

The Quaker Movement and the Quaker Faith

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A Brief History of the Society of Friends

George Fox founded the Quaker movement in mid-17th-century England, a period marked by profound political, religious, and social upheaval. England was experiencing the English Civil War, the Cromwellian Commonwealth, and eventually the Restoration of the monarchy.

In response to the turmoil of the period, Thomas Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*, arguing that only a strong and authoritative government could restrain what he viewed as the self-destructive tendencies of human beings. George Fox and his followers took a very different path—one rooted not in political authority, but in spirituality and the direct experience of God.

The Quaker movement emerged as George Fox and other traveling preachers—including James Naylor, Margaret Fell, and Francis Howgill—challenged the established Church of England. They brought together groups of English religious dissenters who sought to recover what they believed were the practices and spiritual principles of the early Christian Church.

At the heart of their message was the conviction that individuals did not need priests or other religious intermediaries to experience the presence of Christ. Instead, they believed that Christ could speak directly to each person. This principle became associated with what is sometimes called the “priesthood of all believers.”

There are interesting parallels between this idea and the beliefs of the early Christian Gnostics. The Gnostics emphasized an inward, experiential understanding of the divine and held that spiritual knowledge could be discovered within oneself rather than received solely through religious institutions or orthodox doctrine.

There was another striking parallel: many Gnostic traditions recognized women as spiritual equals of men. Mary Magdalene, for example, became an important figure in several Gnostic traditions. Among the early Quakers, Margaret Fell played a similarly influential role. She was not simply a supporter of the movement; she became one of its most important voices and organizers.

Not surprisingly, the Quakers faced significant persecution from both the English state and the Anglican Church. George Fox and other Quaker leaders were imprisoned on numerous occasions for preaching their beliefs. The persecution continued in the English colonies of North America, where Puritan authorities treated Quakers harshly.

Partly in response to these experiences, William Penn founded the Province of Pennsylvania as a colony based on religious tolerance and Quaker principles. Pennsylvania eventually became the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, but its founding reflected Penn's vision of creating a place where people of different religious beliefs could live and worship without the persecution that had characterized much of European religious history.

Throughout their history, Quakers have been associated with a number of distinctive practices and social principles. These include opposition to war, plain dress, refusal to swear oaths, opposition to alcohol, and active involvement in movements for the abolition of slavery, prison reform, and other forms of social justice.

Quakers also developed a remarkable presence in the business world. A number of large companies were founded or operated by Quakers and were influenced by Quaker principles concerning honesty, integrity, fairness, and responsible business practices. These included banks such as Barclays and Lloyds, financial institutions such as Friends Provident, and manufacturing companies such as Clarks, Cadbury, Rowntree, and Fry's.

As it happens, I am wearing a pair of Clarks shoes today. And apparently, Quakers have something of a sweet tooth, because Cadbury, Rowntree, and Fry's all became famous for candy and chocolate!

Today, there is considerable theological diversity within the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers include evangelical, conservative, and liberal traditions, among others. The Society of Friends is organized largely through autonomous local groups, or meetings, whose theological, social, and cultural perspectives can differ considerably. In some cases, those differences can be quite pronounced.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Quaker worship also varies considerably from one tradition to another. Some meetings have services coordinated by a pastor or recorded minister. A recorded minister is a Quaker who has been recognized by the community as having a particular gift for spoken ministry. Other meetings practice what is often called unprogrammed worship, in which there is no fixed order of service and the gathering is predominantly silent. Individuals may speak when they feel moved to share something they believe comes from the Spirit.

So, as you can see, there is quite a bit that Quakers and Unitarian Universalists share in terms of both history and values. Our traditions have different theological foundations, and Quaker worship is certainly quieter than what many of us are accustomed to. But there are particularly strong connections in our shared concerns for social justice, religious freedom, individual spiritual exploration, and the belief that people can engage directly with questions of meaning and the divine.

So, what is the Quaker faith? It is not a tidy package of beliefs that can be neatly summarized and then repeated from week to week in a worship service. Rather, it is an experience of discovery—one that begins a lifelong journey.

The experience of spiritual discovery is certainly not unique to Quakerism. In one sense, it is as old as Christianity itself, and perhaps considerably older if we accept the possibility that people have experienced Christ without necessarily knowing or using that name. What is distinctive about the Religious Society of Friends is its insistence that this discovery is ultimately personal. It cannot simply be handed down by a priest, minister, institution, or creed. Each person must undertake the journey for themselves.

For Quakers, faith is therefore not simply about accepting a prescribed set of beliefs. It is about listening, searching, experiencing, and remaining open to the possibility of encountering the divine within oneself and within the world.