

**An Introduction to
Quakerism
and
An Invitation to
Fellow Seekers**

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A. Introduction

In spite of the fact that there are only around 220,000 Quakers in the world today (approximately 120,000 of them in the United States), they have had a powerful impact on the world in the 350 years of their existence as a group. They have been — and still are — pioneers in many movements, such as education, concern for minorities, women's rights, care of the mentally ill, and peace. And in more recent decades they have been in the forefront of efforts to create a peaceful, just, and humane world community and to assist the elderly in the U.S.A., especially through the establishment of retirement communities, several of them with lifetime care.

Unfortunately, however, they are not well understood by the general public. Sometimes they are incorrectly associated with the Amish, the Shakers, or the Mormons. More accurately, they are often well-known for their excellent schools and colleges, for their conscientious objections to war and their concern for peace, or for their worldwide efforts in relief and rehabilitation through the broad-based work of the American Friends Service Committee, for which it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.

This brief essay is an attempt to tell in capsule form something about the origins of the Quaker movement, a few of their basic beliefs, and some of their contributions to the world — yesterday and today. For those who want to learn more about the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) a few references are noted at the end of this essay.

B. Seventeenth Century England and the Rise of Quakerism

Individuals, organizations, institutions, and movements need to be seen against the background of their time and place. That is as true of Quakerism as of other groups.

For them the time was the latter part of the 17th century; the place — England.

That was a tumultuous period in English history. It was a time of tensions and turmoil. It was a century of changes, conflicts, and colonization. It was a dramatic period, too, with a star-studded cast, including the Kings James I and II and the Kings Charles I and II, William Shakespeare — the playwright, Oliver Cromwell — the Protestant Commoner, Sir Walter Raleigh — the adventurer and colonizer, and George Fox — the Quaker.

Seventeenth century England was a period of social stratification — something like a giant pyramid, with the king and a few of the elite at the top, a small middle-class, and a mass of subjects at the bottom. For the privileged few at the top of that pyramid there were many favors, such as the doffing of hats (known as “the hat honor”) and the use of special terms in addressing them — which the Quakers refused to do.

The most revolutionary aspect of that century, however — was the fact that the Bible, in the King James version, was available for the first time to the general public.

Consequently religion became a major topic of conversation and hundreds of religious tracts were published. Conflicts continued throughout that century, with the Catholics, the Church of England adherents, and the Puritans vying for political control.

Scores of new sects also arose. Among them were the Familists, the Muggletonians, the Fifth Monarchy Men, the

Seekers, and the Ranters.

Then there were the Quakers who adopted some of the ideas of those new sects and added their own beliefs, practices, and a church structure of their own. Many of those ideas were revolutionary then — and now.

Eventually nearly all of those sects died, but the Quaker movement survived because it had a central core of meaningful messages and a new and radical form of religious democracy — a model for church government.

C. The Man in Leather Breeches: George Fox and the Early Friends

In a powerful and provocative statement Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist and historian, once wrote:

Perhaps the most remarkable incident in modern history is not the Diet of Worms, still less the Battle of Austerlitz, or any other battle, but an incident passed over carelessly by most historians — namely, George Fox making himself a coat of leather.

Born in central England in 1624, George Fox showed no special promise as a boy. Apprenticed to a shoemaker who also kept sheep and cattle, he spent many days in solitude tending those flocks and ruminating on the disparity between what people (including the priests and ministers) preached and what they practiced. He was baffled by what he saw and heard, and became an ardent seeker after truth.

Wandering over the countryside one day, something special happened. He described that experience in unforgettable language:

And when all my hopes in them (the preachers) and all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, then, oh then, I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,” and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.

He referred to that incident as something he had learned experimentally; today we would probably refer to it as something learned experientially.

Fox had made a pivotal discovery of life — that God lives and talks to anyone, anywhere, on any topic, and at any time when an individual is ready to listen. Intermediaries are not needed; communication with the Divine can be direct.

Through that discovery his life was transformed; his spiritual integration led to his physical integration. From a shy, troubled, physically depressed youth, he became a sturdy, physically robust, integrated individual, able to withstand the hardships of travel, physical assaults, and years of imprisonment.

Convinced that this message should be shared widely with others, George Fox set out on a lifetime of journeys — to England and to what are now The Netherlands, France, Germany, the Barbados, and the United States. It was for those journeys that he made himself a coat and breeches of leather, to withstand many days of strenuous travel and to endure many nights of hardship in the open fields.

As George Fox travelled from place to place, scores came at first to hear him preach. Later hundreds — and sometimes thousands. As a result of his efforts and those of others, small fellowships, Christian cells, or societies of friends were formed to try to recover the authenticity, spontaneity, and vitality of first-century Christianity.

Several remarkable men and women also joined the new movement, such as Robert Barclay, Margaret Fell, Isaac Pennington and William Penn. As people who were broadly educated and widely travelled, they added a significant new dimension to that movement which had hitherto been composed largely of simple farmers and tradesmen.

Various names were given to this new movement — including The Publishers of Truth and Children of the Light. But they soon decided to call themselves the Religious Society of Friends. However, they were often called Quakers because they trembled in their Meetings for Worship under the influence of the Almighty or in the courts. At first the term Quakers was one of derision but it emerged eventually as a term of respect, — a shorthand for the Religious Society of Friends.

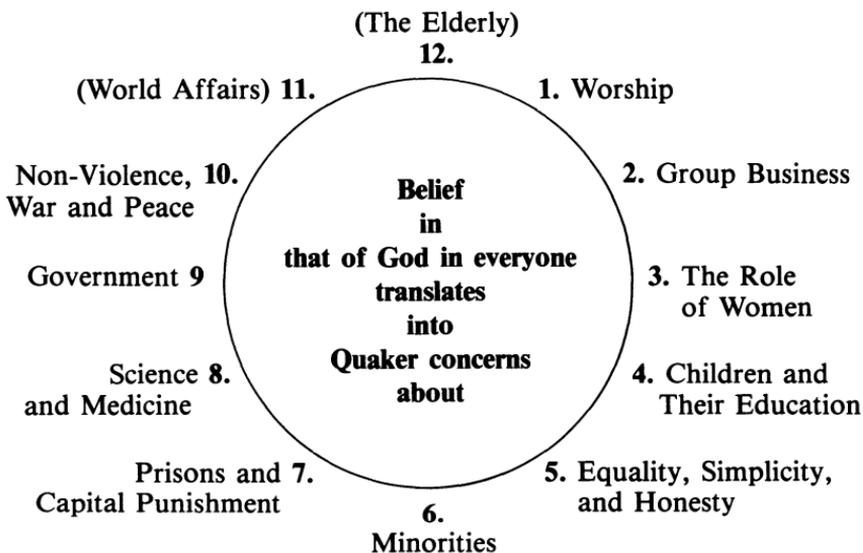
Since the adherents of that group were a threat to the established hierarchies in religion and politics because of their refusal to fight, to respect the “hat honor,” to use special terms of respect to those in power, and to conform in other ways, they were attacked verbally and physically, brought into the courts and imprisoned by the hundreds. Often their imprisonment strengthened their faith; sometimes it attracted others to their cause.

D. The Core of the Quaker Message and Some Of Its Implications

The message of those early Friends was a many-sided one — and it is today. At the center was the belief that something of God is implanted in every human being at birth. We may deny it. We may ignore it. We may by-pass it. But it is always there, ready to be renewed and utilized.

Such a central belief may at first sound simple but it has tremendous implications — and in all facets of everyone’s life. It does not ignore shortcomings, sins, and suffering but it posits the belief that there are tremendous potentialities in every human being on our Planet — regardless of sex, age, race, culture, ethnic background, religion, economic status, or education. We can all overcome; we can all grow by living in the Light.

That core of the Quaker faith has enormous applications; the chart below indicates some of the ways in which Quakers have carried out their inferences:



(Indicates more recent implications)

In some ways that chart tells the story of the history of the Religious Society of Friends for almost 350 years as its members have attempted to live by the Two Commandments of Jesus and to translate into action the passage in the Lord's Prayer which calls for the attempt to establish the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Often Quakers have failed; membership in the Society of Friends brings with it no plaques of perfection, no halos, no passports to heaven. Membership is more like a learner's permit for the long, strenuous, and sometimes difficult journey through life, strengthened by the companionship of fellow travellers.

However, Quakers have often been successful in their beliefs as translated into action:

1. If the Divine speaks to everyone directly, then sermons, hymns, candles, incense, and altars are unnecessary in worship. In expectant silence Friends worship individually and collectively. Aware that worship is not a monologue but a dialogue, they try to listen as well as speak to God. If a worshipper feels that his or her message should be shared with others, that person speaks simply and briefly. Often messages are open-ended, with other worshippers continuing in the same vein as the first speaker. The most moving periods of such worship are often called "Gathered Meetings."

And because Friends consider the different sacraments outer forms, they concentrate on the one sacrament they uphold, that of a committed life in the Light.

2. Because Quakers believe that God speaks to them on temporal as well as spiritual matters, they conduct their Meetings for Business on a conveyor belt of silence, stopping to worship in silence if unity is not reached on an issue. Votes are not taken, with a gloating majority and a disgruntled minority. Instead, "a sense of the Meeting" is sought.

The presiding officer, called a clerk, uses a pencil or pen to record that agreement rather than wielding a gavel as is done in other groups.

3. If that of God is implanted in everyone, as Friends maintain, then women are as fully blessed as men. Hence, from the beginning of Quakerism, women have played an important role in all aspects of that movement and their training in the original separate women's meetings for business helped to prepare them as leaders in the women's rights movement of the 19th century.

4. A high regard for children and a special concern for their education led to the early establishment of parallel schools for boys and girls — and to coeducational institutions within a few years. Wherever Friends have settled, they have organized schools (and later, colleges) which were coeducational long before that became a common practice.

And Friends were among the earliest leaders in the movement for free, public schools in the United States.

5. Because they strived to let their yeas be yeas and their nays be nays, the early Quakers abolished the common practice of haggling in business and early set up the single-price system. The result was a rapid increase in business. In fact a quip about Quakers is that they went to Philadelphia to do good — and did well.

Quakers were often entrusted with the funds of their neighbors and out of that practice the leading banks in England were formed, such as Lloyds, Barclays, and Hoars.

6. Believing in that of God in every human being, Friends treated the Indians or Native Americans in the American colonies with respect and Quakers were the earliest opponents of slavery.

In succeeding generations many Friends have been champions of minority groups.

7. Among the earliest concerns of Quakers was their strong desire to improve prisons, perhaps because they were “experts” on them. That concern has continued up to the present time.

Considering human life sacred, they have always opposed capital punishment.

8. Barred from government offices and the universities because they were Dissidents, and cut off from military service because of their opposition to war, early Friends turned to science and medicine as areas in which they could work creatively. Especially outstanding was their pioneering work with the mentally ill, with the establishment of such institutions as The Retreat in York, England, and the Friends Hospital in Philadelphia.

In every period since then there have been eminent Quaker scientists and doctors.

9. In the colonies of Rhode Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina Friends were often outstanding as governors and legislators, carrying out their concerns for good relations with the Indians, improved conditions in prisons, broadened opportunities in education, protection of civil rights, and other measures. Since Friends withdrew from the legislature in Pennsylvania because they refused to vote for funds for the French and Indian War, there have been few Quakers in public office. But in recent years Quakers have been very active as lobbyists in Washington through the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

10. Based on their desire to carry out the commandment in the Old Testament not to kill and on the injunction of Jesus in the New Testament even to love one’s enemies, Quakers have consistently opposed violence and wars for 350 years,

becoming well-known for that stand. Many individuals, however, have served in the armed forces and their local Meetings have upheld their decisions, as well as supporting their members who have been conscientious objectors. But Friends' groups have never sanctioned participation in wars. Rather than maintaining a negative approach, they have worked on many fronts to remove the causes of conflicts.

11. Especially in recent years Quaker have worked strenuously for the creation of a peaceful, just, and humane world community. Particularly effective have been the efforts of the American Friends Service Committee in the U.S.A. and in many other parts of the world.

12. In this century Quakers in the United State have taken an increasing interest in improved facilities for the elderly. In the early part of that period they established several Friends' Boarding Homes, most of which still exist. And in recent times they have organized several retirement communities, often with lifetime care. Most of them are in the Philadelphia area, but some are located in other parts of the United States where Quakers are numerous.

E. Some Setbacks in the 19th Century and Some Gains in the 20th.

It seems to be an axiom of life that human groups eventually divide, and Quakers have not escaped such separations, especially in the U.S.A. For example, there were two tragic splits in the 19th century with each group emphasizing a part of the original message of Friends which included the historic Jesus and the Indwelling Christ, equality, simplicity, evangelism and missions, social concerns, and education.

Unfortunately some of those divisions persist today and have been "exported" abroad.

Nevertheless, 20th century Quakerism has been marked by several significant gains, including the following:

- . . . the establishment of Pendle Hill in Pennsylvania and the Earlham School of Religion in Indiana as study centers and retreats to encourage individuals and groups to cultivate their spiritual lives.
- . . . the organization of the American Friends Service Committee and the Friends Committee on National Legislation to carry on some of the social, economic, and political work of Quakers.
- . . . the striking growth of Friends in a few parts of the world, especially East Africa and Central and South America.
- . . . deepened concern about women's rights, prisons, the environment, and sanctuary for refugees, as well as about other historic concerns.
- . . . the establishment of two new colleges and several elementary and secondary schools, together with the formation of the Friends Council on Education and the Friends Association for Higher Education, to foster the educational outreach of Quakers.
- . . . the creation of the Friends World Committee for Consultation to promote the worldwide fellowship of Quakers.
- . . . the formation of many new Quaker Meetings and Friends Churches and of several yearly meetings in parts of the U.S.A. where few, if any, such groups existed previously.
- . . . a noticeable increase in the number and variety of publications about and/or by Friends as an extension of their original concern to be Publishers of the Truth.
- . . . a search on the part of Quakers of different backgrounds to discover their identity in the latter part of the 20th century, including the building of understanding among divergent groups.

With these and other signs of growth, some Friends hope that we are entering a new period in our history — that of a Quaker Renaissance.

Speaking on that theme a few years ago, Kenneth Boulding, an eminent economist and poet as well as a leading Friend, had this to say:

I believe the evolutionary potential of the Quaker mutation is very far from exhausted, and indeed, has hardly begun to show its full effects. I believe, furthermore, that the Society of Friends has a vital role to play in the future development of mankind, small perhaps in quantity but of enormous importance in quality, and that to refuse to take on this role or to run away from the burden which it may imply would be a betrayal of trust and a tragedy not only for the Society of Friends but for mankind as a whole. . . . I think that Quakerism is an example of a mutation which was in a sense premature and before its time . . . it is precisely in religious experience that one finds the evolutionary potential that looks forward to the ultimate future of man.

F. An Invitation to Seekers

Yes, the Religious Society of Friends is a very small, fragile, and fragmented group. But it is also a highly significant movement.

Of it William James, the American essayist and philosopher, once wrote:

The Quaker religion which he (George Fox) founded is something which it is impossible to overpraise. In a day

of sham, it was a religion of veracity, rooted in spiritual inwardness, and a return to something more like the original gospel than men had ever known in England.

And the American historian, George Bancroft, once wrote:

This rise of the people called Quakers is one of the remarkable events in the history of man. It marks the moment when intellectual freedom was claimed unconditionally by the people as an inalienable birthright.

Quakers today appreciate such praise from non-Friends, realizing full well how far we come from living up to those comments. Nevertheless we feel that we have much to contribute to the world at our best.

If you decry the secularism and materialism of our times, we encourage you to identify with us in our belief that purposeful living is fundamentally spiritual, permeating every aspect of our lives.

If you are distressed by the conformity of our age and the disregard for the precious nature of every individual, we welcome you as fellow seekers in a religious society which believes that something of the Divine is implanted in each of us at birth and which treasures individuality, but tempers it with the wisdom of the group — under Divine Guidance.

If you are disturbed by the frenetic pace of modern life with its attendant pressures, tensions, and anxieties, we invite you to our fellowship as we strive to simplify our lives and gain a sense of inner peace for living in times like these.

If you shudder at the military might of our own and other nations and at the threat of a nuclear holocaust, we urge you to join with us in finding ways to implement the historic peace testimony of Friends, opposing all wars and preparations for wars and seeking to remove the causes of conflicts.

If you are discouraged by your individual efforts to help create a better world, we would like to point to the many projects in which Quakers are involved — locally, nationally, and internationally — in our attempts to bring freedom, justice, and creative living to people in many places. We encourage you to work with us on some of these important undertakings.

If you consider creeds archaic and even intellectually dishonest, Friends offer you the creedless church. We share many common beliefs and approaches to life, but we encourage individuals to develop their own beliefs and patterns of living. Hence you will find a great variety of viewpoints in our groups.

If you are put off by the paraphernalia and programs of most churches, Friends welcome you to our worship services where we wait upon God in expectant silence. We believe that in such periods of quiet we can tap the spiritual resources which will enable us to live more calmly, more compassionately, and more creatively in this chaotic age.

If you have been helped by some of the practices of Eastern religions but have felt that those faiths concentrate upon individual worship to the neglect of corporate waiting upon God, and bypass social action, we suggest that you explore the faith and practices of Friends as we stress individual *and* group worship and combine the vertical relationship to God with the horizontal relationships with other human beings.

If you are repelled by the practices of many Christians, we urge you to consider with us ways in which we can reclaim the best in our Judeo-Christian tradition and rediscover Jesus of Nazareth as The Great Revealer of the grandeur of God and the potential greatness of human beings who live in the Light — as well as to try to ferret out with us the many truths in other world religions.

If you are disturbed by the loneliness in our large metropolitan areas, Friends point out that their Meetings are intended as homes away from home: caring communities, spiritual fellowships, religious societies of friends.

We welcome fellow-seekers in our fellowship as we all strive to live in the Light.

A Few References for Further Reading

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