

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP, AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

LETTER 144

FEBRUARY 2018

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Dear Friends,

A Very Happy New Year to you all! I hope that you have been enjoying the holiday break and the warmer weather.

I wonder how the festive season has been for you? Several of my non-Quaker friends have told of their relief that Christmas is over for another year. I wonder why we subject ourselves to so much tension during December and almost deny ourselves the peace and goodwill that are supposed to be the basis of the celebrations. Of course, someone has to make preparations for the traditional family gatherings, but these days our consumer society seems to go overboard with expectations of extravagance in feasting and giving. Christian and pagan celebrations seem to be at odds with each other. How did they become so intertwined?

The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary has this to say about Christmas:

“Many of the customs now associated with Christmas were taken over from the Roman Saturnalia and from pre-Christian festivals celebrating the winter solstice (21 December).”

Today, society seems to be losing the Christian focus through concentration on excess and gratification. What is the Quaker position in all this? I've tried to show what Friends think about Christmas and Christianity below.

Yours in Friendship,

Ruth Gadgil.

What do Quakers say about Christmas?

Meeting for Worship usually takes place on a Sunday but there is no Quaker religious calendar. Early Friends' rejection of Christmas and Easter as set times of the year was for them an affirmation of the ever present birth, death and resurrection of Christ in their hearts. Indeed many Quakers used to keep their shops open on established religious festivals as a witness to this fact. In the eyes of others however this was sometimes seen as a canny way of earning more money! Nowadays, although this remains the Quaker position, some Quaker Meetings do hold a meeting for worship on Christmas day and also have carol singing. ... Most Quakers worship on a Sunday morning (set time) in a meeting house (set place) but this is for reasons of convenience, not because Sunday is a holier day than the rest of the week.

Harvey Gilman 1988: A light that is shining – an introduction to Quakers. Quaker Home Service, London.

Quakers have said that every meal, every place, every day and season is sacramental.

Catherine Benland 1993: Quaker Faith and Practice in Aotearoa New Zealand 4.24.

The kingdom of Christ, not being a kingdom of this world, is not limited by the restrictions which fetter other societies, political or religious. ... It has no sacred days or seasons, no special sanctuaries, because every time and every place alike are holy.

J.B. Lightfoot, cited by Geoffrey Hubbard 1974 in Quaker by Convincement. Penguin Books Ltd., England.

Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford.

Do you keep yourself informed about the effects your style of living is having on the global economy and environment?

Advices and Queries, Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 1.02.41

Early Friends were tireless in their challenge to the Church and as long as they continued to argue, they were performing taking the Christian tradition seriously. They rejected it, true, but they had to consider it. They had to find reasons for their faith. Their message thus constituted a commentary on the tradition. But early in the 18th century the argument died down and Friends proceeded to the refinement of their own side of the case. The tradition was not so much rejected as ignored.

The first question to answer is, 'What do Quakers believe about belief? Quakers see Christianity not as a collection of doctrines or of traditional observances, but essentially as an experience and as a way of life based on that experience. The main purpose of early Friends in mid-seventeenth century England was to bring the Church back from a Christianity of ideas (which they labelled 'notions') and forms to a living experience expressed in a way of life. They also insisted that the possibility of this experience was open to everyone and not only to an elect, a privileged few. Creeds represent an attempt to formulate and describe experience, while rituals represent an attempt to fix and define the way in which experience is to be communicated. It is easy, fatally easy, to assume that our words are God's word.

William Oates, 1990: "This we can say. Australian Quaker Life, Faith and Thought." 1.65.

... Furthermore, rituals, dogmatic pronouncements and articles of faith, as propounded by the later established churches, actually divert us away from the religious or prayerful life; they take us away from the immediacy and authority of the inner voice. It is in this sense, I think, that religion has become almost a pejorative term, because pseudo-authority or pseudo-religion has replaced or been confused with the essential religious activity of communing with the divine.

Chris Castle, 1999: "This we can say. Australian Quaker Life, Faith and Thought." 1.66.

I do not think Jesus was a Christian: the development of Christian theological thought derives really from the interpretations of Paul and others.

Helen Gould 1992: "This we can say. Australian Quaker Life, Faith and Thought." 1.67.

To me, being a Christian is a particular way of life, not the unquestioning acceptance of a particular system of theology, not belief in the literal truth of the Virgin birth, or the Resurrection and Ascension, but being the kind of person that Jesus wanted his followers to be and doing the things he told them to do ...

Kathleen Lonsdale 1967: Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 20.26.

In my religious quest I have found my association with the Society of Friends of enormous help. For Quakers have always held that their conviction that 'there is that of God in everyone' means that any person, whether a Christian or not, past, present or future, has the capacity to have the kind of experience I have been trying to describe ... If people choose to use this capacity then they will come to know the experience that Quakers have called the 'inward light'. This can happen to everyone, whether or not they are Christians ...

... Pretty well every colour in the theological spectrum is reflected in the views of Friends. There are those whose faith is most sincerely expressed in the traditional language of orthodox Christianity, as well as those who could be fairly described as religious humanists. Even in the Friend who is an orthodox Christian, elements of agnosticism are likely to lurk, and these become more marked as Friends range from right to left across the theological scale. In between are Friends who would find it hard to be articulate about their faith, but if pressed would be likely to say that their aim was to live in the spirit of loving trust so clearly demonstrated by Jesus.

George Gorman 1969: Introducing Quakers. Quaker Home Service, London.

Are you gaining insights and inspiration from the Bible, from other writings including the literature of other faiths, and from the religious experiences of Friends and others, past and present?

Advices & Queries 2013: The Religious Society of Friends in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Just as Quakers do not limit the service of God to certain times, or places, or people, so they do not have a set-apart priesthood ... There is no need for any specific person to be designated prophet, priest, or church leader. Quakers would say that if people are open to the power of love and light in their lives then they will themselves become prophetic and priestly, and will not need to follow the external authority of church leaders. They will become empowered to be themselves, to find God in their hearts and to serve other people.

Harvey Gillman 1988: Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 27.36.

**Weekends at the Quaker Settlement,
76 Virginia Road, Whanganui 4500:**

**9-11 March – Summer Weekend @
Quaker Acres**

A playful, fun, productive and friendly weekend for all ages to get some Summer Settlement jobs done together. The bonus is great food, free accommodation and swimming.

Contact: Nigel Brooke
brooke.nigel2017@gmail.com

16-18 March – Penal Reform

We explore the legacy of Elizabeth Fry in discussion of reconciliation, justice and restitution in New Zealand society with assistance from visiting speakers.
Facilitators: Penal Reform Group.

Contact: Christine England
syntonychris86@gmail.com

Yearly Meeting 2018

**will be held at Burns Lodge, Mosgiel,
near Dunedin**

Friday 25th to Monday 28th May

**There will be a
retreat day on Thursday 24th May**

**Accommodation can be booked at
Burns Lodge Ph 03-489-2600.
This effectively registers you for Yearly
Meeting, but does NOT cover lunch and
dinner food costs**

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is an association of persons of diverse backgrounds who wish to have ties with the Religious Society of Friends without necessarily being in its membership, or who, through isolation, illness or some other circumstance are unable to attend a Monthly Meeting.

Any person who finds the fundamental Quaker testimonies and the Quaker way of life, with its emphasis on sincerity and simplicity, compatible with his or her philosophy of life is welcome to join the Fellowship. A request to the Clerk will ensure enrolment as a member.