

Learning Resources 7.1

Challenges in the Quaker Faith

The Quaker way finds its roots in the experiences and convictions of the first Friends in the seventeenth century. This produced several emphases, including the rejection of outward liturgies, images and creeds; a suspicion of fixed doctrine and statements of faith; a focus on unmediated spiritual experience; and a sense of caution about human authority, leadership, and hierarchy.

Outward Forms – The earliest Quakers rejected the use of outward liturgies and images, because they believed that such forms tended to distract people from the living presence of God within them. They felt that if God was already present and available, there was no need to focus on mere symbols of this presence.

Creeds and Doctrine – They also rejected the credal basis of Christianity and were suspicious of fixed statements of faith. This, again, reflected their focus on a living relationship with God, which they felt could never be adequately codified using human language and reason.

Unmediated Experience – They were convinced that in the true faith, people enjoyed a direct inward relationship with God in Spirit, without the need for physical mediators. This meant that they doubted the value of human traditions and gave absolute priority to divine revelation. The Bible was regarded as an exception, but only when read under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Human Authority – Quaker caution about the role of human authority was based on their belief that, in the true faith, people are ruled by God, and not by earthly authorities. This was part of their critique of a corrupted Church, which they felt was controlled by men, rather than God.

This combination of factors in the early Quaker movement has presented future generations with a number of key challenges to negotiate:

- 1. A faith caught between heaven and earth** - Friends find themselves caught between the world as it is, and the vision of a new creation revealed to them by the Spirit. This has produced a dynamic tension between two distinct influences: the ways of heaven, and the ways of the world.
- 2. A faith of inward revelation and inherited tradition** - Friends have always practiced an experiential and Spirit-led faith based on continuing revelation, making them suspicious of fixed tradition. However, since the seventeenth century, all Quakers have inherited a pre-existing tradition of their own.
- 3. A faith of corporate cohesion and individual freedom** - From the beginning, there has been a dynamic tension within the Quaker way between the spiritual freedom of individuals to follow their own leadings, and the need for an ordered community with discernible boundaries and a clear identity.
- 4. A faith of inward stillness and embodied expression** - The earliest Friends adopted a quietist spiritual practice that prompted a powerfully charismatic and embodied response. Subsequent generations have found it hard to keep these two aspects of the early Quaker way in balance.

The diverse expressions of the Quaker faith in the world today have found different ways to negotiate these challenges.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. The Quaker community must decide how far it integrates itself into the dominant culture, and in what ways it tries to remain separate. What kind of balance would you seek to achieve and why?
2. The Quaker community must decide how far its life and witness is shaped by current discernment of the movement of the Spirit, and how much attention it should pay to the life and witness of Friends in the past. What kind of balance would you seek to achieve and why?
3. The Quaker community must decide to what extent it should enforce a shared discipline on its members and how much personal freedom individuals can enjoy. What kind of balance would you seek to achieve and why?
4. The Quaker community must decide the extent to which it is an inward and contemplative tradition, or a charismatic and embodied faith. Should quiet inwardness and emotional expressiveness be given equal weight? What kind of balance would you seek to achieve and why?

Learning Resources 7.2

When Quakers Got it Wrong

Across history, there have been several situations in which Quaker conduct appears to have been contrary to the professed values of Friends. It is important to recognize that such assessments are made with the benefit of hindsight, and it may be equally hard for Friends today to recognize their mistakes and limitations clearly and objectively.

Class and Social Status

The early Quaker rejection of established practices of social deference gave the impression that Friends were intent on eradicating social inequality. However, quite quickly, Quaker leaders sought to reassure those in power that they posed no threat to the social order. Their spiritual vision may have been egalitarian, but this did not necessarily extend to external forms of social stratification. By the end of the seventeenth century, the community was dominated by increasingly wealthy and respectable people. This inevitably had an impact on social attitudes, including how they viewed people of lower rank, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is evidence of negative attitudes towards the working classes. During the twentieth century, the social profile of Friends changed, as the community increasingly reflected the culture of a university-educated, white collar, middle class. This has meant that many Quaker communities feel uninviting to working class people.

Colonialism, Enslavement, and Racism

The Quaker community has been closely associated with the campaign for the abolition of enslavement. However, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Friends were heavily involved in the slave-based economy of the British Empire. Many British Quakers gained wealth through investments in shipping and trade, and Friends in Barbados and the American colonies owned slaves. By the late eighteenth century, the Quaker community had embraced abolitionism, but racist attitudes prevailed and, in America, Friends of Colour were often required to occupy segregated benches within meeting houses. For many Friends, former slaves were “fit for freedom, not for friendship.” Today, Quakers are beginning to face up to the reality of racism within their communities, but find this difficult because it seems to undermine their identity as champions of social justice. Friends of Colour express frustration about this, feeling that, too often, demands for racial justice are resisted, viewed as disruptive and conflictual in a community that values peace.

The Position of Women

In many ways, the position of women within the Quaker community has been one of its strengths. Friends recognized the validity of women’s ministry from the beginning of the movement. However, this was quite a limited form of equality. It was about a prophetic ministry, in which God might speak through a woman. It did not imply social equality. The sight of women preaching and acting out dramatic signs in public places was viewed as outrageous by the wider society. As Friends sought to manage their public image and campaign for religious toleration, efforts were made to constrain the roles of women and channel them towards more socially acceptable activities. The establishment of separate women’s business meetings was something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they provided a women-only space enabling a degree of authority. On the other hand, they limited the scope of activity to ‘feminine’ concerns, while the men continued to deal with public matters. It wasn’t until the end of the nineteenth century that men and women took an equal role in Quaker decision-making.

So, pressure to conform to dominant social norms has sometimes impacted negatively on Quaker faith and witness.

More Information on Quakers, Racism, Social Class, and Women

Videos:

Quakers, Racism, and the Blessed Community

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/quakers-racism-blessed-community/>

How Modern Quakers Challenge Traditional Gender Roles

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/how-modern-quakers-challenge-traditional-gender-roles/>

Advice for White Men

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/advice-white-men/>

Books:

Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey, eds. *Quakers and Abolition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

Donna McDaniel and Vanessa Julye. *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African Americans, and the Myth of Racial Justice* (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2009).

Online Material:

Quakers and Slavery Resources

<https://web.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/>

Racial Inequality: Painfully Present among Friends (*Friends Journal*) – Vanessa Julye

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/2003119/>

Recognizing Racism, Seeking Truth (*Friends Journal*) – Inga Erickson

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/recognizing-racism-seeking-truth/>

The Middle-Class Capture of Quakerism (*Friends Journal*) – Donald W. McCormick

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/the-middle-class-capture-of-quakerism-and-quaker-process/>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you feel about the distinction that Quakers in the past made between spiritual equality before God, and wider social hierarchies? Can you see how the tensions associated with being a faith caught between heaven and earth helped shape this position?
2. In addressing these issues, what lessons can Friends today learn from their history?
3. In what ways might all this help explain why Quakers have remained a relatively small religious group?

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