

Quakerism is a way of life, rather than a dogma or creed. It rests on a conviction that by looking into their inmost hearts people can have direct communication with their Creator. This experience cannot ultimately be described in words, but Quakers base their whole lives on it.

The Quaker movement arose in the mid-seventeenth century. Its followers called themselves 'Friends of Truth', or simply 'Friends'. 'Quaker' was an abusive nickname used by others, but Friends have since adopted the term themselves, and today 'Friend' and 'Quaker' mean the same and are used interchangeably. The formal title is 'The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)'.

Friends' basic attitudes show themselves in certain ideas and practices, personal and collective, of which most important are:

- In their meetings for worship Quakers do not sing hymns or use set prayers, but wait on God together in silence. Out of this silence occasionally someone may speak briefly, or pray, or read from the Bible or other religious work.
- Friends try to learn from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the Gospels. They also try to live in the spirit of forgiving love that was shown in his life and death, and which has been a living

source of strength and inspiration to his followers ever since. This does not, however prevent many Quakers from acknowledging a debt to the saints and sages of other religions and to wise people of no declared religion.

- Quakers do not consider that ultimate authority can reside in a church or other organisation. Nor do they regard the mere words of the Bible, or any other writing, as authority. They try to enter into the spirit that inspired the writers. This does not mean that every Friend is his or her own authority. Belonging to the worshipping group exerts a gentle discipline which Friends gladly accept.
- Friends also carry on the business of their Society in a framework of silent worship, placing themselves and their affairs in the presence of God. The proceedings are conducted by a 'Clerk', who is both chairperson and secretary, and records the 'sense of the meeting' at the time without recourse to voting.
- Quakers tend to live simply, but they are not rigidly puritanical. For example, some Friends are teetotal, while others drink alcohol in moderation.
- Quakers recognise only one standard of truth, and consequently do not swear legal oaths. This attitude is also reflected in their avoidance

of speculative business deals and gambling.

- Quakers do not practise or condone discrimination by sex, social class, or race.
- The Quaker way implies non-violence in thought, word and deed. Most Quakers refuse to fight in war, and make clear their opposition to all preparations for it. The Society is regarded as one of the traditional 'peace churches'.
- Quakers are prominent in work for disadvantaged people at home and abroad, though many people who admire this work are not aware of the religious conviction underpinning it.

Finally it is fundamental to the Quaker way to be open to new insights from whatever source, to tolerate differing opinions, and to work for reconciliation wherever there is strife and enmity.

It should not be imagined, however, that Quakers are impossibly 'good' people. Like others they have faults and fall short of their own aims. Nor do they claim that their path is the only true one, they have simply found it right for them.

While Friends are glad to tell others what Quakerism means to them, they do not pressurize anyone to join them, but leave people free to decide whether the Quaker way really is for them.

Everyone is welcome to attend a Quaker meeting for Worship and Friends are delighted when people want to find out more about them. This may take some time. The best approach is to attend a Meeting for Worship on several occasions, and also Meetings in different places, and to do some reading. Leaflets on Friends' silent worship and other aspects of the Quaker way can usually be obtained free from any meeting house.

Two more comprehensive books are available and both contain suggestions for further reading:

A Light that is Shining: an introduction to the Quakers by Harvey Gillman (Quaker Books, £5.00). A general account of the main ideas and practices of the Society of Friends.

Yours in Friendship by Richard Allen (Quaker Books, £5.00). In a series of letters the author introduces Quakerism to new attenders.

Also available by Richard Allen, *Silence and Speech* (Quaker Books, £1.25) practical hints to help newcomers to a Quaker Meeting for Worship to discover what is really happening.

These are obtainable from the Quaker Bookshop at the address overleaf, who also issue a full catalogue of other Quaker literature.

For free information about Quakers contact:

Quaker Life Outreach
Friends House
Euston Road
London NW1 2BJ
E-mail: outreach@quaker.org.uk
Freephone: 0808 109 1651

www.quaker.org.uk



The Quaker Way



Photograph: Philip Meech