

21st Century Quakerism: Finding the Truth – Session 2 Outline

May 6, 2018

1. *The Quaker Way*, Chapter 1 – Finding the Truth

We will be following the material and narrative as presented by Ambler. Remember, though, that Ambler's account is by no means comprehensive of the Quaker Experience. Also, because these experiences and what he is explaining about them are universal in nature, there are valid examples from other spiritual and non-spiritual traditions.

- Chapter 1 gets to the core of Quakerism and gives a very basic introduction to it.
- Ambler goes into considerable depth in explaining the spiritual experiences of Fox and the Early Quakers.
- Because Quakerism is experiential, we are going to try to experience it. Although this is a tall order, Fox found that he was able to guide people to that experience. We might as well try.

What is Truth?

There are two complementary sorts of truth that need not contradict each other:

- Scientific Truth – objective, provable, facts, fundamental to our way of life
- Personal Truth – direct, intimate, about ourselves, our experience of life, our relationship with others, and our spirituality

Exercise 1: Sharing of personal truths

- Ambler uses the example of experience elicited by movies or novels. It could also be sunset or something in nature, or others. Try to recollect a time when you were “*moved*” by something. Share (i.e., *A Christmas Carol* example).
- Let's try again. This time try to recollect a time when you just “*knew something*” or when you received guidance, maybe to do something or not do something, and you didn't know where it was coming from. Share (i.e., airplanes, Mother Teresa example).
 - Note: The information received can be difficult to trust, right?
- Has anyone had *mystical, spiritual experience* they would like to share where they felt they were, for lack of a better phrase, outside of their “normal” experience of life? Share.

2. **Quaker Roots** – Handout 2.1 on the Protestant Reformation & the Anabaptists

Handout 2.1 gives you a quick summary of additional background information about the history of the time Quakerism arose. Here are some key points:

- “Quakerism arose in a time of major religious ferment. Spiritual questions were discussed with the intensity of conviction given to matters such as abortion today.”
- Quakerism emerged as part of the Protestant Reformation (begun in 1517 in Germany), and is also an offshoot of Anabaptism (begun in 1525 in Switzerland).

Protestant Reformation

We talked last month about the Protestant Reformation. The handout gives more detail about how the Reformation played out in England. It lists the changes each successive Monarch made. There was no separation of Church and State. The Church of England and The Monarch were intertwined.

- Then we get to Charles I, “whose reign began in 1625 was very unpopular. His church policy was very unpopular. Puritans got a charter and 20,000 moved to Massachusetts in 1629. In addition to Church policy being unpopular, Charles I's tax policy and arbitrary rule without Parliament were also unpopular. A Civil War resulted which was won in 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 (Church of England) pattern of worship.”
- The majority of early Quaker leaders had English Puritan background. None were Catholics, and none came directly from the Church of England. Many had tried out different Protestant congregations before joining Friends.

Anabaptism

- “‘Anabaptist’ refers to that group of Reformation Christians who believed that the church was a fellowship created by the Holy Spirit who came into membership as adults by their own choice.”
- They insisted on Adult Baptism—hence the derogatory name *ana-* (“again”) *baptists*, since they argued that people baptized as infants needed to be baptized again.
- “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.”
- Some held the quite radical belief that while valuing the bible held the view that salvation was not tied to it. What is essential is the inner grace of regeneration. The Living Word that transforms a person to the good.
- Some came to feel uncomfortable with ceremony and sat in silent contemplation.

We can see both influences, Protestants and Anabaptists in Early Quakerism.

- At this time there was growing distrust of the Authority of State and Church, and much religious and political turmoil. The Church/State wasn’t meeting the needs of the people. There was something else they were experiencing.
- *The teaching of the time, after all, was almost entirely based on the Bible, which was regarded as the one sure source of the truth that people most deeply sought. The preachers and teachers were merely interpreters of “God’s Word.” But that claim...was already beginning to wear thin. The preachers and politicians had obviously not found a truth that could serve the national interest, either politically or religiously. – Ambler (16)*
- In addition, with translations of the Latin Bible, such as Luther’s German Bible in 1522 and the 1611 translation into English ordered by King James, people could read or have others read the Bible to them in their own languages. They began to interpret and to debate the meaning of Bible books and passages for themselves, instead of relying on the clergy who could read Latin.
- Another thing that Ambler alludes to briefly that eroded the Church’s ability to tell people the way it are is the impact of Copernicus. In 1543, shortly before his death, Copernicus published his findings that the Sun, not the Earth, is not the center of the known universe. This is the event that marks the beginning of the scientific revolution. Now science, not idealism, not belief, not the church or the philosopher, will tell us what the nature of reality is.
- *Those who were disillusioned with the teaching of their time could recognize that they must have had some rudimentary knowledge of what they were looking at for otherwise they wouldn’t have realized that the official teaching had missed it or muffled it. Something in their experience enabled them to see what was right and appropriate. – Ambler (17)*
- This is the environment that George Fox lived in.

Discussion

Is anyone seeing parallels between what was happening in the 17th Century and now?

- *I listened to the stories from the Bible as read and interpreted by my teachers and the pastor and knew that there was a kernel of the truth, but the real truth, the underlying truth of the story that I needed to have confirmed for me, was never spoken. The Bible as written and selected by the church for reading by the masses did not contain the truth that I longed to find. I had no idea what it was that I needed to find, but I knew instinctively that I would not find it in organized religion.*
 – Linda M. Moore, *Memories of Magdalene* (2009), writing about childhood in 1950s middle class America
- "So close but not right."

BREAK

3. Fox's Awakening – Handout 2.2 on George Fox

"[George Fox] wanted desperately to find the reality he could trust to give him a sense of who he was and what he was to do" – Ambler (19)

- Point out how much George struggled and how he labored. He suffered extreme depression, spent time alone, went back to the Bible over and over.
- Note: I suspect that in 17th Century England, the Bible was the only self-help book available. He sought out preachers and priests. It was when he gave up, when nothing external had been able to help him, that he had the experience. (18)

As I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people, for I saw that there were 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, no could tell me what to do; then, O then I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition'. When I heard it, my heart did leap for joy....Jesus Christ....enlightens, and gives grace, faith and power. Thus when God doth work, who shall let (stop) it? This I knew experimentally [that is, experientially].

– George Fox, *Autobiography* (1694)

This is the beginning, right? But then what?

Some things we know:

- Fox continued to experience intermittent depression. So it wasn't a one and done. He wasn't magically transformed. But now he knew that there was something else, that "he was upheld by the Spirit" because he had experienced it.
- With practice entering the silence, the spirit, the divine, the Christ within, the light, whatever we call it showed him more. It enlightened him. He had "openings." He grew in the Spirit.
- "As he returned to the inner silence again and again, he was able to discern *how* the voice spoke to him and *how* it enlightened him". (21) This will be different for different people, different for the same person at different times.
 - The "clairs" (clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairsentience, and claircognizance—*clair* meaning clear: clear seeing, clear hearing, clear feeling/sensing, clear knowing) and ordinary experiences.
- * It was a process for Fox and Early Quakers, and it continues to be a process for us today.

*** **What didn't happen:** Fox did not define the experience, explain what it meant, or create a belief system. He was led to guide others to the same experience.

- Early friends have many different words to describe their experience of it.
- The way I see this, it is as if the phenomenon is the same but the individual experiences of it differ.
- Remember the observation from Session 1 that language is twice removed from experience (language attempts to describe concepts which attempt to describe experience).

Quakerism doesn't have a creed or dogma. However we find here two ideas which are so central to Quakerism that they are generally accepted by most Friends.

- **There is "that of God" in every person.** It is universal. There is a quote from William Penn which I am paraphrasing: "When the Christian, the Jew, and the Turk (Muslim) remove their masks, they will see that they are one." Today we may say regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, or sexual orientation.
 - Gail's comment: I have never seen or heard "that of God" defined.
 - Mike's comment: Modern folks may misunderstand what "that" refers to in the phrase "that of God." For the Friends, the phrase meant that all human beings are created "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:27), that all have *the same* divine presence within them.
- **Direct and continual revelation:** The light, the Divine, etc. communicates with us directly and it is present continuously. Whether we access it continuously is another matter. God didn't stop talking 2,000 years ago. And, this becomes part of the process, right?

Quotes from Ambler:

- *He was being told to listen to something deeper with him that could communicate the whole truth that he desired to know, but it would do this, not by giving him just another set of word, but by enabling him to see. It enlightens' he says confidently. It was making him aware of the reality of his life, which had previously been covered by verbal description. (19)*
- *It was not his normal self that was talking, not his reason or his imagination. (19)*
- *He could only think that this inner self or spirit was Jesus Christ himself, the one whom the Bible describes as the very word and spirit of God. (19)*

This was George's experience. Your experience, although pointing to the same thing, may be experienced in a different context. Example.

Silent Waiting

Fox urged people to give up their reliance on books and the people who tried to interpret them and to turn instead to a source of insight and understanding inside them. (21)

- It meant giving up thought and imagination for at least this special time of meditation, for these too were governed by words and images and would inevitably distract from the direct experience they needed. (21)
- Fox discovered that by quieting the mind and feelings, and entering into the silence, he could experience this deeper awareness.
- He closed his eyes and waited for the truth and a light would show up. (21)

Exercise 2: Experiment with silent waiting

- Sounds Easy, Right?
- Let's try. With full awareness that this was a process for Fox. It wasn't a one and done.
- I am aware that this may be a new experience to many but, nonetheless, let's try and see what happens. For me, entering into the silence is *beneath and behind*.
 - Beneath my thoughts and behind my heart to a place of stillness.
 - "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)
 - To a place of pure awareness and I try to stay there.
- What was that experience like?
- What happened in the silence?

4. Pretensions of the Ego

Chances are that silent waiting wasn't that easy, that something other than experiencing the light happened? Something got in the way?

Early Friends called this *self-will*, the tendency of the self to assert itself. Today we would probably call it the *ego*. Where to start with the ego?

- Ego is our self as we think of our self, our sense of identity. Who we think we are, who we present to the world.
- *We need a sense of self, of course, in order to function at all. But we do not know ourselves thoroughly, so any self-image we devise—or take over from others—will be highly selective.... The danger is...that we identify with the image, this flat, two-dimensional picture. We say, and think, this is the real me. But it is not, of course. It is a pretension, fiction, in so far as we identify with it. It has to be maintained against the grain of reality. – Ambler (24)*
- We could spend a long time discussing the ego, what it is, what it isn't, how it operates, dynamics, etc., but will stick with how it is explained by Ambler: that just as our experience of the Inner Light is different, our experience with our egos is different.
- For our purpose the key is to recognize when our ego is interfering with our awareness, and this recognition is a process.
- I know or see or get glimpses of how my ego interferes with this awareness, but I can't say how it happens for anyone else.

Early Friends weren't the first to recognize this self as a problem. However, the Quaker answer was very different and derived from their discovery of what happened in silent waiting.

- *The self was indeed stubborn, but its assertiveness was due to a profound misunderstanding. The self thinks it is alone and needs to fight its corner. But this is an illusion created by anxiety. The self, that is the true self, is in fact connected with others, and indeed with the whole creation and its mysterious origins with God. But it cannot see this because it has identified with an image, an idea. (26)*
- It is the idea of ourselves which keeps us separate.
- "The experience of opening up to the truth can be painful, just because we are so attached to the way we normally think of ourselves." (27) Our ego keeps us safe.
- The practice of silent waiting remains the core of the Quaker way because it lets us see beyond the limits of words. As we become silent and wordless, even in our thoughts, two things happen: the assertive self

begins to subside, *and* "another kind of awareness will arise, quite different from our normal wordy ideas."
(22)

A quote from someone who is not a Quaker, showing the universality of the idea:

It is possible to go on this journey only when there is the light which comes through the understanding of yourself, and that light cannot be given to you by another; No Master, no guru can give it to you, now will you find it in the Gita or any other book. You have to find that light within yourself and this inquiry is hard work. No one can lead you, no one can teach you how to inquire into yourself. One can point out such inquiry is essential, but the actual process of inquiring must begin with your own self-observation.

– Jiddu Krishnamurti,

Bombay, 4th Public Talk, February 20, 1957

<http://jiddu-krishnamurti.net/en/1957/1957-02-20-jiddu-krishnamurti-4th-public-talk>

5. Discussion

6. Wrap-up & Homework

- Set date for next session – June 3, 2018
- Homework:
 - Try 5-10 minutes of silent waiting practice each day.
 - Read Chapter 2 of *The Quaker Way*.
 - Read Handout 3.1 on the Light Within.