

Research Note

On Quakerism and Christianity

Chuck Fager

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Theologically, I define Liberal Quakerism as:

An ongoing effort to make visible a particular portion of the true Church, by means of the specific traditions and disciplines of the Religious Society of Friends. This very idea of manifesting the true Church is, we believe, rooted in the early Quakers' unique and inclusive understanding of the Society's Christian background and origins. The key Quaker disciplines by which this part of the Church is constituted are: silence-based, unprogrammed worship; a free ministry led by the spirit; decisionmaking by the worshipful sense of the meeting; church structures kept to a spartan, decentralized minimum; cultivation of the inward life of both individual and the group; a preference for unfolding experience of truth, or 'continuing revelation,' over creeds and doctrinal systems; and devotion to the historic but evolving Quaker testimonies, especially peace, simplicity and equality.

How Quakerism Is, and Isn't Christian

I don't believe Quakers are required to be explicitly or exclusively Christian. But does that mean Christianity is irrelevant to the Society, as some suggest nowadays?

I believe that liberal Quakerism is intimately related to Christianity in at least four important ways, none of which can be safely disregarded. Let's examine these connections.

First, whatever else it may be, Quakerism is clearly 'Christogenic': It took shape within, and emerged from the religious experience and cultural history of Christianity. However unorthodox it may have been - and I think it was plenty - Quakerism was given voice by women and men who used Christian language, imagery and texts both as a matter of course and as a matter of conviction. These are all items of historical record, no matter how richly ambiguous that record might be when closely examined. Yet the marks of Quakerism's heritage remain indelibly upon it. 'If we would understand our faith fully, it behoves us to understand more about Christianity'.

Second, when this heritage is taken into account, it shows that Quakerism is unmistakably 'Christomorphic', or Christian in its shape and design. That is, its institutions and processes reflect explicit efforts to recreate and practice what early Friends like William Penn regarded as 'primitive Christianity revived.' Wherever we look, from its 'catholic' view of the church, to unprogrammed worship, through the peace testimony, the equality of sex and race, to decisions by sense of the meeting - we can see that its major elements were consciously modeled on what early Friends thought were the features of Christian community at its best.

To be sure, each of these represents an interpretation which departed radically from orthodoxy; and such reinterpretation of Christianity continues today, often in ways that are not immediately recognizable from an orthodox standpoint. But the links are there, to be learned from by all who would bring out the best of Quaker potential.

Learning brings us to the third connection, namely that Quakerism at its best is "Christagogic", that is, it continues to have much that it can learn from Christianity, its founder, and its larger biblical context. This feature may well be the most important, because it seems to me closest to Jesus' own method. I have argued in my book, *Wisdom and Your Spiritual*

Journey (Fager, Kimo Press 1993), that Jesus acted above all like a teacher-sage in the mold of biblical Wisdom. Teaching, particularly by example, was what wisdom sages did; and learning was above all the proper response of wisdom's pupils. Certainly Jesus' teachings, as recorded in the Gospels, and particularly the parables, continue to repay reflection and study. Further, such study is consistent with the attitude of independence of dogmatic systems which is also a feature of both biblical wisdom and liberal Quaker faith.

And finally in this list, Quakerism at its best is 'Christophilic', that is, respectfully friendly, even affectionate toward the parent tradition which gave it birth, which shaped its practice, and from which it still has so much to learn. Such an attitude need not, indeed should not, be uncritical or sentimental.

On the other hand, there are two additional, negative features of the relationship of Quakerism and Christianity which also deserve mention here, for what it is not can be as important as what it is. Specifically, Authentic Quakerism at its best has avoided 'Christolatry'; that is, from its origins the Society's mainstreams have maintained a highly critical relationship to the creeds and systems which have grown up in the various orthodox versions of Christianity like barnacles on a ship. Such Christolatry, the making an idol of one version or another of Christian theology, is still very much with us today, and has a lot to do with why many liberal Friends have trouble with Christianity.

At the same time, Quakerism at its best will not be found to be 'Christophobic'. I say 'at its best' advisedly, because among liberal Quakers today, there are frequent expressions of anti-Christian sentiment. Such outbursts are unfortunate, even if understandable, and we shall have more to say about them; but they are no more part of legitimate Quaker faith than is anti-semitism or any other kind of prejudice.

None of these features of the relationship between Quakerism and Christianity changes the character of the Society as I have tried to define it. The liberal Quaker view of the Church reflects not only its

understandings of scripture and Christian history, its appropriation of Barclay and early Friends, but also its own experience and discernment. This is adapted from a similar passage published in Fager, C. *Without Apology: The Heritage, the Heroes and the Hope of Liberal Quakerism*. Media, Pennsylvania: Kimo Press, 1996.

Mailing Address: *c/o Quaker Studies*.