

Misunderstanding Quaker Faith and Practice

Misinterpretations That Lead to Mindless Faith and Unmindful Action

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You've probably heard a conversation like this between members and attenders of the modern, unprogrammed Religious Society of Friends:

"What do Friends believe? Or, basically, what do I have to believe to join Friends?"

"Oh, don't worry. Friends have no creed. You can believe anything you want in our meeting. All religions are saying the same thing, only in different words. There are many ways to Truth and all religions lead to God. That's why we see the Bible as just one great book among many. We see that of God in every person, that Divine Spark, that little piece of God, in each of us."

"Well, is there anything I have to do?"

"You might say Friends are rugged spiritual individualists. However, all Friends embrace the Peace Testimony."

"How do you get anything done if your meetings are full of rugged individualists?"

"Easy. We work by consensus in our business meetings."

This conversation reflects several perspectives widely embraced by people in the United States in general, and by unprogrammed Quakers in particular. Each view is often held and expressed by people who consider themselves to be right-thinking, well-educated, and well-read individuals. Yet, when one investigates each claim, one finds each is based on vague thinking, factual errors, and remarkable ignorance. They are misinterpretations of faith in general, and Quaker faith and practice in particular, misinterpretations that lead toward

mindless faith and unmindful action—and even lead us to view people of other faiths as bigots.

Let us consider them one by one:

1. All religions are saying the same thing, only in different words. This late 19th-century platitude sounds pleasant and gained much favor in the 20th century. It is fast becoming one of the key pious slogans of popular culture and civic religion. However, it is factually wrong and cuts off any significant dialogue between the followers of different faiths.

Clearly, Satanism, Shamanism, Pantheism, and other minor faiths are radically different belief systems, fostering significantly different behaviors (or "works") in their followers. Even if one narrows the statement down to "all major religions are basically saying the same thing," it still is not factually correct. Studies of Hinduism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity quickly expose essential differences in their understanding and experience of God, their expectations of their followers, and their outcomes. Such study can be an arduous intellectual undertaking, but some help is available. For instance, Michael Green's "But Don't All Religions Lead to God?": Navigating the Multi-Faith Maze is a good starting point. And Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures, by Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), brings significant added scholarship for those who desire to delve deeper.

One of the most regrettable results of the all-faiths-are-the-same position is its tendency to stop positive dialogue with those of other faiths. Rather than being an enlightened position that brings people of different faiths together and honors their differences, its claim is that "underneath the surface, you're just like us; we have nothing to learn from you." It is a claim that blinds its believers to very challenging differences. Devout Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, and Muslims will immediately perceive the lack of knowledge and experience behind this position and respond, "I beg your pardon! We definitely are not just like you." What serves too often as an attempt to be nice and

accepting of people of other faiths ends up being off-putting and insulting.

2. You can believe anything you want as a Friend. This is one of the most regrettable claims mouthed in Friends meetings because, in reality, it is not true. One can see how the claim is a corollary to the all-religions-are-saying-the-same-thing position, and such statements are made with the intention of putting newcomers at ease. However, many liberal, unprogrammed Friends meetings have a strong bias against Christians, against Republicans, against individuals who have scruples over abortion and gay marriage, and some even voice discomfort concerning meeting membership for those of lower social classes.

3. Friends have no creeds. When Friends of the past made statements against creeds, what they emphasized was that creeds have no saving power. The mere declaration that one believed the creed was beside the point of true faith. Quakers asserted that what was really important was meeting their Lord, bringing life under God's will, and becoming a living witness through words and deeds to God's presence in their lives. Friends of the past were not afraid to embrace doctrine. They wrote books filled with it, and emphasized that the foundation of Quaker faith lay not in words but in a living relation with the Creator.

A few years ago, the Outreach Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting produced a Welcome poster and postcards with what might be called the present-day creed of many Friends (italics are mine):

Who are the builders of, and worshipers at this meetinghouse? Are we only a sect of the past or do we really still exist today?

We who have been called Seekers after Truth, Quakers, and Friends, are members of the Religious Society of Friends. Yes, we are a sect, but we do not separate ourselves from the world around us.

We believe God is present in every person and that peace is

preferable to war. We gather in silent communal worship to wait on the Spirit of God. Sometimes it moves us in other ways.

We have no formal creed, no ritual, dogma, nor liturgy. Instead, to help us follow divine guidance we pose, both individually and corporately, searching queries; we strive to trust to love, rather than react to fear.

We work towards peace because we believe it is the only way. We are led to implement our concerns for the equal rights of all. Many of us have been drawn to this religion—Quakerism—because of its dual commitment to spiritual awareness and social action.

These beliefs are not always easy to hold nor to honor with action but our search has led us to commit ourselves to them.

Perhaps this approach of Friends could be helpful and meaningful to you. We welcome you to accept our invitation to search with us at this or any other meetinghouse or place. If you wish, please come to join with us for worship. Your children are also welcome either at meeting for worship or First-day school.

Ironically, a creed that claims not to be a creed is still a creed. The foregoing is very clearly a statement of belief, and Friends who fail to subscribe to it often find themselves quietly isolated from the meeting.

4. That of God in every person is that Divine Spark, that little piece of God, in each of us. This concept was antithetical to the thinking of original Friends and is a product of late 19th- and early 20th-century "polite mysticism," part of a renewal movement among unprogrammed Friends. Its origins lie in Greek Neo-Platonism, reinterpreted to make early 20th-century unprogrammed Quakerism more intellectually acceptable in college and university circles. It dominated thinking in the first 50 years of the century, but fared poorly in the vast bloodlettings and genocides of World War II and the ensuing Cold War. The idealism and rationality that undergirded Neo-Platonic mysticism proved of little relevance in the face of the cynicism and irrationality of Nazism, Communism, and nuclear war.

The majority of Friends in unprogrammed meetings today are biblically illiterate, theologically unlettered, and unfamiliar with Friends history and spiritual experience. For instance, one often hears unprogrammed Friends speaking of "my Inner Light" and "your Inner Light," as if the Inner Light was something each of us possessed. Friends' original understanding of the Light comes from John 1, where it is clearly identified with the work and presence of Jesus Christ—an understanding recognized for nearly two and a half centuries by Friends. It is only in the 20th century that "the Light" has been divorced from Christ Jesus and reinterpreted to be much more comfortable, far less active, and—yes—less intrusive and searching than it really is.

5. The Bible is just one great book among many.

Individuals who make this claim mistakenly conclude that earlier generations of Quakers were saying that the Bible was not really important. Quakers of the first generation rightly pointed out that the Word of God does not refer to the Bible, but to Christ Jesus (see John 1 and Revelation 19:13). However, this truth in no way demoted the Bible in their minds to the status of any other great book, like Plato's Republic or Islam's Qur'an. Quite the opposite! George Fox, that first Friend with his remarkable knowledge of Scripture, observed that he had "no slight esteem of the Holy Scriptures, but they were very precious to me, for I was in that spirit by which they were given forth, and what the Lord opened in me I afterwards found was agreeable to them." Quakers asserted that the Bible still was to be treasured because it contained "the words of God" and was vital as a guidebook against which to check the rightness or wrongness of one's spiritual leadings. Even most non-Christian scriptures can't match the Bible's remarkable evolution, being the work of many hands over more than one thousand years: a book of books detailing the work of God in salvation history.

6. All Friends embrace the Peace Testimony. The claim that peace is the one essential Friends testimony is grounded in a fundamental misunderstanding of Quaker testimonies. A quick review of Quaker history will establish that, after the first

generations of Friends, a significant number fell away from the Peace Testimony. The Fighting Quakers of Rhode Island in the 18th century are an early case in point. According to John H. McCandless in *None Were So Clear*, even in the 1930s, far more Methodists embraced a pacifist position than did Friends (both proportionately and in real numbers). Twenty-first-century Friends who espouse the slogan, "War is not the answer," are often hard put to define what is the answer, relying on partisan political arguments rather than divine commandments to support their stand.

The earliest Quakers had no checklist of testimonies, and they did not view what became "the Testimonies" as a smorgasbord of behaviors from which they could pick the ones they felt like accepting. They viewed their lives—all their words and actions—as testimony, a witness to the presence and power of Christ Jesus within them. Instead of a smorgasbord of virtues—brotherhood, integrity, peaceableness, etc.—early Quakers viewed the entirety of their lives as being a seamless and living witness. To divorce peace from integrity, compassion, gentleness, and truthfulness was to plant the seeds of discord that led to violence and war.

7. Friends are rugged spiritual individualists. The rugged individualism embraced, praised, and fostered by U.S. culture has thoroughly infected the Religious Society of Friends, and nowhere more so than in unprogrammed meetings. In those meetings one often hears regret, even grief, over the disintegration of community in U.S. culture. Ironically, many who join Friends these days are on a passionate search for community because they are victims of shattered relationships, broken families, and an individualism that trumps the most important social relationships of marriage, family, and kinship. They feel like individual flotsam tossed to and fro on an uncaring societal sea, rough with commercial exploitation and the chop and undertow of banal appeals. Several years ago I listened to a Friend's heartfelt agony over the loss of community he had experienced, but was not surprised when he confessed that he

was unwilling to give up his "freedom" in order to serve the expectations, limits, and demands of community. His spiritual individualism trumped the requirements of the community.

8. Quaker business meetings work by consensus. This idea blossomed during the second half of the 20th century when many sociologically trained individuals glanced at the Quaker meeting for business and noticed what they thought was a similarity to the process called "consensus-building." This misidentification arose, like so many others discussed here, by a failure to study both Quaker history and Quaker doctrine.

For early generations of Friends, meeting for worship with a concern for business had nothing to do with consensus-building. It consisted of seeking God's will and allowing the meeting to be brought into unity by the immediate presence and active power of God. This early understanding required each participant in the meeting to cast aside personal agendas, pet ideas, and political positions, and in so doing to seek the divine will. It was incumbent on all present to allow God to challenge and change hearts and minds, and bring a miraculous divine unity, where before there were human strife and division.

What brought us to these unseemly misinterpretations?

We might well ask why Friends today espouse such simplistic falsehoods. Let us examine several possible reasons, while recognizing that they don't begin to exhaust the possibilities.

First, most of the statements examined here allow the speaker to avoid any challenge or conflict. The first three statements examined above immediately cut off any further conversation or examination of their claims. They are often Quaker "code" for saying circumspectly, "I'm uncomfortable with religious discussions," or "Don't bother me." Friends often protest that the statements examined here are signs of an open mind, but this protestation is mistaken. Such positions are actually as close-minded as those of a biblical literalist or fundamentalist. They might well be termed Quaker unprogrammed fundamentalism.

Second, such positions avoid the difficult and uncomfortable struggle of seeking and finding God, and beyond finding God, seeking and doing God's will. Modern Friends revel in being "seekers," but are often quite uncomfortable with those who claim to be "finders." Why? Because the struggle to find God leads to discoveries about ourselves that are uncomfortable and disconcerting, and will demand changes in our behavior that will draw us away from, and into conflict with, shallow, self-centered, destructive, and unsustainable popular cultures.

Third, such positions may be rooted in, and fed by, our feelings of guilt over the sins of our own Western civilization. We feel bitterness over the sins of colonialism, racism, and violence against non-Western religions and cultures over the last five centuries, and that guilt too often propels us toward a simplistic declaration: "We're not part of that! We affirm you. You see: We reject the faith and civilization that failed in part and fostered those horrors." We use an opt-out strategy, thus avoiding the hard work of determining what remains good in Western societies, and what needs to be redeemed. And we simplistically embrace other cultures as good, failing to realize that nationalism, greed, expansionism, and violence are not Western failings, but human failings. We're dealing with the human condition, not the Western condition.

Fourth, such positions may also represent a positive veneer masking the postmodernist political slurry so popular in university classrooms. Yet, the postmodernist deconstruction of belief systems does not lead to a more tolerant and positive society. It simply strips citizens of life-saving and life-sustaining beliefs and values, leaving them confused and defenseless against those who would exploit them.

The danger in misunderstanding Quaker faith

The misunderstandings discussed here often lead us to take positions and make claims that may well horrify us when we discover their true import. Peter Kreeft, a Catholic author and professor of Philosophy from Boston College, relates a truly

mind-opening discussion in one of his classes between several Catholic students, a Jewish student, and a Muslim. The Jewish student noted that the college had removed all the crucifixes from its classrooms and immediately identified the reason: the passage of government regulations allowed church-related colleges and universities to receive government money if that money was not used for overtly religious purposes. One step in being less overt was Boston College's removal of the crucifixes that once hung in all its classrooms.

When a Catholic student observed that another good reason for the removal of the crucifixes is that they might offend people of other faiths, the Muslim could contain himself no longer: "That reasoning treats people of other faiths, like myself and my Jewish friend here, as bigots. It assumes we will be offended: that is, that we are bigots. While we do not believe Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, we do believe he was one of the greatest prophets. And while we do not use symbols like the crucifix in Islam, if a government attempted to remove a symbol of Jesus' importance to Islam, we Muslims would stand between the government and it and declare we were ready to be martyrs to prevent that from happening."

What! We try not to offend others and discover we're assuming they're bigots? We strive to be open-minded, only to find we're close-minded? We claim to have no creeds, but obviously do? We say we cherish one another in community, but are so individualistic that we are unwilling to assent to the common understanding, discipline, and willing self-sacrifice that can make community possible? How can this be? It can be, because, as good therapists know, we are creatures remarkably adept at hiding from the truth of our condition. Facing our condition can be extraordinarily painful, but it is necessary for true understanding, right ordering, and redemption.

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