



Yearly Meeting of
the Religious Society
of Friends in Britain

Quakers and Encounters with other Faiths

Quakers in a multi-faith society

As Quakers living in a multi-faith Britain it is becoming increasingly important for us to understand other faiths. This can be seen as part of our work for peace and justice as well as a means of deepening our own spiritual life. It can be done through study, dialogue, meditation, worship and fellowship with people of other faiths, as well as working alongside them on campaigns or social projects.

Inter-faith encounters can be misused or subverted, and discretion is sometimes called for, but they can be extremely rewarding.

A little history

Early Quakers had encounters with other faith communities. George Fox quoted from the Qur'an when writing to the King of Algiers about the plight of Quakers and other captives. Mary Fisher visited Turkey in the 17th Century to speak with Sultan Muhammad. She said:

“They are more near Truth than many nations; there is a love begot in me towards them which is endless ...”

John Woolman displayed a similar reaction to Native Americans, disparaged by his contemporaries as heathen.

Friends have continued over the years to maintain this tradition.

The value of Quaker inter-faith encounter

In the last few years the need for inter-faith encounter has greatly increased. Recent history and insensitive media coverage have turned an unwelcome spotlight on faith communities, particularly Muslims, making them feel isolated, threatened and fearful. Quakers, who themselves were once persecuted and considered a threat to the state, may be able to play a valuable role in supporting such faith communities and in witnessing their right to maintain their faith as part of our multi-cultural society. All should learn to appreciate the complex interplay between faith, culture and race. This may be displayed, for example, in matters of dress, diet and demeanour.

If our own Quaker faith and practice are well grounded, they will probably be strengthened rather than shaken by our inter-faith encounters. Most people who enter seriously into inter-faith dialogue recognise the extensive similarities between the great religions, not least the fact that there is wide diversity within each of them. It is helpful to spend time exploring these similarities to break down prejudice and to build trust. There are, however, real differences between the world faiths, and these need to be recognised. For example, the idea of reincarnation is deeply embedded in some faith traditions and completely absent from others. As inter-faith encounter proceeds it becomes possible first to acknowledge and then to transcend these differences.

There are various kinds of inter-faith dialogue:

- of life, in which people of different faiths through meeting in friendship enrich one another in living by their respective religious values;

- of collaboration in social involvement with a common commitment to peace, equality and justice;
- of an intellectual kind, where theologians and religious scholars seek a clearer understanding of the truths that underlie their traditions;
- of religious experience, relying on insights from prayer and contemplation in the different faiths;
- and, with discretion, in sharing our personal struggles, the debates within our faith, and the methods of our tradition for keeping that tradition live and vibrant, for example in relating ancient teachings to present day issues.

What you can do

Become better informed. There are plenty of sources of information on the basic beliefs and practices of other faiths, both in print and on appropriate internet sites. Some of them are mentioned in the resources section at the end of this leaflet. Writings from other faith traditions can be used in private study, discussion groups and in work with children and Meeting for Worship. By using such material in a 'pick and mix' manner, however, we may not be understanding and interpreting it in the same way as someone of that tradition.

Individually or in a small group, begin to encounter people of other faiths by arranging, for example, to:

- join a local inter-faith group or take a lead in starting one;
- support or take initiatives for inter-faith events such as the Week of Prayer for World Peace or One World Week;
- be open and ready to participate in religious festivals when the occasions present themselves;
- make a special effort to reach out to any local faith community that is suffering adverse publicity, intimidation or abuse.

Personal friendships will often lead to a breaking down barriers, and can provide openings to other faith communities. Bear in mind, though, that people in other faith communities may know little about Quakers and may be wary of us.

Resources

Understanding Islam, by C Hewer. London, SCM Press, 2006

Islam, the straight path, by J Esposito. Oxford University Press, 3rd edn, 2005

The vision of Islam, by S Murata & W Chittick. I B Tauris Press, 1996

An Introduction to Shi'i Islam, by M Momen. Cambridge, Mass, Yale University Press, 1985

Western Muslims and the Future of Islam, by T Ramadan. Oxford University Press, 2004

Introducing Hinduism, by H Rodrigues. London, Routledge, 2006

Introduction to Hinduism, by G Flood. Cambridge University Press, 1996

Buddhism, A Very Short Introduction, by D Keown. Oxford University Press, 2000

Buddhist Ethics, A Very Short Introduction, by D Keown. Oxford University Press, 2005

A concise history of Buddhism, by A Skilton. Birmingham, Windhorse Publications, 1997

Exploring Sikhism, by H McLeod. Oxford University Press, 2000

Sikhism, A Very Short Introduction, by E Nesbitt. Oxford University Press, 2005

The Jews: their religious beliefs and practices, by A Unterman. Sussex Academic Press, 2nd edn, 1999

Judaism, by D Cohn-Sherbok. London, Routledge, 1999

Judaism, A Very Short Introduction, by N Solomon. Oxford University Press, 2000

Christianity: A Very Short Introduction, by L Woodhead. Oxford University Press, 2004

Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs, by N Smart. London, Fontana, 1997

The World's Religions, by N Smart. Cambridge University Press, 1998

Inter faith organisations

Inter Faith Network for the UK (www.interfaith.org.uk – its membership list is comprehensive)

World Congress of Faiths (www.worldfaiths.org)

Churches' Commission of Inter Faith Relations (www.ctbi.org.uk/ccifr)

Scottish Inter-Faith Council (www.interfaithscotland.org)

Inter-Faith Council for Wales (www.interfaithwales.org)

London Inter Faith Centre (www.londoninterfaith.org.uk)

Council of Christians and Jews (ccj.org.uk)

British Muslim Forum (www.bmf.eu.com)

A leaflet from the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR).

QCCIR can provide advice and support to Quakers and Meetings who want to broaden and deepen their encounters with other churches and faiths.

Contact: QCCIR c/o Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ. Email: marigoldb@quaker.org.uk Telephone: 020 7663 1060