

350 YEARS OF QUAKERISM

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is celebrating its 350 anniversary this year with (among many events the new £5 note) an Exhibition and a series of Public Lectures in the Exeter Central Library on Thursdays from 16 September to 24 October.

The Society formed in 1652 around George Fox. Though I do not believe he was aware of this, his concept of religion was very much of his, and our, time, following in the steps of Galileo and Francis Bacon and anticipating the thinking of Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle, by rejecting the traditional authorities unless they had been tested and found valid by experience. This put him and the 'Friends of Truth / Light', as Quakers originally called themselves, in direct conflict with the then dominant Calvinists.

The distinguishing feature of Quakerism then, and now, is our rejection of all Creeds which we believe are both divisive and fail to reflect essential truths because of the limitations of words to define spiritual matters. For us Christianity is not the words we use about Jesus, but the way we try to live.

Quakers are generally known, apart from the cartoon images on cornflake packets, as a 'Peace Church'. Historically this started with Quakers rejecting violence as a political weapon in a 1660 rebellion against Charles II - a position we maintain to this day, though our work now is far more directed towards reconciliation of conflict or trying to remove the causes of war, than in dogmatic pacifism. We try "to live in that Spirit that takes away the **cause** of all wars."

Truth has long been a Quaker concern. In the seventeenth century because Quakers refused to swear oaths (then required in Court) on the grounds that they had only one standard of truth, they suffered frequent imprisonment and sequestration as a result. Truth is still a central concern, not only for us individually, but also in encouraging Government and Industry to avoid lying to the public.

We are active in our concern for equality by recognising that we are all "unique, precious, children of God". This does not mean that we should be treated identically, regardless of age, infirmity, colour or gender, but that we should recognise that everyone is equally important and a vessel of the Spirit.

Simplicity has long been a Quaker concern in order to avoid focussing our minds on irrelevancies. In the early days this also led Friends into the cul-de-sac of developing a special 'simple' form of clothing. Now we reflect the same concern far more in our wish not to exploit the planet by excessive consumption.