

My Brief Take on Being Quaker

by *Kean O. Yeoh*

Our liberal stream of the Quaker tradition is a unique and unlikely blend of theological openness and spiritual earnestness.¹ Early Quakers in the 17th century differed from other Christian groups of their day in believing that the divine light was universal² since each of us is endowed with “that of God.”³ Its founder, George Fox, proclaimed, “God, who made all, pours out of his spirit upon all men and women in the world, in the days of his new covenant, yea, upon whites and blacks, Moors, and Turks, and Indians, Christians, Jews, and Gentiles, that all with the spirit of God, might know God and the things of God, and serve and worship him in his spirit and truth.”⁴ Over the centuries, the liberal wing of Quakerism has evolved into a theologically plural, “forever-seeking church,” open to continuing revelation.⁵

However, what has remained unchanged since the time of George Fox is the belief that everyone has “that of God,” and therefore is able – through God’s grace and the setting aside of self will – to experience the Inward Light. The intention to discern divine will and guidance is the reason behind the “Quaker method”⁶ of sitting in silent stillness, whether it is during Sunday worship, meeting for business, or other corporate religious processes. Communal intimacy with the divine produces unity in thinking and decision-making that transcends the need for compromise or consensus. Thus discerning the promptings of Spirit – spiritual earnestness – shapes all aspects of Quaker life. Direct divine encounter makes unnecessary a theological creed, an official scripture, a minister, or liturgy. Because there is no order of service involving music, sermon, or ritual, liberal Quakerism calls itself “unprogrammed.”

Experiencing divine grace and guidance as a group fosters community, love, equality, integrity, and voluntary simplicity, which collectively constitute the Quaker “testimony” or witness to the world. Through their religious practices, Quakers are both transformed and compelled to transform the world by acting out their faith as a prophetic people.⁷ Consequently, for hundreds of years, Quakers have been active in promoting peace and social justice, including anti-slavery, women’s suffrage, prison reform, opposition to war, and current efforts to lessen our carbon footprint.⁸

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Notes

1. I have followed Ben Pink Dandelion’s lead in using “liberal” (versus conservative, meaning Christocentric) to refer to unprogrammed Quakers on the assumption that British usage carries over to the US.
2. Martha Dart (1989). *Pendle Hill Pamphlet* 289, p. 6.
3. *The Journal of George Fox*, edited by John L. Nickalls (1975), p. 263.
4. George Fox (1831). *A Collection of Many Select and Christian Epistles, Letters and Testimonies*, Vol. II, p. 235.
5. Ben Pink Dandelion (2014). *Open for Transformation: Being Quaker*, p. 36-37.
6. Howard Brinton and Margaret Bacon (2002). *Friends for 350 Years*, p. 133.
7. Pink Dandelion (2014). *Open for Transformation: Being Quaker*.
8. Friends General Conference (FGC) flier.