

THE QUAKER MYSTICAL MODEL

What can the Society of Friends teach the society of Saints?

BY MOYNE OVIATT

THROUGHOUT Christianity different groups and individuals have sought God through an internal process known as mysticism. The mystic yearned for direct communication with the divine, believing that a spiritual union with God was possible. Some mystics attempted to commune with God in a group setting, as did the Gnostics in the first and second centuries after Christ.¹ Most often, however, mystics were solitary individuals who felt a spiritual call and looked for an individual path to God apart from the religious forms of their day. Though they may have been recognized and even admired by their fellow Christians, they were definitely seen as a different breed from the "ordinary Christian." St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, and dozens of other devout mystics found a place in religious history, but few chose to follow their lead. Nor did these mystics seek to direct others in their footsteps, though some wrote about their own divine experiences.

In contrast, during the mid-seventeenth century a group of Christian mystics appeared who desired to make that inward road a viable path for Christians in general. They took the individual mystical experience and made it a group process.

The Society of Religious Friends, or Quakers, as they later came to be known, began with the mystical experience of one teenage boy. In a story that may have a familiar ring to Mormons, a teenager named George Fox became dissatisfied with the religious teachings and practices of his day, believing that Christians had fallen away from the concepts originally taught by Jesus. He sought enlightenment through prayer about his religious confusion. While praying one day, he heard a heavenly voice that said, "There is one, even Jesus Christ, who can speak to your condition."² Fox was elated and astonished to find that an individual could receive revelation directly from God without the church acting as an intermediary. He began to communicate his experience to others and soon found a receptive group of fellow seekers. Since 1649 the Quakers have been practicing and refining their special form of silent congregational meditation, which they call "waiting upon the Lord."

As one author notes, "Quakers are not so much concerned with theology and doctrine as they are with a unique method of worship."³ However, there are a few theological guiding principles that shape their practice. The first and chief among these is the belief that the Light of Christ is given to every person that enters the world. This is identified variously as Inward Light, Christ Within, Light Within, the Wisdom, Truth's Voice, the Vine, the Bread of Life, the Witness of God, and other symbolic associations all explaining the same divine Spirit.

The second principle is that individuals find this light

within themselves by silent introspection rather than by following a specific religious leader or practice, again emphasizing method over doctrine. Quakers do accept the Bible and its teachings, but feel the spirit and intent is more vital than the exactness of translation.

The third principle is that the Inward Light brings unity of all people. The unity and equality with one's fellow beings is essential to the Quaker understanding of God. One prominent Quaker writer put it this way: "The mysticism of Quakers is directed both toward God and toward the group. The vertical relation to God and the horizontal relation to man are like two coordinates used to plot a curve; without both the position of the curve could not be determined."⁴ Because Quakers feel that in the presence of Divine Light there is unity among men, they have developed a strong doctrine of equality among people, social service to the community, and pacifism and work for world peace. During the American Civil War, for example, they were leaders in the abolition of slavery, and have always been conscientious objectors in times of war. For three hundred years they have emphasized equality between the sexes, and women have an equal voice in worship and religious leadership.⁵

Quaker worship consists primarily of waiting for the Lord in silence. No prayers, hymns, scripture reading, sacrament or communion, sermons, or programs of any kind are part of their meetings for worship. Meetings begin when everyone arrives and sits together in silent meditation. No signal indicates the beginning of a worship meeting. In fact, worship does not begin when meetings begin, but rather when each individual "centers down" or "digs deep," as Quakers call it, and begins to center his attention on the Inward Light. The advice to "dig deep" refers to the parable of Jesus about two houses, one built on sand, the other on rock. The rock was reached by digging deep in order to find a truth which cannot be shaken by surface storms (Luke 6:48).⁶

Thus, each individual is responsible for the quality of his or her own worship experience and none can depend on an interesting speaker or religious music to lift one's soul to the Divine. By the same token, each person is expected to contribute to the quality of the meeting by adding his own attentive spirit of worship to the meeting. Quakers believe that collective silent worship is far more powerful than individual meditation. Just as the light of many candles increases the brightness and heat in a room, so the collective attention to the spiritual Inward Light increases the intensity of the spiritual environment.

There is no exact method prescribed for centering down on the Divine Light during a meeting of worship. It is as individual as the people present and as earlier explained occurs in silence, giving each one the opportunity to follow one's own inner guide. The process is first one of detachment from the everyday, trivial, temporal affairs of life. This might be done by deliberately focusing on some inward symbol, perhaps a

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verse of scripture (such as the Beatitudes), a phrase of poetry, or an image of an event in the life of Christ. Some people find an imagined visual image a better focus; some prefer repeating a phrase to clear the mind. After a time such focused attention may lead one to a stage of self-examination or prayer.

This stage of meditation is known as "purgation." During this stage the worshipper focuses on examining his life and determining what areas need to be improved to bring him closer to God and more receptive of the Inner Light. In this regard the Quakers have a set of "queries" or questions that they may read at home or that are occasionally read in a meeting. These questions are designed to help the worshipper examine his life in the areas of worship, community service, education of himself and his family, human brotherhood, and unity in spirit. Some sample questions are: "What place do you make in your daily life for inward retirement and communion with the Divine Spirit? Do you take part in trying to be an instrument of reconciliation between individuals, groups, and nations? Are your meetings a source of strength and guidance for daily Christian living? What are you doing to be aware of other people's needs and to give help accordingly? To understand and remove the causes of social evils?"⁷

The process of purgation is frequently followed by an attitude of prayer and worshipful expectancy or adoration. Such prayer may or may not be in words. At this stage, called "illumination," there may be an articulated insight into some spiritual truth not understood before, a renewed sensitivity to the spiritual in life, or a sense of new intelligence.

The process of illumination may give way to a feeling of peace, enlightenment, or love that is described as "union." In other mystic traditions this is thought of as union with God, but with Quakers it is equally important to experience a sense of union with one's fellow beings. An openness both to God and others as well as a sense of wonder and heightened spiritual sensitivity are commonly expressed results of this "centering down" experience.⁸

The steps described above may occur in any order or even simultaneously; it is not intended that they follow a strict sequence. In addition to this silent worship in a group worship meeting, Quakers are expected to have times of daily meditation and prayer alone and with their families. Daily reading of the Bible is also encouraged.

Quaker worship, however, is not always silent and certainly not solitary. In assembling for worship there is a recognition that some are further advanced in their search than others. Part of the purpose for meeting together is to encourage one another along that inward road, and "for those who are further advanced to help those who have not gone so far."⁹

In this regard, Quakers also engage in what they call "vocal ministry." During silent worship when any person present feels that the Spirit Within has given an individual message that would be of benefit to the group as a whole, he simply delivers the message. It may be as simple as a prayer on behalf of the community of worshippers, or a comment on any religious topic. The purpose is not to preach, exhort, or explain scriptures, but rather to lend strength, encouragement, or insight to others present and to act as an instrument for God in delivering his message. One is not to deliver

his own message, but to be a conduit of God's Spirit. In that way, speaking in Quaker meeting is different from the strictly private and personal expressions of faith given in Mormon testimony meetings. However, Quaker services and Mormon testimony meetings are similar in that in both speaking is voluntary, spontaneous, and occurs in response to the promptings of an inward Spirit, rather than any prearranged program. It has been my experience that each vocal ministry in Quaker meetings is brief and followed by long periods of silence before anyone else speaks. These silences give the others an opportunity to absorb and contemplate the message delivered. It is not unusual for only one person to speak briefly during the entire hour of a Quaker worship meeting.

The simplicity and spontaneity of Quaker worship makes each meeting unique, though the method is identical in each.

It seems to me that we Mormons can learn some lessons from the Quaker philosophy and method of worship. One such lesson is the value of silence. Much inward, spiritual activity can take place when nothing of an outward visual or auditory nature is apparent. Silence in testimony meeting does not necessarily mean that "this precious time is going to waste" as members sometimes comment.

A second lesson is the importance of simplicity. High tech or high entertainment is not the essence of spirituality. Bringing simplicity to our lives and our methods of worship may be as conducive to spiritual development as handouts, visual aids, and multimedia presentations.

Quaker philosophy can also teach us about equality and brotherhood among people. As the Church becomes more and more international, and the gospel net gathers more of every kind, we need to heighten our appreciation of differences, and realize that differences need not be divisive.

A final lesson is that of individual responsibility for our spiritual lives. If the kingdom of heaven is within, then our search for God both begins and finally concludes with ourselves. Others may aid, support, and encourage along the way, and the institutional Church may provide ordinances for salvation. But in the end, the kind of people we are, the kind of life we want to live, and the kind of relationship we develop with God depends on us. That makes the inward search for meaning and individual spiritual development not just important, but vital.

Notes

1. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1978).
2. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1972), p. 262.
3. Howard Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), p. xiii.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
5. Rosemary Ruether, and Eleanor McLaughlin, eds., *Women of Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 153-81.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
7. *Queries* (N.p.: Pacific Yearly Meeting of Religious Society of Friends, 1960).
8. *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1955), chap. 4.
9. Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years*, p. 60.