is pure . . . it commands your own reason to keep silent, and to cast your own thoughts out,"⁽¹⁶⁾ and, "The pure eye and ear will be opened to hear God."⁽¹⁷⁾

The seat of true identity is found only in hearing and obeying the speaking God. It is found through a relationship to God and not through self-realization. The self that stands all by itself and nourishes a self-conscious life of its own apart from God is not acceptable to God. In God and Christ we can find out who we are without plunging into the depths of despair. Fox says, "The light will let you see [your] evil deeds . . . and whether your deeds be wrought in God, and if you believe

in the light . . . you will . . . receive power from Christ, from whence the light comes . . . to stand against the evil, which he hath given you a light to see,"⁽¹⁸⁾ and ". . . it is the light that discovers all this, and the love of God to you. . . . So, wait upon God in that which is pure . . . and stand still in it . . . to see your saviour to make you free from that which the light doth discover to you to be evil."⁽¹⁹⁾

Fox saw the connection between denying oneself and taking up the cross. In his *Journal* he describes the first workings of the Lord with him in these words: "There did a pure fire appear in me . . . and then the spiritual discerning came into me, by which I did discern my own thoughts . . . and what it was that did veil me and what it was that did open me. And that which could not abide in the patience nor endure the fire, in the Light I found to be the groans of the flesh (that could not give up to the will of God), which had veiled me, and that could not be patient in all trials . . . and *could not give up self to die by the cross*"⁽²⁰⁾(emphasis mine).

The "giving up self to die," the "giving up to the will of God," and the "patience to endure the fire" are the terms by which Fox describes the inner change that came over him and transformed him from a being in the depths of despair, to a being with faith and hope. He felt the presence of God as a refining fire which ". . . trieth all things,"⁽²¹⁾ but which was, none the less, the love of God as it ". . . let me see myself as I was without him."⁽²²⁾

The self or false personality is "judged out" by the light and a new life appears in them who ". . . walk in him the new and living way, out of the old way."⁽²³⁾ He says, "all may be made God's free men and women, to serve God in the new life, and in the new and living way, showing forth the fruits of the new heart and new spirit,"⁽²⁴⁾ "for, it is the life, and the living and walking in the truth that must answer the witness of God in all people."⁽²⁵⁾ Fox describes the Christians vocation as ". . . showing the new life to them that be in the old."⁽²⁶⁾

To be made "God's free men and women" means to be made: ". . . free from the devil, free from all false ways, false worships and teachers, free from being subject [to] the serpent and old Adam, so free men [and] women to serve the Lord in the new life . . . and there is your joy, peace, and comfort and that which makes you free is the truth and the truth is Christ."⁽²⁷⁾

The truth that makes free is not a private truth but it is the truth that comes from God and Christ and it is given freely to all men and women and it is the same in its appearance to all people. "The light," says Fox, "is but one . . . and walking in it, you have unity one with another."⁽²⁸⁾ Here also is true free will. It is grounded in a disciple-master relationship to God and Christ. Isaac Penington says: "The will is not of itself but stands in another, and is servant to that in whom it stands, and there its freedom is bound and comprehended. For there is no middle state between both [good and evil] wherein the will stands of itself."⁽²⁹⁾

The new man or woman in Christ is not a super-being, nor is the new man or woman an isolated individual. Turning from self-centeredness, self-will, and self-righteousness to the light of God means that there is fellowship with all who believe in the light, hear the light, obey the light, and walk in the light. Fox says, ". . . all loving the light here no self can stand, but it is judged with the light; and here all are in unity,"⁽³⁰⁾ and this is the light . . . that brings you into peace, and unity with God, and one with another, and with Christ."⁽³¹⁾

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APPENDIX

Questions and Responses

Chapter 4

Question 1: I've always thought of Quakerism as a species of mysticism. Could you tell us more about your understanding of the relation of Quakerism and mysticism?

Lewis Benson: I'll try to review what has been happening in recent years in relation to this question. A. C. Bouquet, who wrote the *Pelican Comparative Religion* some 30 - 35 years ago, says that mysticism is a word not in general circulation before 1900, and one reason that it got in circulation then was that, in 1899, Dean Inge wrote his famous book entitled, *Mysticism*. Dean Inge's book begins with a sentence to this effect, that no word in the English language has been used with more meanings or more loosely than mysticism, with the possible exception of socialism. There still isn't a firm conventional understanding of what the word means, especially in Quaker circles. When I was young, mysticism was the thing that everyone said was the key feature of Quakerism in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, anyway. Of course, this was due to the writings of Rufus Jones more than anybody else. He set forth the charter of mysticism in the introductions that he wrote to *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, and *The Second Period of Quakerism*. Now those introductions have been deleted from the second edition and other introductions have been substituted. This indicates a change of climate.

What changed the climate? In a pamphlet called "Prophetic Quakerism," published in 1943, I contrasted prophetic Quakerism, which I identified with George Fox and the early Quakers, and philosophical Quakerism, which I identified with Rufus Jones and William C. Braithwaite and all the exponents of modern Quakerism. I said that there is no continuity between the prophetic Quakerism of the early Quakers and the mystical Quakerism of the twentieth century Quakers. This was widely circulated and read on both sides of the Atlantic. But the thing that really carried more weight was Geoffrey Nuttall's book, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Thought*. This title doesn't describe the content of the book which is all about his views on Quakerism.

Geoffrey Nuttall is a scholar and church historian. He wrote the introduction to the Nickall's edition of Fox's Journal, but he's not a Quaker; he's a Congregationalist. In this book, which was written three years after my pamphlet, he challenges the claims of Rufus Jones that George Fox and the early Friends were dependent in any observable, provable, historical way on the mystics of the Middle Ages, or the Protestant mystics like Boehme and other mystics in England.

About 1958, the Quaker Theological Discussion Group was founded and they were open to critically examine the works of Rufus Jones. This was done, and a number of papers were published on this topic in "Quaker Religious Thought." So, the Quaker Theological Discussion Group has not given any weight to Rufus Jones's theories of the origin and meaning and character of Quakerism over the past ten years, at least.

However, Rufus Jones not only wrote these two influential introductions to the official Quaker history, Braithwaite's history, but he also wrote a book a year for 50 years, and this still carries some weight, but less and less.

The mystical view of Quakerism, that is, Rufus Jones's view of Quakerism, is that the Quakers are a link in a chain of which the medieval mystics are also links. This, we've gotten away from. But what has taken its place mostly through the influence of Geoffrey Nuttall and then Hugh Barbour, is the theory that Quakers are a species of Puritanism. They are the "left-wing" Puritans. If the Presbyterians are on the extreme right end of this spectrum, the Quakers are on the extreme left. I reject this just as vigorously as I reject the mystical theory. We haven't gotten on the right basis yet as far as historiography is concerned.

John Curtis: The difficulty with using the term "mysticism" is that there are so many different kinds of mysticism. There is, (1) *classical mysticism* where the human soul merges into God and does not seem to be related to ethics in any significant way, (2) *ethical mysticism*, the kind that Howard Brinton wrote about--Friends thought about it more as human beings getting in touch with God, and there was definite ethical aspects inherent in it, and (3) there is also *Christian mysticism* which differs from these other kinds of mysticism in that it centers in the person of Jesus Christ. This gives it an objectivity because it is related to specific events in history and an emotional warmth because it's related to the person of Jesus.

The difficulty in using the word mysticism is that everybody is going to take it in a different way. For example, the way I've been describing it here, that is, Christian mysticism, is not the way that Rufus Jones and his followers have described it. Well, why did they do it?

Science was their problem. Science was going to solve everything. They saw that the Christian-fundamentalist view among Friends could not meet the conditions of the modern world. They were concerned with the survival and renewal of Quakerism. They hoped that this change would do so and at first it did seem to do so. However it eventually eliminated every aspect of Quakerism. So this is why we're trying to make clear the fundamental difference between the prophetic and the philosophical understanding and experience of God: the one is centered in a God who reveals his will to people through his Son, and the other is a philosophy of religion, a series of ideas that explain all religion.

Now about Rufus Jones, I think something should be said about the kind of person he was. He had an unusual ability to help young, scientifically minded people to come to understand that it was possible to have an experience of God. He could get across the idea that there is a living religion that's different from the kind of thing you get in the conventional churches.

Question 2: I am interested in the kind of Gurdjieffian efforts to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. I think that this is very common among Friends today: not only the ideas and methodology of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, but all kinds of other philosophies and systems. I think it might be helpful if you would comment a little more on that. I want to give you a quotation from Donald Malcolm, who used to review books for the "New Yorker": "He who steps outside to ring his own doorbell, should not be surprised to find nobody at home."

Lewis Benson: I haven't heard this way of describing a particular experience, but it describes my experience. When you find nobody there, it's a kind of terror. This is what shook me up, and I stayed shook up for several years. But there are people in the Society of Friends who take Gurdjieff

seriously and consider themselves sympathetic readers and students of his system. The "Subud" development is related to it although Gurdjieff himself had nothing to do with Subud. It came after his death. But, it's just as un-Christian.

The Gurdjieffian approach as I've represented it, and I think it's a true representation, is without the element of "grace" in it. That is, you don't get any help from God, ever. Subud comes in with something a little less austere, a little less strictly methodological, and it has made a great appeal to a number of people and to Quakers. I know people who have left the Society of Friends because they become involved in Subud.

I think Quakers get involved in self-redemptive systems because of the word "mysticism." This word opens the door for so many things. In one way it's a semantic problem. There are discriminating and indiscriminating ways of using the word mysticism, but I think there's no safe way of using it. You're always exposed to trouble and confusion.

Some Quakers have said to me, "Weren't the prophets mystics?" Of course, it depends on how you're defining the word. You can define mystic so that it includes the prophets, but if you do this, prophetism stands over against mysticism. If Abraham was a mystic, then the distinction we've been trying to make is in vain, e.g. the pure religion that comes from above, the religion that consists in hearing the word that is not our own word and responding to it in obedience. If Abraham was a mystic, then we can't make a distinction between the faith of Abraham and the faith of the mystics, who, in their most classical manifestation, claim that salvation consists in union with God in which the dialogue, the hearing and obeying, ends.

However, most orthodox thinkers, like Brunner, say that the dialogue never ends, that the person who walks in the footsteps of Abraham is always a hearer and obeyer. This is our human condition. We are creatures who are dependent on the Creator.

Question 3: I think that science is still a problem for a lot of people, that lots of Quakers still accept the mystical approach, and that the Christian church itself is partially responsible for this because of the atrocities they have committed. This is very difficult to deal with.

Lewis Benson: Yes, there still are representatives of the Rufus Jones position in the Society of Friends, and we have to deal with it somehow. My own way of dealing with it is to try to patiently discuss the problem. The difficulty that immediately arises is the problem of a common frame of reference. It is often maintained that mysticism includes Prophetism, but I don't think it does. I think mysticism is one thing and prophetism is another. There is a book, *The Hebrew Prophetic Consciousness*, by Harold Knight, that attempts to deal in a descriptive way with the prophetic experience over against the mystical experience. And there's another book, *Prayer*, by F. Heiler, which contains a section comparing the mystical experience with the prophetic experience, and they are not the same experience. The prophet is one who doesn't choose to be a prophet. He doesn't take it up like dentistry or civil engineering. God puts his hand on him and says, "I want you to speak my word." And usually he tries to get out of it. This is what the Bible tells us about the prophets. Now, the mystic is a person who cultivates, through certain techniques or certain methods, a particular kind of religious experience and religious life, and he consciously chooses to go up a ladder of which there are rungs that have names. The mystical ladder is something you find everywhere in the literature of mysticism, not only Christian but non-Christian. So there's a real sub-

stantive difference between prophetism and mysticism. Mysticism is actually incompatible with what we're saying here and with what George Fox said in the seventeenth century.

Question 4: Well then, there is a difference between prophetic religion and faith and experience and religion in general, that is, all the other religions of the world?

Lewis Benson: Yes. Abraham is the prototype of the prophetic type of experience. God speaks to him out of the blue. He doesn't expect it. But he listens and he believes God, and he obeys, and this makes all the difference. Mysticism is a part of what Fox called, "the religions of the world which are vain." Once you're convinced of such a thing as mystical religion, then you're in for another trap, and that is that all the religions have a mystical aspect, they manifest themselves in a form of mysticism. When I read Fox's *Journal* for the first time, my mind was full of Gurdjieffian metaphysics. It took me a couple of years to get all that stuff out of my head. But, I'd already started to read Fox's *Journal* and my theory was, "This is great stuff, but he doesn't tell you how to do it." There must be a method. Well, I kept reading and reading, and no method, no technique. Finally, I came to the conclusion that there just isn't any technique in this. There isn't any methodology.

Gerald Herd in his Pendle Hill lectures said that religion is either theological or methodological. There's only two kinds. What I've been saying here is that the Hebrew and the Christian kind are theological in the sense that it's God initiated religion, whereas, all the other kinds, and this is something that theologians like Barbour and Brunner say, too, are human constructions, that is, religions of self-redemption. In other words, you learn the system, you practice it, and you come out with certain results. There are just two choices: theological or methodological, and the theological religions are very limited in number--Judaism and Christianity.