

George Fox and Quaker History

Contextual notes and frequently asked questions

Where does George Fox get his theological terms from?

Fox was very well versed in the Bible. One person said that if every Bible in England was destroyed, Fox would be able to rewrite it from memory. He uses the Book of Revelation more than any other book but selects his theological terms from throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. After 1611, there was an English language Bible (King James Version) in every church although the Geneva Bible of 1590 may also have been an influence.

How do we know that George Fox's Journal is an accurate account of events?

The Journal was dictated (Fox had trouble writing) first in the 1660s and a second time in the 1670s, both at times when Fox thought he was going to die in prison. We can corroborate some of the events it recalls from other people's journals and, more accurately, tracts published at the time but it is a weak historical source because of the way it was written retrospectively. The account of climbing Pendle Hill for example never appeared in the first short version of his journal, only the longer second one.

What did other people and groups think of George Fox at the time?

Fox does not come across as socially charming but his preaching and manner obviously affected many who heard him. Perhaps they recognise what today we may call 'authenticity.' Others thought he was at best rude and potentially dangerous and blasphemous. He was often beaten or stoned by angered listeners. Other leaders of religious groups and clergy would also have had little time for him because of his dismissal of every church group other than the Quakers.

Why were people so afraid of Quakers?

The idea that everyone was spiritually equal and that all were ministers meant that the Quakers enfranchised the whole of society at a time when there was a clear distinction between ruling class and ruled. The Quaker theological message could appear politically revolutionary. The King had been executed in 1649 but taken to their extreme, it was perceived that Quaker ideas might lead to a leaderless state or the rule of the mob.

Where did George Fox get his money from?

Fox inherited from his uncle and then his father and this gave him independent means. Others 'travelling in the ministry' were helped by Margaret Fell's establishment and administration of the Kendal Fund to support itinerant Friends.

The origin of the name 'Quakers' (and other names for the group)

At his 1650 trial in Derby, Justice Bennett coined the phrase Quaker for those whom he had heard 'trembled' before God. This was pejorative term that had been used before, for example for group of Muslim women imprisoned on a ship in the Thames in 1647, but it stuck to Fox and his followers and they adopted it as a badge of authenticity, 'the people called in scorn Quakers'. Quakers themselves referred to themselves as 'the saints', 'children of the Light' or 'Friends of the truth.' The term 'Religious Society of Friends' came into use in the eighteenth century.

The words 'experientially' and 'experimentally'

When Fox writes in his journal of his transformational 1647 experience that he 'knew this experimentally', he means simply that he knew this 'experientially'. He knew this from an experience, not from a text or teacher.

The word 'convince' and what it meant in Fox's time

Quakers talked of being 'convinced' and of 'convincement' in their transformation narratives. To be convinced in seventeenth-century English means to be 'convicted' – they found that their former lives and beliefs were judged as found wanting by God. However this discomforting experience was followed by the possibility of repentance and the acceptance of a new and transformed (perfected) life of mission and witness.

'Steeple-house' and 'church' and what early Quakers meant by those terms

Quakers referred to church buildings as 'steeple houses' or 'mashouses', pejorative terms reflecting their view that every place was equally sacred. Fox preached up a tree in Sedbergh churchyard as it was equal to preaching within the church. The church for Quakers was the community of believers, people not property.

'Concluded under sin'

Fox talks of having been 'shut up in unbelief' and 'concluded under sin' at the end of his account of his transformational 1647 experience. It was as if he had been wrapped in sin, that he had inhabited a place in which he could do no more than continually fall short, that the conclusion to all his actions was that of missing the mark.

Pronouns (thee, thou, you etc.)

Like French with its polite and deferential 'vous' form and more familiar 'tu' form, seventeenth-century English used two forms of address: 'you' as the polite and deferential one and 'thee and thou' as the familiar one. The Quakers adopted the latter form for talking to everyone, a witness to their idea of spiritual equality and their sense of needing to humble and level society down before God.

Whether replying to sermons was banned/normal/allowed but unusual

It was a right within church life in seventeenth-century England that parishioners could reply to a sermon after the minister had finished. Quakers took advantage of this right but also interrupted sermons, which was not usual practice.

17th century women's clothing (in the context of female Quakers and their travel arrangements)

Early Quaker women dressed plainly and soberly, avoiding anything that might have suggested vanity or luxury such as ornate buttons, ribbons, braid or costly fabrics. This was not a distinctive Quaker 'uniform', however, but a simplified version of contemporary ways of dressing.

Rates of literacy

Rates of literacy in the seventeenth century are hard to gauge accurately, in part because reading and writing were taught separately, and many people were able to read without also being able to write. Literacy was associated with people's social and economic position, with whether they lived in an urban or a rural context (literacy rates were higher in London than elsewhere), and with gender. There was a long-term trend of growing literacy, however, and it has been estimated that by the end of the seventeenth century, fifty per cent of men and twenty-five per cent of women could sign their names (which is taken as the best indicator of being able to write as well as read).

Who actually counts as a Calvinist

On this course, we refer to Calvinism particularly in regard to the idea of predestination, the doctrine that God preselected those who will be saved. Calvin's ideas were influential especially amongst the Puritan rulers of 1650s England. They differed from Quakers in their selective idea of salvation, their focus on scriptural authority and they were antagonised by the Quaker doctrine of perfection.

'Humiliation' in Fox's writing

Days of Fasting and Humiliation were national days of public prayer and repentance called when recent events (such as a defeat in battle, a flood or a bad harvest) were taken to indicate God's judgement. They could be called by the religious or the civic authorities; Cromwell called a number of these while he was in power as Lord Protector.