

17th century Quaker Roots

Roots in the Protestant Reformation

Quakerism arose in a time of major religious ferment. Spiritual questions were discussed then with the intensity of conviction given to matters such as abortion today. Theological debates occurred not just among theologically trained people, but among the general population, who would come out to hear a debate or listen to a visiting preacher the way people today come out to watch a major athletic event. Spiritual life was taken very seriously, and for many people religion was perhaps the most important area of interest and concern.

Quakerism emerged in England in the middle of the 17th century and can be viewed historically both as part of the Protestant Reformation as it developed in England, and as an offshoot of the European Anabaptism which in part preceded this Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation as we are most familiar with it has been defined as starting when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral in Germany in 1517; these theses called for a wide range of reforms in the Catholic Church. When Luther, his supporters, and others protesting abuses in the Roman Catholic Church were unable to achieve the reforms they sought, and were rejected by the Church, they set up new churches outside the Catholic fold. This was a radical step, to this time there had been only one Christian Church in Western Europe, and the Reformers split it, perhaps forever.

Luther and the other Reformers emphasized that a person is saved by God's grace and is justified by faith, not by human deeds. They set up simpler forms of worship, got rid of some of the sacraments, simplified clerical clothing and ceremony, and allowed clergy to marry. They also translated the Bible out of Latin and into the common language of the people, who for the first time were able to read it for themselves.

In England, the course of the Protestant Reformation was complex. Henry VIII declared the Church of England independent of the papacy in 1534. Henry wanted very little change in the Church, except for his rejection of papal authority. He kept the sacramental ceremonies of baptism, penance and communion, he continued confession, absolution and works of charity; and he also differed from some Protestants in believing that Christ was physically present in communion.

When Henry died in 1547, his nine year-old son Edward became king. During his brief reign, the Church of England became fully Protestant. Much of the ceremonial patterns were set aside, prayers for the dead were omitted, and other changes were made in the liturgy.

At Edward's death in 1553, however, his half-sister Mary, who was a Catholic, took over, and the Church of England became Catholic again. About 500 Protestants were killed ('Bloody Mary' - but this is a Protestant perspective!)

Mary didn't live long, however - in 1558, Elizabeth became queen. Tired of religious turmoil, she decided to have a Church of England in which practically everyone would belong - a church whose theology was shallow and inclusive. English Puritans, however, were dissatisfied with this. They wanted a national church purified of what they saw as superstitious ceremonies, false theology, corrupt priests and religious lukewarmness. The name 'Puritan' comes from their desire to purify - the church. They saw in John Calvin's city of Geneva and in the English-language Bible a divine ordering of church and state. They saw the Bible, not the church, as the basic authority for religion, and they believed in the priesthood of all believers.

The Puritans continued to be dissatisfied when James I began his reign in 1603. During James' reign, a significant event took place: the King James Bible was published in 1611. This was the Bible generally used by Friends. It wasn't the first Bible printed in English, but it was the most important one to that time.

During the final year of James' reign, in 1624, George Fox was born at Fenny Drayton, in Leicestershire, England. His parents were Puritans, and righteous people, as Fox describes them in his *Journal*. Most of the other first generation leaders of Friends were also born during James' rule, and grew up during the reign of his successor, Charles I.

Charles I started to rule in 1625, and continued the policy of his father in supporting strong central authority over the church and a highly ceremonial form of worship. Some Puritans decided to give up their hope of setting up a

purified national church in England. They were able to get a charter for Massachusetts in 1629, and at least 20,000 Puritans crossed the Atlantic to live in a colony where Puritanism was the sole state religion. The Boston Puritans were intolerant of religious dissent, and around 1660, hanged four Quakers....

Charles I made himself extremely unpopular through his taxation measures, his arbitrary rule without Parliament, and his church policy. Around 1640, English merchants, Parliament, the Scots and the Irish united in opposition; most supporters of the opposition were Puritans. A Civil War resulted, which was won about 1645 by the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell.

After about 1640, there was increasing freedom in England for sects and congregations which did not accept the Anglican (or Church of England) pattern of worship. Baptists, Independents (also called Congregationalists) and others flourished; so did groups of Seekers, who had rejected all outward sacraments and clergy and waited for God at their meetings in silent worship. In addition there were Ranters and Familists, who placed inner freedom above ethics.

It was in this rich environment of many varieties of religious seeking and finding that Quakers got their start. The vast majority of early Quaker leaders had English Puritan backgrounds. None were Catholics, and none came directly from the Church of England. Many had tried out different Protestant congregations before joining Friends.

Some of the future Quaker leaders, including James Nayler, Edward Burrough and William Dewsbury, served in Cromwell's Puritan army. Cromwell's army was a hotbed of religious ferment, and Nayler became a popular preacher there.

Roots in Anabaptism

The Puritan roots of Quakerism are easier to trace than Quakerism's other major historical roots - those in Anabaptism. Just as 'Puritan' is a general term that includes a diversity of theologies and practices, so is 'Anabaptist.' The word 'Anabaptist' refers to that group of Reformation Christians who believed that the church was a fellowship created by the Holy Spirit of people who had come into membership as adults by their own choice. They believed in adult baptism of believers, and thus required that people who had been baptized as children be baptized over again as adults. Because of their belief that baptism must be voluntary, they strongly opposed coercion by the state in religious matters.

Anabaptists saw themselves as a church gathered by the Spirit and made up of people fully committed to obedience to the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount. The main Anabaptist tradition believed in nonviolence and freedom of conscience. There was a strong corporate discipline maintained to help people remain faithful in a world that was viewed as sinful. Jesus had been faithful, loving and nonviolent, and had suffered and died a martyr's death, and Anabaptists were called to follow.

Some Anabaptists, such as Hans Denck (born about 1500), while valuing the Bible, held the then quite radical view that salvation is not bound to it; what is essential is the inner grace of regeneration, the living Word of God that transforms a person to the good. This comes close to Friends' beliefs a century and a half later.

Some Anabaptists came to feel uncomfortable with ceremonies, and sat in silent contemplation. This pattern of worship is similar to that of the Seekers in England, who were among the first attracted by George Fox's message.

While it is more difficult to trace direct links between early Friends and Anabaptists than it is between Friends and Puritans, connections exist nonetheless. Elizabeth tried to root out Anabaptism in England during her reign, but it seems clear that Anabaptist beliefs were not destroyed but rather expressed more quietly. George Fox moved among the English Baptists while a young seeker, and there were visits between these Baptists and the Anabaptists on the European continent. In addition, some Puritans appear to have been influenced by Anabaptism, and a merging of perspectives occurred.

– From *Quakerism 101* by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (pp.10-15)