

What Quakers believe – and sometimes do!

By Eric J. Schiller

Some say that finding out what Quakers believe is like nailing jelly to a wall. Ask a Quaker what he/she believes and you are likely to get reflective pause – and then quite possibly you may soon hear what Quakers do not believe: no creed, no clergy, no rituals, no holy scriptures.

I have recently met some inquirers who wanted to know what Quakers believe, and as a result of these meetings I have come to realize that the above approach not only is ineffective, but it is not true. There are in fact solid tenets that most Quakers believe – and that they try to put into practice. In the following I will try to outline my list of what most Quakers believe. I expect that there will not be unanimous agreement on the following list. It is certainly true that Quakers have no authoritative pope speaking for us all. However let me see if there are some tenets upon which most of us can agree.

1. We tolerate diversity

Quakers certainly have evolved from the days of George Fox, its founder. When he proclaimed the authority of the “inner light of Christ” that could lead us into all truth, he seemed to be implying that the ongoing search for truth could

lead us into hitherto undiscovered paths.

As a result, Quakers today have within their ranks a wide variety of religious opinions. One of the most striking evidences of this is the free intermingling of “Christocentric” Quakers and universalistic Quakers. Christocentric Quakers generally trace their faith and practice back to the life and teachings of Jesus.

We seek this light and wait for the inner leading. It is this continual quest that gives meaning to the silent waiting, which constitutes much of our worship.

Universalistic Quakers find their religious inspiration from a variety of other sources, religious and even secular. The amazing thing is that these two seemingly different strands of Quakers cohabit in dynamic mutual acceptance. Christocentric Quakers do not force their views on the others, and universalistic Quakers respect and accept the views of their Christianized fellow members.

2. We have a realistic view of human nature

Quakers do try to emphasize the capacity for good in human beings. The statement of George Fox, that “there is that of God in everyone,” is frequently quoted. In fact, as a consequence of this belief, we are exhorted to “walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.”

However, this does not mean that Quakers deny the dark side of human nature. We are too familiar with the ways of the world to come to the conclusion that all is sweetness and light out there. We are called to struggle against the vast sea of darkness that exists, while attempting to always focus upon the candle of light in the darkness.

Quakers therefore do not share the outlook of some New Age philosophies that overlook the failings of humankind. Instead we try to confront these failings both in ourselves and in the larger society.

3. We follow inner spiritual leadings

George Fox spoke of the inner light of God, which leads us into all truth. We seek this light and wait for the inner leading. It is this

continual quest that gives meaning to the silent waiting, which constitutes much of our worship. This inner light is often distinct from the callings of the world and the latest popular trends. As a result, Quakers can often be said to be “marching to a different drummer.” This often can mean taking unpopular decisions and following it up with unpopular actions.

4. We believe in putting into practice that which we say we believe

Quakerism is not a spiritual debating society – though we do often debate issues vigorously. It is also not a quietist withdrawn society, though we do regularly withdraw to listen to the inner light that is within us all. When the light has shone and the Spirit moves, we are then compelled to apply what we have learned. It is therefore a fearful thing to truly wait for light and wisdom, for the urging to faithful action will soon follow.

5. We try to speak the truth – even to the powerful

Quakers are known for their “plain talk.” Not having preachers and prepared sermons, we seek to hear the truth spoken forcefully.

Though we strongly believe in the separation of church and state, this does not mean that we will not speak out forcefully to our political leaders when needed. We should also not be afraid to applaud government leaders when they do works that genuinely support the peaceful development of humankind.

6. We try to live simply

A characteristic strand in Quaker testimony is our effort to live simply – reducing our consumption of the world’s resources, reducing environmental harm, and labouring for a just distribution of the world’s resources for all the world’s peoples. We are far from perfect in this ideal. We are all caught up in an increasingly affluent society, surrounded by a world of terrible poverty. This troubles us and the urging of conscience compels us to be more modest in our lifestyle.

7. We believe in the peace testimony and strive to practice it

The peace testimony of Quakers is a result of their attachment to inner spiritual values. We believe that the Spirit of God is the spirit of peace. This spirit that animates us is a spirit of love. It cannot therefore result in belligerence and war. Spiritual motivation that leads to war is an aberration – it does not come from the spirit of light. This understanding of “Spirit” fits well into the original Christian tradition, but it is not exclusive to it. Many other strands of religious thought lead to the same conclusion. In this way, both Christian and non-Christian Quakers are in agreement. Peace then is the touchstone of all religious thought. Violent actions cannot proceed from the inner light and such actions are to be opposed and resisted. Peace is the way!

Conclusion

These then are a cluster of belief-principles that Quakers gather

around. They have evolved over centuries of religious experience. We do not consider these principles to be uniquely ours. We rejoice when others come to the same peaceful understanding of the divine. We willingly work and cooperate with all like-minded souls. Moreover, our beliefs are not divorced from this world. When confronted with injustice, exploitation, and the violence that maintains these unjust systems, we are ready to act to oppose these dark impulses in human nature.

In his book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Tolstoy said that there are three levels at which we understand Truth. The first level is personal. Here we understand truth as result of our particular situation based on family, upbringing, and our own circumstances. The second level is the group level. Here we attach ourselves to the particular grouping that is dominant in our lives. This may be nationalistic, a religious grouping or some other primary group to which we have joined. However there is a third level of truth which is above all of these; it is universal, ineffable, and beyond all of our worldly groups and categories. Our group’s belief systems can at best be a faint reflection of this greater overarching truth. It is with this realization that all of our belief systems must be humbly held, for we do not have absolute truth within our own particular grasp.



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