

## Society of Friends, aka Quakers

Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches of America: Origins and Beliefs*, rev. ed. (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976, 1983), 138–146.

One of the most unusual religious systems to emerge in the modern European world was the Society of Friends. This faith, constituted during the political turmoil of seventeenth-century England, was another powerful movement that sprang from a profound personal experience of a conscientious leader. One of the most distinguished modern figures in the movement, Rufus Jones (1863–1948), aptly described the founder of this religious society, George Fox (1624–1691):

Fox ... was ... a man of unusual native capacity, of extraordinary depth of life, swift of insight, a born leader, a spiritual genius, a fine union of mystic, prophet and practical reformer, a rugged, fearless champion of a fresh and novel type of Christianity. [Rufus M. Jones, *The Quaker's Faith* (n.p., n.d.), p. 1.]

Born in Fenny Drayton, Leicestershire, England, George Fox was the son of a weaver and of a mother whom he respected as an “upright woman.” Although his parents considered directing him into the Anglican ministry, they changed their plans and apprenticed their son to a shoemaker. As a consequence of this decision, Fox learned a practical trade and received a meager formal education. As a youth he was taught “to be faithful in all things” and recalled that he “never wronged man or woman.” [George Fox, *An Autobiography*, edited by Rufus M. Jones (Philadelphia, 1919), pp. 66–67.] When he was nineteen, the young man invited by several nominal Christians [Christians in name only] to participate in a drinking bout. A custom had developed in which men continued to drink until one refused to order another round and the individual who dared suggest a cessation had to pay for all the liquor. Fox was grieved and highly disturbed by the fact that members of a [139] Christian Church suggested that he participate in such a “cankorous” vice. Abruptly leaving his associates, George Fox completed his business and returned home. But he could not forget the incident. Instead of sleeping that night, he remembered pacing back and forth, praying and crying to the Lord. In the midst of his anguish, Fox declared that the Lord comforted him, saying:

Thou seest how young people go together into vanity, and old people into the earth; thou must forsake all, young and old, keep out of all, and be as a stranger unto all. [Ibid., p. 68.]

On the morning following this religious experience, George Fox informed his parents that he was leaving home. When they inquired concerning his decision, he said that the Lord had instructed him to leave father and mother for His sake. Earning a livelihood as a shoemaker, Fox traveled from community to community, examining various beliefs expounded by professors of religion. This investigation led him to challenge many popular doctrines of that age. Consequently, in September 1643, George Fox not only “broke off all familiarity or fellowship” with young and old, but became a

wandering seeker, initiating his quest for religious truth. [Ibid., pp. 68–69.]

During his wandering, George Fox learned the beliefs of Puritans, Separatists, and Baptists. He reclined in fields and orchards, reading the Bible. In his attempt to draw closer to the Lord, he fasted frequently and prayed fervently. As the months passed, Fox became increasingly disturbed with the sin prevalent in society and with what he regarded as de-[140]ficiencies in the religions of his age. After concluding that none of the preachers were teaching the pure gospel of Christ, he said he heard a voice which declared, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.” As Fox listened, his heart leaped with joy. He testified that the Lord commenced revealing to him heavenly wisdom. He learned, he said, that the Lord does not dwell in churches, temples, or holy places, but in the hearts of men. Everyone is enlightened by the “divine light of Christ.” Although it shines in all of us, Fox declared, most people, even Christians, deny this light, hate it, and refuse to communicate with God. [Ibid., pp. 76, 82, 100.]

Four years after leaving home, the wandering seeker became a traveling preacher. This stormy ministry began after Fox decided that a formal education was not an essential prerequisite for teaching others the gospel of Christ. His convictions precipitated a denunciation of salaried, professional clergy and all historic Christian creeds. Such criticism encountered violent, brutal opposition, but the oppression did not prevent him from proclaiming his innermost convictions.

As early as 1650 a nickname for the followers of Fox was popularized. While George Fox was being interrogated by Justice Gervase Bennett at the time of his incarceration in the Derby jail, Fox told the judge to tremble at the word of the Lord. Replying to this admonition, Bennett called the prisoner a “quaker.” Possibly the judge employed this term of reproach because it had been used previously to describe members of this movement who sometimes trembled or quivered with religious emotions. [Ibid., pp. 125–26.]

Meanwhile, the earliest disciples of Fox called themselves “Children of the Light” or “Friends.” After 1665 the official name of this religious community became the Society of Friends; eventually, as the name Quaker lost its derogatory connotation, Friends incorporated this nickname into their patterns of expression. [William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 22, 57, 73, 132, 307.]

As this religious movement gained converts in the British Isles and spread through the Western Hemisphere, persecution intensified. Fox and his disciples were imprisoned and whipped by angry spectators. According to Fox, more than 1,000 Friends were incarcerated in 1656; in the winter of 1661 about 4,000 were placed in dungeons. Modern historians have estimated that between 1661 and 1689 approxi-

mately 12,000 Quakers were imprisoned in England and of these more than 300 died during their confinement. [Vernon Noble, *The Man in Leather Breeches* (NY: Philosophical Library, 1953), pp. 136, 161, 167.]

During the last half of the seventeenth century, hostility against these Protestants was as evident in the English mainland colonies as in Great Britain. After Quaker missionaries converted a few Virginians in the 1650s, political leaders enacted laws forbidding these Christians from settling, preaching, and worshipping in that colony. Meanwhile, the first Quakers, two women missionaries who landed in what is today New York City, were promptly imprisoned and shortly thereafter expelled. [141]

At the same time the Quakers were encountering opposition in Virginia and New Netherlands, they introduced their faith in New England. The earliest followers of Fox in the Bay colony were not only fined, whipped, imprisoned, and banished, but their bodies were mutilated by branding and by the clipping of their ears and tongues. Two male itinerants and one female missionary were also executed for violating a Massachusetts statute. The crime committed by these Friends was that they had returned to that colony after being banished on pain of death.

Eventually, members of the Society of Friends found several havens in America where they could worship in peace. In 1681, after the earliest Quaker immigrants were granted the right to settle in Rhode Island, New Jersey, and several other English mainland colonies, William Penn, a convert to this faith, was given a territorial grant by the English monarch. Although the king justified his actions by claiming that this charter was issued in return for a debt owed to Penn's father, possibly a paramount reason for this action was the king's desire to remove from England individuals classified as undesirable dissenters. Shortly after receiving this charter, Penn launched a "Holy Experiment" in Pennsylvania which included the right of good people of all religious persuasions to worship in peace. Many industrious Quakers were attracted to this province, settling mainly in and near Philadelphia. There they prospered and invited others to join them in building a land of liberty.

Viewing the development of this faith, it almost seems as though the early Quakers thrived on persecution, for their growth during the first turbulent decades of their history was remarkable. In 1660, out of a population of approximately 5 million there were possibly 30,000 to 40,000 Friends in England and Wales, and by the end of the seventeenth century, there were probably more than 50,000 Friends in Great Britain and approximately 40,000 in the Western Hemisphere. [Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 512; Noble, *The Man in Leather Breeches*, p. 275; Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (NY: Macmillan, 1960), p. 24.] In 1688, after toleration was extended to Protestants through England and her American colonies, the rapidity of growth declined. In 1800, after a century of toleration, there were not appreciably more Quakers living in the world than there had been during the first five decades of the movement's history. Today [early 1980s] the world membership is not significantly larger than it was in 1700; in 1981 the total

membership of five different bodies of Quakers in this country [USA] was about 141,000 and the world population, including the American Friends, was slightly over 400,000.

These membership statistics prompt individuals to ask why there was such a spectacular growth in the number of Quaker converts during its formative years and why the membership has remained relatively constant for more than 280 years.

Many factors explain the immediate popularity of Quakerism. The Friends' emphasis on equality and plainness of speech and dress appealed [142] to many, especially those who were not classified as aristocrats. Fox's rejection of religious ritual and formalism, his emphasis on individual spiritual experiences, his humanitarian concerns, and his extension of the right to lay members and women to preach and participate in religious services and other meetings were powerful attractive forces. Salaried preachers who delivered sermons were replaced in the worship services by a membership who spoke or prayed as the Spirit directed. After Quakers gathered in homes or unadorned meetinghouses, they meditated. There was no opening prayer or singing of hymns. Silence was interrupted when a man or woman stood and spoke. According to Quaker belief, the person would then relate a message which was revealed through the Spirit of the Lord. Such a pattern of worship was appealing to many who were not satisfied with the ritual or the emphasis on preaching that characterized other denominations.

After its initial success, however, Quakerism lost some of its original vitality. The missionary zeal of the third generation of Quakers was not as apparent as among the earliest converts; during the nineteenth century, most attempts to spread the movement by means of direct proselyting activities were discontinued. Meanwhile, many children of the original converts lacked spiritual enthusiasm; prior to the American Revolution congregations of Friends seemed to have languished in sections of Delaware and in other parts of the American wilderness. During the American Revolution, this movement was further weakened as a consequence of the Quaker opposition to war. Following the birth of the new nation, influences from other denominations, strict membership requirements, and frequent excommunications — sometimes for marrying outside the faith — also hindered the growth of this religious community.

The strength of the movement also seemed to have been sapped partly as a consequence of debilitating schisms. While Fox contended that all men can know God and derive knowledge from the Lord without any intermediary in the form of a church, sacrament, priest, or sacred scripture, some members felt differently about the Inner Light. Leaders of the faith were unable to agree on precise principles or procedures that would enable members to differentiate between truth and error or human reasoning and messages conveyed by the Spirit of God.

During the early history of this religious community, theological harmony in many congregations was maintained by employing the writings of Robert Barclay (1648–1690) as a guide of religious truth.

Barclay was a disciple of Fox who crystallized and defended with scriptural references the basic views of the founder of this denomination. In 1673 he published a Quaker *Catechism* and three years later brought forth his influential *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1676). In his writings, which passed through many editions and were widely circulated in this country, Barclay [143] mentioned his belief in a trinitarian God who can only be known by the Spirit. Denying that Adam's sin was directed imputed to man, he described with an Arminian flavor his conviction concerning the fall and atonement, emphasizing man's vital role in the salvation experience. Barclay described in his popular works the Quaker belief in the Inner Light, and referred to the Bible as an important secondary source of religious truth which contained revelations of God to ancient saints. Considering life beyond the grave, this influential Quaker apologist felt that all men, regardless of their religious affiliation, would be judged according to their understanding and response to law and to the Inner Light. Moreover, Barclay rejected all outward, physical sacraments, and identified true worship as waiting and watching for the Light of Christ and then proclaiming to others the word and will of God.

While selections from Barclay's *Apology* served as a norm of faith in some Quaker societies, three emphases were visible in the early republic that shattered Quaker unity. Religious liberalism strengthened the Quaker tendency to resist creedal statements but carried this characteristic "to the point where it was scarcely necessary to believe anything in order to be a Quaker." [Edwin B. Bronner, ed., *American Quakers Today* (Lebanon, PA: Sowers Printing Co., 1966), p. 17.] Meanwhile, an evangelical movement insisted on the endorsement of prescribed beliefs; while the liberal faction within this community became more tolerant of variations of faith, the evangelical wing remained intolerant of deviations from the classical theology. A third emphasis apparent among Quakers of the early nineteenth century was quietism, a mystic spirit based upon following the Divine Light.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, theological diversity had separated the American Quakers into at least three major bodies called the Hicksite, Wilburite, and Gurneyite Friends. After one observer investigated the Hicksite-Orthodox split, he confessed in bewilderment, "I didn't know you had enough theology to split over." [Edwin B. Bronner, *Quakerism and Christianity* (Lebanon, PA: Sowers Printing Co., 1967), pp. 5-6. The leaders of these three Quaker movements were Elias Hicks (1748-1830), John Gurney (1788-1846), and John Wilbur (1774-1856). For additional information on the history of this faith see Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism* (NY: Macmillan, 1942).

Another aspect of this ecclesiastical movement has been the genuine concern of Friends for the welfare of others. In harmony with the teachings of George Fox, eighteenth-century Quakers led an attack on slavery, the first denomination in this land to do so. Influenced by the actions of two Quaker humanitarians, John Woolman (1720-1772) and Anthony Benezet (1713-1784), the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting repudiated slavery in 1758 and then in 1776 expelled all members who kept slaves. Yearly meetings organized in the

South, however, were not as forceful in their actions against slaveholders. In the early republic, other Quaker leaders, such as Benjamin Lundy (1789-1839), continued the abolitionist crusade, denouncing all who supported the institution of slavery and aiding blacks who were seeking freedom in the northern states and Canada.

Members of this society have been interested in other social reform programs as well. Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) gained a reputation for [144] promoting prison reform in Great Britain. Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) is recognized for her efforts to secure improved treatment of the mentally ill. Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) was a pioneer social worker, temperance leader, and advocate of suffrage for women and blacks.

In harmony with the Quaker heritage of concern for the oppressed, the American Friends Service Committee was organized in 1917 to assist English Friends with relief work in devastated regions of France, and to give conscientious objectors and others a constructive alternative to military duty through various forms of service. After the war the organization continued. During its history, the "AFSC" has sponsored many programs to promote international peace, to provide food, clothing, and medical and social services to others, and to establish equal rights for all men and women, regardless of their race, creed, or nationality.

The Quaker spirit of humanitarianism, of equality, and of cooperation is reflected not only in their pattern of faith and worship and their social action programs, but also in their church organization and their Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meeting. When they gather at these sessions, Friends consider local church issues, such as Sabbath meetings, church property, and service projects. All, including men and women, have the same rights. No votes are taken, and decisions are made only after a unity of thought is clearly expressed. If there is no consensus of opinion, decisions are postponed for later discussion.

A Quarterly Meeting is formed by the assembly of members from several Monthly Meetings. Four times a year these representatives gather to worship and consider business pertaining to their common interest.

The Yearly Meeting is an annual gathering in which Friends discuss issues on a much larger scope than is possible in other assemblies. Committees present their proposals for peace, social justice, race relations, education, temperance, and the advancement of other humanitarian goals, and Friends, by consensus or by employing democratic procedures, render decisions.

One of the largest organizations of Quakers is the Friends' General Conference, a national body comprising eight Yearly Meetings. This group is a Quaker body designed to promote fellowship and unite the actions of Quakers living in different parts of the country. [William Hubben, *Who Are the Friends?* (Alburtis, PA: Hemlock Press, n.d.), pp. 11-12.]

Although there are various Yearly Meetings in America (five distinct Yearly Meetings are organized in

Ohio), all representing different wings of the Quaker movement, there was a tendency, following World War I, for American Quakers to form organizations designed to reunite their members, to forget their differences, and to work harmoniously toward common objectives. Consequently, while major divisions within the movement have continued, the boundaries separating members are in some instances being [145] weakened by Friends who are striving to identify beliefs which best represent their historic tradition.

Throughout the history of this movement education has had a high priority. Quakers held that everyone, including tradesmen, should secure the best possible education. In many instances, where there were no schools, Friends established educational institutions. Currently many members of this faith have received exceptional training in Quaker or public schools.

Like other religious communities, Quakerism has experienced many changes during its history. The plain Quaker clothing in most instances has disappeared, and the traditional language has been replaced by modern terminology. No longer are men and women separated in most gatherings; men now sit on the women's side of the aisle and women occupy benches once restricted to men. Music and pastoral sermons have been introduced in many American Quaker services. In this pastoral system, unprogrammed meetings have been retained but in some instances these meetings are held apart from the more formal services, or are incorporated into a Sabbath service in which the focal point is a sermon delivered by a full-time professional minister. The beliefs of some contemporary Quakers are similar in many respects to those popularized by modern theologians who are reinterpreting classical Protestantism. According to some Friends residing in twentieth-century America, life's quality, not adherence to particular forms or creeds or methods of worship, is the essence of true religion. [Lawrence McK. Miller, Jr., *The Practice of Quaker Worship* (n.p., n.d.), p. 2.] Even though the enthusiasm of the early Quaker missionaries has subsided, the spirit of toleration, of equality, and of concern for others, as reflected in the teachings of George Fox, has continued to dominate the convictions of many members of the Society of Friends.

### **Distinguishing Beliefs**

Since most Friends of the twentieth century no longer embrace many beliefs popularized by Robert Barclay, and since a wide latitude of belief exists among these Christians, it is difficult to identify many distinguishing characteristics of contemporary Quaker theology.

"Many, or most theological questions are left for the individual to decide." According to many Friends, "The essence of Christian faith is a way of life. Theological matters, such as original sin and our subsequent redemption by the sacrificed death of Jesus, the literal acceptance of the Bible, the mysterious union of the divine and human in Jesus Christ, life after death, and others are to be interpreted according to individual insight and growth." Another explanation of the current theological position of many Friends is that "Quakerism presents the believer with ... challenges rather than imposing a standardized creed or rule of faith. This

condition enhances growth of vision and understanding." [Hubben, *Who Are the Friends?*, p. 18. Not all Friends would agree with Hubben's deemphasis on doctrine. Much diversity of belief currently exists among Quakers regarding the tenets outlined by this Quaker writer.] [146]

Although changes have taken place in Quaker theology, there are a few beliefs that represent their distinct historical heritage that have remained popular. In harmony with the views of their earliest leaders, Quakers of today teach that there are two sources for determining religious truth, the Inner Light and the Bible. Every man, they assert, has the Inner Light (called the Seed, the Truth, the Light of Christ, and That of God in Every Man), and when individuals unite with this spirit, they can learn truth as did the prophets of old. They also teach that the Bible represents an important phase of man's spiritual history, and although they believe that this work contains mistranslations and errors or addition and omission, it is viewed as a book which informs man of the will of God as revealed to the ancient saints.

Quakers have also retained their peculiar belief concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper. While they teach that man should be cleansed spiritually, they say that baptism should be considered as occurring in a spiritual sense, without employing water. They further hold that the communion should be considered as the nourishing spirit of God in a purely symbolic sense.

Friends also emphasize the principle of religious liberty, separation of church and state, and the equality of men and women. Traditionally, they have also been opposed to war; many Friends are conscientious objectors. Moreover, they are often active leaders of various humanitarian programs.