

# Introduction to British Quakerism

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*Open Meetings for Quaker worship and discussion are held each **Tuesday** during term-time from 12.30 to 1.30 in the upstairs Meeting Room of the Faith and Reflection Centre. University folk can 'pop in' at their convenience, even for short periods, during this time.*

*'Ask two Quakers and you'll get three answers'*

Quakers in Britain have a variety of views on some issues which other religions assume to be fundamental, such as life after death and the nature of God. Yet the independent British Quaker journal '*the Friend*' quotes '**In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity**'. In this booklet, several issues about which Quakers are often asked are approached from angles commonly found in British Quakerism. Depending on their own experiences, other Quakers might emphasise different aspects, but all would concur with 'all things in charity'.

*It is hoped that this booklet answers some questions and points the way to other more profound concepts. Many books and courses are available: I would be happy to address any further questions.*

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## Introduction

Quakerism is a religion which arose among English Christian protestant puritans in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although there was a degree of internal peace in England until the late 1630s, bitter wars of religion raged in Europe until 1648. In England the commercial and literate classes were thriving (many of the 'Pilgrim Fathers' of 1620 were of this class) but not ruling and were therefore discontented yet living at the expense of the poorest peasants whose conditions were miserable. Parliament's House of Commons (largely representing puritanical pro-Presbyterian commerce but not peasantry, while the defeated Lords represented Anglicanism) took power after a bitter civil war (1642-1649) which had class, commercial, political and religious overtones. The Commons abhorred democracy, and religion was politicised – not least against unlanded non-Presbyterian 'dissenters' including early Quakers. Presbyterians believed in 'predestination' whereby 'salvation' was pre-determined by God, a doctrine to which Quakers were (and remain) opposed. Over 4% of English people (about 4 million) may have died during the civil war, directly or indirectly, and many more in Ireland which was harried by the victorious puritan leader Cromwell.

Although the fundamental nature of humankind – our psychological hunger, wants and needs – remains, many assumptions and ways our mid-17<sup>th</sup> century ancestors thought are so different from now, including our understanding of science and the role of religion etc., that it is hard for us to relate to early Quakerism's puritanical intolerance of 'frivolities' such as music, poetry, theatre and games. Quakers assumed that they were uniquely correct and that all other religions were 'in error'. Their sheer earnestness, confidence and sense of certainty would be off-putting to modern Quakers.

Yet conditions in mid- to late 17<sup>th</sup> Century England led many, including early Quakers, 'Seekers' and 'Levellers' to question the nature of an all-powerful God who allowed cruelty and suffering. George Fox (1625-1692), often regarded as Quakerism's founder, built on ideas some of which were over 100 years old. His classically educated friend Robert Barclay (1648-1690) was familiar with Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism yet was Christocentrically orthodox but rejected his Scots Presbyterianism for a more gracious and inwardly present 'light' – a concept which became fundamental to Quakerism.

## World and British Quakerism today

Quaker practises today can vary between and within countries; there have been quite severe splits, particularly in 19<sup>th</sup> century North America. South American and East African Quakerism have their own characteristics so among the 400,000 or so Quakers world-wide (20,000 or so in Britain) there are differences in practices of worship and in theology. Worship may be 'programmed', with a set order of service including hymns, Bible readings, spoken prayers etc., or 'unprogrammed' with some spontaneous inspired ministry during otherwise silent or still worship. Theological ideas about our ultimate destiny and interpretations of the nature of God and Jesus can be 'conservative', 'evangelical' or 'liberal' (trends not unknown in other churches). But worldwide Friends 'unite' in the principles of 1. '*direct experience*' ('direct encounter with God') needing no intermediary priest or text; 2. spiritual *equality*; 3. conducting business affairs through '*corporate discernment*' (without voting); and 4. a preference for '*waging peace, not war*'. The "Friends World Committee for Consultation", based in London, promotes this broad common understanding and a feeling of international 'Fellowship' of all types of Quaker. In Britain, mainstream Quakerism has developed generally along unprogrammed and liberal lines although a few 'Primitive Friends' regard themselves as faithful to the 17<sup>th</sup> century founders' teachings.

To outsiders, British Quakerism may appear 'polite', white, and middle-class; but differences do exist although more in 'theology' than in practice as British Quakers find unity principally in our form of worshipping in stillness, seeking 'spiritual discernment' to guide our feelings and our work, and recognising that 'actions led by the Spirit are louder than words' – even if we are not quite sure of the nature of that 'Spirit'. Most Quakers are not trained theologians but are willing to develop and share insights into their religious experiences as their knowledge and understanding grows.

A Quaker's religious **experience** is both individual and precious. It is often continuously evolving ('continuing revelation'). Experiences can be very emotional, and greatly 'inform' and 'regenerate' the way a Quaker thinks and lives. Quakers sometimes use our forebears' word 'convincement' to describe these experiences and their effects. This differs from evangelical 'conviction' (which, commonly, is of sin – British Quakers don't accept the concept of 'original sin'). Importantly, Quaker experiences need no 'intermediary' (such as priest or 'scripture') and, so long as the 'fruit' is gracious, loving and constructive, should not upset Quakers with different experiences. Some Quakers feel a strong relationship with a personal and accessible God and experience a powerful and loving 'transcendence' which can originate from 'that of God within' but can also take them beyond their everyday circumstances. Others associate 'God' with unhelpful concepts of divine 'power'; some even deny 'His (sic) existence', preferring a non-personality concept of divine spirituality, just as almost all British Quakers deny any personality behind evil (i.e., there is no 'Satan'). Sharing individual experiences and differences (diversity) is not always easy but is encouraged and indeed essential. Love, an underlying principle and motivation of Quakerism, helps.

Quakers accept also that while some have a profound experience of a 'world beyond' and life after death, others don't and pay little attention, preferring to concentrate on 'righting the wrongs' of earthly realities and the need to live by our Testimonies (see below) without expecting a reward after death. However, they don't (or shouldn't) dismiss those who have 'beyond-life' experiences.

Similarly, while some British Quakers have sympathy with concepts of the Trinity (a small number are frankly Trinitarian as are evangelical Quakers elsewhere in the world), many regard it as symbolic or allegorical, perhaps originating from the way some early Christians translated their intense emotions surrounding Jesus' death into believing he was physically resurrected and ascended to heaven, and therefore must have been divine. Such symbology should not be dismissed as fantasy if it leads to experiencing a loving and gracious force empowering doing 'good in the world' such as the relief of suffering. Although many British Quakers do not accept three actual entities, most accept Jesus' life on earth (probably not born of a virgin) as significant history with some wonderful but not unique teaching. Nobody can fully understand anybody else's intensely personal *experience*, but the 'proof' of experiences should be how they lead to the expression of love in their lives.

Early Quakers anticipated modern ideas that the Christian 'Second Coming' has already happened and that the 'kingdom of God' is revealed by those who live in spiritual and genuine fellowship with each other now. Most Quakers are very sceptical about a Revelation-style 'apocalyptic' event at the end of time, although they are not oblivious to the currently dire global outlook.

Quakers regard the whole of life to be a 'sacrament' and that no special rites such as baptism or communion are necessary. For similar reasons, Quaker Meeting Houses are not consecrated as worship can be held anywhere; and that every day is special making even Christmas Day and Easter-time equal in religious significance to any other day. For a while Quakers abandoned the pagan association of week-day and month names in favour of neutral but somewhat unimaginative numberings such as the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the twelfth month. Nowadays, Quakers mark dates by the modern Gregorian calendar and do not deny the joys of family Christmas-time sharing and giving.

Modern British Quakers do not assume that their insight is the only correct one. A favourite Quaker writing starts '*Do you respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern?*'. It ends '*Think it possible that you may be mistaken.*' This applies not just to other Quakers but to all forms of religion which emphasise, for example, the 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' in William Blake's poem (to Blake, these were divine *and* human attributes). Blake came 130 years after George Fox and was not a Quaker: his attitude differed from most English Quakers of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century but appeals strongly to many modern Quakers. (Eighteenth century Quakers were less revolutionary and rather pro-business and industry, but still opposed slavery and war, as did Blake; but generally had antipathy for poets and artists like Blake.)

### Quaker 'Testimonies' - Non-theological fundamentals in action; STEEP

This section emphasises Quaker attitudes and responses to how to live. The acronym STEEP may help as it has the virtue of making things seem not easy; but in an attempt to illustrate a natural 'flow' the ideas or 'Testimonies' behind this acronym are presented in a slightly different order.

#### E – equality

Underlying Quakerism is what early Quakers called '*that of God in everyone*'. This fundamentally religious concept has several consequences, among them; -

- a) Equality of gender and absence of titles (no 'Mrs', 'Mr', 'Miss', 'Ms', 'Lord', 'Lady', 'Dr' etc.).
- b) Respect (equality) for people of all races.
- c) Respect (equality) for children as individuals in their own right – from babyhood.
- d) Opposition to all forms of human maltreatment – child abuse, slavery, war, torture, imprisonment, etc.

Some practical outcomes are the anti-slavery campaigns (still needed, sadly), prison reform, fair access to education, and pacifism. On this last point there is some diversity although 'conflict resolution' is at the heart of Quakerism – see later. These principles are valid beyond humankind. So everyone, whether Quaker or not, is 'Friend' (capital F). Modern Quakers call each other 'Friend', but do not restrict this just to Quakers but will address anybody as 'Friend' (which can cause confusion, or worse). Limiting this admittedly arcane honorific just to other Quakers would be exclusive and give the wrong impression of Quakerism's Testimony to equality. It's probably better for others just call them 'Quakers'. The official organisational name is 'The Religious Society of Friends', often followed by (Quakers) – parentheses intended.

#### S – simplicity

This does not mean naïvety or denial of complexity. Many Quakers are expert in complex disciplines including literature and linguistics, artistic performance, interpretation and teaching, science, philosophy, medicine, engineering, finance etc. Some of the following seem simple, quaint, condescending or even boring, but can give great satisfaction.

- a) Living and enjoying oneself sustainably and within one's means
- b) Eating and drinking healthily
- c) Gaining a level of education suitable for enabling independent living
- d) Reading widely and keeping generally well informed
- e) Wearing clothes of relatively sustainable materials: but there's nothing wrong with 'style'
- f) Living in adequate quality accommodation – again there's nothing wrong with 'style'
- g) Developing a generally caring attitude, including to one's own sexuality and that of others
- h) Developing a meaningful professional and social life-style, interacting positively with friends and family and avoiding too much emphasis on 'self'
- i) Seeking holidays and entertainment which are enhancing as well as enjoyable: entertainment outside one's comfort zone can be life-enhancing especially if shared with others
- j) Live adventurously. Learn to cope with adversity by sharing and caring.
- k) Avoid blaming others
- l) Simplicity of thinking; Quakerism should not be distracted by over-complicated theories or 'notions': one of our 'Advices' reads *Remember Christianity* (sic) *is not a notion but a way*. This does not deny wisdom and expertise earned through careful scholarship and analysis, but these should not get in the way of worship or activities directed towards the benefit of society.

This may sound 'lovely' but Quakerism doesn't underestimate the effects of accidents, illness, unemployment, failed relationships and sheer bad luck. Friendships inside and outside Quakerism are important. Compromises may be needed; sustainable clothes and healthy food may not be cheap.

## T – truth and Integrity

Quakers hope that their name is a by-word for honesty; letting ‘yeas be yeas and nays be nays’: it isn’t always easy, but the principle holds.

After the English civil war, the Royal Court became a by-word for deceit, dishonesty and corruption: Lying in a court of law after swearing on the Bible was commonplace. Quakerism developed the idea that honesty meant no oath-taking even if at the risk of imprisonment: quite often this was through refusal to swear loyalty even though no disloyalty was intended. Eventually, civil authorities recognised that ‘affirming’ with no hand on Bible could be accepted: nowadays, anybody can affirm.

Legend has it that the unusual integrity of Quaker businesses was noticed so much by their non-Quaker business fellows that Quaker shop-holders were entrusted to hold small sums of money in safe-keeping. This ‘trust’ was enhanced by very low or even no interest rates on borrowing. Thus arose the Quaker finance houses such as the Friends Provident Insurance Company (now, sadly, merged into ‘Aviva’), and Banks such as Barclays/Gurneys, and Lloyds. (An offshoot of Gurneys which sold bills of exchange at discounts, initially very reliably, eventually fell foul of a financial crash in the 1860’s: the legal verdict was ‘error’, not fraud: such leniency these days would be unlikely.)

There can be downsides to honesty: too much may not be so good a thing. Quaker pride in ‘Plain Speaking’ may be less edifying for those on the receiving end and hardly in the spirit of Quakerism. Furthermore, diplomacy (sometimes dismissed as ‘lying for your country’) has often been a difficult profession for Quakerism although a bit of truth and integrity could go a long way there.

Similarly, the Quaker phrase ‘Speaking Truth to Power’ too often becomes ‘telling off your MP’. A more Quakerly approach would involve ‘dialogue’: each party, through listening, tries to understand the other’s concern so well that they can describe it to the other’s satisfaction and furthermore be willing to change their own mind or at least their approach. Quakers in Peace Studies often advocate dialogue. But integrity is especially important in everyday life, whether buying or selling, homecare, paying bills on time, doing repetitive tasks, writing reports, bringing up children, being in humdrum positions of trust, filing honest tax returns, and being a reliable and kind neighbour.

## E – environment

Long before anthropogenic climate change and ozone holes became recognised, Quakerism espoused ‘sustainability’ and stewardship rather than possession and exploitation of the environment. Concern for nature and the welfare of all forms of life (except, perhaps, pathogenic bugs, and even these often have an anthropogenic component) makes the ‘Gaia’ concept attractive to Quakerism. Rampant green-house gas production from fossil fuels (and the oil-dependent plastics industry) and excessive domestication of large ruminants, melting tundra and losses of polar albedo is threatening humankind with severe climate change and resource depletion, the scale of which is as yet scarcely understood. Challenges from habitat destruction are compounded by rising numbers of people and more competition. These are leading to a weird form of self-destruction behind which lies human greed. But individual needs cannot be denied – everyone deserves respect through *that of God*. Good stewardship, the rapidly rising use of increasingly cheap renewable energy (the potential capacity of which is as yet widely under-estimated) and the adoption of principles allied to Quakerism (countering environmental over-exploitation) all give cause for hope.

## P – peace

Quakerism is well-known for its pacifism and its contribution to conscientious objection.

At a Gathering of British Quakers, Friends arranged themselves along a line from ‘complete pacifism’ to willingness to support war. Several die-hard pacifists were on the wall on the left, with an uneven ‘bulge’ of pacific sympathisers of varying degrees, and others to their right felt that ‘just wars’ could be valid, and some thought that Army service could help post-hostility reconstruction.



Quakerism's peace testimony goes back to the English Civil War: although some Quakers were in Cromwell's 'New Model Army', Quakerism soon came to 'deny' *'all forms of outward fightings'*. This, which to contemporaries was original, was directed at the **causes** of war such as resource depletion, denial of fair distribution of resources, and societal disruption. So people literally had to fight for survival. A significant field of medical research parallels this – 'social determinants of health'. Fear, ignorance, greed, corruption and poverty lie at the roots of strife and of ill-health. To tackle these effectively, advantage of humankind's natural inventiveness needs to be taken.

The World Bank (no less) says that people all over the world suffer substantial inequalities which generate 'social and political burdens'. The global wealth/poverty gap is very wide and progressing: analyses differ, but a few billionaires are thought to hold as many resources as billions of the world's poorest. Poverty breeds desperation and violence especially as even poor societies learn, through social media, how unfairly wealth is distributed globally: something is deeply wrong. Quakerism encourages resolution without violence, favouring positive peace with no oppression or suppression. Fortunately, Quakerism is not alone in seeking a peaceful revolution in global economics. Allies include other churches, but many others are non-religious.

Humankind is intelligent and entrepreneurial. Resource adaptation must be high on the global agenda of the 21<sup>st</sup> century although generations of sustained poverty relief will be needed. Entrepreneurial Quakerism (a loving and spiritual use of the human characteristic of advancing through invention, efficiency and constructive efficiency measures) could have a special place.

Quakerism recognises the validity of 'conflict' without which progress through competition would be retarded. Conflict can be constructive, but *violence* in conflict is abhorred. 'Conflict resolution' is a Quaker speciality. Quakerism recognizes the need for societal 'enforcement' more by carrot than by stick. Quakerism's use of the word 'Discipline' is more in the sense of 'discipleship' or following – 'setting an example' rather than not sparing the rod.

### Final comments

Although Quakers have no written creed (as words can change meaning and concepts evolve – indeed wars have been waged over words), Quakers do have writings, some of which are 'official'. The main current British writing is 'Quaker faith & practice', also known as 'The Quaker book of Christian discipline'. A new version, intended to give a new look to the nature of the Quaker religion, has been started; completion will take a few years. The booklet 'Advices and Queries' is for use in Quaker meetings, private devotion and reflection, as a challenge and inspiration to Friends personally and as a religious community, and as a concise expression for enquirers and the wider world of our faith and practice. ([http://www.warwickquakers.org.uk/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/a\\_and\\_q.pdf](http://www.warwickquakers.org.uk/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/a_and_q.pdf) )