

A Quaker / Universalist Convergence

By Donne Hayden

“ . . . claiming that everything that rises must converge, Teilhard [de Chardin] grounds his philosophy of evolution in mysticism. The movement of Matter, then Life, and finally Thought is both forward and upward to a mystical union with God-Omega (the beginning and end of cosmic evolution).”¹

“Everything that rises must converge,” said Teilhard de Chardin, speaking of mysticism, not physics. At some level, when we rise above the mundane and material, we converge; melt into each other; differences disappear, and we become one.

This past week we held a memorial for Charlie Pierson here at the meetinghouse. Those of us who have come to Cincinnati Friends in the past few years didn't have the privilege of knowing the man, by all accounts a quintessential Quaker, who, in addition to long years of quiet and faithful service to the Meeting, was a conscientious objector (CO) during WWII. Charlie joined Cincinnati Friends Meeting in 1937 when he was nineteen years old; a few years later when war was declared, Charlie filed as a CO. The Draft Board hassled him because he worked for a company that manufactured goods used in the war effort. Eventually, however, with the blessing and support of Cincinnati Friends Meeting, Charlie became a *bona fide* CO. He was still drafted into the Army, but he was permitted to serve in non-combat position; he was sent to England with a medical unit where he worked as a clerk processing the wounded into and out of the hospital. Unfortunately, aside from an 11-page, front & back, single-spaced

¹ H. James Birx, “The Phenomenon of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,” a presentation to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mobile, Alabama, on May 4, 1997 as part of *The Harbinger* symposium, “Religion and Science: The Best of Enemies - The Worse of Friends.” Accessed 10/20/2010
http://www.theharbinger.org/articles/rel_sci/birx.html

typed letter he sent home to his mother, and which reads like a travel brochure detailing his visit to London, I found nothing Charlie wrote down about his experiences in the war.

But his story converges with that of another conscientious objector—Griswold Williams, a Universalist minister—whose life I researched a few years ago and for whom I found written records, mostly in old newspapers, but also early records of the Bureau of Investigation (forerunner of the Federal Bureau of Investigation). Like Charlie Pierson, Williams was a conscientious objector who nonetheless served overseas during a war.

The convergences of Universalism and Quakerism in Griswold Williams' life interest me. (When I use the term "Universalism," by the way, I'm using it in the sense in which it was understood in the early 1900s when Williams was a young Universalist minister, i.e., that there is no Hell because a loving God would not create such a place; everyone will be "saved," thus "universal salvation." Universalism is one of the original Christian "heresies." Did you know that if you are a heretic you are still a Christian? You just don't accept the orthodox interpretation of things. Back to Griswold Williams).

I first became aware of him because his name appeared with an affirmation widely used (with some modification) in UU churches. The small UU church where I was minister before I came to Cincinnati Friends had this affirmation on a hand-lettered plaque at the front of the church and recited it every Sunday at the beginning of worship. When I first heard it, I was struck by how Quakerly it sounds. See if you agree.

Love is the Doctrine of this Church,

The quest [for] truth is its Sacrament,

And service is its Prayer.

To dwell together in Peace,

To seek knowledge in Freedom,

To serve [hu]mankind in Fellowship,

To the end that all souls shall grow

into harmony with the Divine,

Thus do we Covenant with each other

and with our God.

Imagine my delight at discovering that L. Griswold Williams, a Universalist credited with writing this Quakerish “covenant,” worked with Quakers in France during World War I!

Williams’ story began in 1912, when the 19-year-old from Waterford, Connecticut entered Meadville Theological School in Meadville, Pennsylvania. He left the seminary 2 ½ years later in 1915, expelled for his support of striking Italian factory workers. By 1916, Griswold Williams was a preacher, riding the circuit of Universalist churches in western Ohio. (Like Quakers, Universalist ministers didn’t have to have a university degree).

During Williams’ last year at seminary and his beginning career as a Universalist minister, war raged across Europe and debate swirled around the possibility of the United States entering the war. In December 1915, President Woodrow Wilson asked for a standing army of 142,000 and a reserve of 400,000,¹ and took measures to begin conscription of all able-bodied men. In March 1916 the Senate unanimously resolved to bring the U.S. Army to full strength. By early 1917, President Wilson succumbed to pressure for the United States to enter the war on the side of Britain and France against Germany and its allies.

Like many others, young Griswold Williams had strong opinions on the subject.² As the son of working class parents (his father was a silk dyer and his mother a dressmaker) and advocate of Social Gospel theology, Williams was concerned that the common working man was being led to fight, kill and die for a cause not properly his own. By 1917, he was full-time minister at All Souls' Universalist Church in Marion, Ohio; on Feb. 23 that year, the *Marion Tribune* published a letter to the editor in which he expressed opposition to the United States entering the war. I love being able to "hear" his voice (wish I could find something like this from Charlie Pierson). Here is an excerpt from Williams' letter:

I read only the other day that the exports of the United States had increased three billions or one hundred per cent in three years. It seems passing strange that in times of such prosperity, men, women and little children should be without food, starving in the midst of luxury. These half fed laborers are being told that they must be ready to defend our legitimate rights by going out and murdering as many Germans as they can. I for one wish to register myself as one who refuses to do any of this defending. If the owners want the markets let them do the fighting, not the workers. The workers of America have no quarrel with the workers of any other country. Is this unpatriotic? If you mean by patriotism the willingness to die for the good of humanity, then I am a Patriot, but if you mean the willingness to die for the sake of bank accounts of the Capitalists of this country, I am not. For the sake of the working men of the world whose struggle for Justice is one, and in the name of the workingman of Nazareth, Brother of Humanity, I refuse to uphold or engage in any war.

—L. Griswold Williams, Minister, All Souls Church Universalist

² Secretary of State Wm. Jennings Bryan, for instance, resigned in protest of Wilson's involving the U.S. in a European war.

Sounds like a Quaker to me. Definitely a pacifist.

In the next few months the following events occurred: On April 2, 1917 President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war, which was done on April 6. In May 1917, Wilson signed the draft law passed by Congress, declaring that anyone failing to register would be arrested and subject to a year in prison. From Friday, June 2 to Monday, June 4, the days following Wilson's announcement that the draft would begin on June 5, newspapers across the United States reported dozens of arrests of persons trying to leave the country to avoid conscription.³

In the week prior to that announcement, Griswold Williams had cards printed up announcing his sermon topic for Sunday evening, June 3, 1917. The cards, which he distributed around the small city of Marion, Ohio, read:

There is the Patriotism of the gunmaker who wants his country to fight to maintain his bloody trade. There is the Patriotism of the woman willing to have her sons die in battle. There is the Patriotism of the food speculator who waves a flag to cover his theft. There is the Patriotism of those who believe that war can be ended by war, and there is the Patriotism of a Follower of Jesus.

Two days after he gave that sermon, he registered with the Marion, Ohio draft board as a conscientious objector for "religious beliefs." A month later on July 4, he gave a speech on the steps of the Marion County courthouse that made statewide news; the *Hamilton Evening Journal*, July 6, 1917 reported:

³ On June 5, 1917, besides Griswold Williams, about 10 million men registered for the first draft. (Ray H. Banks, "Historical Background of the World War I Draft," <http://members.aol.com/Rayhbanks/bgground.html>).

Tonight the United States District Attorney at Cleveland was requested to send a federal officer [to Marion] for Rev. L. Griswold Williams, pastor of All Souls' Universalist church, who has been under the surveillance of Postmaster Frank T. Campbell for several weeks because of his alleged pro-German utterances.

Mr. Williams in an address on the courthouse esplanade, scolded President Wilson and the government for warring against Germany until an angry crowd forced him to stop speaking.

And on July 7, 1917 the Marion paper, the *Elyria Evening Telegram*, reported that following the speech on the court house steps, "a meeting of the church congregation was held and it was decided not to re-employ Rev. Mr. Williams when his contract expires. His first year as pastor will not be up until Nov. 30."

Throughout late summer and fall, Griswold Williams continued to speak out. Because he openly opposed the war, his loyalty to the U.S. was in question, and he was twice reported to and questioned by the Bureau of Investigation. In spite of this, Williams was hired as minister at First Universalist Church in Lockport, New York, where at least some of the congregation supported his pacifist beliefs.

Though even conscientious objectors were drafted for non-combatant service, as a minister, Williams was in one of the few categories exempt from military service. He could have remained as minister of the Lockport Universalist church, but early in 1918, Griswold Williams sought out Rufus Jones and other Friends who were organizing non-military service alternatives for drafted Quakers. By April 20, 1918, Griswold Williams was applying for a passport to go to

France to work with the American Friends Reconstruction Unit (later known as the American Friends Service Committee).⁴

In late 1918, Williams was in the Marne Valley of France with other conscientious objectors, mostly Quakers. All around them, bombs were still dropping as Williams and others worked to rebuild the homes of French villagers. In his book, *A Service of Love in Wartime*, Rufus Jones, the great Quaker mystic, included a long poem written by Griswold Williams (see below), a Universalist minister with mystic tendencies. At the level of understanding the Christian message of peace, they converged.

Next week at Cincinnati Friends Meeting, Quakers and Universalists will converge at the annual Christian Universalist Association Conference being held here. As Griswold Williams was *a Universalist among Friends*, next weekend Phil Gulley, a Quaker minister and author who is the keynote speaker on the subject of Universalism, will be a *Friend among Universalists*. You are all invited to join us—come converge!

⁴ The detailed story of the formation of the AFSC is found in Rufus Jones' book, *A Service of Love in Wartime*, now out of print.

POEM USED IN RUFUS JONES' BOOK, *A SERVICE OF LOVE IN WARTIME*:

"THE FRIENDS RECONSTRUCTION UNIT - THE MANUFACTURING DEPARTMENT"

by L. Griswold Williams, in France, 1918

I've been making windows—
 Oak windows in our shop along the river—
 Thinking of where they'll go and what they'll maybe do:
 Windows to overlook the crumpled roofs of clattering towns,
 To open out across the silent wastedness of trampled farms,
 On white-scarred vineyard slopes,
 Or shattered woodlands healing at the touch of Spring.

Some may be gates of magic liberation,
 Giving on living worlds of leaf and sky,
 Where those whose feet can never tread dear earth
 Shall send their spirits wandering far;
 At these will children climb to greet the infant moon,
 Or press their noses tight, watching the first snow feathers fall;
 Through here may little breaths of morning murmur;
 This humble shrine day's glowing altar fires. . . .

And I've been making doors—
 Doors that shall open as a sheltering hand to harassed hearts
 Praying a solace in some broken place;
 Doors guarding at last those helpless ones
 Guns could not guard nor armies make secure.

Here homing age may fumble at a lock,
 Or venturing youth push wide with eager hand;
 This door may usher Birth with hopefulness,
 Close quietly when Death has passed with friendly eyes,
 Or part relentlessly two lovers, lingering with reluctant lips at dusk;
 Here may a woman lean with shadowed face,
 Waiting a lad who lies in an untilled field. . . .

I've not made doors and windows for chateaux or palaces—
 Only for little wooden *démontables**
 To shelter mostly simple folk
 Dripped from the grinding jaws of War.
 Red tiles will be for roof, the walls be brown, and green the
 white-knobbed doors.

The sections bolt together easily,
As barren as a shed for animals almost,
Until my doors and windows make it—Home. . .
O patient Master Workman of the world,
Shaper of all this home of humankind!
Teach me the truer trade of making doors and windows for men's souls:
Windows for letting in Love's widening dawn,
Doors swinging outward freely on Truth's pleasant ways.

**Démontable* – adjective describing something that may be disassembled. The “pre-fab” houses Friends constructed for French villages were called “les démontables.”