

The Light Within and its Religious Implications

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Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life.

Thomas R. Kelly, 1941

Introduction

The Society of Friends encompasses a wide variety of beliefs and perspectives, but perhaps the most distinctively Quaker religious concept is that of the *Light Within*. Also frequently called the “Spirit” or “that of God in everyone,” the Light is a Divine presence within each of us: a manifestation of God in all people. Identified by early Friends as the living Spirit of Christ, the Light serves as a moral guide, a comfort in times of need, a spur to action, and the Seed from which inward spiritual transformation can grow.

Light is that which makes visible, and the first function of the Light Within is to make clear to us our true spiritual nature, laying bare what we may have hidden from ourselves, whether good or bad, and showing us ourselves as we really are. For some, this may mean seeing one’s true worth after years of imagined worthlessness; for others, it may mean recognizing for the first time one’s own capacity for evil. For all, gaining a more honest and complete understanding of oneself is a crucial step in spiritual growth.

By this light it hath pleased the Lord to give me the distinction of things inwardly in my own heart. The Lord hath shewn me by it evil and good in my own heart, and taught me to chuse the good, and refuse the evil. So that as my eye hath been turned to this light, and kept to this light, I have known and walked in the way of life; for the power which hath appeared in this light, hath created me anew, made me a child of light, and taught and caused me to walk in this light, as God is in the light.

Isaac Penington, 1681

The Light not only clarifies our own inward nature, but also helps us discern how to live our lives. The Light informs and excites the conscience, turning us away from what we know is wrong, and toward what is right and true and just. The Light is the source of authentic “concerns” — the persistent, growing sense we sometimes feel that some moral or spiritual issue requires our attention and discernment; and of authentic “leadings” — the sense that one is impelled by Divine will toward a particular course of action.

We can just let go and contemplate the painful reality as the Light reveals it to us, turning it slowly around the way a child holds a glittering pebble up in the light. In this more expansive, less judgmental state of consciousness we may gradually

become aware of new dimensions, or causes, or outcomes of the problem as we continue to hold it in the Light.

William Taber, 1992

The Light can be unsettling but is ultimately a source of inward peace and comfort, both in the assurance it provides that God is always with us, and in the clear conscience it brings to those who do what they know inwardly to be right. Friends have a special calling to build peace in the world; but true peace is rarely built by those who are dominated by turmoil in themselves. Those who would bring peace out to others must find it also within. It is by turning to this inward source of reconciliation and forgiveness that we find the foundation for outward action.

This I told them was their first step to peace, even to stand still in the light...

George Fox, recounting events of 1652

Discerning the Light

Attending to the Light Within requires effort, and a careful discernment of what in ourselves is truly of the Divine Spirit, and what instead is simply the expression of our own egos, desires, or assumptions. The Light endows all people with the capacity to perceive and act in accord with what God would have us do, but our exercise of that capacity is frequently imperfect.

The experience of Friends has been that the Light is most reliably recognized from a state of inward calm and quiet. It is for this reason that in our meetings for worship, including our business meetings, we try to empty our minds and put aside anything which might mask or distract us from our perception of the Light: the stresses and worries of daily life, the bitterness of resentment or anger, the diversion of idle fantasy, or whatever else might so fully occupy our thoughts as to crowd out what we most need to see. We should hesitate to accept as the Light's guidance any impulse which does not persist as these things are set aside.

Give over thine own willing; give over thine own running; give over thine own desiring to know or to be any thing, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee, and be in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that, and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of life, which is his portion.

Isaac Penington, 1661

Discerning the Light is most effective when pursued communally. Not everyone is led to the same actions, and we cannot expect that what the Light makes clear to one person will always be made clear to everyone; but checking one's perceptions against the understanding of a broader spiritual community provides an invaluable anchor and partial safeguard against a false sense of Divine leading. The Light does not contradict itself; when Friends' understandings of what the Light requires are not just different but incompatible, this is a sign that more discernment is needed.

Since there is but one Light and one Truth, if the Light of Truth be faithfully followed, unity will result. "The Light itself," says Thomas Story, "is not divided, but one and the same entire, undivided Being continually." The nearer the

members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another, just as the spokes of a wheel approach one another as they near the center.

Howard Brinton, 1952

Friends have often found that living as the Light leads us requires personal sacrifice. Early Friends faced severe persecution for their beliefs, and even in modern times Friends have frequently found themselves in confrontation with the state or other powerful interests. Friends who face no such dangers may still find that the lit path conflicts with their natural desires to pursue comfort, pleasure, wealth, or prestige. Sacrifice by its nature involves hardship, but sacrifices to which one feels deeply called can also be spiritually enriching.

The natural Mind is active about the Things of this Life; and, in this natural Activity, Business is proposed, and a Will in us to go forward in it. As long as this natural Will remains unsubjected, so long there remains an Obstruction against the Clearness of divine Light operating in us; but when we love God with all our Heart, and with all our Strength then in this Love, we love our Neighbours as ourselves; and a Tenderness of Heart is felt toward all People...

John Woolman, 1772

Friends should not feel troubled if the Light is difficult to discern, or if they do not feel clearly led to any particular course of action. Our first responsibility is simply to wait and to listen. No more can be asked than a sincere effort to discover and live out what one knows inwardly to be right. Even those most experienced in cultivating the spiritual life report long periods of drought; our part is to keep the ground prepared so that the Seed may sprout in its own time.

The first gleam of light, ‘the first cold light of morning’ which gave promise of day with its noontide glories, dawned on me one day at Meeting, when I had been meditating on my state in great depression. I seemed to hear the words articulated in my spirit, ‘Live up to the light thou hast; and more will be granted thee.’

Caroline Fox, 1841

A Religion of First-Hand Experience

A religion based on discerning and responding to the Divine Light within each of us must be a religion of first-hand personal experience. Friends have long held that religion known only through accounts in books, intellectual systems of theology, the mediation of clergy, or in any other way than personally and directly leaves out what is most essential in spiritual life and may even displace the necessary work of opening ourselves to the inwardly transformative power of the Spirit.

And then [George Fox] 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? Art thou a child of light, and hast walked in the light, and

what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?’ &c. This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly, we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew again, and cried bitterly; 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, recounting events of 1652

Through much of our history, Friends objected even to the performance of psalms and other hymns, as “singing the condition of David” — that is, as expressing the spiritual state of King David, presumed author of many of the psalms — which would be a poor substitute for discovering and expressing one’s own spiritual state. Few Friends object to hymn singing nowadays, but we continue to recognize the importance of personal authenticity in religious expression, and the danger of putting vicarious religion in the place of real experience.

To say that religion must be known first hand does not mean that hearing the religious perspectives of others is of no profit; on the contrary, this can be of immense value. But the words of others have an effect only to the degree that they strike a respondent chord in ourselves and so lead us to experience something on a personal level. Other people may give a clearer articulation to what we know only dimly in ourselves, or may present it in a new way or from a novel perspective, or may lead us to see elements of our own views as inconsistent with what we know more deeply to be true.

Conversely, in our own religious speech and conduct toward others, we may expect to be helpful only if what we say and do finds an echo in what the Spirit already testifies to them inwardly, or to use George Fox’s phrase, if it “answers that of God” in them.

...be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your life and conduct may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you: then to the Lord God you shall be a sweet savour, and a blessing.

George Fox, 1656

We cannot hope to call forward the Light in others unless our own communication with them flows from the Light in ourselves. Indeed, Quakers have traditionally held that all religious speech, whether ministry or prayer, in meeting for worship or elsewhere, should be under the direct and extemporaneous influence of the Spirit, and not simply recited from memory or composed by the “natural intellect”:

The worship, preaching, praying, and singing, which we plead for, is such as proceedeth from the Spirit of God, and is always accompanied with its influence, being begun by its motion, and carried on by the power and strength thereof; and so is a worship purely spiritual...

Robert Barclay, 1678

Diversity of Belief

Our paramount concerns in religious life are to properly attend to God's Light in ourselves and all people, discern what we are called thereby to do, and respond to that call as led, both as individuals and as a community. A sincere effort in all these things leaves room for a wide variety of theological perspectives. Issues of religious doctrine are of secondary importance at best, and at worst serve as a divisive and harmful distraction from the real business of spiritual engagement and building a more just and peaceful world. Partly for this reason, we do not require assent to any specific list of religious tenets as a condition of membership in the Religious Society of Friends, nor does Illinois Yearly Meeting formally affiliate with any organization which requires such assent.

Humanity and Purity, Bowels and Holiness, they are the pure Religion and undefiled in God's Sight, in his Account; not Creeds but Practice, not Profession tho' of true Words, but Experience and good Living.

William Penn, 1692

Just as faith without works is dead, so too is a merely intellectual belief in religious ideas without the quickening power of the Spirit. Instituting a standard of belief in a religious organization encourages the false view that belief, by itself, has some redemptive or salutary effect. But the Light, properly attended to, effects a far more thoroughgoing and deeper transformation than simply coming to believe a doctrine.

For by our works we must be tried, and not by a profession founded on belief or faith; nor by faith only; for belief never saved the soul, except when it has become an operative belief—till the soul is led to condescend to those things that are pointed out to it by the light, and to work by it and with it...

Elias Hicks, 1826

In any organization in which a confession to specific articles of faith is required, some individuals will inevitably feel pressure to make such a confession, whether they are inwardly convinced of its truth or not. Such requirements tend therefore to undermine the integrity of the members, and to promote dishonesty and hypocrisy. Friends value authenticity above conformity, holding that any expression of religious faith should arise from the operation of God's Spirit within, not from external expectations.

And, dear friends, be faithful in what you know, take heed of making a profession of what you are not, and so you be found dissemblers before the Lord; but keep low in meekness and patience, standing in the will of God in all things...and then you shall be brought into a possession of what you have but had a profession, and find the power of what you had but in words, which is hid from all professions in the world, and is revealed no other way, but by the pure light of God dwelling in you, and you in it.

James Nayler, 1653

Many Friends have felt that some important elements of religious Truth resist formulation in words. Any statement of faith to which Friends were expected to subscribe would therefore provide an incomplete and distorted view of what we really regard as most important.

The deepest spiritual insights are wordless. A Friend called one morning to say that in meditation that morning she had had an overwhelming awareness of the reality of the Inner Self, the God Within. Her voice was filled with awe. The awareness was accompanied by a certainty, an understanding that could not be disputed, yet there were no words with which to express what had transpired....A wordless knowing, an indisputable clarity of understanding — such is the eloquence of the mystical experience. It speaks to something deep within us, and we are never quite the same.

Betty Clegg, 1982

Although there is no specific list of doctrines to which we expect our members to assent, this does not mean that there are no specifically Quaker religious ideas. Far from it: Friends have developed a rich system of Quaker religious thought over a period of more than 350 years, and we encourage participants in our meetings to familiarize themselves with it and consider its principles carefully. Nor can it be said that we regard every conceivable religious idea as an equal expression of the Truth which God reveals in all people. In the clearness process for membership, for example, meetings may consider whether an applicant's views are broadly compatible with the perspective of the meeting community as a whole and of Friends more generally. But the utmost caution must always be exercised not to let a concern for doctrine divert us down a divisive and lifeless path.

Christ and Christianity

Early Quakers understood themselves to be engaging in “primitive Christianity revived” (to use William Penn’s phrase), and through most of our history, Friends have been united in placing the person and teachings of Jesus Christ at the center of their spiritual life. Present-day Friends recognize and value the Christian foundations of Quaker faith, although an overtly Christian perspective is no longer universal among Friends. To varying degrees in our different meetings, many of us draw as heavily from other spiritual traditions as from Christianity, or understand the Light Within and other Quaker religious concepts in ways which are largely independent both of Christianity and of other traditional religions. Not a few of us approach such matters from a primarily or entirely non-theistic perspective. Many also of us are committed Christians—and diverse in our understanding of what that entails.

Yet underlying this diversity is a deeper unity, and a commitment to discerning and following the Light Within. We have found by experience that we reap more spiritual fruit through love and care for one another, through forbearance and forgiveness, through service and community, than we do through a vain attempt at achieving a homogeneous theological position.

It may nevertheless be useful and interesting to Friends of all perspectives to have some familiarity with historic or traditional Quaker thought on Christ — not as a normative standard of

belief, but as an aid to understanding the original motivations for some of our concepts and practices, as a reference point in understanding our current diversity, and as part of the common heritage of the Religious Society of Friends. Many Friends have also found — sometimes to their surprise — that engaging with the perspectives of earlier generations of Friends serves to advance their own spiritual growth, or to significantly alter their understanding of Christianity.

But as I had forsaken 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, Oh! 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.

George Fox, recounting events of 1647

As understood by Fox and other early Friends, Christ is found first and foremost by turning inward. They perceived the Light Within to be the Spirit of Christ, working in and through all people to guide us and redeem us into the life which God would have us live. Present within us at first perhaps only as a small seed, Christ is strengthened in us as we hearken to such guidance, remaking us anew. The voice of Christ within teaches a life of love, forgiveness, humility, and compassion; and turns us away from all that is contrary to such a life.

What is the *sum and substance of the true religion*? Is it not love from a principle of life? Is it not a travel out of the enmity of the creature into the love of God? Doth not the light of life spring in the love, and gather into the love? Doth not Christ, revealed in the heart, and leavening the heart with the favour of life, teach love to enemies, to bear with them in love, to seek them in love, to forgive them in love, to pray for them in love, to wish good to them, and wrestle with God for mercy towards them, even while they are hating and persecuting?

Isaac Penington, 1663

In contrast to many of their Puritan contemporaries, who understood salvation as an external payment of our debts by Christ, early Quakers saw redemption in Christ’s inward work transforming and purifying the spirit.

Here is light, here is life, here is righteousness, here is peace, here is heavenly joy, here is the holy power, springing and bringing forth their fruits, and precious operations and effects in the heart; and here is assurance of the love of God in Christ for ever, and that God will never leave nor forsake that soul which is joined to him, and abides with him in this seed; but it shall be kept by the power of God, through the faith that springs from this seed, unto perfect redemption and salvation.

Isaac Penington, undated

It is not always clear from the writings of seventeenth century Friends how they understood the respective roles of the inward operation of Christ in the spirit and the outward, “historical” crucifixion and resurrection in effecting salvation. This issue became a major point of schism in the 1820’s. In keeping with our general openness to diversity of belief, most of us are now content to regard such questions as matters of individual faith.

Friends and the Bible

Just as we are diverse in the roles we ascribe to Jesus in our spiritual lives, we are diverse also in the ways we use and interpret the Bible. There can be no doubt that to George Fox and the other founders of Quakerism, the Bible was deeply important and influential. Their writings are rich in scriptural allusions, and they clearly took themselves to be advancing the same religion as advocated by scripture, taken as a whole and rightly understood.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that early Friends favored a “Bible-based” religion. Friends have always held that religious belief and practice ought to be based on what God reveals inwardly through the Light. Fox and other Friends claimed that what God taught inwardly could frequently be found also in the testimony of scripture, but it is the Light, not the Bible, which serves as the foundation.

This I saw in the pure openings of the light without the help of any man; neither did I then know where to find it in the scriptures; though afterwards, searching the scriptures, I found it. For I saw in that light and spirit which was before the scriptures were given forth, and which led the holy men of God to give them forth, that all must come to that spirit, if they would know God or Christ, or the scriptures aright, which they that gave them forth were led and taught by.

George Fox, recounting events of 1648

Early Friends believed that the scriptures were written under the guidance of the Light Within, and that therefore there could be no contradiction between scripture, rightly understood, and what the Light reveals to us now. While this may seem to imply that one can “test” apparent revelations by checking whether they are consistent with scripture, Friends have often held that such testing is problematic, because the correct interpretation of scripture — at least for the purposes of spiritual discernment — can itself be reliably garnered only under the guidance of the Light. Without confidence that we are discerning accurately what God reveals inwardly and directly, we can have no confidence in our interpretation of scripture. Indeed, we would have no reason to trust the scriptures at all if not for a respondent spark in ourselves which finds itself echoed in them.

Friends believe that Divine guidance is freely available to all people, to guide our speech and actions. The idea that the scriptures were written under Divine guidance therefore does not accord them a unique status in human history. Revelation continues down to the present day; there can be no closed canon. Many of us feel that other writings, including some from very different religious traditions, express the Light no less than the Bible.

We now recognize that the writings of the Bible reflect to some extent the varying personal experiences and cultural perspectives of its authors; just as our own speech in meeting for worship, though offered under a sense of Divine guidance, may reflect the limitations of personal experience and understanding. The Bible is perhaps all the more useful for expressing a variety of different conceptions of God and the relation between God and humanity, including some from historical and cultural contexts quite far removed from our own. Yet underlying this variety we perceive a deeper unity: a single Spirit that finds expression in many ways.

Quakerism and Other Religious Traditions

Our experience of the divine-human relationship is that it is constant and eternal, and includes every human being at every moment.

Lloyd Lee Wilson, 1993

Friends hold that the Light Within is present in all people, regardless of religious affiliation. Quakers claim no monopoly on religious truth, and we welcome the insights we may gain from other religious traditions.

There is a Principle which is pure, placed in the human Mind, which in different Places or Ages hath had different Names; it is, however, pure, and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of Religion, nor excluded from any, where the Heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes Root and grows, of what Nation soever, they become Brethren in the best Sense of the Expression.

John Woolman, 1760

What is truly important in spiritual life may be found among the adherents of many different outward faiths. This is not to say that all religions are equally true or that all spiritual paths are equally legitimate, for it seems clear that different faiths make different and incompatible claims. But discerning and responding to the Light Within does not require adherence to any particular tradition or organization. In a deeper sense, all those who humbly and sincerely commit themselves to do what they know inwardly to be right are united: on a single path and in a common community, despite all superficial diversity.

The *Humble, Meek, Merciful, Just, Pious* and *Devout* Souls, are every where of one Religion; and when Death has taken off the Mask, they will know one another, though the diverse Liveries they wear here, make them Strangers.

William Penn, 1682

Just as spiritual Truth is not confined to any one outward religion, so neither is any outward religion immune from error, even of the most egregious kinds. History provides innumerable examples of atrocities and crimes committed in the name of religion. Even though Friends are known for our work toward justice, peace and equality, we are far indeed from being able to claim a spotless record. Many of the accomplishments for which Quakers are best known were the result of long efforts by small minorities of Friends who had to labor hard against

resistance from other Quakers. Our attitude to other faiths must be one of openness and humility, and we must be diligent in seeking out and uprooting the seeds of injustice, both in our individual beliefs and practices, and in the institutional structures of the Society of Friends.

I was then carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and heard them blaspheme the name of Christ; at which I was grieved; for His name to me was precious. I was then informed that these heathen were told, that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ; and they said among themselves, ‘if Christ directed them to use us in this sort, then Christ is a cruel tyrant.’

John Woolman, 1772

Rites and Ceremonies, Days and Times

Friends have made an honest effort to take that last step which the Reformation did not take. They have wished to exhibit a genuinely *spiritual* religion.... They have wanted every step and stage of salvation and of worship to be a *living process*. They are afraid of phrases which are supposed to have some *sacred* efficacy. They are anxious not to have officials who belong in a special class and are assumed to have peculiar powers that others lack. They do not recognize places or buildings as having any inherent sanctity. They count only on those operations which are truly ethical and spiritual; that is, those operations which produce in the person *a new spirit and a new power to live by*. The religious life, for them, is witnessed by a new creation. There are no substitutes for life; there is nothing that can take the place of a momentous spiritual event.

Rufus Jones, 1927

For Friends, the essence of spiritual life is to attend diligently to God’s promptings within, and respond as led. In our experience, a faithful response to such leadings will serve the practical goals of cultivating peace, forgiveness, justice, and loving care — in ourselves and in the world. The performance of rites and ceremonies is largely extraneous to such goals, and Friends have generally regarded ceremonial performance as inessential to religious life. Seventeenth century Friends took the unusual step of discontinuing the rites of baptism with water and the Lord’s supper, which had been part of Christian practice from the earliest times. Most Friends today continue to view such ceremonies as separable from, and much less important than, the spiritual realities they represent.

It is perhaps not humanly possible to live a life completely free of ritualized behavior, and from some perspectives Quaker practices such as meeting for worship might be seen as rituals. We do not attempt to eliminate everything in our conduct which serves to mark certain activities as religious. But we keep the level of ceremony low, in order to concentrate on what is truly vital.

Friends have sometimes claimed that to those who experience the spiritual reality which a ceremony symbolizes, the outward form becomes superfluous; and to those who have no such

experience, it is pointless: an empty form. But rituals often seem much more powerful than we would expect of empty forms and superfluities. A well-designed ritual, like well-composed music, can induce a vivid sense of connection with the Divine. This power gives us all the more reason to be cautious about rituals. Authentic connection with the Divine is not simply a feeling, however vivid, but a regeneration of the spirit, bearing real fruits of love, compassion and forgiveness. An artificially induced feeling may or may not have such a regenerative effect; it is important not to let the feeling itself become one's primary goal in spiritual practice.

The whole of life is a sacrament. The worst, the poorest and meanest, of us as well as the bravest and the noblest before our brief day darkens, have broken divine bread. If we believed it wholly, for others as for ourselves, we should have peace. Even now, the measure of our peace is our belief in it, and our forgetfulness of it is the measure of our unrest. To forget it utterly is despair. That the daily bread of human existence, with all its hope and joy, its agony and failure, is broken to men by no blind fate, but by an Eternal Wisdom that is Eternal Love,—this is the underlying faith that saves us from madness. But it is a faith that must be proved, and striven for, and actualised, hour by hour and day by day. We must grip it hard, if we are to recognise God's sacraments as, one by one, they enter into our experience.

May Kendall, 1902

Ceremonies, religious holidays, and visits to places with religious significance can serve as occasions to rejoice in God's grace and bounty, and may invite a deeper connection with the Divine. However, we might be misled in confusing such observances and the emotions that accompany them with the divine encounter itself. True religious experience contributes to inward transformation and its outward expression in how we live our lives.

For most of our history, Friends did not celebrate holidays; and while simple celebrations of Christmas and Easter have now become common, we continue to hold that all days are equally holy in the sight of God. Similarly, while we may feel special attachment to our old meetinghouses and other places associated with our Quaker heritage, we do not regard them as more holy than the world in general, all of which is consecrated to God's purposes.