

Quakers: Paths to Humanism

A Brief Overview of Quaker History

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) has its origins in the Protestant Reformation, arising in England in the middle of the 17th century. Many religious seekers were dissatisfied with the established Church of England and yearned for a religion of personal experience and direct communication with God. George Fox (1624 - 1691), the founder, wanted to persuade the church to return to what he perceived it to be in the days of the Apostles. He called for an egalitarian religion that would not be oppressive of people on account of race, sex or class. Fox's meetings were different from orthodox Christianity: silent meditation, with no music, rituals, or creeds. Fox and his followers fought for the end of slavery and more humane treatment of criminals.

In 1647 Fox became an itinerant preacher, spreading his message that a direct, unmediated experience of God, leading to continuing revelation instead of a closed canon, is available to all people. By 1652 Fox had attracted a small group of devoted followers and the Religious Society of Friends of the Truth was born. Once, when hauled before a judge, Fox chided the jurist to “tremble before the word of the Lord.” The judge mocked him, calling him a “quaker” and the name stuck. Quakers were persecuted across England and hundreds died in jail.

Quakers fared little better in the American colonies. Colonists who worshiped in the established Christian denominations considered Quakers heretics. Some were deported, imprisoned, and hanged as witches. Eventually they found a haven in Rhode Island which decreed religious tolerance. Quakers also began to settle in the Delaware Valley and in 1681 the King of England granted the land to the west of the Delaware River to William Penn (1644 – 1718) in payment of a debt owed his father. Penn was a “convinced” Friend and much of Pennsylvania’s early history was shaped by Quaker principles and practices.

Over the years, Quakers became more accepted and were admired for their honesty and simple living—social progress regularly tested when liberal views came to the fore. During the American Revolution some Quakers who refused to pay military taxes or fight in the war were exiled because of that position. Quakers consistently rallied against the social abuses of the day: slavery, poverty, prison conditions, and mistreatment of Native Americans. Quakers also were instrumental in the Underground Railroad before the Civil War.

During World Wars I and II, many Quaker men enlisted in the military in non-combatative positions such as serving in a civilian ambulance corps, a dangerous assignment which allowed them to relieve suffering while still avoiding military service. Following World War II, Quakers became involved in the civil rights movement. Bayard Rustin, who worked behind the scenes, was a Quaker who organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Quakers also demonstrated against the Vietnam War and donated medical supplies to South Vietnam.

(Sources: QuakerInfo.org, Quaker.org, the ReligiousTolerance.org.; “Brief History of The Religious Society of Friends” (<http://www.doylestownquakers.org/who-we-are/quaker-history/>) and “Street Quaker Meeting” (<http://www.quakersatstreet.org.uk/yimg-reports.html>)

A lesser known part of Quaker history, in 1939 a Quaker group in California formed a non-theistic society based on humanist beliefs: the Humanist Society of Friends. In addition to pursuing a reason based agenda, they were authorized to train and certify people who would be accorded the same rights granted to theistic ministers. Since 1991, as an adjunct to the American Humanist Association, they have endorsed qualified members to serve as humanist celebrants. In 2003 they removed the “of Friends” portion of the name.

According to the Friends General Conference, there are approximately 87,000 adult members of Quaker groups in the United States. (www.fgcquaker.org/.../faqs-about-quakers)

The Key Principles of Quakers

Although Quakers have no creed, and therefore no formalized statement of belief, they do have “testimonies,” sets of guiding principles. The basic Quaker testimonies cited by Hans Weening are “truth, equality, peace, simplicity and community.” Weening, a Quaker theologian, is the author of the following statement of traditional principles which we have abstracted below. Note that while he readily uses “God-language” that’s not embraced by all Quakers today.

Quaker Testimonies

The word ‘testimony’ is used by Friends to describe a witness to the living truth within the human heart as it is acted out in everyday life.

Truth

Truth is a complex concept. Sometimes the word is used for God, sometimes for the conviction that arises from worship, sometimes for the way of life. It was the obedience to truth as they understood it that led Friends to act in ways which others thought odd and even provocative. ...The concern for truthfulness led Friends right from the first day to refuse to take oaths. An oath according to them was a sign that there were two different levels of truthfulness and they believed that you should tell the truth all the time.

Equality

If God is directly accessible to all persons, regardless of age, gender, race, nationality, economic, social or educational position -- if every person is held equal in God's love and has equal potential to be a channel for the revelation of God's Truth -- then all persons are to be equally valued.... For Friends this insight has meant, from the beginning, equality of the sexes and of races.... It also formed the basis for opposition to slavery and the death penalty.

Peace

This testimony has led Friends to oppose all wars and preparation for wars. ... Friends, faced with military conscription, worked to establish the right of conscientious objection. Some

Friends today work to end the conscription for military purposes not only of their bodies but also of their tax money. The peace testimony has meant efforts to ease suffering of victims of war on all sides. It means efforts to be or to seek a reconciling force between peoples and nations in conflict. It means a constant search for nonviolent means of conflict resolution through institutions of law, such as international treaties and structures like the European Union or the United Nations. It means a continuing search for peace and social justice through personal and group nonviolent techniques for mediation and social change.

Simplicity

The testimony of simplicity seeks.... to focus our attention on what is essential and eternal, without distraction by the transitory or the trivial. Plain and honest speech is an expression of simplicity. Respect for God's creation and, therefore, concern for the environment and the right use of the world's resources is another obvious expression of this testimony. A growth economy based on extravagance, wastefulness and artificially stimulated wants is seen to be a fundamental violation of the testimony of simplicity.

Community

As equally beloved children of God, all human beings are brothers and sisters, one human family, no matter how great our differences of experience, of culture, of age, of understanding. ... We must learn to deal with one another by affirming and nurturing the best we find in each other -- or, in the words of George Fox - by "answering that of God in everyone."

Source: Meeting the Spirit - An Introduction to Quaker Beliefs and Practices
(<http://charlestonwv.quaker.org/meeting-the-spirit.html>)

Creeds and theology. Weening also expressed the following ideas regarding creeds and theology: "The absence of creeds does not mean that Friends feel that it does not matter what a person believes. They recognize that personal beliefs vitally affect behavior. Friends are people of strong religious views, but they are quite clear that these views must be tested by the way in which they are expressed in action. Many Friends have hesitations about the value of theology, fearing that it too easily leads to speculation and argument. But all would agree that humans, as rational beings, must think about the nature of their religious experiences. Friends are encouraged to seek for truth in all the opportunities that life presents to them. They are further encouraged to seek new light from whatever source it may arise. Their questing and open attitude to life has certainly contributed to the tolerance with which Friends try to approach people and problems of faith and conduct.

"This may make it easier to understand how the Religious Society of Friends can accommodate such a range of religious outlooks among its members. Pretty well every color in the religious spectrum seems to be reflected in the views of Friends. There are Friends whose faith is most sincerely expressed in the traditional language of orthodox Christianity. Other Friends could justly be described as religious humanists."

The following values have been developed, promoted and practiced by Friends' schools throughout the United States:

Simplicity – Clearing the way for deeper engagement in ourselves, our community, and our education.

Peace – Creating peace in ourselves and our community.

Integrity – Being true to oneself and one's values and honest with others.

Community – Respecting and valuing every person's place in our lives.

Equality – Respecting every person's right to fairness and respect.

Stewardship – Valuing the gifts we have been given.

The acronym for this is SPICES, an outlook and approach which adds flavor to the Quaker lifestance and one that humanists surely also support.

The Key Principles of humanism

There are numerous statements that express the principles of humanism and that relate to Quaker principles. Here are several brief examples:

“As an ethical doctrine, (humanism) affirms the dignity and worth of all people and their ability to determine right and wrong purely by appeal to universal human qualities, especially rationality. It searches for **truth** and morality through human means in support of human interests, and focuses on the human capacity for self-determination.”

-- The Basics of Philosophy (http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_humanism.html)

“Humanist principles of justice and of valuing the dignity of each individual also lead us to support **equality** and oppose unwarranted discrimination. Humanists have been deeply involved in campaigning against discrimination – from homophobia to racism – for decades. Humanists have also been in the forefront of developing modern ideas of human rights, and have been prominent human rights defenders.” -- Human Rights and Equality (<https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/>)

“Humanists recognize that war and violence are human problems. Wars are started by humans and they can only be ended by humans. That is why throughout history and across the world Humanists have worked to build **peace**.”

-- Humanism and Peace, The International Humanist and Ethical Union (<http://iheu.org/humanism-and-peace/>)

“Humanism encompasses the view that we can make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values and that we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists hold that we must take responsibility for our own lives and **for the community** and the world in which we live.

-- “What is Humanism?” Humanist Society of West Yorkshire (<http://www.wyhumanists.org.uk/humanism/>)

We also suggest that you go to the sources noted below for a more complete presentation of the key principles of humanism. The principles cover a wide array of humanist concerns. We have drawn from several statements.

From Humanist Manifesto I (1933)

-- In place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer, the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

--The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.

(http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I)

From Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

-- From the Preface: "Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation."

-- From the Closing: "We will survive and prosper only in a world of shared humane values.... At the present juncture of history, commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable." (http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II)

From Humanist Manifesto III: Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003)

"...Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone."

(http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III)

From the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 (International Humanist and Ethical Union)

-- Humanism is a lifstance aiming at the maximum possible fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

(<http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>)

From "What Is Humanism?" by Fred Edwords

Former AHA Executive Director and currently the director of the United Coalition of Reason, Fred Edwords has written prolifically about the principles of humanism. In an essay on *What Is Humanism?* he concludes with a keen observation: "So, with modern humanism one finds a lifstance or worldview that is in tune with modern knowledge; is inspiring, socially conscious, and personally meaningful. It is not only the thinking person's outlook but that of the feeling person as well, for it has inspired the arts as much as it has the sciences; philanthropy as much as critique. And even in critique it is tolerant, defending the rights of all people to choose other ways, to speak and to write freely, to live their lives according to their own lights. So the choice is yours. Are you a humanist? You needn't answer 'yes' or 'no.' For it isn't an either-or proposition. Humanism is yours -- to adopt or to simply draw from. You may take a little or a

lot, sip from the cup or drink it to the dregs. It's up to you."
(http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/What_is_Humanism)

Helen Bennett shows her views on humanism in her poem "What Humanism Means to Me" found in her book, *Humanism, What's That? A Book for Curious Kids* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2005).

Humanism means to me
I've got the opportunity
To realize that I am free
To take responsibility.

To me, it doesn't seem so odd
That many people pray to God
Whenever they are feeling low --
It's just the way they have to go.

But when I do not know the way
I do not feel the need to pray.
I use my brain to figure out
What the problem's all about.

I'm grateful that I have my eyes
To see the beauty of the skies,
I'm glad I have my ears to hear
The voices of my friends so dear.

But best of all, my brains the one
That figures out what must be done
To help me run a better race,
To make the world a better place.

For additional essays on Living the Humanist Life, Humanism and Traditional Religion and related issues, see: http://americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism

Additional Quaker beliefs and practices that indicate that many Quakers and humanists are "On Common Ground."

A concise, but complete definition of humanism reads: "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, *without theism and other supernatural beliefs*, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity." In this regard, humanists surely share nearly complete common ground with members of the Nontheist Friends organization.

Nontheistfriends.org describes their organization in the following ways:

“Nontheistfriends.org presents the work of Friends who are more concerned with the natural than the supernatural. Some of us understand ‘God’ as a symbol of human values and some of us avoid the concept while accepting it as significant to others. We differ greatly in our religious experience and in the meaning we give religious terms.

“We are not a pressure group trying to move Quakerism toward non-theism. We bless what our theist brothers and sisters bring to Quaker meetings and worship. All Friends have much to learn from each other. We hope to strengthen the Quaker tradition of welcoming people of diverse religious experience and to show by example that this can include nontheists.

“We are part of meeting communities that include theists and non-theists. Together we worship and love and cooperate, even as we differ on the particulars of our religious experience. Quakerism has been changing ever since George Fox had his first opening on Pendle Hill, becoming deeper and richer. We are all part of this living faith.

Elsewhere the Nontheist Friends affirm that “Like traditional Friends, nontheist Friends are actively interested in realizing centered peace, simplicity, integrity, community, equality, love, joy, and social justice in the Society of Friends and beyond.” There also are nontheist Quaker study groups. As they indicate, “Friendly nontheists are attempting sympathetically to generate conversation with others who are more comfortable with the traditional and often reiterated language of Quakerism. Questioning theism, they wish to examine whether the experience of direct and ongoing inspiration from God ...might be understood and embraced with different metaphors, language and discourse.” Source: Non-theistic Friend (http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Nontheist_Friend)

In response to, “How can you be a member of the Religious Society of Friends and not believe in God?” Nontheistfriends.org suggests: “A misconception is to think that, because you do not believe in God, you are not religious. By nature one is religious because one wonders about the human condition. ... The wisdom of Quakers is that they do not elaborate about the precise content of that statement [God is in everyone] but leave to each individual the task of creating its meaning. For some, of course, it is a statement of fact. For me it is a most fruitful concept that explains everything and nothing, but whose consequences are magnificent, as all testimonies derive from it.” Source: Hubert J Morel-Seytoux (<http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk/nfn-faq.php#a6>)

In summary, “The Religious Society of Friends has long welcomed atheists, agnostics, humanists and freethinkers as part of its community, and now has significant numbers of non-theist members.” Source: One Humanist (<http://onehumanist.tumblr.com/post/15182142185/the-quaker-testimonies-the-religious-society-of>)

Related readings

Godless for God's Sake - Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism; Edited by David Boulton, a Quaker humanist; Publisher: Nontheist Friends, 2006. Twenty-seven Quakers discuss how they combine membership in the Society of Friends with rejection of traditional belief in a transcendent, personal and supernatural God. "For some of these 'nontheist' Friends, God is no more (but no less) than a symbol of the wholly human values of 'mercy, pity, peace and love.' For others, the idea of God and 'God-language' has become an archaism and a stumbling-block." (David Boulton also wrote *Faith of a Quaker Humanist*, a 24 page pamphlet published by the Quaker Universalist Group in 1997.)

Quaker and Naturalist Too by Os Cresson; Morning Walk Press; Iowa City, Iowa. 2014. The focus of this book is Quakerism and science from the author's perspective and the history of this approach among Friends. It begins with a foreword by David Boulton in which suggests that the book is a handbook for Friends seeking reconciliation with and a history of the development of Quaker nontheism. The text is divided into three sections. The first offers a general approach and specific practices that support unity on views on science. The second is about Quakers from a naturalist's perspective, science from the author's perspective, and Friends' outreach to scientists. The third is a review of Friends' writings that led to the Quaker nontheism of today and a review of religious naturalism in the time of George Fox. The book includes a list of publications on Quaker nontheism, a bibliography of material about the forerunners of the Quaker nontheists of today, and over 200 source notes for further study.

Humanists and Quakers: An Exchange of Letters by Harold John Blackham and Harold Loukes; Friends Home Service Committee; 1969. Co-author Harold John Blackham was an architect of the international humanist movements and founder of the British Humanist Association.

Dean Bond of Swarthmore: A Quaker Humanist by Emily Cooper Johnson; J. B. Lippincott Company, 1927. Elizabeth Powell Bond was the first Dean of Women at Swarthmore College who served in this position from 1890 to 1906.

We Are On The Same Page

When you compare the following quotations, you will see many ways we are on the same page. The first set is from the Quaker perspective followed by the humanist view.

"What is the Quaker faith? It is not a tidy package of words which you can capture at any given time and then repeat weekly at a worship service. It is an experience of discovery which starts the discoverer on a journey which is life-long. The discovery in itself is not uniquely a property of Quakerism. What is unique to the Religious Society of Friends is its insistence that the discovery must be made by each man for himself. No one is allowed to get it second-hand by accepting a ready-made creed. Furthermore, the discovery points a path and demands a journey, and gives you the power to make the journey." -- Elise Boulding was a Quaker sociologist and a major contributor to creating the academic discipline of Peace and Conflict Studies.

"If fighting is inconsistent with an ideal society, then fighting will not bring the ideal society. A spiritual result is produced by spiritual means and a material result by material means. If war is

evil, as almost everyone admits, then it cannot be the right way to produce a good result.”
-- Howard Brinton was an author and professor whose work influenced the Religious Society of Friends for much of the 20th century.

“Quakers are known for wanting to give back. Ban the bomb and the civil rights movement and the native American struggle for justice -- those things were very, very front-burner in my childhood, as were the ideas of working for peace and if you have more than you need, then you share it with people who don’t.” -- Bonnie Raitt is an American singer and songwriter.

“Peace cannot grow out of violence and hate. To harvest true peace and security, one must sow seeds of love and justice. To achieve peace, one must practice it. Acting from and through non-violence, we can reduce injustice and suffering and fear and increase justice and joy and hope.”
-- Douglas M. Crawford-Parker, Professor in the English department at University of Kansas.

The following quotes are cited in “The Quaker Way” (<https://hamiltonquakers.ca/article/quaker-way>)

Peace. “We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity ... and do deny and bear our testimony against all strife, and wars and contentions.”
-- Margaret Fell, a founding member of the Friends, was the wife of George Fox.

Integrity. “Integrity is a condition in which a person's response to a total situation can be trusted: the opposite of a condition in which he would be moved by opportunist or self-seeking impulses breaking up his unity as a whole being.”
-- Kenneth C. Barnes was the founder of the Wennington School in England.

Community. “If there is to be a religious solution to the social problem there must also be renewed in a disintegrating society the sense of community, of mutuality, of responsible brotherhood for all...”
-- American Friends Service Committee, “Speak Truth to Power,” A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence

Equality “Equality was the first testimony to emerge, as Friends recognized the equality of all people, regardless of age, gender, or superficial status. Thus Friends refused to use the gestures and language that implied inferiority and superiority. We know that all are not given equal advantages or opportunities, but all are equally worthy as individuals.”
-- Howard Brinton's *Friends for 300 Years*, published in 1952.

“Imagine all the people living life in **peace**. You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will be as one.”
-- John Lennon

“I grew convinced that truth, sincerity and **integrity** in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life, and I formed written resolutions . . . to practice them ever while I lived.”

-- Benjamin Franklin; while raised as an Episcopalian, he was a Deist as an adult. This statement reflects his humanist lifestance.

“Human history can be viewed as a slowly dawning awareness that we are members of a larger group... Groups of people from divergent ethnic and cultural backgrounds working in some sense together [is] surely a humanizing and character building experience. If we are to survive, our loyalties must be broadened further, **to include the whole human community**, the entire planet Earth.”

-- Carl Sagan, an American astronomer, cosmologist, author, and science popularizer; recipient of the American Humanist Association’s Humanist of the Year in 1981.

“When we speak of **equality**, of women and men, of Blacks and Whites, of all the world's people, we are talking about Humanism.”

-- Gloria Steinem is an American feminist, journalist, and social and political activist; recipient of the American Humanist Association’s Humanist of the Year in 2012.

The following quote, literally, gets at the heart of both humanism and the Quaker approach to life: “You can talk with someone for years, everyday, and still, it won't mean as much as what you can have when you sit in front of someone, not saying a word, yet you feel that person with your heart, you feel like you have known the person for forever.... connections are made with the heart, not the tongue.”

-- C. JoyBell C. She is the author of poetry and literature books delving mainly into the mysterious, the philosophical and the esoteric.

What is the Next Step?

As noted, many non-theist Quakers have taken the step to be a humanist. What do we suggest as a next step? We recommend the book *Humanism As the Next Step* by Lloyd and Mary Morain (the Humanist Press, Washington, DC, new revised edition 2008) as your next reading since it presents a concise overview of the history and principles of modern humanism. We also suggest that you begin to dialogue with humanists in your area on the core humanist principles discussed above and look for additional commonalities which you are certain to find.

Also, if you harbor any doubts about the concept of a divinity (as many Friends clearly do) the next step would be to explore the American Humanist Association’s website (americanhumanist.org/ where you will find a wealth of information about humanism, our local groups, programs, publications and resources of all types for people of all ages. You can, of course, follow the American Humanist Association on Facebook and Twitter and become a member of the AHA. Perhaps you may wish to identify yourself as both a humanist and a

Quaker. You surely would not be the first to do so! Many Quakers realize that they have a home in humanism. We welcome you!

For additional information and for answers to any questions you might have about the humanist worldview and lifestance, please contact us at: aha@americanhumanist.org

A final word

“There is thus much common ground between humanists and Quakers, and some comparative analysis of the nature of beliefs and practices in the two communities is long overdue.”

-- Roy H.W. Johnston is an Irish physicist and author.

We hope this paper has addressed Roy Johnston’s concern for “some comparative analysis.” As we have attempted to indicate throughout this paper, Quaker focuses on peace, integrity, community and equality resonate closely with humanism. We stand on common ground. Let us begin to walk together. Let these principles and practices be the meeting place of the Quaker and the humanist lifestance.