Friends Experiential Faith

For Friends, the inward and corporate experience of the Ground of Being is the starting point of faith. Friends’ search for Divine Truth relies primarily on continuing revelation, through individual experience, tested by corporate discernment in Friends meetings. The local Friends meeting provides a stimulus for and a check on inward experience. Queries and advices are part of Quaker tradition and experience, and religious writings from diverse spiritual traditions often provide a broader perspective.

Corporate Discernment. The experience of the Spirit is both individual and corporate. Through worship together, ministry in worship, group discussion and discernment, and daily interaction, individuals teach the meeting and the meeting molds and teaches individuals. Light comes to us both directly from the Source and through the meeting as a whole.

Testimonies, Advices, Queries. While Friends do not rely on creeds and dogma, there are guides to follow and to measure against. Testimonies are statements of central ethical principles and outward manifestations of the inward transformation that grows out of a living relationship with the Divine. Friends use testimonies as guides and as measuring-sticks in their lives as individuals, in their families, and in their meetings. Testimonies among Friends vary over time according to the life and spirit of each group. For NPYM, central testimonies include integrity, community, peace, equality, simplicity, and earthcare. These are described in more depth in Chapter 4, “Fruits of the Spirit.”

Advises are written reminders of what a life lived in the Spirit might look like. The first general advices were adopted in 1791. Friends in various yearly meetings have adapted and revised them periodically since then. Some advices are straightforward suggestions about specific issues of concern to Friends at a particular time; some are wide-ranging challenges for all time.

Similarly, early Friends used queries to ascertain the state of the Society as a whole, both spiritually and practically. The first set of such questions to be asked of monthly meetings was:

Which Friends in service to the Society, in their respective regions, departed this life since the last Yearly Meeting?
Which Friends, imprisoned on account of their testimony, died in prison since the last Yearly Meeting?
How among Friends did Truth advance since last Yearly Meeting and how do they fare in relation to peace and unity?

Taken together, the advices and queries are a reminder of the common faith and principles held to be essential to the life and witness of the Religious Society of Friends. Individually and in meetings, Friends consider how the advices and queries affect them personally and communally.

Scripture. The Quaker movement began at a time when the Bible had recently come into wide circulation in England, and Friends drew greatly from it. George Fox and other early traveling ministers knew the Bible well, studied it earnestly, and quoted it often.
However, while affirming the inspiration of the Scriptures, early Friends also emphasized a distinction which has remained important to this day. In Henry Cadbury’s words, “Divine revelation was not confined to the past. The same Holy Spirit which had inspired the scriptures in the past could inspire living believers centuries later. Indeed, for the right understanding of the past, the present insight from the same Spirit was essential.” Thus, in emphasizing the power which gave forth the Scriptures and the accessibility of this same power to us today, Friends have avoided making Scripture a final or infallible guide. Instead they are invited to be drawn into that same Spirit which gave forth the Bible, to be led in a continually maturing discovery of the Divine. Today, while many Friends still rely on Scripture in their search for continuing revelation, they also rely on other inspired writings from a broad array of faith traditions to assist them in their individual spiritual practice and to prepare for corporate worship.

Names. The name, the Religious Society of Friends, finds its source in Jesus’ statement that “You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master’s business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father” (John 15:14-15).

Over the centuries, Friends have used many words and phrases to describe the divine life and power at the heart of the universe: the Eternal, the Truth, the Holy Spirit, the Divine Principle, the Light Within, the Inward (or Inner) Light, the Seed, the Light of Christ, Christ Within, God, the Living God, Lord, the Word, Power, True Silence, Divine Spirit, Grace, Presence, and others. All such terms are weak attempts to express the inexpressible. The diversity of words and phrases reflects the diversity of beliefs and variety of experiences among Friends.

Sacraments and Creeds. The absence of outward rites and ceremonies in Quaker worship is a fruit of the primacy of inward experience and a stimulus for it. Friends seek to view all of life as sacramental. Desiring to avoid symbolism that may tend to supplant substance, Friends do not observe outward sacraments, such as water baptism or bread and wine communion.

Similarly, Friends do not rely on formal statements of belief. Adherence to a creed is not a test of faith or the measure of suitability for membership. The lack of a creed has sometimes led to the misconception that Friends do not have beliefs, or that one can believe anything and be a Friend. However, most Quakers take the absence of a creed as an invitation and encouragement to exercise an extra measure of personal responsibility for the discovery of faith. Rather than relying on priests or professional theologians, each Friend is encouraged to take seriously the personal disciplines which enable spiritual transformation. The statements of belief, both in word and in deed, which belong to Friends flow out of lives of service, reflection, and prayer.

It is not opinion, or speculation, or notions of what is true, or assent to or the subscription of articles and propositions, though never so soundly worded, that ... makes ... a true believer or true Christian. But it is a conformity of mind and practice to the will of God, in all holiness of conversation, according to the dictates of this Divine principle of Light and Life in the soul which denotes a person truly a child of God.

William Penn, 1692

Friends’ Place in Christianity. Whether one interprets the Quaker movement as a strand within Protestantism, as a third force distinct from both Protestantism and Catholicism, or as new and distinct form of spirituality, the movement, both in its origin and in the various branches which have evolved, is rooted in Christianity. It has offered from its inception both a critique of many accepted forms of Christianity and an empathy with people of faith beyond the bounds of Christianity. Some Friends have placed particular emphasis on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while others have found more compelling a universal perspective emphasizing the Truth enlightening every person. One of the lessons of Friends history as a religious movement is that an excessive reliance on one or the other of these perspectives, neglecting the essential unity of the two, has been needlessly divisive and has diminished the vitality of the Quaker vision.
The concern of Friends is for this faith and practice to be a living and transforming power in their lives, not a particular verbal formulation. Challenged by the words of Jesus as quoted in Matthew 7:21—“It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven”—Friends do not place emphasis on the naming of God. Instead each is encouraged, in John Woolman’s phrase, “to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart.” In the course of following this spiritual path, many Friends do come to find great depths of meaning in familiar Christian concepts and language, while others do not. Although sometimes perplexing to the casual observer, this phenomenon does not trouble many seasoned Friends who have discovered a deep unity with one another in the Spirit.

It is important to see beyond the perplexity and to celebrate the fact that the Religious Society of Friends is not a single, homogeneous group but a large and diverse spiritual family with several branches that have evolved in different directions over the past three centuries. As one reads Quaker literature, of which this Faith and Practice contains only a small sampling, patterns of belief appear. But it is only in careful, sustained observation of Friends work and ministry as individuals and as a community that an understanding of the underpinning faith emerges with fullness and clarity. The brief generalizations offered here are no substitute for thorough study and reflection; at best they offer a few signposts which will draw one into a richer journey and remind one of deeper insights.

As I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most-experienced people. For I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, O then, I heard a voice which said “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,” and, when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory. For all are concluded under sin and shut up in unbelief, as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the preeminence, who enlightens, and gives grace and faith and power. Thus, when God doth work, who shall let it? And this I knew experimentally....

George Fox, 1647

And so he [Fox] went on and said, How that Christ was the Light of the world and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this Light they might be gathered to God, etc. And I stood up in my pew, and I wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before. And then he went on, and opened the Scriptures, and said, “The Scriptures were the prophets’ words and Christ’s and the apostles’ words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord.” And said, “Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say?” ... This opened me so that it cut me to the heart.... And I cried in my spirit to the Lord, “We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves.”

Margaret Fell, 1652

Experience is the Quaker’s starting-point. This light must be my light, this truth must be my truth, this faith must be my very own faith. The key that unlocks the door to the spiritual life belongs not to Peter, or some other person, as an official. It belongs to the individual soul, that finds the light, discovers the truth, that sees the revelation of God and goes on living in the demonstration and power of it.

Rufus M. Jones, 1927

The best type of religion is one in which the mystical, the evangelical, the rational, and the social are so related that each exercises a restraint on the others. Too exclusive
an emphasis on mysticism results in a religion which is individualistic, subjective, and vague; too dominant an evangelicalism results in a religion which is authoritarian, creedal, and external; too great an emphasis on rationalism results in a cold intellectual religion which appeals only to the few; too engrossing a devotion to the social gospel results in a religion which, in improving the outer environment, ignores defects in the inner life which cause the outer disorder. In Quakerism the optimum is not equality in rank of the four elements. The mystical is basic. The Light Within occasions the acceptance or rejection of a particular authority, reason, or service.

Howard Brinton, 1952

There is indeed One that speaks to my condition, but that One may not announce a name, or even speak a word; it may reveal itself as Light, or inner peace, or compassion for humanity. But whatever its manifestation, there is only One. If that One is perceived as a King, then that is a true perception; if it is perceived as a Mother, then that is also a true perception. If I call God “Holy Mother” and you call God “Divine King,” does that mean there are two Gods? No, there is only One.

That of God within every person is sometimes recognized as the Spirit of Christ, or the Holy Spirit, or the Inner Light. As Friends we accept and respect that Spirit, however perceived, in all people, and particularly in each other. We can give testimony to our own experience, as honestly and faithfully as possible, but we cannot alter another’s spiritual condition. Let us receive Light as it is given to us, and share it as we are able, and trust in the One that can speak to the condition of all people, to care for and guide us all.

Helen Park, 1979

When we turn inside or beyond ourselves to grasp some understanding of the divine, we discover through encounter that what we need to find we will find: a Something creative and renewing, overwhelmingly strong and passive, completely wise and innocent, living and dying, feminine and masculine.

Our father, our mother, our light, which is in heaven and earth, holy is your name. Come.

Patrice Haan, 1983

I am just now beginning to feel comfortable with the realization of a Feminine Spirit as a personal presence. I will continue to work toward centering in Worship, to be open to the Light, its peace and comfort, and maybe then, its message through her voice. I do not search for her. I just know her as the source of my Light.

Molly Barnett, 1983