

Theology In A Religiously Plural World:

Some Contributions of William Penn

AS "THE LAST GREAT FLOWERING of Puritan political innovation," William Penn's "holy experiment" played a major role in the colonial religious and political utopianism that was to have such profound effects in modern history.¹ Attempting to carry to completion the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the various kinds of Puritans who turned to the New World hoped to embody their religious convictions in a new social and cultural order. In each case the result was envisioned as a beacon that would stir new hopes in the Old World and lead ultimately to the transformation of history into the Kingdom of God. This vision, in its various forms, bequeathed to later Americans much of the historical optimism, insistence on reform, and national religious ideology that have shaped a distinctive American self-understanding and approach to foreign policy. It has also served as a model and goad for ideologues and reformers elsewhere.

Most of the Puritans assumed that adherence to their brand of orthodoxy was a prerequisite for full participation in the new community and tried to set up a closed society. Many New World developments were required before they added religious liberty and cultural pluralism to their list of ideals. In this respect Penn's colony was the most forward-looking of all of the utopian ventures. As Sydney Ahlstrom has written, "Pennsylvania flourished as a model state where people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds could live together under

¹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), 212. Ahlstrom here reflects the tendency in recent historiography to stress the continuity of the reforming movement beginning with dissatisfied Anglicans in the sixteenth century and ending with Interregnum groups such as the Ranters and Quakers. According to Ahlstrom they all shared "an unprecedented emphasis on the need for an inner experience of God's regenerating grace" and "a concern for drawing out man's duties in the church and in the world." *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (New York, 1967), 27.

equitable laws in a single commonwealth" and thus was "more nearly a paradigm of latter-day American democracy than any other colony."² Moreover, as one of the more radical of the Puritan colonies, Pennsylvania was to a unique degree a harbinger and an ideal for future Americans in its social reforms. Although much of the founder's reformism, especially that relating to non-violence, has given way to more coercive social patterns, Penn's views on penal reform, native Americans' rights, capital punishment, and support for the destitute have left their mark. Even where they have been disregarded or even rejected, Penn's goals have often been recognized as ideals to be striven for or, at least, as beautiful, if impossible, dreams whose time may come.

Although the significance of Pennsylvania as a harbinger of later social and political developments is at least partly related to Penn's religious values, Quakerism is normally seen as having left considerably less of an imprint on American society as a form of religious thought and practice. The movement was represented in all of the colonies and kept pace with population growth for much of the colonial era, but it became increasingly sectarian toward the end of the eighteenth century and has remained a fringe body ever since. Its distinctive marks, namely, silent worship, opposition to creedal standards, lay polity, a countercultural stance, and pacifism have not been typical of the American religious scene. Indeed, Quakerism gained many adherents as it moved across the Continent primarily by taking on the doctrinal, revivalistic, organizational, and even cultural characteristics of American evangelical piety.³

Quakerism's direct influence on American religious thought and practice may have been small, but there are certain important respects in which it has proven to be well ahead of its times and has served as a forerunner, if not as a major influence. Its attitude toward women, especially as religious leaders, and its regard for native Americans' property rights come immediately to mind. Less well known is the fact that Quaker theology foreshadowed some of the most significant developments in modern Christian thought.

² *Ibid.*, 112.

³ Most evangelical Quakers have retained elements of the pacifist witness, and clearly Quaker pacifism has had a significant impact on Protestant and Roman Catholic ethical practices, at least for a significant minority.

The seventeenth century was the period when many Europeans first began to ponder seriously the implications of cultural and religious pluralism. Quaker leaders, and William Penn especially, were in the forefront of such concerns. Such early Quaker thinkers as Penn made a courageous, if halting, attempt to theologize in light of a developing conviction that human minds grasp metaphysical realities only "through a glass, darkly" in myths and metaphors. They argued that transcendent realities are not directly available to the human intellect and that as a result the conflicting Christian sects should make fewer claims for their doctrines. In addition, one finds in Quaker thought an attempt to probe more deeply than Christian theologians had done previously the meaning of the Christian claim that there is salvation in no other name but that of Christ (Acts 4:12). Their conviction was that the Christ of Galilee known to Christians was the same as the eternal Christ who had enlightened all people in all eras with saving knowledge.

In both areas of their thought Penn and other Quaker writers developed ideas that bear striking resemblance to major trends in mainstream Christian theology that have come to the fore three centuries later with the arrival of a world culture suggesting that religious truth is not a monopoly of one religion or sect. The organization of this article will be in reverse chronological order: first presenting the recent themes in theological epistemology—symbolism, paradox, and demythology—and then analyzing similar topics in Penn's writings. On the three-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Penn's pluralistic society, it seems appropriate to consider the remarkably prescient theological conviction that lay behind his political and social views.

Modern theology is often said to take as its starting point Immanuel Kant's distinction between phenomenal/empirical and noumenal/transcendent truth and his insistence that religious knowledge differs fundamentally from knowledge of natural phenomena that is publicly verifiable. Beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Protestant and, more recently, Roman Catholic theologians have largely given up attempts to prove Christian truths by arguments for God's existence or the argument from miracles.⁴ Such reasoning is seen

⁴ For a discussion of these developments, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New*

as not only unable to perform the apologetic task of bringing about religious belief but also as misleading and, in a sense, corrupting when used to fortify a religious posture gained through a revelatory experience. Many theologians have stressed that religious knowledge, which results from divine disclosure in an encounter that is dependent on divine initiative, cannot be "objectified" or conceptualized without harming the relationship to the divine. It is a form of knowledge that can be termed existential—a being grasped by a reality that cannot be grasped adequately in propositional form. In the words of Charles Davis,

The basic certitude in faith belongs to it, not as an intellectual assent, but as a self-transcending relationship with God or Ultimate Reality, a relationship analogous to love. . . . The basic assurance of not being deceived in a situation of love is grounded upon the experienced reality of the loving relationship, not upon explicit argumentation.⁵

The assurance or certitude comes from experiences that, although they may at times take place in a public liturgy or prayer group, are directly verifiable only by their subject and indirectly verifiable by behavioral changes over a period of time. Neither form of verification is foolproof, and any authentic religious certitude is seen as part of a dialectic that includes doubt and despair.

According to this theological perspective, religious experience or faith is always mediated by symbols. For that reason, on the strictly noetic or conceptual level, religious knowledge is a form of indirect or reflecting knowledge. Its symbols are based on analogies or metaphors that point to transcendent realities which cannot be grasped directly. When the analogy or metaphor is taken literally, the mystery to which it is intended to point or which it mediates becomes a conceptual object at the supposed command of the grasping intellect. Imperceptibly believers and religious movements regularly move in this direction in a longing for certitude; the lack of control and the radical demands of authentic religious knowledge are too threatening. Davis calls this tendency a form of "fundamentalism" that shifts the ground of religious certitude from the relationship with the transcendent to the system of

Pluralism in Theology (New York, 1979), especially Part I; Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View* (New York, 1975).

⁵ Charles Davis, *The Temptations of Religion* (New York, 1973), 24.

mediation itself.⁶ It is an intellectual form of idolatry that substitutes doctrine for the transcendent reality.

From the perspective of this understanding of religious doctrine, many twentieth-century theologians influenced by Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy and existentialism insist on the paradoxical nature of such Christian doctrines as the trinity, the person and atoning work of Christ, and human freedom.⁷ Each doctrine is understood as an attempt to hold on to various aspects of scriptural affirmation and Christian experience that appear contradictory or problematic when put in propositional form. For example, properly understood, the doctrine of the trinity prevents Christians from conceptualizing the Godhead either as one God who has appeared in three manifestations or as three Gods. Recognizing that unity is primary in the Godhead but that community is essentially present prevents Christians from understanding the Godhead as "personal" in more than an analogical sense.⁸ Similarly, it is impossible to conceptualize adequately Christ as one person with fully divine and human natures; how God can be eternally loving and omnipotent and yet dependent on Christ's life, death, and resurrection for the salvation of mankind; and how fallen humanity can be in bondage to sin and dependent on God's prevenient grace, on the one hand, and in some sense free and responsible for its plight on the other.

A related manifestation of this theological tendency is seen in the demythologizing movement originated by Rudolph Bultmann.⁹ Bultmann believed that many Christians understand the story of Christ's incarnation, life, and resurrection/ascension too literally. Christ, many seem to believe, had lived with his Father in the heavens above the skies, came down into the world to prove God's reality and power by breaking the laws of nature, saved humankind by satisfying divine justice on the cross, and ascended to heaven to be with the Father until a second and final trip was called for. Bultmannians believe that a literal understanding of such conceptions anthropomorphizes the transcendent by subjecting it to the time, space, and causality categories that apply to

⁶ *Ibid.*, chapter 1.

⁷ For a brief discussion of these movements, see William Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (New York, 1957).

⁸ John Hick's way of putting it is to describe the Christian view as the belief that God is "at least personal."

⁹ See, for example, Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York 1958).

finite phenomena, albeit in expanded form. On one level Bultmann and his followers are insisting that the time, space, and causality references be understood symbolically so as to let Christ be seen as the transcendent/immanent God inviting humans to allow a transforming reality into their lives rather than as a kind of glorified Superman.

Using this understanding such aspects of the Christ-story as his incarnation, resurrection, ascension, and second coming do refer to divine acts or events in world history; they are simply not the kind of publicly verifiable or empirically known events assumed by the literal minded. At times, however, Bultmann and his more radical followers have gone beyond this to insist that those developments in the Christ-story that cannot be understood literally must be taken as referring not to divine action in world history but simply to developments in the life of individual believers. To demythologize, for example, the resurrection in this sense means to understand it simply as a symbol for the rebirth of the Christian.¹⁰

Although the reordering of theological epistemology may have begun in earnest with Kant, one of the most important early chapters in this story took place in the seventeenth century and involved William Penn and the Society of Friends. In the wake of the Reformation, many Europeans were faced with a myriad of conflicting Christian sects each claiming with absolute certainty to possess true doctrine. They began to wonder whether any of them had a direct grasp on religious truth. With this cacophony ringing in their ears, some Europeans, imbued with a theological rationalism, transformed Christianity from a religion of redemption into a simple ethical monotheism whose essential beliefs mirrored those of all of the universal religions. They proceeded to deny the Trinity, explain away Christ's divinity, and deny that humanity was in a fallen state needing redemption by the grace of God in Christ.¹¹ The Quakers, among others, sought to approach the doctrines of Christianity in a more symbolic and experiential manner while retaining what they perceived to be the tradition's central insights about God, Christ, and humanity. William Penn was more conversant than most

¹⁰ See the discussion in John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing: Bultmann and his Critics* (London, 1960).

¹¹ I Enlightenment theologians in England include deists such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury, John Toland, and Matthew Tindal.

Quaker leaders with theological movements dealing with similar issues, such as the Cambridge Platonists, and as a result he had more to say on this matter than most Quaker writers.¹²

Penn believed that the major reason for Christianity's divisions and its lack of power in his day was a misguided approach to religious truth, especially among the English Christians known as Puritans. Despite their original emphasis on rebirth, apparently they were of the opinion that their doctrines gave them a firm intellectual grasp on divine realities and that proper creedal affirmation was the key to true religion. Attempting to improve on Scripture and to capture the essence of divine truth, Christians had fallen to struggling over doctrinal conceptions of Christ's nature, the persons of the Godhead, the atonement, grace and free will, and other theological issues.¹³ Such struggles Penn saw as both useless and counterproductive, since they assumed that religious knowledge was propositional and prevented Christians from preserving an openness to the true divine encounter.

"We make not our Religion to stand in a Belief of so many Verbal Articles; but a Conformity of Soul to the Grace of God." "For it is not Opinion, or Speculation, or Notions of what is true; or Assent to, or the Subscription of Articles, or Propositions, tho' never so soundly worded, that. . . makes a Man a True Believer, or a True Christian. But it is a Conformity of Mind and Practice to the Will of God, in all Holiness of Conversation, according to the Dictates of this Divine Principle of Light and Life in the Soul, which denotes a Person truly a Child of God."¹⁴ Penn's point was not just that deeds are better than creeds but that true religious knowledge is a product of God's gracious visitation through the Spirit. It comes not primarily as a matter of learning and intellectual conviction but in the form of what modern theologians call an existential encounter. Penn called such knowledge "experimental" or "spiritual" and distinguished it from "notionalism." We do not come to

¹² The Cambridge Platonists, a group of liberal Anglicans drawn to Platonic thought and especially its view of reason, included John Smith, Benjamin Whichcote, Henry More, Ralph Cudwell, and Nathanael Culverwel. For descriptions of these and other rationalist groups, see John Tulloch, *Rational Theology in England in the Seventeenth Century* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1872).

¹³ William Penn, "An Address to Protestants of All Persuasions" (1679), *The Collected Works of William Penn* (2 vols; London, 1726), I, 744-752, 774.

¹⁴ Penn, "A Just Rebuke to One and Twenty Learned and Reverend Divines" (1674), II, 607; "A Key Opening the Way to Every Common Understanding" (1692), II, 781.

know God by reading about him or thinking about him unless in the process God comes in upon the soul by the light or Spirit and opens to it the things of God. Although Penn allowed that Scripture was directly inspired, it was still a verbal deposit rather than a divine reality, "the like Power not usually accompanying the meer or dead Letter, as the living Voice."¹⁵ The "living Voice" could come through the human voice raised from silence as well as directly by the Spirit, but even in the former case it was the personal form of the mediator that enabled God to confront one. For this reason God was more likely to continue the encounter and to strengthen one's faith through "bowels" or mercy than through doctrinal conviction. Christians who were confronted by their neighbors in need—for whom religion was "to visit the Fatherless, and the Widow" (James 1:27)—were more likely to be visited by the Spirit than those who believed that religious development depended on conviction about proper doctrine.¹⁶

In traditional theological terms, Penn was affirming that the essential guiding faculty in religious affairs was the will rather than the intellect. Faced with Christians of conflicting doctrines whose lives gave evidence of similar levels of conviction but whose Christianity seemed to lack vital power in direct proportion to their preoccupation with intellectual apprehension of divine realities, he and other Quakers concluded that the search for certitude through doctrine was a form of pride. Christians were less in need of satisfying their curious intellects and gaining certainty through their intellectual grasp of God than they were of being empowered by the Spirit to do what in their hearts they knew was right.

Penn believed that many of the Puritans had once known that God comes in an existential encounter. Most of the puritan sects had started "spiritually" or "enthusiastically" but had in the course of their development grown "letteral, Earthly, formal."¹⁷ They had forgotten that the main written guide to spiritual realities, Scripture, is deep and obscure in places and filled with at least apparent contradictions. The Scriptures, given on diverse occasions, omit the characteristics of a doctrinal guide; are sometimes "proper," sometimes figurative; are literal in places and allegorical in others; and are often lacking in

¹⁵ Penn, "Urim and Thummin" (1674), II, 633.

¹⁶ Penn, Letter to William Popple (October 24, 1688), I, 138.

¹⁷ Letter to Viscountess Conway (October 20, 1675), *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 1, eds. Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn (Philadelphia, 1981), 357.

definition of terms, coherence, and plainness. The Christian's job is not to try to improve them by deducing doctrines from them but to recognize their symbolic or "mystical" nature and to understand that they are only a "map" or "picture" of divine realities.¹⁸

The problem Penn found with his intellectual opponents was that they strove to make Scripture yield concepts easily understandable to them. Too many of the orthodox Christians had too "crude" or "physical" an understanding of theological mysteries. In Penn's view such concepts as the "Persons" of the Trinity, Christ's presence with the Father, the incarnation and ascension of Christ, Christ's atoning transactions with the Father, and the bread and wine of the eucharist were understood in too literal a manner. By understanding the persons of the Godhead literally rather than analogically, many Christians were, in effect, tritheists who then found it perfectly easy to understand the atonement of Christ literally as a payment from one being to another that released the latter's love. Literalism also led to a tendency to entertain "mean and dark" views of God according to which God had a spatial abode above in the heavens, where Christ sat at his right hand and thus could not be "within" humans as the Quakers contended.¹⁹

Unlike later Enlightenment figures, such as the Unitarians and English deists, Penn and his fellow Quakers, for the most part, did not give up such doctrines as the Trinity and even the atonement but tried to understand them in a less literal manner. Penn was not wholly consistent in this regard. He was something of a rationalist in theology and sometimes regarded the inner light as the means of going beyond the stories and metaphors of Scripture to a direct intellectual apprehension of God's truths. He could call the inner light "Reason" or "right Reason" in the Platonic sense and view it as the source of a direct apprehension of divine truths resembling innate or intuitive knowledge.²⁰ In his more conservative moments, however, Penn was most

¹⁸ "The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication" (1673), II, 376; "A Reply to a Pretended Answer" (1695), II, 813.

¹⁹ Penn, Letter to John Collenges (January 22, 1673), I, 164-66; "The Counterfeit Christian Detected" (1674), II, 587-88; "A Defense of Paper, Entitled, Gospel Truths" (1698), II, 894; "The New Witnesses Proved Old Heretics" (1672), II, 161-62; "Tender Counsel and Advice" (1677), I, 199; "Reason Against Railing, and Truth Against Fiction" (1673), II, 530.

²⁰ Penn, *Primitive Christianity Revived*. . . (1696) and *A Defense of the Duke of Buckingham*. . . (1685) A comprehensive discussion is found in my *William Penn and Early Quakerism* (Princeton, 1973), 245-261.

interested in telling his opponents what many theologians today increasingly emphasize: namely, that theology must be founded in experience and cannot get away from paradox and symbol.

At times, however, he moved on to a form of demythologizing of doctrine that not only reminded opponents not to take in a literal spatial and temporal sense the Christ-story of a descent and ascent from heaven but seemed to press on to a reduction of all Christological doctrines to existential verities. As George Keith recognized after departing from the Quaker fold, Penn and other Quakers seemed at times to believe that the life of Christ and heaven and hell were merely symbols for spiritual experience. Because "inward" rather than "outward" realities were fundamental and because the "inward" experience of Christ was universally available, the events of Christ's birth, death, resurrection and second coming, were a parable or narrative symbol for the spiritual experience of each individual believer. To this extent they provided an early version of the radical Bultmannian approach to demythologizing.²¹

Although most of the universal religions teach that theirs is the most adequate path to spiritual fulfillment, Christianity has been uniquely exclusivistic in claiming that all spiritual fulfillment is dependent upon the salvation-event that is the focus of the Christian religion. In the spirit of the claim in Acts 4:12 that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ, Christians have developed the central conviction that salvation for all individuals is dependent upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For most of Christian history this has meant that there is no salvation outside the Church of Christ in the sense that a true and saving relationship with God can come only to those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. At various times throughout the Christian era predestinarian theologians such as Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) have reminded the visible Church that it is improper to restrict God's freedom of action and have insisted that God can and no doubt does save whom he will. This reminder has come increasingly to the fore as Christians have pondered the existence and power of other religions and their own

²¹ See, for example, *Some of the Many Fallacies of William Penn Detected* (London, 1699). The tendency to spiritualize salvation history can be seen in Penn, *The New Athenians No Noble Bereans*. . . (1692), *A Key Opening the Way* (1692), and *Primitive Christianity Revived* (1696).

decreasing percentage of the world's believers. But in light of the traditional doctrine asserting the world-wide, if not cosmic, significance of the Christ event as the enabler of salvation, the openness to salvation beyond the visible Christian fold could mean no more than that the merciful God saves benighted heathen by the back door, as it were, of heaven. They are accepted in spite of their ignorance of Christ and his saving event and of the nature of God as revealed only in Christ.

In recent decades, however, many Christian theologians have been more radically affected by the increasingly more direct encounters among the religions of the world. No longer content to consign non-Christians largely to spiritual ignorance even while admitting them to heaven, Protestant and many Roman Catholic theologians have apparently found it impossible to believe that the vast majority of human beings of past and present times have lived largely without an authentic experience of divine reality.²² Beyond evangelical-fundamentalist circles it is difficult to find a Christian theologian who makes the atoning death of Christ the central event of salvation-history in the manner of the substitutionary or penal/satisfaction theories that have reigned supreme since the early middle ages.²³ Presumably, such theories are difficult to square with the idea of the universal possibility of saving knowledge of God. It has become commonplace for theologians to rediscover the *Logos* theologians such as the Alexandrian fathers of the third century and to emphasize Christ's activity as the Word or *Logos* of God who has been active throughout the world since the beginning of time.²⁴ This doctrine enables Christians to allow for the true knowledge and saving activity of God and Christ in all cultures. The increasingly

²² Many Americans were startled during the recent presidential campaign by the claim of the leader of the Southern Baptist denomination that God does not hear the prayers of Jews. Although this puts the belief in rather extreme form, the doctrinal positions of the roughly half of American Protestants who qualify as evangelicals or fundamentalists consign non-Christians largely to spiritual ignorance. More interesting for my purposes, however, is the fact that most of the theologians representing the other half (what used to be called the Protestant mainstream) of American Protestantism and many Roman Catholics have rapidly jettisoned traditional views in recent decades.

²³ These theories emphasize that Christ's death on man's behalf enabled God to save by satisfying his justice and providing an object for his wrath, thereby making possible a renewed relationship between God and humankind.

²⁴ The Alexandrians, such as Clement of Alexandria (150-220) and Origen (185-254), linked the Biblical concept of the word of God and the Platonic *Logos* (reason, word) and argued that the *Logos* was available to all human beings.

widespread conviction, discussed earlier, that religious truth is symbolic and that humanity's deepest insights into divine realities are only secondarily noetic experiences is an essential prerequisite for this interpretation of *Logos*.

Karl Rahner, probably the most influential contemporary Roman Catholic theologian, is a good example of this tendency; his idea of spiritually mature non-Christians as "anonymous Christians" has been widely influential. Rahner is convinced that all human beings live in the same existential situation and that God's gracious presence is available to all through what he refers to as a "supernatural existential." At the same time, he believes that it is through Christ that the salvation of non-Christians is brought about. He means by this both that Christ, the *Logos*, is universally present and active in other religious and non-religious cultural traditions and that in some sense Christ's life, death, and resurrection makes possible God's gracious presence in all of humanity.²⁵ With respect to the relation between the historical Christ and universal revelation, Rahner is widely understood to be modernizing and highlighting the traditional dogmatic view that salvation is available universally *intuitu meritorum Christi* or because of the meritorious atoning deeds of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. In recent writings, however, Rahner questions whether Christ's historical life and death can be intelligibly seen as the cause of universal salvation. He suggests that they cannot be seen as the efficient cause but only as the final cause or *telos* of the process of divine self-communication. It is at the point of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the process of God's self-communication becomes irreversible and historically tangible.²⁶

Protestant theologies which attempt to see God's gracious redeeming presence as available universally through the *Logos* are found in a variety of forms. Process theologians, who utilize the philosophical categories of Alfred North Whitehead, have been particularly active here.²⁷ An especially interesting discussion is found in Schubert

²⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, transl. William V. Dych (New York, 1978), sections 4 and 5, especially 142-52 and 311-321; "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," in *Theological Investigations 12: Confrontation 2* (New York, London, 1974), 161-78.

²⁶ *Foundations*, 316-18.

²⁷ See, for example, John Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia, 1975).

Ogden's *Christ Without Myth*. Ogden believes that an authentic redemptive relation with God is a possibility for all human beings through the Christic or self-giving activity of God but that it is unnecessary to see the historic Christ-event as the causal agent. Rather, it has the role in Ogden's thought of what we might call the paradigmatic development. In Ogden's words, through the universal activity of the *Logos* the possibility of an authentic relation with God "is not man's own inalienable possession, but rather is constantly being made possible for him by virtue of his inescapable relation to the ultimate source of his existence." Again, "what makes authentic existence everywhere factually possible is not that man is not completely fallen, but that, in spite of his fallenness, he is everlasting the object of God's love, which is omnipresently efficacious as a redemptive possibility."²⁸ Ogden believes that the understanding of divine-human relations made known in the Christ-event is profoundly true and that, however different the symbols in other religions, the same reality is present in them in the same way.

Questions about the universality of salvation through Christ have not come to the fore often in Christian thought. Before the twentieth century they arose primarily among those early modern and modern thinkers who were in the process of giving up Christian views of humanity's fallenness and need of gracious redemption in favor of a simple ethical monotheism with an optimistic view of humanity's moral resources. Beyond this broad strain of theological liberalism, the idea of the universal availability of redemption came to the fore among a small minority of Protestants in the wake of the age of exploration and discovery and the consequent dawning of Europe's first realistic awareness of other religious and cultures. Early Quaker thought probably represents the most sustained and serious reflection on the issue before the twentieth century. Influenced by certain themes found in such sixteenth-century reformers as Sebastian Franck and Caspar Schwenckfeld as well as developments in their own day, Quaker thinkers including Isaac Penington, Samuel Fisher, Robert Barclay, George Whitehead, and Penn were more or less consciously trying to combine an emphasis on the central insights about God's grace and humanity's fallenness found in the Christian tradition with a soteriology that interpreted anew or went beyond the orthodox insistence on the life, death, and resur-

²⁸ Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (New York, 1967), 141, 121.

rection of Jesus as the central cosmic redemptive act that is the enabling event for all salvation. Their concern was to understand how Christ's encounter with all human beings was made available.

Convinced that Christ enlightened every man coming into the world (John 1:9), such Quaker theologians as Penn claimed that the light of divine knowledge available to all people is the light of Christ or that its major function was to mediate a confrontation with the "eternal" or "inward" Christ. Thus the "light within" or "Spirit" was virtually interchangeable with "Christ." Friends meant by this not simply that some knowledge of God was available to all but that the self-giving God in the form of the "eternal Christ" or "Christ the same yesterday, today, tomorrow" was available to all as a redemptive agent. The question thereby requiring their discussion was the relation between the eternal Christ and the historical Jesus whose life, death, and resurrection have been the focal point of Christian theology.

Although Penn, like other Quakers, was not fully clear about how to combine his new emphasis with traditional doctrines of the person and work of Christ, he struggled to make sense of traditional views of Christ's fully divine and human natures and of the atonement rather than simply modifying them. On the person of Christ he could affirm that Christ became "Flesh" or "Truly and Properly Man," but he was so concerned not to jeopardize the saving activity of Christ apart from his incarnation that he tended to assume that the incarnation added nothing essential to Christ's personal consciousness and powers.²⁹ On the atonement Penn used all of the traditional metaphors about Christ's cosmic victory through his sacrifice, especially in his later works, but he was clearly reluctant to give Christ's death universal causal efficacy in any significant sense.

The more conservative early Quaker position was that which is today found in most Christian theology that is concerned with the problem of the universality of salvation. It is stated clearly and influentially in Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. According to Barclay, through a particular set of deeds carried out at a particular time in history, namely, Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the saving light flowed into every corner of the world and backward and forward into every moment of time. Human beings, however, could enjoy the

²⁹ Penn, "A Key Opening the Way", II, 783; "The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication", II, 415; "The New Athenians No Noble Bereans" (1692), II, 802.

benefits of this event without ever having heard of Jesus, since Christ's gracious presence could be experienced without knowledge of his name or "human" history.³⁰ Penn approached this view of the matter in his more conservative writings, as in his statement that Christ's death on the cross "put Mankind into a Capacity for Salvation, and has given every one a Talent of Grace to work it out by." He also admitted that "it is very possible that a Man may receive Benefit by a Medicine, of whose Composition he may be ignorant."³¹ But Penn was more troubled than Barclay and most early Friends by the thought that a particular historical deed could be the causal agent of all salvation. His thought along these lines bears striking resemblances to the theological approaches of Rahner and Ogden.

Properly speaking, according to Penn, we cannot attribute to the historical Christ anything but an "instrumental" effect. Christ's death is the cause of universal salvation only "Parabolically, Hyperbolically or Metaphorically." We ought to attribute salvation in the proper sense to the divine "Word-God" and say that what was witnessed at Calvary "confirmed" the salvation wrought by God. The incarnate Christ was indeed a scapegoat bearing the sins of the world, "though it is not the Work, but God's free Love that remits and blots out, of which the Death of Christ and His Sacrificing of Himself was a most certain Declaration and Confirmation."³² The sacrificial life and death of Christ were a declaration and confirmation of God's redeeming love in that they provided a unique revelation of the self-giving that is at the heart of divine reality and renewed the movement of the Spirit that would eventually transform the world. The Christ-event made unmistakably and publicly known the nature of God and started the final, culminating chapter of the story of divine disclosure that had begun with the creation. Penn's language has overtones of both Rahner's belief that Christ's act is the "final cause" or *telos* and of Ogden's thought that it is the paradigmatic event. With them he took redemption by Christ as his starting point and attempted to universalize this experience rather than reducing Christianity to a few simple truths.

³⁰ Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1678), Proposition VI, Sections 15 and 26.

³¹ "A Key Opening the Way", II, 784; "A Reply to a Pretended Answer" (1695), II, 815.

³² "The Christian Quaker", I, 578-79, 575; Letter to John Collenges (January 22, 1673), I, 166.

The Quakers are best known today for their pacifism and humanitarian endeavors. It is clear that the regard in which they are held rests less on their religious thought than on the congruence between word and deed in their commitment to peace and to the oppressed. Such has been the case since the beginning of the movement. Even contemporaries who admired their willingness to suffer for their cause in Restoration England found the "confused noise and humming" or the "Vomitings and diseased motions" of their theology hard to take.³³ The situation was similar with Penn, whose contemporaries found his intellectual acumen less clear than his passionate commitment to human rights and to a new social order. William Braithwaite is no doubt correct in noting that Penn achieved greater heights as an activist trying to turn Quaker visions into reality than as a theologian.³⁴ In his theological writings he could be overly passionate and ill-tempered, shockingly inconsistent, and even a victim of the theological pride of which he accused his opponents.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the theological vision and accomplishments of Penn and other Quaker thinkers who attempted to make some sense of the religious pluralism in which they found themselves. The diatribes written against Penn and his colleagues were at least in part smokescreens protecting traditional thinkers from coming to terms with their own lust for theological certitude and with the implications for traditional Christian thought of the existence of myriad sects within Christianity and a host of religions beyond its pale. As we participate in the process by which people of different religious symbols come increasingly into communication with one another, we would do well to honor Penn's foresight and even to ponder his attempts to provide a theology for a religiously plural world.

Hamilton College

MELVIN B. ENDY, JR.

³³ The former phrase is John Owen's description in "A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity" (1669), *Works*, ed. William H. Goold (1850-1853; rpt., 16 vols., London, 1965-1968), II, 399. The latter is Richard Baxter's in a debate with Penn on October 5, 1675 as recorded in Baxter's hand in the Baxter manuscripts in Dr. Williams' Library, London.

³⁴ William Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (2d edn., rev. by Henry J. Cadbury; Cambridge, 1961), 211.