

The Spiritual Journey of a Solitary People: The Free Quakers of America

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“There is a Principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names . . . In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation so ever, they become brethren.”

---- *The Essays of John Woolman*

ABSTRACT

The following exploration of the fundamentals of the Religious Society of Friends called Quakers will focus upon a lesser known tradition of the Quakers, namely that of the “Free Friends of Philadelphia” and their modern progeny, the Free Quakers of Indiana. These Free Quakers, as they are called, are those who chose to exercise their free right to follow their conscience in all things, a tradition reaching back to the 18th century in Philadelphia when a contingent of Friends chose to support the war against Britain. A great deal is known about the programmed and unprogrammed traditions of the Religious Society of Friends, the former electing to have recorded ministers and formalized worship and the latter opting for no clergy and a preference for the mystical tradition of silent worship. Much less is known about the Free Quakers of Revolutionary Pennsylvania and the subsequent modern day Friends, their ideological progeny. In this brief essay, we intend to correct this common oversight in Quaker history.

ESSAY

The Religious Society of Friends dates from the late 18th century and in evangelical parts of America Quaker meetings have been called Friends’ churches since the late 19th century (1). However, the Monthly Meeting of Friends is the most historic and traditional manner of referring to their places of worship. The term “Quaker” has been an acceptable nickname for Friends since the time of George Fox, their founder, when Justice Bennet in 1650 used the term in response to Fox’s appeal to the Justice to “tremble at the word of the Lord” (2). “Friends” came early to be the most common term used in reference to Quakers and it refers to the Society’s commitment to being “Friends of Truth” and “Friends of the Light.” In the 20th century, Friends of the evangelical type chose to identify the use of the term “Friends” to reflect the words of Jesus who said, “You are my friends if you do what so ever I command you” (3). This is only a recently employed explanation of the term’s true origin and reflects a theological orientation rather than historical accuracy (4, 5).

As is well known, Quakerism arose out of the religious ferment of the mid-17th century in England and Europe and in 1682, William Penn took the initiative to found Pennsylvania on Quaker principles. The early Quakers worshipped without a set liturgy or prearrangement of any kind, and without any appointed minister, believing that God would use any one of the worshippers, man or woman, as minister. The religious tenants of Friends are set out in the classic work of Robert Barclay, entitled, *Theologiae Verae Christianae Apologia* (6) and, though not authoritative, it is considered an historical document of merit for spiritual reflection and engagement (7). Friends do not, as a community, embrace a creed of faith, preferring rather to draw from the experience of quiet centeredness in the lives of each of its members as a source of light and truth in the governance of their “will to service” in the world.

Their central belief is in the “Light Within,” its possession consisting chiefly in the sense of the Divine Will of service within each member of the community and the community as an entity of conscious desire to make a difference for good in the world, *Quaker Faith & Practice* (8). The

Light Within, variously called the Inner Light and Inward Light, centers in the core of each individual and constitutes the fundamental source of right thought and right action. It is the core of the inner self of each person and the community itself embodies this Light Within as well. Peace, simplicity, universal brotherhood, and stewardship of the world constitute the fundamental ingredients of this sense of the Inner Light. Each of these qualities are embraced and lived out according to the insights of experience felt by each member of the community without external authority interfering with one's own exercise of service in the world (9). Rejection of the externals of Christian practice including the Sacraments and ordained ministry reflects this sensibility of the power of inner guidance to everyone made universally present in the centering of the Inner Light within every person (10).

Within the Society of Friends, there is a keen desire to recognize and honor the particular orientation towards the faith community of each member. This spirit of liberality was, for example, exemplified during the Revolutionary War when Nathaniel Greene, a Quaker from Rhodes Island, became George Washington's first general in the field to fight the British (11). In 1781 Samuel Wetherill broke with the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting of Friends over the issue of whether or not Friends could support the war with Britain. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, among many, contributed to the building of the Religious Society of Free Friends' Meeting in Philadelphia which opened on June 12, 1784 with 200 attending. Betsy Ross, among many, became a Free Quaker but, with many starts and stops, the Free Quakers were eventually re-united with the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and now only holds a single meeting annually in November to commemorate their founding (12, 13).

Thomas Paine, himself, had embraced the Society as a way of fending off the political pressures of faith-affirmation in colonial America, a tendency of control which has always characterized American political activity. Walt Whitman certainly embodied the essence of Free Quakers in his life and poetry and it can be suggested that Emerson himself was taken up with the quintessentials of Free Quakers as was David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. And, the New Light Quakers of Massachusetts during the 1820s must not be forgotten in this context as well (14). Subsequently and in the same spirit of the Free tradition, during the Civil War some Friends chose to fight on the side of the Union against the Confederacy "owing to the demands of their conscience." These were all called "Free" Quakers as they were free to honor the dictates of their hearts and conscience without the censorship of the wider Society of Friends (15).

There have been Free Quakers from the very beginning of the Religious Society of Friends. Some were associated with the Society while others maintained their independence and even their anonymity (16). Free Quakers have been around for nearly four centuries and though appearing dangerously close to being imperialistic, Quakers have always contended that anyone in human history who lived out the Five Principles and the Five Freedoms of Free Quakers were, indeed, Free Quakers, while not using the term nor consciously embracing the faith (17). Wherever in history individuals have embraced these principles and these freedoms, the Free Quakers were quietly there, knowingly or otherwise, for the principles and the freedoms are universal and eternal, knowing neither time nor space, in their truth (18).

The Free Quakers are, today, a small gathering of independent-minded Friends in the same spirit of Philadelphian Free Quakers who, likewise, quietly but firmly embrace an independent spirit of thought and action motivated solely by a commitment to do the right thing for the right reason. As with the Amish, however, they maintain no house of worship, and by tradition no formalized creed of faith, no tradition but independence, no governance but freedom of thought and action with adherence to the guiding principles of the Religious Society of Friends (19). A confident reliance upon the Inner Light as self-understanding, peace as conflict avoidance and resolution, simplicity of values in action, justice in defense of human rights, and stewardship of the earth and all that live therein constitute their faith and practice perimeters (20). Though not in a

direct historical line from the Free Quakers of Philadelphia, nevertheless, the Free Quakers continue in the same spirit of their principles to this very day as ideological progeny of the 18th century Free Quakers (21). The Religious Society of Free Quakers of Philadelphia embodied the founding spirit of that same movement of conscience now embraced among this small gathering of Friends known as Free Quakers.

Furthermore, Friends who have historically lived “in the absence of a Meeting” were also called “independent” Quakers owing to the lack of a regular opportunity to worship with Friends on First Day (Sunday) in a proper Meeting House. Therefore, Free and Independent Friends have been a part of the Society’s tradition from early days. For example, Free and Independent Friends do not gather in Meeting Houses, we do not even build them, but rather choose to worship independently, at home, on the farm, away from the maddening press of gathered worshippers. Emily Dickenson best expressed Free Friends’ sentiment when she wrote: “Some keep the Sabbath by going to church; I keep it by staying home” (22). Like the Old Order Amish, these Independent Friends think of meeting houses and church buildings as a waste of limited resources which Friends may use to help others rather than set aside a building for once or twice a week usage (23). Though Friends have traditionally built meeting houses, Free Quakers (as Free and Independent Friends prefer to be called) choose not to do so. Their sense of community rests upon shared concerns of conscience rather than a traditional gathering for worship. When concern runs high among Free Quakers, there may be a meeting of one rather than a group to address an issue which weighs heavily upon a member of the community. Whether a meeting of one or a large gathering of concerned Friends, the focus is always upon the “Light Within,” that sense of awareness of the right, the good, and the true (24). When there is this proper orientation, it matters little whether there is one Free Quaker or many. If the intention is to do right, then one or many makes little difference in the rightfulness of the concern.

Historically, there have been essentially four options with respect to faith-based orientations among Friends, namely, *theocentric*, *christocentric*, *anthropocentric*, and *cosmocentric* (25). These are recent terms for what have always been acknowledged as legitimate faith-based orientations of Friends. Some Friends draw their inner strength from an active belief in the God of the Universe, whether or not biblically linked or not depends on the individual Friend. The God of the Bible has, of course, been a central belief orientation of Friends from early times but it has not ever been the exclusive orientation. Some Friends draw their spiritual comfort from a particular belief in a personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth, some recognizing him as the Son of God while others embrace him as the spiritual center of their faith, a supreme example of goodness and light (26). Still others have focused much more on the human person as the focal point of their faith-based orientation as relates to their inner spiritual life, a well cultivated if not always articulated humanism. Finally, and more intentionally self-conscious in this and the last century, there are Friends who look to an ethical naturalism as the center of their faith-based commitments, a concern for the earth and the universe as relates to the human community’s decisions about what to do and how to do it (27). It is a cosmocentric orientation wherein the universe and the evolutionary process of cosmic development is seen as that driving force which affirms the connectedness of all things.

These then are the four optional faith-orientations of Friends today -- theocentrists who believe in a God of the Universe and even the God of the Bible, christocentrists who look to Jesus as personal comforter, anthropocentrists who look to humankind as the source of all answers, and, finally, cosmocentrists who believe the universe holds the truth that the evolutionary process itself is the final and complete source of all reality (28, 29). What ever one’s particular orientation, among Friends there are no distinctions. Friends’ work is service, not speculation, and their mysticism is practical, not cerebrally abstract or experientially esoteric. The Shakers of early American history, an early branch of the Society of Friends who came from England, were keen to say: “Hands to work and hearts to God” (30). Today, Friends prefer to say: “The better the day, the better the deed.” “Worship in your heart, not in a building, and look for every opportunity to

be of service to human kind and the world in which we live.” This is the code of Free Friends independent of creedal constraints (31). It is what they do that says who they are and loving the world and serving its needs is what they do as Free Quakers (32).

The fundamental ingredients of the faith and practice of Free Quakers, consist of the Five Principles, which are simple to name and easy to explain, and the Five Freedoms, equally simple. In the following, we will explore each of these Principles and each of these Freedoms in attempt to bring clarity to those who are in search of a fuller explanation of the faith and practice of the Free Quakers.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES

The Five Principles are as follows: a belief in (1) the Inner Light of self-understanding, (2) simplicity in manner of life, (3) peace and non-violence, (4) social justice and human rights, and (5) the stewardship of the earth.

1. The Inner Light

From the earliest days of the Society of Friends, the affirmation of the universal connectedness of all things constituted a central ingredient in their faith experience. Called variously the “Inner Light,” the “Light Within,” and the “Inward Light,” each term nuanced a particular experiential perspective (33). Friends have always believed that “there is no place where God is not.” “That of God in every man” was the old phrase used by Friends based upon the statement in the Gospel of St. John that refers to “the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” In earlier days, reference to God was central as the “evidence of connectedness,” and today, a concept like “systemic integrality” or Einstein’s “systems theory” suffices to indicate the integrated view of Friends in the world. And, because of this universal connectedness, there is nothing which is left out, everything counts, everything has value, everything merits our attention and care and well-meaning nurture of it (34). And this relatedness of all things informs the way Friends assume our place of responsibility and accountability in the world around us. From inside out, there is this unifying principle, what in an earlier day was simply called “the Inner Light” which bears witness to the unity of the universe. The “Inner Light” of the Free Quakers is in the Socratic tradition of “Know thyself.” The Inner Light of self-understanding is the central guiding principle cherished and nurtured by the Free Quakers (35).

2. Simplicity in Manner of Life

Unlike the Old Order Amish (36), who cherish the past as a refuge and protection against the present, Friends affirm the primacy of the guiding principle of plain living to be an affirmation not of the past and ways of living long left behind but of a way of living in the present and towards the future (37). Such a life carries with it a witness to what is essential and what is enduring about social responsibility and accountability. Plain living, once exemplified in speech and dress, carries with it a sense of doing what is essential for the continuance of life with the least amount of cost to the environment (38). To sustain the world with the least amount of intrusiveness and consumption while nurturing a healthy and enduring social life within the community of all living things means a commitment to “minimal sustainability.” Plain living in the 17th century now means in the 21st century a full conscientiousness regarding consumption, avoiding abuses, misuses, and unfair appropriations of the environment such that plain living can, should, and will provide an example to the world of how to live responsibly, meaningfully, and accountably in a world of limits which must be shared with all (39, 40).

3. Peace and Non-Violence

The peace testimony of the Society of Friends is iconic in its history (41). Always the first ones in where violence and conflict rule, Friends have for four centuries sought out opportunities to foster peaceful living in situations where conflict is difficult to avoid and troublesome to resolve. Being neither gripped by a psychopathic death wish nor a naïve notion of simplistic solutions to genuine issues of conflict, Friends have always sought to lead with the peace testimony as a starting point for conflict resolution and as an ending place for sustainable community. While opposing war with methods of conflict resolution as a first-choice option in imposing power over disagreement, Friends have, however, fought in wars and have asserted physical force in intractable conflict situations (42). “Free Friends” are Friends who are free to choose whether to participate in the use of force to resolve conflict, as in the case of General Nathaniel Greene of the Revolutionary War who was General George Washington’s first in command while still a Quaker from Rhode Island. And likewise during the World Wars, Friends found themselves serving in the armed services, often but not always in the medical core (43). But the testimony of peace, the affirmation that the avoidance and resolution of conflict must be the primary agenda when addressing issues of disagreement, fraught with anger, hatred, fear, and suspicion, has always been a guiding principle of the Society of Friends (44).

4. Human Rights and Social Justice

Connectedness, simplicity, and peace all led Friends to embrace a fundamental sense of universal fraternity, not just an affirmation of the unity of all people as a society of brothers and sisters, but as a fundamental testimony to social justice and human rights (45). To speak of brotherhood and sisterhood without addressing the key issues of social justice and basic universal human rights is far from the Quaker way of being in the world (46). Fraternity means justice, it means a commitment of every person to every other person’s basic right to social justice. Love, worthy of the name, when applied to the world means social justice and an unrelenting effort to provide basic human rights to every person. Quakers embody an ethical mysticism based upon the principle of a universal relatedness to each other and the world which demands action, involvement, and engagement where ever and when ever the principle of fraternity, of social justice and human rights are in danger (47). To be a Friend is to embrace the responsibility of fraternal vigilance over human rights and social justice. Anything less is unworthy of the tradition of “Friends of Truth.”

5. Stewardship of the Earth

The principles of relatedness, simplicity, peace, and fraternity all lead to the realization that to be a Friend in the world is to be a caretaker of the world, one committed to an unrelenting vigilance in the shepherding of social relationships and of the physical world we inhabit (48). The world is not simply here for humanity to enjoy as it uses up and dispose of the resulting rubbish of an over-stimulated desire to consume. “The world is a part of who we are,” say Free Quakers, “and we, in turn, are mutual sharers in the destiny of our physical environment just as we are responsible for the care and treatment of our social environment” (49). This is the guiding sentiment of Friends everywhere. Stewardship means responsibility and accountability, a sense of doing what is best for the world, not just what is best for the human inhabitants, but what is in the interest of the earth’s future, its destiny as a living organism within the universe. The pristine notion that the world has been given to the human community to use, abuse, and discard must give way to a broader, more mature notion of humanity’s relatedness, connectedness, and mutually shared reliance and reliability in its care and treatment (50). Humanity is not the consumers in a world to be consumed, but rather participants in an environmental process requiring respect and mutual care in the recognition that the earth has produced its multiplicity of life forms. These life forms,

including the human animal, must then behave responsibly, accountably, and compassionately, not just for one life form but in the interest of all life forms, knowing and directing them as wisdom of experience and science dictate.

THE FIVE FREEDOMS

The Five Freedoms are as follows: (1) freedom from creeds, (2) freedom from public worship, (3) freedom from programmed gatherings, (4) freedom from clergy, and (5) freedom from evangelization.

1. Freedom from Creeds

Since the time of George Fox, Quakers have presented their faith experience in the form of queries rather than as creedal statements requiring compliance. Queries provide an opportunity for the individual and the community to reflect upon their own experience without being insistent or intrusive respecting others' experience. Each person assessing his or her own experiences according to each's "own personal light" as Quakers say (51). Free Quakers are particularly keen on the individual freedom of faith expression based on one's personal life experience. No creeds and no imposed rules of faith and conduct are involved. Independence of thought and freedom of expression is the quintessential ingredients of the Free Quaker tradition. There are no meeting houses, but rather, each one worships according to the light one has in his or her own experience of life. When community happens among the Free Quakers, it happens spontaneously and not regulated by formula (52). Prayer is silent and faith is inward. Free Quakers witness to their experience of the meaning and value of life by the lives they live, not by the words they say. The silent witness of peace, brotherhood, justice, simplicity, and stewardship is a strong tradition among Free Quakers and it is in the midst of these things that one will find Friends, free and independent of institutional formulas and regimented activities. The queries of the Free Quakers are simple -- Do I seek for peace? Do I nurture brotherhood? Do I work for justice? Do I exemplify simplicity? Do I embrace stewardship? Each Friend poses these queries to himself, but not to others. Each answers in the affirmative to each query and determines, for oneself alone, how one exemplifies one's answers in one's daily life (53). Each Friend must strive to answer, for oneself, in the affirmative and, by doing so, his life becomes a witness to the meaning of life for the Free Quakers today and in celebration of the Free Quakers of yesterday.

2. Freedom from Public Worship

Emily Dickinson's poem, "On Keeping the Sabbath" is most applicable here.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church --
I keep it, staying at Home --
With a Bobolink for a Chorister --
And an Orchard, for a Dome --

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice --
I just wear my Wings --
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton -- sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman --
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last --
I'm going, all along.

---Poem 324 (54).

That a religious tradition could exist without public worship is amazing within itself but the Old Order Amish have come closer than any in doing just that excepting, of course, the Free Quakers. The notion that there should be and is a specific place for the community to gather for worship is alien to the theology and experience of the Amish for, in their tradition as with the Society of Friends and Free Quakers, “there is no place where God is not” is the rule governing the community’s faith expressions (55). Free Quakers have once, in Philadelphia in 1784, chosen to build an edifice which constituted a physical center of their corporate witness to their legitimacy and viability as members of the Religious Society of Friends with strong adherents to the notion of the exercise of freedom and liberality of conscience in matters of faith and practice (56). Since that time, not once have Free Quakers repeated that architectural extravagance, preferring rather to affirm the viability of any place and every place as a seat of worship. Whereas the Amish have designated the family farm as the convenient gathering place for members of the church district, Free Quakers have not done so. “Keeping the Sabbath,” in a manner of speaking, is done within the heart and mind of every Friend, and place and time are irrelevant so long as the heart is warm with love and the mind free of distraction (57). If one is alone, then one worships alone. If one is with another, there is communal worship, but it happens spontaneously and without prior arrangement or contrivance.

3. Freedom from Programmed Business

Free Quakers do not gather for public worship nor for formal business (58). The business of Free Quakers is to abide by the queries in all walks of life and one worships where ever and when ever one adhering to the five principles. Whereas the Religious Society of Friends in the traditionalist modes of programmed and unprogrammed monthly meetings chose to gather themselves for deliberation, cogitation, and implementation, Free Quakers choose rather to act as the occasion arises without consensus or group affirmation or validation (59). The responsibility for right action, then, rests with each Free Quaker who must answer to the queries addressed personally rather than communally. If the action is right minded, the community will affirm by tacit acknowledgment and emulation; whereas, if the action is wrong minded, silence and diverted eyes will show a failure of approval (60). That corporate action is sometimes called for is not to be doubted and when Free Quakers act independently but in union with others, corporate action occurs. However, there is no contrivance in reaching consensus for it occurs spontaneously as the occasion arises without prior arrangement or orchestration.

4. Freedom from Clergy

Free Quakers believe that every person has a gift of service and nurture and every Friend is responsible for the exercise of those gifts (61). The notion that one person within the community would have a gift so superior to anyone else that he or she should be set apart is alien to the experience of Free Quakers (62). Though programmed Friends have their own ministers and elders as a result of their own faith experience, Free Quakers prefer to allow the gifts of each person to make themselves evident in the exercise of them (63). Service and nurturing gifts are legion and their uses are far from being named. That any one person should have sufficient gifts as to be so identified and designated is far from the Free Quaker experience. However, that gifts of special relevance and specificity are identified and named goes without saying for one cannot hide the gift one has to serve and nurture the wider community (64). And, when that happens, the gift and the person are noticed and that person becomes, in the mind of the community, a “weighty Friend,” one with a specific gift for specific service. Rather than always looking to the one clergy person for all of the gifts of service and nurture, Free Quakers feel that a faith community learns who has what

gifts for specific situations and, thus, no one is a specialist but all are generalists in the service and nurture of community and society (65).

5. Freedom from Proselytizing

One's life is one's witness. If the way one lives is not a meaningful testimony of the Friend's Way, then all of the words in the world will not make a difference (66). Talking is too often a substitute for doing, and Friends are all about doing the right thing rather than talking about it (67, 68). Free Quakers have taken notice of the Old Order Amish in their active refusal to engage in witnessing, testifying, and evangelizing. They witness, testify, and evangelize by living their life of faith, not by talking about it, nor writing about it, nor verbally broadcasting it. Friends are resolute in their conviction that a life centered in the Inner Life and motivated by the five principles of service to the world is a sufficient witness to their faith. Conviction by example far exceeds conversion by preaching in the experience of Free Quakers (69). Others may prefer to be missionaries; Free Quakers prefer to be exemplars of the centered life by service in the world.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Free Quakers are a quiet and unassuming community of Friends serving the world by adhering to the Five Principles of nurturing the Inner Light of self-understanding, living simply and plainly in a complex and troubling world, exemplifying by their life and work a world of peace and non-violence, seeking for human rights and social justice in all walks of life, and striving at every opportunity to care for the earth in which we live. Free from creeds, public worship, programmed business, the clergy, and pressures to evangelize, Free Quakers strive to adhere to these Five Freedoms and live within the perimeters of the queries of centered and right living. With roots back to the Founding Fathers and Mothers of the Revolutionary period of Colonial America, Free Quakers continue today quietly going about their affairs with confidence that the Five Principles and the Five Freedoms will stand them in good stead in the face of a world increasingly convoluted and troubled owing to lack of a centered life governed by the Inner Light of self-understanding. Somewhere between the Socratic aphorism, "know thyself," and the Shakespearean mandate, "to thine own self be true," lies the Free Quaker dictum, "Hands to work and hearts to God," taken from the Quaking Shakers of English history. To know oneself and to be true to that knowledge is to embrace the Inner Light of self-understanding which leads to love and service to all.

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