

# The Society Of Friends

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### Distinguishing Principles

The Society of Friends formed the extreme left wing of the English Reformation. Originating in the middle of the seventeenth century, it was a significant part of the religious revolution which accompanied the political revolution under Cromwell. But the Quakers' true religious affiliation can best be found, not so much in early Puritanism as in the pre-Reformation mystical sects on the continent of Europe. The Society of Friends classified itself as neither Catholic nor Protestant, but as a third form of Christianity.

The so-called "purification" of Roman Catholicism, begun by the early Puritans, reached its culmination in the Quakers, who made radical efforts to eliminate all the religious practices which they believed had originated since New Testament times. But Quakerism resulted from something more than this process of subtraction. It revived a doctrine, central in the experience of the early Christian church. This was the belief that the Spirit would be poured out upon the congregation ready to receive it. This Spirit, or "that of God in every man," or Christ within, or the Seed of the Kingdom, or the Truth, or the Inward Light, to use some of the many names which the Quakers applied to the Divine Presence in the midst of the worshiping group, unites all the members into a single organic whole, the body of Christ. The individual experience of inward oneness with

an invisible Reality is also an experience of the mystical union of individuals with one another.

The meeting for worship, in which the Divine Presence is realized through silent communion with God and man, is the most distinctive and perhaps the only distinctive contribution of the Society of Friends to Christian practice. The Quaker Meeting, in this respect, is closer to the altar-centered worship of Catholicism than to the sermon-centered worship of Protestantism.

Second in importance to group-centered inspiration and subordinate to it is individual inspiration. The claim of the early Quakers that they were inspired in the same way, though not to the same degree, as were the prophets and apostles who wrote the Bible, brought them into sharp conflict with the Puritans who had substituted the authority of the Bible for the authority of the Church. To the Quakers, the Bible is a word of God, but not *the* Word of God. Since the Bible came from the same Divine Source, as does all true inward inspiration, it is a valuable and necessary check on the authenticity of such inspiration. The Light Within is superhuman and no part of man as such, but when unresisted it can permeate and transform man's reason and conscience. This Light is a source of religious and moral truth, of power to conform to this truth, and of unity not only within the group, but eventually with all men everywhere. Since this Light of Truth is not divided but exists whole in every man, the nearer men come to it the nearer they come to one another.

The implications of these doctrines were revolutionary. In congregational worship no leadership of priest or pastor was necessary. Anyone in the worshiping group might become a vehicle of vocal ministry whose primary function was not so much instruction in belief and in behavior as spiritual guidance in prayer, meditation and worship. There could be no pre-arrangement. To inward baptism of the Spirit

and inward communion with God, outward sacraments of baptism and communion could add nothing. If used as symbols there was a serious danger that they would be substituted for the reality. For this reason, they were given up. There could be no formal singing of hymns, or repeating of prayers, or creeds, or even reading of Scripture in the meeting for worship as few could sincerely put in their own mouths the words of another. Since the Divine Light was in all, there must be complete equality in the meeting: equality of men and women, servants and masters, educated and uneducated.

Because this Light is continually capable of revealing new and living truth, the Friends possess no written statement of belief which has the authority of a creed. But the test of truth is not wholly subjective. There is an objective test in the teachings and work of the historical Christ, as interpreted and vitalized by the Christ Within. The Quakers consider themselves Christians, not simply mystics. The early Friends agreed to much of the Christian theology generally accepted at the time, but they objected to the doctrines of imputed sin and imputed righteousness; they held to the possibility of perfection and complete freedom from sin in this life, and they declared that, since the Light "lighteth every man that cometh into the world," all men, including the ancients and heathens who had never heard of Christ, could be saved if they lived up to the measure of the Light given them.

The group which worships together meets also from time to time, usually monthly, to transact the business of the church. A clerk is appointed to record decisions. Votes are not taken, because all decisions should be reached on a basis of unanimity. Exceptions to this principle sometimes occur, as the degree of unity required depends on the character and urgency of the question. The search for unity succeeds in proportion as the process of attaining unity becomes a religious exercise.

Membership in the Society of Friends is obtained through membership in some particular Monthly Meeting. A group of Monthly Meetings combines to form a Quarterly Meeting, and a group of Quarterly Meetings combines to form a Yearly Meeting. The larger meetings do not exist to exert authority over their constituent parts, but to engage in larger undertakings. There is no delegated authority. All members of Monthly Meetings have the same rights in the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings.

The social doctrines of the Society of Friends are derivatives of their religious doctrines. Disobedience to the Light results in inner conflict, but obedience results in peace and serenity of mind. An act is good which creates inward peace, regardless of apparent or immediate outward consequences. Quaker pacifism is not derived primarily from the New Testament nor from facts showing the futility of war, though both these types of arguments are sometimes referred to. The consistent Quaker refuses to fight because, if he fights, the Light in his conscience will give him no peace. War is wrong, not so much because of the physical damage it causes as because of the spiritual damage done to those who participate in it. This doctrine does not entirely eliminate the use of force in the enforcement of law, provided that force is used lovingly and impartially for the good of all concerned. That Quaker pacifism is a fruitful doctrine in the general field of human experience is shown by the fact that it made Quakers pioneers in prison reform, and in the use of non-violent methods in institutions for the mentally ill. After nearly every war within the past three centuries, the Quakers have engaged in rehabilitation, not only to repair physical destruction, but primarily to remedy the spiritual damage caused by hatred and acts of vengeance.

The equalitarian doctrines of the Quakers brought upon them severe persecution by persons who wished to safeguard their status as superiors. The use of the familiar "thou"

instead of the then complimentary “you,” the elimination of all flattering titles, including Mister and Mistress, the refusal to remove the hat or bow the knee in salutation, appeared like rudeness to their contemporaries, but the Quaker insistence was intended to stress the doctrine that all men are worthy of equal respect. The Quaker doctrine of simplicity called for avoidance of all superfluity “in dress, speech and behavior.” In dress, this resulted for a century in the adoption of a standardized pattern, the object of which was to avoid being victimized by changes in fashion. In speech, it resulted in an extreme endeavor to stick to the simple truth without verbal adornment. Related to this was a practice which resulted in great suffering, the refusal to take a judicial oath. The oath was objected to as recognizing a double standard of truth telling. The old testimony, now happily abandoned, against several forms of art, such as music, the theatre and fiction, came partly from viewing them as untruthful, and partly as superfluities which might distract attention from more important things, rather than from the Puritan belief that they were carnal pleasures, wrong in themselves.

Of great historical importance was the doctrine of religious liberty on behalf of which the Quakers suffered severe penalties as law-breakers for many years. In America, there was no persecution for religious belief in colonies controlled politically by the Quakers,—Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Rhode Island, and for a short time, North Carolina. These were, also, the only colonies which had no state-supported church.

### History

The history of the Society of Friends may be divided into four periods as follows: (1) the apostolic age, 1650-1700, (2) the age of conservation and cultural creativeness, 1700-

1800, (3) the age of conflict and decline, 1800-1900, and (4) the modern period, 1900- . These dates are approximate. Changes took place in different areas at different times.

1. In the apostolic or heroic age in the later seventeenth century, the first Quakers set out, not to found a sect but to bring all Christianity back to what they believed was its primitive state. In 1647, George Fox at the age of 23 discovered “experimentally,” as he said, the Christ Within. He soon found other persons who had similar experiences. After 1652, under Fox’s leadership, the movement grew rapidly. In spite of violent opposition and persecution, it spread to all parts of England. Fervent Quaker preachers could be found everywhere. They proclaimed their message in the market place, in the fields, in taverns or quiet homes. After the fashion of those days, they even interrupted the minister in the pulpit. Soon they made converts in various parts of Europe and in all the American colonies. The Quaker invasion of New England is a dramatic story. The Puritans used every device, including hanging, to keep them out, but to no avail. The severest persecution took place in England between 1662 and the Act of Toleration in 1689, during which time there were many thousands of Quakers in prison. More than four hundred died there.

2. With the end of persecution, the Quakers emerged as a respectable sect, though losses through fines continued for some time to be heavy because of refusal to pay tithes to the Established Church. To many who had lost all their property in the struggle, the New World became a haven of refuge. The Baptist colony of Rhode Island, holding to religious liberty, received so many Quakers that they controlled its affairs politically until the Revolution. New Jersey was purchased in 1674 and colonized, and Penn received Pennsylvania in 1681, giving it the most liberal charter of its time. For seventy-five years, the Quakers ruled Pennsylvania, resigning their control because their

refusal to support the French and Indian War would mean the loss of the charter of the commonwealth. During their rule, they were wholly successful in maintaining peace with the Indians.

In the eighteenth century, the old missionary fervor disappeared, but there continued to be a powerful nonprofessional itinerant ministry. The society in America not only held its own, numerically, but gradually increased. A written discipline was developed and strictly enforced. This sharply defined the Quaker way of life, which became a genuine cultural pattern distinct from that around it. In this century, largely under the leadership of John Woolman, members of the Society of Friends freed their slaves. As a result of the struggle over slavery, most Friends in Virginia and the Carolinas after 1800 migrated to the old Northwest.

3. The synthesis of mystical inwardness and evangelical outwardness was a source of strength to early Quakerism. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the evangelical elements were accentuated by the influence of the Wesleyan revival and the original synthesis was weakened. In England, there were tensions but no important separations occurred. English Quakers were busy in an effort to abolish the slave trade, to reform prisons and to carry out works of philanthropy. Numbers and spiritual vitality declined, although there was toward the end of the century an awakened intellectual interest in Quaker history and thought.

American Quakerism in the nineteenth century was torn by divisions. The most important of these occurred in 1827, when the elders of Philadelphia forbade the preaching of Elias Hicks, a prominent minister from Long Island. Hicks was a pure mystic, to whom historical Christianity meant little. Those who sided with him, the so-called Hicksites, claimed that the separation was caused solely by an undue exercise of authority against an approved minister, while

their opponents, the so-called Orthodox, claimed that the tension was due to the denial by Hicks of the divinity of Christ. As the country Friends were mainly followers of Hicks, we have here an example of the long-brewing rebellion of the country against the growing domination of the city. This separation spread from Philadelphia to other Yearly Meetings.

In 1845 a new separation began in New England. John Wilbur accused Joseph John Gurney, a prominent English Friend then traveling in America, of subordinating the inward work of the Spirit to the Bible and the historical events at the rise of Christianity. The resulting separation between the Wilburites and the Gurneyites, like the earlier separation, was a cleavage between the mystical and evangelical trends. Wilbur stood midway between the ultramysticism of Hicks and the ultra-evangelical doctrines of Gurney. This separation also spread to various parts of the Society. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Orthodox, recognized the Wilburite Yearly Meeting in Ohio, but eventually gave up official correspondence with all groups in order to appease its own small Gurneyite minority.

The differences between the Wilburite or Conservative Friends and the evangelical Gurneyites were widened by the great religious revival which followed the Civil War. The fervor of this movement stirred many Christian churches, including the Gurneyite meetings. A type of traveling evangelist new to the Society of Friends began about 1868 to use revivalistic methods in Quaker meetings. Many converts remained unconvinced of Quaker practices in general, and in particular of the Quaker way of worship. As a result a majority of the meetings throughout the West, New England, and the South changed their way of worship to a programmed service of the usual Protestant type, conducted by a professional pastor. These groups usually call themselves "The Friends Church," as distinguished

from "The Society of Friends." Their churches are frequently community churches which minister to a limited geographical area which includes a variety of religious attitudes.

From the beginning, Friends emphasized the need for education of all their members, but as compared with the Puritans, they were slow in creating colleges because they did not feel the need for a trained and scholarly ministry. Also they distrusted the intellectual emphasis which encourages men to rely too much on human wisdom. A lifelong self-education was stressed by many as the soundest way of making the proper use of spiritual gifts. In the eighteenth century, almost every meeting in America had beside it an elementary day school. In the first half of the nineteenth century, co-educational boarding schools and academies were developed, and in the latter half, nine colleges were established. Throughout this century, Friends were also busily engaged in promoting education among the Negroes and Indians. Their greatest single achievement was their work for Negro freedmen after the war between the states.

4. The twentieth century finds in America a great variety in faith and practice under the name of "Friends." The chief groups are as follows:

The *Friends General Conference* (or Hicksite) group holds a general conference without legislative authority every two years, and maintains a central office at 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia. It is made up of six yearly meetings (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Canada, Illinois, Indiana, New York) with a total membership of 18,130. Its chief organ is *The Friends Intelligencer*.

The *Conservative* (or Wilburite) group has no headquarters, though its chief center is the Friends Boarding School at Barnesville, Ohio. It is made up of five yearly meetings (Ohio, Iowa, Western, North Carolina, Canada)

with a membership of about 2,700. As its meetings are mostly rural, it has suffered through migrations to the city. Closely allied to this group is *Philadelphia Yearly Meeting* (Orthodox) with a membership of 5,261 and headquarters at 802 Arch Street, Philadelphia. Its periodical is *The Friend*, published fortnightly.

The most important recent event in Quaker history has been the spontaneous growth of more than a hundred *Independent Meetings* in all parts of the country whose members are drawn from several branches or from none. These new meetings are all non-pastoral, and held on a basis of silence. Many of them are giving up their independent status to join a larger, regularly constituted body, or in some instances, to avoid partiality, by joining more than one larger body. Recently eighteen of these meetings have united to form Pacific Yearly Meeting with a membership of about 1,000.

The groups listed above adhere to the historical unprogrammed Quaker type of worship based upon silent waiting. Of the groups which generally have, or which include, programmed religious services with professional pastors, the *Five Years Meeting* comprises eleven yearly meetings (Baltimore, California, Canada, Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska, New England, New York, North Carolina, Western, Wilmington) with a total membership of 69,389. These yearly meetings send delegates to the superior meeting held every five years. The headquarters of the Five Years Meeting is at 101 South Eighth Street, Richmond, Indiana, where its organ, *The American Friend*, is published. It supports missionary work in Africa, Asia and Central America. Many local meetings in the eastern yearly meetings of this group are of the nonpastoral type.

A group of four *independent pastoral yearly meetings*, Ohio, Kansas, Oregon, and Central in Indiana, hold a more pronounced evangelical theology and make a wider use of

revivalistic methods, often approximating the Pentecostal or Holiness type. They have a total membership of 18,799. Their chief organ is *The Evangelical Friend*. Foreign missions are a primary interest of this group.

In general, and cutting across the old distinctions which are ceasing to have their former importance, the Society of Friends in America today may be divided into three approximately equal groups: (1) those who adhere to the historical Quaker practice in worship, (2) the pastoral-modernist and (3) the pastoral-fundamentalist. The first is slowly increasing; the second is slowly decreasing; while the fundamentalist groups continue numerically about the same.

Since the Quakers hold to a highly non-authoritarian form of church government, separations among them are not as significant as would otherwise be the case. Unity is rapidly increasing among the various meetings in the eastern United States, where the more conservative tendencies prevail. All branches of the Society in New England have reunited. Many meetings in the New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore areas are affiliated with more than one branch. The two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings have long shared most of their enterprises, and in 1946 they constituted a General Meeting in which distinctions are eliminated. In 1920, in London, and in 1937 at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, conferences were held at which all Quaker bodies in the world were represented.

The Society of Friends in England (London Yearly Meeting) has a present membership of 21,888. This includes groups in New Zealand and Australia. Its chief organ is *The Friend*, of London. Its headquarters is Friends House, Euston Road, London. Membership has considerably increased during the past fifty years, furnishing a number of leaders in religion, education, social reform and politics. The resistance to conscription of Quaker pacifists during the

First World War, when many went to prison, won a special status for English pacifists during the Second World War. English Friends have engaged in extensive relief work during and after these wars. Closely associated with them in these undertakings is Dublin Yearly Meeting, with a membership of 1,990.

Groups of Friends exist in China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, India, Japan, Norway, Palestine, South Africa, Sweden and Switzerland. Though small, these bodies exert an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. In Germany and France during the last war, local Friends had an opportunity to perform special services to persons in acute need because of persecution or privation. These groups practice the characteristic Quaker way of worship.

The best known recent development in American Quakerism is the American Friends Service Committee with headquarters at 20 South 12th Street, Philadelphia. It was organized in 1917 for reconstruction work in France by conscientious objectors to war. Since then, in collaboration with the corresponding but older English committee, it has carried out relief work on a large scale in many countries of Europe and Asia in World Wars I and II. It has also engaged at home in a variety of enterprises including care of refugees, the organization of work camps for college students, promotion of international and interracial understanding and education for peace through institutes and seminars.

The American Friends Fellowship Council and the Friends World Committee for Consultation are two other agencies which represent all branches of Friends. The Fellowship Council looks after new, independent meetings, intervisitation among meetings, and the *Wider Quaker Fellowship*, a group of about 4,000 persons scattered all over the United States who wish some affiliation with the Society

of Friends, but who do not desire to join it. The World Committee for Consultation seeks to increase mutual interest and understanding among all groups of Friends in the world through publications, intervisitation and conferences.

The modern member of the Society of Friends is much more keenly aware of the history of his sect, and of the place which it holds among Christian bodies and in world religion than was the Friend of a generation or two ago. This is largely due to the growth of educational conferences, summer schools, study groups and institutions for adult education in religious and social subjects, such as Woodbrooke in England and Pendle Hill in America. Many Friends today attend college. The effect of higher education has frequently been to modify the older type of mysticism, sometimes completely erasing the distinction between mystical and rational insight. As a result, there is now a greater emphasis on the immanence and less emphasis on the transcendence of the Inward Light. There is more dependence on thinking and less on feeling. But the recent growth of new meetings in the neighborhood of colleges and universities does not necessarily mean that Quakerism is becoming a religion for intellectuals. The intellectual often seeks the silence of a Quaker meeting because he feels the necessity of penetrating below the rationalizing surface of his mind to the inner depths of being where the meaning and significance of life can be discovered.

The old tension between mystic and evangelical is replaced in many areas today by a corresponding variance in point of view between a Quakerism which emphasizes the cultivation of the inward life and a humanitarian Quakerism which finds its principal expression in remedial works. The evangelical who stresses an improved status in the world to come is replaced by the exponent of a social gospel who desires to improve conditions in this world. The

type of mind is the same, though a shift has taken place from the religious to the secular. Most members of the Society of Friends realize that a synthesis of the way of Mary and the way of Martha is better than is either way alone, though differences of emphasis must continue because of differences of temperament.

The modern Quaker believes that mystical faith can contribute a needed element in religion today. Because it is primarily based on living experience rather than on outward authority, Quakerism is compatible with contemporary science, and has no fear of losing anything through scientific discovery. But modern science has directed its attention to gaining power over the external world. This brings neither peace nor happiness. Peace and order will not come in the outer world until they first come within. Chaos in the world today is a reflection of the inner chaos in the soul of man. Quakerism offers one means for obtaining inward peace and order. In the silence of prayer and worship, enlivened by the united efforts of a group, there comes out of the depths of the soul strength and order which can overcome conflict, unify the inner life and the life of the group, and produce the only kind of peace which can propagate itself in the outer world. The history of the Society of Friends shows that, when the conscience becomes sensitized by such a process, actions tend to follow which are in accordance with the dictates of conscience. For this reason, members of the Society of Friends have become pioneers in such fields as religious liberty, prison reform, the abolition of slavery, the effort to abolish war, the education of Negroes and Indians, the treatment of the mentally ill, the equality of the sexes, and a type of religious democracy which developed into political democracy. The present day function of the Society of Friends is to aid all men everywhere to create such a sensitivity of conscience that social pioneering will continue.