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SILENCE AND WITNESS

The Quaker Tradition



Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series

all, and there is, at the opposite pole, the higher self-forgetfulness in which every faculty of the soul is intensely awake, with the result that consciousness is widened to include what is beyond thought and memory.⁴

The Universal Light of Christ: Marjorie Sykes and Ham Sok Hon

Marjorie Sykes (1905–95), born in Yorkshire, graduated from Cambridge University, and went to India to teach in the city of Madras (now Chennai). During her sixty years in India she served as a school teacher and principal, a peace educator, a co-worker and translator of Rabindranath Tagore, and a teacher in Gandhi's ashram Sevagram, where she worked closely with Vinoba Bhave. Marjorie Sykes worked among Friends in Madras in the south, in Bengal, and in central India, and was fluent in Tamil, Bengali, and Hindi. Her Quakerism was rooted in a solidly Christian self-understanding, yet she acknowledged truth as she encountered it in other faiths, especially those she met in India. She could footnote Quaker truths with references to the Upanishads.

The living core of a religion is not to be sought in its outward observances, ceremonial, liturgy or festival (though it may be sought through them), nor yet in any intellectual world view which may emerge from its sacred writings; it is to be sought in the way it leads men, in the secret places of the heart, into the Presence of God . . . All living religion begins with this awed recognition of a Mystery and Power which is great beyond all comprehension, and yet is 'nearer than breathing and closer than hands and feet'. All living religion goes from this to a two-fold task: the human being is impelled to purify himself, to cleanse heart and mind and will, so that he may enter more and more fully into communion with that Reality and so fulfil the true purpose of his own life; at the same time he is impelled to share with other men his experience of the Mystery, and in

so doing to use the words and symbols of his own age and country. Quakers also have a heritage of form and symbol, which was created to express a living truth of our experience; our very forms and symbols are a witness to the faith that God is beyond all forms and that the Free Spirit cannot be confined within any of its temporal symbols:

'The One Breath enters the world, taking a
myriad of forms,
Even so the One,
The innermost indwelling Life of all that is,
Taket h a myriad of form –
Yet is that One beyond all forms.'

(Katha-Upanishad)

. . . The central purpose of all religion, of all worship, is salvation; it is to make men whole and *free* by turning them away from the self-centeredness of the 'natural man' and enabling them to find their True Centre . . . We all know the fruits of the Spirit, and recognize the beauty of holiness, in our own ancestral tree . . . The flowers of unselfish living may be found growing in other men's gardens and rich fruits of the Spirit may be tasted from other men's trees. They spring from the same Holy Spirit of Truth, the same seed of God, whose power moves us through Christ. . . . We do not desire that all should take the name of Quaker or the outward name of Christ. We do desire that all should be guided by 'that Spirit which is pure and holy', and that God will speak to them in whatever language, and through whatever symbol, can best bring them to the True Centre of their lives.*

Ham Sok Hon (1902–89), called by many 'the Gandhi of Korea', spent his lifetime promoting non-violence and democratic rights. His life mirrored the sad history of Korea in the twentieth century: he suffered imprisonment by the occupying

Japanese and Russian forces, then crossed the Thirty-Eighth Parallel into South Korea, where he was a political prisoner of oppressive Korean regimes. He came to call prison his 'university of life', not only because it was a place of serious self-study but also because it taught him lessons in political life that he could never learn in ordinary university. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace prize, this gentle prophet inspired many in his homeland and beyond.

Ham Sok Hon came to Quakerism through the Christianity he had encountered as a younger man, first Presbyterianism, then the Non-Church Movement. In Quakerism he found a means that enabled him to blend his Christianity with his Asian identity. Quaker pacifism offered him a Christian vehicle for the non-violence in Taoism that had moved him deeply when he studied Taoist texts during a prison term. The Quaker belief that the Light of Christ was available to all people everywhere gave him a way to affirm the gifts of Asian thought.

I don't want my salvation, if it is only for myself. The salvation should be for everyone in the whole world. Even the communists, atheists, heretics, evangelists, and shamanists, all of them should have the salvation, that is the real salvation.'

I love both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, but it is Jesus Christ that I believe in. There is no God for me except His God.*

The Church labelled me a heretic . . . Their reasons were chiefly, "He has forsaken the Cross", or "He doesn't pray", or "He is too Oriental." But I do not deny the Cross. I only say that the Cross is not for us simply to adore and behold from a distance, rather we must strive to bear the Cross in our bodies. I do not neglect prayer. I only maintain that public prayer is all too often no more than formality and the self-flattery of men and thus we should avoid public prayer insofar as possible. Finally, I am prepared to fight with conviction against the rejection of things Oriental by

the Church. This is because most of the opposition to Confucianism and Buddhism is done only on the basis of narrow denominationalism without any understanding of their real meaning.⁹

Our thoughts should not be too narrow . . . The laws of the universe and of life are poly-dimensional. It should not make a difference if we have different thoughts. No two people have the same face. Such is life. Why do people insist that my religion and my thoughts should be the same as theirs? . . . Varieties of life and thought should grow.¹⁰

If anyone said, 'My painting, my poem, and my song are the only great ones', and declares 'Others' paintings, poems and songs are terrible!', he does not understand the real meaning of the arts.¹¹

It is like opening a mountain path by the cutting of a tunnel from either side of the mountain. This tunnelling of the mountain begins in totally opposite directions, yet ultimately, the aim is the same. By approaching the centre [essence] of the mountain [Truth] from different directions, they will meet at the mid-point of the mountain.¹²

The Wilderness and the Dark Night: Samuel Bownas and Sandra Cronk

Samuel Bownas (1676–1753), a minister writing about 1750, used the image of the biblical wilderness to describe the experience of inward purification and the transition from bondage to the freedom of grace. For him, the wandering in the desert symbolized the interior aridity of this purgation: familiar spiritual practices no longer sufficed. Only a radical attentiveness to and reliance on 'our spiritual Moses' could bring the faithful to the inward Promised Land. Samuel Bownas' language is in