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## Commons on "Beyond Diversity to a Common Experience of God"

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## Comments

PAUL A. LACEY

Anyone who knows Douglas Steere will recognize in this paper an unintentional testimony to his own greatest contribution to the work of the church in the modern world: sowing the seed in the furrow God is plowing across all borders and boundaries and creeds that separate men. In Douglas' writings, in his concern for the devotional life, in his vast work of meeting people, bringing fellowship and reconciliation, and renewing and maintaining ties with those he meets around the world, he reflects for the rest of us what he sees as the discovery coming from the ecumenical efforts of the World Council of Churches — "that it is not in doctrine or liturgy or church discipline but alone in the common devotional experience of loving the same Lord and serving him in situations of acute human need that diversities can melt away." Douglas has met many people on that devotional level, and he speaks of its tendering effect with authority. Everything I say in comment on Douglas' paper must be taken in the context of my appreciation for the witness of his life.

There are two points at which I would query Douglas Steere, and they seem to be at polar extremes from one another. In fact, however, they are two aspects of one question I would ask all through his paper.

Though I strongly endorse Douglas' position, I cannot help feeling that to say our diversities melt away in our loving the same Lord neglects the fundamental problem both within the Society of Friends and between Christianity and the other great religions. To put it most simply: to say this is to say that Christians have already found their highest common factor, which they know experimentally but express doctrinally as the Lordship of Christ. This is a formulation which is hardly congenial to many of the people with whom we know we *have* and *need*

fellowship. When a commitment to the Lordship of Christ became a requirement for membership in the World Council of Churches a few years ago, it was not easy of acceptance for all church groups, including some bodies of the Society of Friends with long histories of participation in its work.

We may find it helpful to say that we have fellowship with the Hindu and the Buddhist as well as with other Christians, but we must realize that to explain this fellowship in terms of our acquaintance with the same Lord, no matter what our Hindu or Buddhist friends call him, is to apply a very restrictive formula to the experience. I once had a student write a paper arguing that James Joyce, though he had repudiated religion in his life and had left the Catholic church in great agony of determination, was nevertheless Christian because he was serving, in Tillich's terms, "the God above God." I told my student that Joyce would have considered such a gesture of fellowship a terrible impertinence, and that respect for the agony of Joyce's decision and the integrity of his stand should prevent us from applying the Christian label to him. It may make our way easier to bring all good and faithful men under the rubric of the Church, but it can easily be an act of paternalism. Yet my student would have felt that his theology at this point was a good deal more liberal than mine. He was responding to the passionate devotion to the truth which he recognized in a non-Christian writer, and doctrine did not matter. And at the very moment that I am warning that Douglas has put what he calls our common experience of God in a severely limiting formula — a scandal and stumbling block to millions of people — I must also say that it is the only formula I can use, because it alone witnesses to the experience as I have had it.

We cannot choose between doctrine and devotion, and this is so because doctrine, even at its worst, has grown out of devotion. And at its best, doctrine is continually growing out of devotion; it has put down living roots into the soil of the devotional life. The formula and the experiment must always be checking each other, so that the truth they both represent can have the power to convince us. When they do not seem to support each other, the seeker after truth has to explore both possibilities: that the formula is wrong, or that the experiment was not prop-

erly done. There is a predisposition among Friends to believe that it is always the formula that is wrong, but such a predisposition is very dangerous. What are the statements in London Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* (which Douglas so rightly praises) but the sincere, careful, provisional recording of formulas and of the experiments which confirmed them in particular lives? If we absolutize the experiential, we have sealed ourselves off from full dialogue with others every bit as much as if we had proposed a verbal shibboleth as a test of orthodoxy.

Archbishop Temple said that he believed in no creed, but he used several to bring him closer to God. That healthy distrust of the formula is something we Quakers lay claim to, but we do so often with far less justice than the Archbishop had. It is true that every formulation of the truth falsifies the truth, but it is also true that most of us act as if every formulation *but our own* falsifies the truth. But the problem of trusting to our own experiences exclusively is that experience is always more limited and limiting than even the creedal statement. The latter is, at least, the expression of the devotion of many individuals in many times, even when the experience seems ossified in the creed. We are so attached to our formulas and creedless creeds that we do not know when we are applying them as tests of orthodoxy. We are like the elderly Quaker lady at Cape May who objected, "But God can't be like that! Why, it would be unquakerly!" I am arguing, of course, that the devotion and the doctrine, the experience and the formula, no matter how much we want to keep them apart, stay separated only in an act of abstraction, not in the life we lead.

The danger in failing to recognize this is that it becomes so much harder to recognize and be skeptical of our own creeds than it is to recognize and distrust somebody else's. I wish I could feel the "singular restraint" in making theological formulations which Douglas calls characteristic of Friends. I take it he would find this restraint especially among unprogrammed Friends and Friends in the independent meetings in this country and around the world. I note among many of these Friends a distrust of all recognizably theological language, but I do not see that this leads them to a greater restraint in making theological statements. On the contrary, their theologizing, at its worst,

lacks even the restraint of precise language. A few years ago I was leading a group of Young Friends in a series of discussions. The agenda called for two days of talking about what we could know about God, but it became clear in a short time that the topic had little relevance because the word "God" had no meaning for most of them. We could know nothing of God, in short, because all the experience they had had argued the non-existence of God. When I asked what they would prefer to discuss, they answered that they wanted to talk about the basis for social concern — a belief in "that of God in every man." I offer this as a not-untypical approach to theological discussion among Quakers. I do not suppose that the average Quaker knows any less about Christian thought and history, the Bible and theology, than his counterpart in any other Christian denomination, but he seems to be alone in being proud of his ignorance. There is something deeply ingrained in us so that, though we respect learning in any other field, we treat theological ignorance as something of a virtue. The result is that, when we enter the marketplace of ideas determined to enrich and be enriched, we find ourselves offering a certain amount of counterfeit coin — coin whose exchange value is less than the face value claims. Does the answer lie in our reaching a new depth in our devotional life? Undoubtedly; but the work of interpreting experience according to the categories of religious thought is not to be scorned or neglected.

My second query of this paper has to do with the other aspect of the relation of creed to experience, how faith speaks to faith. I am reminded frequently that the first Epistle of John begins by establishing two appropriate expressions of personal witness. First there is the testimony of the eye-witness, who tells what happened as he verified it with his own eyes. Then there is the witness of the transformed life, in which the facts of the eye-witness take on their real significance. The man who claims to love God but does not love his brother, therefore, is a false witness, a liar. The whole witness is one of life and words, since words are also the product of a life. Here again I am concerned with a right valuation of creed.

It is probably a good indication of the difference between us that when I was asked to speak on a topic similar to Douglas', "Bases of Unity among Friends," I found myself speaking prima-

rily of the good that comes from disunity and disagreement among us. I find that it is less the things we *have* in common than the things we *have not* which most strengthen my life in my encounter with others. I find myself, therefore, asking what we hope for in the mutual irradiation Douglas welcomes between the world faiths and Quakerism. Wilfred Cantwell Smith said to us last year that to talk of revealed religion was wrong, for surely what God reveals is himself, and religion is the response to that revelation. In my encounters with believers from other traditions, I want to know where we do not differ, but I also want to know that, when we differ, the differences matter. Mutual irradiation, I take it, must involve, in part, a respectful and loving attempt at mutual conversion at precisely those points where the differences are real and vital. Jacques Maritain, in *On the Use of Philosophy*, insists that what we want is not a fellowship of beliefs but a fellowship of men who believe: "I distrust any easy and comfortable friendship between believers of all denominations. I mean a friendship which is not accompanied, as it were, by a kind of compunction or soul's sorrow. . . . The duty of being faithful to the light, and of always following it to the extent one sees it, is a duty which cannot be evaded." Maritain is speaking of mutual irradiation, but he is warning us that the price of this fellowship is heart-soreness; if we are to try to meet men where they are and be true to where we are simultaneously, we must be prepared for discomfort and unease. The alternative Maritain describes as a World's Fair Temple, "which would make all faiths have their stand, window display, and loudspeaker . . . , on the condition that all of them should confess they are *not sure* that they are conveying the word of God, and that none of them should claim to be the true Faith. . . ." This alternative is not mutual irradiation but what modern physics calls the heat death.

Though I value the emphasis Douglas Steere has made in this paper, I feel something by way of counterbalance is needed. Douglas has taught us all the value of learning where words come from; in what I have written I have tried to remind us that one way to do this is to listen to what the words actually say, to give the letter its proper valuation in relation to the spirit.