

Shaping and Shaking One's Beliefs

A notable group of people called Shakers, more fully known as The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, have only one very small group in existence today. It was founded in 18th century England and they were known as "Shaking Quakers" because of their ecstatic behavior during worship services. Shakers settled in colonial America, with initial settlements in New Lebanon, New York (called Mount Lebanon after 1861). They practice a celibate and communal lifestyle, pacifism, and their model of equality of the sexes, which they institutionalized in their society in the 1780's. They are also known for their simple living, architecture, and furniture.

During the mid-19th century, an era of manifestations resulted in a period of dances, gift drawings, and gift songs inspired by spiritual revelations. At its peak in the mid-19th century, there were 6,000 Shaker believers. By 1920, there were only 12 Shaker communities remaining in the United States. At the present time, there is only one active Shaker village, Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village, which is located in Maine. Their celibacy, combined with external and internal societal changes, resulted in the thinning of the Shaker community, and consequently many of the other Shaker settlements are now village museums, like Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts.

[\[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakers\]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakers)

I have always appreciated these people, along with many others like them, although their beliefs eventually ended their communities along with their better ideas and contributions to the larger society. One of their lasting influences can only be admired and appreciated in their museums large and small around the areas of their legacies. I admired the simplicity of their living, architecture, furniture and their songs. One song in particular is still rather well known and popular:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free,
'tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be,
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.

Because of their inability to change, requiring continually shaping and shaking their beliefs as time moved them forward, they are almost totally extinct. The ability to live simply with a gift to be truly free seemed to be ignored in their own communities. Instead of allowing the continuing movement of time to bring them toward maturity, especially regarding their beliefs, they held fast to "a place just right," and lost their ability to love and delight. In short, their beliefs became their downfall!

One of their primary beliefs was celibacy, "abstinence from sexual relations. The condition of remaining unmarried, especially for religious reasons." Their literal interpretation of scriptures, as in the examples in the writing of Saint Paul (1 Corinthians chapter 7) coupled with other secular reasons for absolute celibacy may have effected their belief. Perhaps the ambiguity, "doubtfulness or uncertainty as regards interpretation" was

part of their influence. Their belief, "Something believed or accepted as true, especially a particular tenet or a body of tenets accepted by a group of persons," was a large part of their demise. Perhaps things for them as a group might have been different if they were able to embrace the last part of this song?

When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.

When beliefs become permanent and solidified in our venture of life they prevent the change of "bowing and bending" without shame and delight. Beliefs that are cast in stone absolutely prevent further growth and development in moving forward.

Beliefs are a part of our lives. A belief is when we accept that something is true or acknowledge that something exists but, as time goes by, when we begin to sense something regarding a belief is different or changing, we need to have flexibility as in "turning, turning we come round right." Our universe was created with three important venues that enable its ongoing existence - change, diversity and equality. We cannot be a useful part of this universe if we do not like or cannot accept any change. In fact, whether we like it or not, each of us changes continually or we definitely could not remain among the living; this is normally referred to as growth. Diversity is another absolute essential to everything living, whether animate or inanimate, for continuing existence. The fact is that everything that exists in the universe is equally important for the whole of life itself. Change is the enabler, diversity is the energizer and equality binds it all together.

The earliest sources of belief within our human species probably came from three vital qualities - imagination, inspiration and revelation. It is probably from these three venues of ours that we formulated what we began to call religion. From the concept of the human trinity, body, mind and spirit, we observed and formulated individual and corporate beliefs about ourselves and our world. People noted the centrality of the earth and believed that the earth was a flat plain on which lived. We also observed the heavens above the earth and developed impressions and stories of the gods who lived above us. We formulated the constellations and charted how they, along with the sun, moon and stars, may be in control of what happens on earth. Astrologers became the persons who predicted their meanings and provided charts to give guidance for life in general. Even though we have a completely different factual understanding of the universe today, this first world tradition is still believed by many



Religious symbols in clock-wise order:

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bahá'í Faith, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Slavic neopaganism, Celtic polytheism, Heathenism (German paganism), Semitic neopaganism, Wicca, Kemetism (Egyptian paganism), Hellenism, Italo-Roman neopaganism.

[\[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_religions_and_spiritual_traditions\]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_religions_and_spiritual_traditions)

Beginning of Religion:

"In ancient times the word religion was linked to mythology, but it really has more to do with how the world was created, what exactly a human's place in this world is, what happens after death, and how you get through this experience and the next life without having to suffer. No matter what the religion, the people who follow it have created a god that reflects their own image and likeness."

"Even though Hinduism is considered the oldest religion on record, it is actually not one single religion. Hinduism is a combination of Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism. It was based on the morality of the times and adheres to dharma, karma, and other social norms. Unlike many organized religions it is more open to philosophical and intellectual ideas."

[\[http://www.enkivillage.com/oldest-religion.html\]](http://www.enkivillage.com/oldest-religion.html)

If you have further interest in the details and beliefs of any or all of these religions there are many online resources available. My purpose here is to simply point out the progressive revelation of these many forms and varieties of religion that have been and may still be in vogue today. Any study you make will demonstrate how changes have occurred, that they continue as an expression of their diversity, and their equality of impression and mark given to human experiences. A very extensive link may be found here:

[\[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_religion\]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_religion)

Religion has been very useful to us as human beings and its value continues in our everyday living. If we did not have or utilize imagination, inspiration and revelation we would be missing a rich and full venue of life we continue to enjoy. Art, music, inventions, and much more come from these three creative and intuitive gifts that inspire and energize us in body, mind and spirit. Even as science developed utilizing observation, hypothesis and theory, there was little or no attempt to end these religious values in which we believe and practice. As science grew in prowess and importance we came to value the additional venue of factual understanding. Science also brought us tools that enabled us to observe more acutely, helping us fine tune our vision and information.

Religion and science are very different in scope and source but, when shared together, each enables our lives to be enriched.

The Value of Religion and Science Together:

"Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." - Albert Einstein

The telescope was one of the first instruments of observation in science that literally turned our understanding of the world we thought we knew upside down. The earth was no longer the center with the heavens above and the mysterious nether world below. Now our earth was observed as one of many planets that orbited around the sun just as our moon orbited the earth. This was the venue of observation and the hypothesis that investigated and perfected our observations that established our development of new theories. As our observations became verified by hypothesis, we declared them as laws or theories. Now, in addition to our inward and invisible venues of imagination, inspiration and revelation, we have the outward and verifiable facts to connect with information, knowledge and understanding. It was in the age of Enlightenment that we began

the struggle to equally value religion and science that I hope will become a genuine custom in this 21st century. Like the older image of the horse and carriage, "you can't have one without the other."

Beliefs are the core of religious truth while scientific facts are basic to verifiable understandings. Note the difference: *belief*, "something one accepts as true or real"; *fact*, "a thing that is indisputably the case." For the greater part of our human existence we have been using and enjoying spiritual and unverifiable knowledge. It has only been since The Enlightenment, around 1700 CE, that we have seen verifiable facts begin to take precedence and change the character of human existence. Religion began losing its control as the events of the Reformation gave rise to conflicting religious ideas and beliefs which were seriously splintering with little or no primary control. The ability of science to verify their facts was tempered with their willingness to disregard theories that could no longer hold up under continuing hypothesis, only added pressure on those who insisted on keeping their beliefs without factual support. Adding to this dilemma was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution with its complex and radical socioeconomic changes, bringing extensive mechanization for production systems resulting in large-scale factories. This brought about an economic base to many people who formerly were at the mercy of those who had wealth and power to begin to enter the debate and form their own opinions.

It may be that in recent times, we are just beginning to sense an equal need for both science and religion. Without both religion and science working together we might only continue to struggle toward a maturity necessary for a more intricate and complex world.

This reminds me of an interesting scripture in 1 Corinthians 13:9-13:

"Our knowledge is incomplete and our ability to speak what God has revealed is incomplete. But when what is complete comes, then what is incomplete will no longer be used. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I no longer used childish ways. Now we see a blurred image in a mirror. Then we will see very clearly. Now my knowledge is incomplete. Then I will have complete knowledge as God has complete knowledge of me. So these three things remain: faith, hope, and love. But the best one of these is love."

It is my hope that in this 21st century we may begin to act more like adults, as we leave our childhood years behind us, and grow into the full stature of our humanity. So many people and communities, through religion and science, need to grow into their full stature to function well into all future possibilities. I believe our human species has a clear responsibility to participate in that development of change, encouraging diversity and equality as well as in our personal responsibility to change, promote diversity in our own lives and accepting the diversity of others while sharing together the important future of our universe. Too often, because of our unchanging beliefs, we prevent growth and development in ourselves and others by becoming thwarted with ideas whose time has passed, as in the example of the Shakers and their insistence on being celibate. Being celibate may be fine for a period or even the choice for one's whole life, but to insist on celibacy as a consistent rule for everyone can be disastrous! While there are many religious denominations that allow groups within them to practice celibacy, they usually comprise a smaller part of the denomination as a whole. Today, however, many of these religious orders within such denominations are also slowly diminishing as beliefs change about human sexuality.

Observation and Learning:

I began this paper by citing the Shakers as a group because they were and remain a wonderful people whose lifestyles have been popularized in a number of museums that remind us of their honorable gifts. They are especially remembered for their simplicity of life, pacifism, their model of equality of the sexes, their architectural style and their beautiful simple form in furniture. With our lives having become so involved and complicated with an accumulation of things, busy schedules and loss of community values, we might do well in giving some consideration to their culture. We have learned from many to study past history so that we learn valuable lessons to obtain a better life for ourselves now. What can we learn from the Shakers?

First and foremost was the asset of their belief, as set forth in their song outlining their "dance" (as way of thought and behavior) that forms a gift to everyone who can claim their recommended behavior:

Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free,
'tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be,
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.

They aspired to simplicity and freedom in the way they behaved with each other and toward all in the world around them. Each individual was invited to "come down" according to their understanding as to how they "ought to be" and have the freedom to appreciate who they were meant to be. To me this was great advice that resembles our very beginning in the creation in the story of Genesis. At the end of chapter one, a brief outline of the creation, we are told in 1:27, "So God created humans in his image. In the image of God they were created; male and female." Like all things created in this story God declared that it was very good. In this chapter we have the outline of the "days" of creation that blends quite well with the evolutionary timeline in science. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_evolutionary_history_of_life]

I believe there are two major lessons that we can realize from conflicts in their religious faith that became their Achilles heel: In the second part of their "dance" they also sang:

When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.

Given their distrust of human sexuality and their choice of celibacy, along with their belief in the second coming of Christ, they seem to have become distracted from the wholeness of the creation stories in Genesis. Having these two doctrines of their community life, celibacy and the second coming of Christ, they seemed unable to simply "turn, turn" to enable them to "come round right" as the progress of human history continued to change.

In the second chapter of Genesis, the older of the two stories, we are given more particular descriptions of the creation of human beings and their place in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:7:

"Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the earth and blew the breath of life into his nostrils. The man became a living being." This story suggests that God placed him in the Garden but

that the man felt lonely and in Genesis 2:21-22, "So the Lord God caused him to fall into a deep sleep. While the man was sleeping, the Lord God took out one of the man's ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. Then the Lord God formed a woman from the rib that he had taken from the man. He brought her to the man." So, verse 23, the man replied, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She will be named woman because she was taken from man."

[The Bible is not the only source of stories about the beginnings of the universe nor about how the variety of humankind came into being. Almost every unique culture around the world has their own stories about their understanding of how they came into existence adding to the stories of human origins. It just may surprise you to realize how many stories in the Bible also appear in other documents. Some are very similar while others are quite unique and different. It seems that, from the beginnings of humanity, there was an invested interest in how we originated with a desire to know our ancestry showing reproduced as a people. Religion is partly defined as "a cause, principle, or activity pursued with zeal or conscientious devotion" about our common interest in the who, what, when, where, why, and how we are here. Science today is a major part of this history with archaeology, evolution and human origins, along with the mysterious phenomenon of digs, artifacts, myths, ancient places, and the hard to explain.]

[\[http://www.ancient-origins.net/human-origins\]](http://www.ancient-origins.net/human-origins)

Without sensing the gifts of both religion and science, after the Reformation and Enlightenment, the Shakers were unable, it seems, to move forward with the positive awareness of their "simplicity for living" by their important understanding of their own concluding words of their "dance."

When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.

Why Beliefs will Always Change and Develop:

Very simply there is nothing in this universe that stays the same. The core principles of the universe are change, diversity and equality. Change is the essence of life, diversity provides the possibility for a continuing variety, and equality assures the common dignity and worth of all that exists. The Singularity and The Big Bang contained all that was necessary for the beginning, becoming, and the growth (expansion) of the universe. The Theory of Relativity is the formula for the sum total of matter and energy made equal and energized by the speed of light squared, a metaphorical trinity of the relationship of matter, energy, and light. It has taken almost 14 billion years to become the universe we have today. After the human species began to evolve only a little more than 200,000 years ago, we have only recently begun, in the last 7,000 years, to gather information, codify our knowledge, and come to a better understanding of our various probabilities, possibilities and productivity.

Human history began in very primitive ways with stories and the development of writing only a few thousand years before the Common Era. At the beginning of the Common Era we started with a new calendar to coordinate daily plans and schedules, and recognize new ways for differing governments and communities to somehow fit together in calendar record. Leading up to this new Era was the translation of the Septuagint as defined in the dictionary, "A Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures that dates from the 3rd century BCE,

containing both a translation of the Hebrew and additional and variant material, regarded as the standard form of the Old Testament in the early Christian Church and still canonical in the Eastern Orthodox Church." This work began in the 3rd century BCE and was completed by 132 BCE, initially in Alexandria, but in time elsewhere as well. The Septuagint is the basis for the Old Latin, Slavonic, Syriac, Old Armenian, Old Georgian and Coptic versions of the Christian Old Testament.

At the beginning of the Common Era was the beginning of Church history, or the history of the Christian Faith, began about 30 A.D. in Palestine with a small number of Jews and Jewish Proselytes, about 120 according to Acts 1:15, following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. By the third century A.D., Christianity had grown to become the dominant religion of the northern Mediterranean world. It also gained important extensions to the east and south of the Mediterranean. ... The apostolic period extends from the Day of Pentecost to the death of the Apostle John, and covers about seventy years, from A.D. 30 to about 100. ... "The second period, from the death of the apostle John to the end of the persecutions, or to the accession of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, is the classic age of the ecclesia pressa, of heathen persecution, and of Christian martyrdom and heroism, of cheerful sacrifice of possessions and life itself for the inheritance of heaven. It furnishes a continuous commentary on the Saviour's words: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; I came not to send peace on earth, but a sword..." [<http://www.theopedia.com/church-history>]

From the beginning of the Middle Ages In the history of Europe, the Middle Ages or medieval period lasted from the 5th to the 15th century. It began with the fall of the Western Roman Empire and merged into the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery. The Middle Ages is the middle period of the three traditional divisions of Western history: classical antiquity, the medieval period, and the modern period. The medieval period is itself subdivided into the Early, High, and Late Middle Ages. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Ages]

While there were changes in every area of life, the advancement of science was more emphatic at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment. Prior to Enlightenment organized religion was probably the most powerful influence and source for knowledge and understanding in civilization. The basic core of religion is imagination, inspiration and revelation which generates the beliefs that shape information for knowledge and understanding of the world as it was then known. Many beliefs were rigidly held as noted in the creeds and doctrines of the Holy Roman Catholic Church established by Constantine with a number of bishops at the beginning of the 4th century. There was, and still is, a great corpus of resistance to any changes suggested by scientific studies that developed in the Middle Ages. The control of the ruling classes and empires held tightly to their need for beliefs to be in charge of their subjects to maintain their order and rule.

The beginning of science, especially as it came to the fore after the Enlightenment, is based on observation, hypothesis and theory. As information was gathered and observed it was only a beginning stage of discovery and speculation. We remember that hypothesis is a tentative until there is some factual verification. Following hypothesis it becomes a theory or law and remains a theory only if the facts remain verifiable. Herein is the distinctive difference between religion and science:

Belief, "Something believed or accepted as true, especially a particular tenet or a body of tenets accepted by a group of persons."

Fact, "Something demonstrated to exist or known to have existed."

Verify, "To demonstrate the truth or accuracy of, as by the presentation of evidence."

Science is based on verifiable facts that become theory only if the theory remains verifiable! Religion is based on beliefs "accepted as true by a group of persons" and remains true by declaration only. Lacking any factual verification for a religious belief it must use dogmatic opinion for perpetuating a belief while science only relies on continuing factual verification to maintain any theory. We should feel blessed that we have both religion and science that enables us to move into the future with inspiration and certainty. Einstein provided a pithy statement we quoted earlier to express this gratitude for partnership:

"Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." - Albert Einstein

What We Learn From Shakers:

They were simple believers that held firmly to two beliefs in particular that thwarted their existence:

- ✚ They practiced a celibate and communal lifestyle
- ✚ They believed in Christ's soon Second Appearing - (not "shaping" life in this world, but waiting for a whole new world to come) as developed below.

Even though men and women were held in equal esteem and had women in leadership, they held strictly to their belief in celibacy. This seriously limited the perpetuation of their community to growth only by adding converts who, when they joined, vowed to remain celibate as well. The following quote shows us the priorities of the Shakers:

"Repent. For the kingdom of God is at hand. The new heaven and new earth prophesied of old is about to come. The marriage of the Lamb, the first resurrection, the new Jerusalem descended from above, these are even now at the door. And when Christ appears again, and the true church rises in full and transcendent glory, then all anti-Christian denominations—the priests, the Church, the pope—will be swept away."

([7] [Edward Palmer Thompson. The Making of the English Working Class. IICA; 1980. p. 48.]

[\[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakers\]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakers)

The Shakers were a group of people that began a downward cycle no longer capable of **Shaping** (forming) **and Shaking** (changing) by refusing **CHANGE and not maturing in Beliefs**. They began in the 18th century but they never became a part of the new beginnings of the changes in religion and science in the period of Enlightenment. Not recognizing dramatic changes around them, they lost sight of the reformation of religion - imagination, inspiration and revelation - along with the growing advances of science - observation, hypothesis, and theory. In their formation they took no account of the basic principles and core values of the universe - change, diversity and equality. Instead they tenaciously held on to two beliefs that would cause their eventual demise; absolute celibacy and the soon return of Christ bringing in an entirely new age. Their denial of the basic necessity for human propagation and the centuries old prophesy, ending this age, for a future New Age of a new heaven and new earth established by God seriously diminished their continuing existence. They offered no hope for future development of humanity now by total espousal of celibacy and by belief in an outdated prophecy that is centuries long overdue without any plan for humanity in this present lifetime.

The Jesus they followed was not the historic itinerant rabbi who lived, taught and ministered in Galilee announcing the Kingdom of God that was to be renewed. It was the continuance of that Covenant revealed to

Abraham, Moses and by all the Prophets of Israel; "a binding agreement, a divine promise establishing God's relationship to humanity and all creation." The invitation of Jesus to everyone was simply "follow me" and become partners with him in the Realm of God - the way, the truth, and life. God is that very Spirit, "breath," that made us human beings from the "dust" of the earth; the elements that we share with the whole of the universe. From the stories in Genesis the human species has a special responsibility to care for and tend to creation as noted in the story of the garden. We are called to be like Jesus, the people of God to renew and refresh God's establishment and vision of Covenant.

The Shakers, like so many groups and communities, over time developed their unique and special way of connecting with God and one another. Their customs grew out of a special focus and emphasis of selected ideas of particular and special meaning, thereby becoming a particular group of religious people. Their beliefs led them to a rather narrow way instead of a broader view of an expanding world with more inclusive ideas and opportunities for growth and development. Their beliefs turned them inward rather than outward to expand their appreciation of the universal concepts emanating from the expansion of both religion and science. The pithy statement of Einstein, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind," was a summary of their experience. The absence of scientific evidence crippled their religious faith and left them blind to see the future they had to offer the world. The universe is inclusive with the creativity of change, diversity, and equality. Their religion was basically blind because of their weakness in utilizing imagination, inspiration and revelation to see more than what they chose to believe. This stunted their personal growth and development and their spiritual gifts of simplicity, and their awareness of the Spirit within them is lost to us all.

Closing Thought:

As suggested in the title of this paper, ***Shaping (forming) and Shaking (changing) One's Beliefs***, we share the universal importance of change, diversity, and equality. LIFE [Living Into Future Experience] is vital to every facet of the universe and is especially essential to the fullness of our human species. To be and become all that we are meant to be in body, mind, and spirit we all need to include and utilize the "trinities" that follow in the four points noted here to substantiate and be coordinated with all creation:

- **Universe:** Change, Diversity, Equality
- **Religion:** Imagination, Inspiration, Revelation
- **Science:** Observation, Hypothesis, Theory
- **People:** Body, Mind, Spirit

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