Quakers

A woman preaches before an assembly of Quakers in London in 1723.

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

Founded officially in England in 1668 by George Fox (1624-1691), Quakerism has long been known for its progressive stance on many political issues, including abolitionism, women's rights, and pacificism, as well as its relative tolerance of homosexuality and gay and lesbian identity.

The official name for the Quaker religion is the Religious Society of Friends. The term Quaker was originally a derogatory word that described the unusual manner in which Quakers worshipped.

It was first used in 1650 by an English judge at the trial of George Fox. As Fox explains, he "first called us Quakers because we bid them tremble at the word of God." Friends--as Quakers call themselves--and detractors alike saw the trembling they experienced in worship as a sort of quaking, hence the name Quaker.

Quaker religious services are called meetings and grew out of a resistance to the strict hierarchy and elaborate rituals of the Church of England. Believing in simplicity and the possibility of spiritual revelation in the contemporary world, Quakers encourage all members of its religious society to minister to each other; thus, traditional Quaker worship lacks ordained ministers or priests.

Social Activism

Throughout their history, in both England and America, Quakers have been active in socially progressive movements and the struggle for equality. As Margaret Hope Bacon writes, Quakers believe that "there is an element of God in everyone," and that every human being is "worthy of respect, and each has within a seed which will illuminate the conscience and foster spiritual growth."

This reverence for the divine in everyone has meant that Quakers were among the most fervent abolitionists and supporters of equal rights for women. Interestingly, four of the five women who led the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 were Quaker women, including Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Even though it would be misleading to label these women by the modern term lesbian, their commitment to women both politically and personally, reflect a same-sex orientation.

Quakers and Homosexuality

The Quaker history of social activism and protecting human rights has undoubtedly influenced their attitude toward homosexuality. In 1945, the Quaker Readjustment Center was opened in New York City. According to Steve Hogan and Lee Hudson, this center was the "first social welfare agency for gay men and lesbians in the United States."

In 1963, British Quaker Alastair Heron prepared an essay that grappled with the Quaker position on homosexuality. In "Towards a Christian View of Sex," he presents an even-handed discussion of homosexuality. He writes, "One should no more deplore homosexuality than left-handedness."

Although this essay encourages tolerance of homosexuality in general, it maintains a Christian perspective on sex more generally, maintaining, "One must disapprove that promiscuity and the selfishness, the utter lack of any real affection, which is the stamp of so many adult relationships, heterosexual as well as homosexual."

Arguing that it is in marriage that "sexual impulses have their greatest opportunity for joyful and creative expression," Heron implicitly extends this possibility to gay men and lesbians. In a way, his tolerance of homosexuality and his insistence on holding gay men and lesbians to the same moral standard as heterosexuals reflect certain Quaker attitudes that has led to some meetings sanctioning same-sex unions.

In 1972, gay and lesbian Quakers and their supporters formed Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns as an educational and social group. A number of local Quaker meeting houses have subsequently sponsored glbtq groups, but given the democratic nature of the Quaker religion, each meeting house must collectively decide how supportive it will be of gay and lesbian issues. Thus, some Quaker meetings bless same-sex unions and lobby for glbtq equality, while others do not.

The American Divide

As Quakerism has evolved over the past three hundred years, it has split into numerous sub-groups. In the United States, the Society of Friends is a relatively small, but influential denomination, divided roughly into two types--orthodox and conservative.

Orthodox Friends, also known as evangelical Quakers, more closely resemble other fundamentalist Christian sects. This branch of Quakerism grew out of the evangelical movements of the nineteenth century, and its practitioners view the Bible as the literal word of God. They also worship more traditionally, or as Quakers refer to it, they believe in programmed worship with a pastor leading the congregation through the service.

Conservative, or liberal, Quakers adhere to earlier versions of Quakerism, believing that the Inner Light shines in every human being and that unprogrammed worship--gathering silently together, until one friend feels the spirit of God move him or her to share testimony--allows Quakers to experience and share this light with their peers. In the twentieth century they have also grown to view the Bible much less literally than their orthodox counterparts and stress the potential divinity in each person over the dominant narrative of Christ.

These differences help account for the diversity of opinion in the American Quaker community about homosexuality. Evangelical Quakers in the United States and around the world resemble other more conservative religions in their view that homosexuality should not be accepted nor should same-sex unions be celebrated. For example, in 1992, the Friends Church Southwest Yearly Meeting issued a statement declaring, "We reject and utterly oppose homosexual activity, especially the 'blessing' of same sex unions, as sinful and displeasing to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

In contrast, conservative Quaker communities have extended welcome and acceptance to gay men and lesbians. Many Quaker meetings have passed resolutions in favor of equal rights for glbtq people, including recognition of same-sex unions. As early as 1986, for example, the Beacon Hill, Massachusetts Meeting affirmed "the goodness of committed, loving relationships and offers recognition and support to those who share this ideal and desire to enter into a permanent relationship based upon it . . . . The same loving care and consideration should be given to both same-sex and heterosexual applicants as outlined in Faith and Practice."

Overall, Quakers who worship in the tradition of the original Quakers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have responded to homosexuality with compassion and sometimes complete acceptance.

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