

DOGMAS

The appointment of a female Leader for the American Episcopal Church heartens me, though I am saddened by the opposition it has attracted. In their origins, all religions are essentially religions of love, particularly Sikhism and Christianity, though you would be hard put to recognise this in many of the more extreme statements made by Christians during this last week. Mankind is very gifted at finding ways to build walls around its campfires and regarding everyone not huddled in the group as a dangerous alien.

I belong to the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers, one small group which formed over 350 years ago to try and provide a focus for a renewal of the Protestant churches, to try and direct believers back to the spirit behind Jesus' teaching, rather than to focus on the essentially irrelevant questions of dogma which had caused the hideous religious wars of the time. We are not the only such group among the worlds religions, Sikhism is one, Confucianism and Buddhism two others and there are of course other peaceful, mystical groups in Christianity and Judaism as well as Sufism in Islam.

One belief seems common in such bodies, that there is a power behind the universe, though probably not one which intervenes directly. When I hear someone say of some fortunate event; "That was the hand of God", I look at my hands and think that it can only be a hand like mine which will be used. I do not believe that "God's hands" are driven by a divine power or magic, but by love, the love that can inspire each one of us, of any religion or of none. This Spirit is not interested in the words we use, nor in our gender or sexual orientation, it is a spirit of love, alien to cruelty or injustice or hatred and indeed to all the powers which divide and dehumanise us.

Jesus was as close to the Spirit as is possible to get, and he clearly had no desire to sideline women (you remember how he ticked off Martha when she wanted to drag Mary into the kitchen). Nor did he ever condemn homosexuality, nor indeed anything other than pride, greed, cruelty and oppression. He preached a religion of love, not one of doctrine and dogma, a religion which we urgently need to rediscover today.