

# The History & Origin of Quakers

By Monika Smith, NSW RM

We have to thank the inspiration and spirit of George Fox, who, in seventeenth century England, started the group of people known as 'the Quakers'.

'The enduring influence of a way of life and a way of thought' was a phrase used by both Barclay & Penn who wrote not of The Society of Friends or of the Quaker Church but of the People Called Quakers.

Quakers did not hesitate to speak of their Movement as Primitive Christianity Revived, First Publishers of The Truth, Children of the Light – such language being taken from the Testaments: Luke 11:8, John 12:36. Even the official name - The Religious Society of Friends was an adoption of the words of Christ, 'I have called you friends' (John 15:15).

In spite of the emphasis on the sinfulness of war in which Quakers were for a while unique, one is surprised to learn of the use of a language steeped in the use of military metaphors of the New Testament — knowing the Epistles as they did, they felt no embarrassment in speaking of 'the breastplate of faith and love', or 'for a helmet, the hope of salvation' or when thrown into prison one should 'endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.' (2 Tim 2:3).

## Early Quakers —prophets or priests

The nickname Quaker was really an unintended compliment. It was a way of admitting that these people were not insipid but were instead, the movers and shakers of the establishment.

What is surprising is that the first Quakers were seldom mere followers, they were all involved participators in what was an important undertaking. Other Christian leaders including Martin Luther had announced the priesthood of every believer as a doctrine but these new people, the Quakers, came close to demonstrating it as a fact – it was a 'priesthood of every member'.

Fox was not merely a great speaker, a good organiser but an inspiration for total involvement — by 1715 about 2750 tracts had been produced. In the first 13 years after 1652, Quakers were responsible for at least 25000 printed pages. There was a prophet-hood of every member, and so there was persecution in England with the law that Quakers who were banished and who returned, would be put to death, showed how deep and almost frantic the fear of the Quakers was. Four were actually hanged 1659, 1660, and 1661.

Within twenty years of the beginning, Fox realized the Movement had to have some formal structure especially that which involved regular times and places of meetings.

## A travelling ministry

With the cessation of persecution and the death Barclay and Fox in 1690 and 1691 the first great burst of new life came to an end. Without the present danger of imprisonment Friends became a quieter people. Since the number of Quakers in the colonies soon outnumbered those in the mother country, the spiritual centre of gravity tended to move westward. An important practice was the constant visiting — the travelling ministry.

Of all the surprising features of Quakerism was the inequality between Quaker numbers and Quaker influence. Quakers have never been numerous, not even keeping pace with the general population growth.

Fox was born in 1624 in Drayton in the Clay now called Fenny Drayton — a tiny village in Leicestershire — a year before Charles I became king. When Fox was nearly 20 years old, he experienced spiritual longings and great misgivings, and so he went to the state-appointed pastors of the national church who were singularly unhelpful. They thought he was slightly deranged and could not understand a man who was trying to find the very basis of a vital faith. So he looked further and found it alone by direct experience. By the age of 23 in 1647 Fox had arrived at a faith, grounded not in tradition or on the reports of other men, but in an immediate divine-human encounter.

After five years of wandering over England and talking to many, and being imprisoned twice, Fox came to a realisation, a maturity. In the summer of 165, he climbed a hill on the border of Leicestershire and Yorkshire and saw his way clearly. In the north he found people called the Seekers who were only too glad to know someone who could make them into Finders. The people were the kindling while Fox was the spark. Soon he spoke at a fair and then at Firbank Fell where he addressed more than 1000 people standing on a rock and speaking more than three hours.

From then on he was not alone and many who heard him then in 1652 became vigorous missionaries almost over night. They went out two by two like the Apostles. At first the religious leaders were not seriously disturbed. They believed that within a month they would come to nothing. Far from this prediction coming true, these people inspired by Fox went to many parts of the world, including various sections of Europe and the English colonies in America.

In that same summer together with some companions, Fox travelled to Ulverston in Lancashire where he met the Fell family. Judge Fell never became a Quaker but his wife Margaret did and became a most influential woman in the new movement. Her great house Swarthmore Hall became the base for the Quaker preachers — a place to rest, to be safe from persecution and imprisonment.

### **Fox in Ireland, Barbados, Jamaica and Mexico**

The Journal of Fox is chiefly a record of his missionary journeys – he suffered eight imprisonments, the longest being two years and eight months for refusal to take the oath of Supremacy and Allegiance. Though he suffered much and was much depleted after many beatings he continued to speak and write to the day of his death. In 1669 at the age of 45, Fox married Margaret Fell, the widow of Judge Fell. Though he was not able to often enjoy the comforts of Swarthmore.

Fox travelled to Ireland in 669, Barbados, Jamaica and the Mexican colonies for two years, 1671 – 1673, to Holland and Germany for three months in 1677, and to Holland again in 1684.

Fox died in January 1691 and was buried in the Friends burial ground near Bunhill Fields, London in the presence of about 4000 people.

### **Quakers in the century of thinkers**

Fox lived in a century of great happenings — the Century of Genius, Bacon's Advancement of Learning, Cervante's Don Quixote, the first edition of Hamlet appeared and in 1616 the circulation of blood was expounded. The century was adorned by the thinkers Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, while in science we have Galileo, Boyle and Newton, then in literature we see John Milton and in religious thought there were Blaise Pascal, John Bunyan and Richard Baxter.

Whereas Fox was not directly influenced by the ideas of his time, Robert Barclay and William Penn could quote from the great writers who had come before.

The great religious burst of the 17th century came not in a period of calmness but during the strain and stress of the civil war, the war that stirred up new ideas and led also to a moral and spiritual decay. This became an ideal seedbed for the thinking of the young Fox. Though not a great reader of learned works nor printed sermons of the Puritan preachers which appeared very regularly, Fox was certainly affected by the exciting ideas which were the major causes of the civil war which led to the execution of the King and emergence of Oliver Cromwell.

### **Fox's insights**

Early in 1646 when Fox was only 21 he travelled to Coventry and as he entered the city he experienced his first great insight by which he was changed from a Seeker to a Finder. The insight was his answer to the question 'What is a Christian? Christians are believers but there is a difference between the appearance and the reality. The mark of a true believer is a changed life, one cannot become one by a mere ceremony – it is the reality of the new life that counts, the reality is a powerful starting point'.

The second insight was an answer to what it means to be a minister. It was a common belief which Fox had assumed uncritically, that the ministry was a trade, an occupation like any other and that a man could qualify for it by attending a trade school such as Oxford or Cambridge. Fox saw that a theological education was not enough for true ministry. The externals such as ordination, the laying on of hands were nothing. What is done externally cannot change a minister and if it is a holy calling rather than a trade it is naturally open to all, whether male or female. Fox said in Christ there is neither male nor female, there is neither lay nor clerical.

### **‘All real life is meeting’**

The third insight came soon after. What is the church? Everyone referred to the building as holy and Fox declared that the Lord had shown him that he dwelt in people’s hearts not in the steeple houses. So as a consequence this insight the Quaker places of worship were called meeting houses and so avoided making a distinction between holy places and secular places.

The meeting house is not sacred, but merely a convenience. God can reach people in barns, in prisons or anywhere. In the language of the late Martin Buber ‘All real life is meeting.’

In the early 20s, Fox suffered great inner turmoil. He got little help from other men but rather from his constant study of the Bible. What we call insights he called ‘openings’.

Fox’s most important ‘opening’ was the realization that he could base his faith not merely on reasoning and not on reports of the experience of other men in other ages, but rather on a first hand living reality with Jesus Christ living in the present. He can be known directly here and now. The Quaker way has always been more a method than a system of beliefs. It is far more relevant to ask how a Quaker seeks to relate to that on which he ultimately depends.

So if Christ can be known directly many of the things that have been thought necessary, such as buildings, crosses, books, organs, coloured windows, begin to take second place. Fox no longer felt the need to consult the priests. He had learned that he could go to the source.

### **An ocean of darkness and an ocean of light and love**

Fox was troubled by the problem of evil but saw it was not ultimate. ‘I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God: and I had great openings’.

He was able to tell the multitude that Christ, the living Christ, is the teacher, their counsellor, their shepherd and their bishop to oversee them and that their bodies are the temples of God. This was extremely moving but disturbing to the priests who recognised that if what Fox said was true, their function was not necessary.

Fox promised all that they would walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone. Only a remarkable man could write from a foul prison about ‘walking cheerfully over the world’.

### **A living fellowship — caring for one another**

Fox was able to create a living fellowship with a vivid life of its own. He won over well-educated people (Barclay and Penn) and could make such persons feel they could learn from the fellowship of men and women less privileged than themselves. Burdens were shared. If one was in prison the family was cared for by the others. When all adults in the meeting were in prison the children kept the meeting going. This mutual sharing has always been a part of the Quaker way — one of the reasons for its continuance. Quakerism is a tree with mystical roots and practical fruits (‘Problems of Quakerism Today’ by Evelyn Thixon) or from a Hindu mystic who said God could only be experienced not described.

Quakers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century set the precedent for characterizing the faith and practice of the Society of Friends as a third form of Christianity. They drew a clear distinction between themselves, the Roman Catholics and the Protestants. The Quaker doctrine of immediate revelation through the Spirit is an answer to Barclay’s opposition to those who argued that the leading of the Spirit cannot be trusted as a certain guide to truth. The Catholics disagree about tradition, the Protestants about the meaning of the Scriptures, saying ‘neither tradition nor scripture, nor reason make the rule of faith any more certain’.

## **Quakers and the reformation**

The Reformation began as a spiritual revolt against the old forms of authorities. Its leaders feared a religion based purely on the Spirit and insisted that such a religion laid the road open towards anarchy. The new reformed churches sought alliance with the state. The German Reformation crushed the Anabaptists who represented an inward type of religion and the English reformation tried to crush the Quakers. Quakerism represented the extreme left wing of the English reformation which accompanied the political revolution under Cromwell. Another ancestor of Quakers can be traced to the mystical trend which has always been present in the Christian church, producing saints and martyrs. Mysticism is a religion based on spiritual search for an inward experience of the divine. Whenever a religion becomes too formal and institutional, depending too much on external expression, the mystic rises up in protest and points the way to a religion which is internal and independent of outward forms and which is centred in the direct apprehension of God '— this experience requires no church, priest or books. The history of all religions has been the story of the tension between the mystic or prophet whose religion is an inward experience and the priest whose religion is expressed through doctrine and symbols.

## **A practical group mysticism**

Quakerism is different to but influenced by Judaism and Islam but it is a group mysticism grounded in Christian conceptions. Religion may begin in the thought and imagination of some seer or prophet but its implications are only demonstrated in the course of historical development with a group of humans who live according to its precepts.

Quakerism is primarily a method, including a certain body of beliefs which are accepted after having been arrived at by much talk and discussion using the proper method. They can be modified by further use of the same method. The scientific method is directed towards the outer world as is psychology which depends on laboratory methods but the Quaker method differs from the scientific method in that it is dealing with what can neither be measured or weighed. It is directed to the inner life, a response to moral claims and religious insights. As Quakerism is based primarily on experience it becomes a continual process of change, depending on the age in which we live.

This method is based on accepted facts of the physical universe and by a process of reasoning to deduce the further truths which are accepted by faith. Quakerism, though primarily directed to the inner life, accepts the historical facts or events such as the story of Christianity, the revelation of God in human terms through Jesus of Nazareth. Only as the outward eye of time and the inward eye of eternity are focused on a single fact does the fact reach a three dimensional quality of truth.

Quakerism is a form of group mysticism which has lasted longer than most. It has shown both strengths and weaknesses. But the central fact is this religion is the uniting power of the Divine Spirit which integrates the group so it becomes an organic whole.

## **Quakers — a radical faith**

Seekers were the most radical wing of Puritanism. They suffered the bitterest persecution from the conservative wing of the reforming churches. They dispensed with the mediating function of the priest; they resisted and rejected the ancient authority of the church and its hierarchy and began to interpret the Scriptures in new ways. They were the inheritors of the mystical tradition of the Hebrew prophets which was an inexplicable part of religious life and became a central reality for the early Friends. There were thousands who rejected the mediation of priest and ordained minister and who wanted to find a faith dependant on personal experience. It was into this turmoil of Seekers' expectancy that in 1643 George Fox put down his tools of trade, turned his back on the church into which he had been born to find a new way through his perplexities. He was able to open up the Truth, he was able to discover the essence and to crystallise into practical experiences necessary for the setting up of the Kingdom of God in the hearts of men. He found the way from the mystic vision into the world of the real life. He had the imagination to feel sympathy for another man's condition, could penetrate through the obtuseness of those that bullied and so discover and reach the spiritual nature of man which became the start of changing the way men lived.

### **Few in number but not in influence**

The Quakers are an interesting phenomenon. They worship in silence and publish a continuous stream of booklets and pamphlets. They are few in number yet you find them everywhere - often in places of influence. They are fearless social reformers and have a very good head for business. They proclaim a great message yet do it in muted tones. They have never celebrated sacraments nor borne arms. They have never refused to recognise women as ministers and they recognise a bond of unity among themselves but have never appropriated the title of 'church', preferring to call themselves a 'society' only. The basis of the unity they feel is not doctrine but an attitude which gave rise to one of their earlier names 'Friends of the Truth'.

To outsiders they present a problem - their kindly calm and tolerant religion is difficult to convey in words. They seldom answer questions about their faith directly. Some are deeply mystical, some are deeply rooted in biblical faith. They are a world wide faith yet have no central authority - they are small in numbers but there are Anglo-Saxon Quakers, Masai Quakers, Mexican Quakers, Eskimo Quakers, Chinese Quakers and many more.

### **Bibliography**

- \*The People Called Quakers – D. Elton Trueblood
- \*Friends for 300 Years – Howard Brinton
- \*Approach to Quakerism – E. B. Castle
- \*Portrait in Grey – John Punshon
- \*Spirituality of George Fox – Monika Smith, NSW RM, short talk, 1996