

Quakers

The Quaker movement, formally known as the Religious Society of Friends, began in England in the 1650s. There are about 210,000 Quakers across the world.

Quakers emphasise direct experience of God rather than ritual and ceremony. They believe that there is something of God in everybody and that each human being is of unique worth. They seek religious truth in inner experience, and place great reliance on conscience as the basis of morality.

Although outsiders usually regard the movement as a Christian denomination, not all Quakers see themselves as Christians; some regard themselves as members of a universal religion that, for historical reasons, has many Christian elements. Tolerance is part of the Quaker approach to life, so Quakers are willing to learn from all other faiths and churches.

There is no creed or formal set of beliefs that you have to hold to be a Quaker. Quakers think that faith should be based on a person's own inner conviction and on taking part in a shared search for the truth with other Quakers. They believe that faith is something that is always developing and not something frozen at a particular moment in history that can be captured in a creed or statement of faith.

Quaker History

George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, set out not to form a denomination but to take believers back to the original and pure form of Christianity. His aim was to inspire people to hear and obey the voice of God and believed that everyone should try to encounter God directly and experience the Kingdom of Heaven as a present, living reality. He objected to the hierarchical structure and the rituals of the churches of his time, and rejected the idea that the Bible was always right.

Fox went even further and argued that God himself did not want churches which were, he said, either unnecessary or an obstruction in the way of knowing God. Not surprisingly, Quakers were persecuted in Britain on a large scale until 1689.

God

Quakers place great emphasis on the knowledge that God is love. They believe that the light of God is present in everyone and anyone who lets his or her life be guided by that light will achieve a full relationship with God. Anyone can have this direct, personal relationship with God without involving a priest or minister.

They believe that God grows and changes with His creation and that He continues to speak to human beings.

Creation

Because Quakers place emphasis on spiritual truths as revealed to each individual, beliefs about creation, and many other matters, vary widely. Some believe that God created the universe and controls all events. Others believe in the scientific accounts of creation alone or profess not to know how the world was created.

Man

There is good and evil inside all human beings, and all human beings can choose between them. Everyone has the power to choose good over evil if he or she wants to. Because every human being has the light of God within him, Quakers regard all human beings as equal and

worthy of respect. They believe that all human beings contain goodness and truth and do not accept value judgements based on race or gender; rather, they welcome diversity.

Man's Problem

Man's lack of awareness of and obedience to the light of God within is the cause of all wrongdoing. Many believe that evil is simply an unfortunate part of human nature that we all must work to eliminate.

The Solution To The Problem

When it comes to salvation, again beliefs are diverse. Some Quakers hold to an evangelical understanding of salvation by faith but most believe that all will be saved because God is good and forgiving and the divine Light of God is available to all. Those who hold this view see no need for atonement.

The Final Outcome

Quakers do not agree on what happens after death. Some believe in an afterlife, some don't. They tend to concentrate on making this world better rather than pondering what happens after leaving it.

How Do We Know These Things?

Quakers do not regard any book as being the actual 'word of God'. Most regard the Bible as a great inspirational book but it is not the only one. They believe that whilst Christ's life demonstrates the full truth of God, spiritual truth can only be known through direct revelation from God and conscience gives a guide to conduct.

Doubt and questioning, they say, are valuable tools for spiritual growth

Distinctive Practices

Worship

Quaker meetings for worship (they use this term in preference to the word service) take place in meeting houses — not churches — and are open to everyone. There is no structure, and no one leads.

The meeting begins when two or more worshipers come together to be in the presence of God. They sit facing each other in a square or a circle, putting everyone in a place of equal status and enhancing awareness that they are meeting as a group.

Everyone waits in shared silence until someone is moved by the Spirit to do something as part of their worship. The silence provides a space for people to separate themselves from the pressures and events of daily life and to get closer to God and each other. Quakers believe that if they wait silently for God in this way there will be times when God will speak directly to them. However, a Quaker meeting is not a time of individual meditation. It is important that the waiting in silence and the listening are done as a group for the group is more than just a collection of individuals: a sense of unity is essential.

A person will only speak if they are convinced that they have something that must be shared, and it is rare for anyone to speak more than once. The words spoken are usually brief and may include readings from the Bible or other books, praying, or speaking from personal experience. The words should come from the soul — from the inner light — rather than the mind.

Each speaking is followed by a period of silence. There may be no outward response to the contribution from other people, but if there is it will be something that builds positively on it. Discussion and argument are not part of the meeting.

Quakers believe that God speaks through the contributions made at the meeting. Some people say that there is often a feeling that a divine presence has settled over the group.

The meeting ends when the elders shake hands. Sometimes the entire hour may pass without a word being spoken.

There is a Quaker hymn book, called *Worship in Song, A Quaker Hymnal* but, on the whole, the use of music is rare.

Quakers do not believe in sacraments, either as realities or symbols, or in the use of liturgies or ceremonies. Neither do they believe in a clergy.

Holy Days

Quakers do not celebrate Christian festivals such as Easter and Christmas.

Social And Political Action

Quakers do not separate religious life and secular life but believe that all life should be 'lived in the spirit'. For that reason they maintain the highest ethical standards in business practice and everyday life. They work actively to make this a better world and, based on their belief in equality of all human beings, are particularly concerned about human rights, social justice, peace, freedom of conscience, and community life. They are also concerned about environmental issues: Quakers seek to live simply so as to reduce the burden on the world.

They are dedicated to pacifism and non-violence, but Quaker pacifism is not simply the refusal to fight: it includes working actively to bring about or preserve peace, by removing the causes of conflict.

Meetings For Business

Individual Quaker Meetings carry out matters of business and administration at "Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business". The whole of such a meeting is regarded as worship.

These meetings begin with silence. When the Clerk judges the time is right, he or she summarises the agenda before the meeting, provides any necessary background information, and lays the first item before the meeting.

People stand up to show they wish to speak, and are called by the Clerk. The traditional formula for raising an issue is to begin "I have a Concern..." When everything is said the meeting agrees a minute setting out the decision. The decision is not based on a majority or a consensus, but on the "sense of the meeting". The group waits until "the right way will open and we shall be led into unity."

Questions For Discussion

1. What do you consider to be the main weakness of the Quaker movement?
2. Are there any good things that we can learn from the Quakers?