

2017

**Review of Our Life is Love: The Quaker Spiritual Journey by
Marcelle Martin (San Francisco, California: Inner Light Books,
2016)**

Carole Spencer
George Fox University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spencer, Carole (2017) "Review of Our Life is Love: The Quaker Spiritual Journey by Marcelle Martin (San Francisco, California: Inner Light Books, 2016)," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 128 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol128/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

**REVIEW OF *OUR LIFE IS LOVE: THE
QUAKER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY*
BY MARCELLE MARTIN
(SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA:
INNER LIGHT BOOKS, 2016)**

CAROLE SPENCER

I feel somewhat reluctant to write a review of this book. Not because I fear being too critical of it, but because I fear being too complimentary. Full disclosure: Not only did I have the privilege of writing the preface to *Our Life is Love*, but I read drafts of some of the chapters as they were being written when Marcelle Martin was the Mullen Writing Fellow at Earlham School of Religion. I also know Martin personally, and her life authentically accords with what she has written, indeed, *her life is love*. So naturally I feel a deep investment in its reception, promotion, and a hope for a wide readership. I will also confess that it supported and confirmed much of my own research and interpretation of early Quaker history as a movement of transformational holiness, and I appreciate the methodology of a narrative and participatory approach. Martin also helped expand my vision of contemporary Quaker spirituality beyond familiar terrain, as my thinking about Quaker holiness has continued to evolve. The great strength of the book is found in Martin's ability to translate the early Quaker mystical experience, which can feel alien and unreal in the demise of traditional religious narrative today, into a meaningful context.

Marcelle Martin is a modern-day mystic and prophet—don't be put off by that designation—she is a mystic within a long-standing Quaker tradition—a mystic who is also an agent of peace and justice in the tradition of the Valiant Sixty, John Woolman and Thomas Kelly. Through her words we are invited to step back into Quaker history and see it again in fresh and profound ways. She carefully articulates the perennial roadmap of the way to divine union of early Friends. She also tells powerful stories of modern Friends across our diverse traditions who continue to flesh out that roadmap, demonstrating its

continuing relevance, but often using different language in our more secular, multi-cultural and interfaith world.

The title of the book comes from Isaac Pennington's powerful and moving description of the mission of the early Quaker movement:

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand...[until that love and peace and tenderness is reflected] in the eyes of all with whom ye converse.

Clearly words to bring conviction in the divisive and often polarized climate of our current Quaker culture. But such a life is only possible through a change of consciousness, which as Martin outlines, evolves through the Quaker spiritual journey.

Martin draws on her own life experience throughout the book, beginning with a vivid story of her of own spiritual awakening, a unitive experience that changed her life and propelled her into a life-long spiritual adventure. Unlike academic historians, Martin is willing to write openly about her own spiritual experiences, and viewed through the gift of a mystical consciousness enable her to resonate with the experience of early Quakers in ways few of us are able to do. Her deep empathy with early Friends, allows her to illuminate their writings in an accessible way for Friends today. While Martin did not write this book as an academic study of religion maintaining scholarly distance from her subjects, it is well researched and includes ample notes documenting her sources, and an extensive bibliography (though not an index, which would be helpful). Academic historians and religious scholars will be quick to point out its strong confessional approach, and lack of critical distance, but her engaged participation with her subjects opens new avenues of integration of intuition, feeling and imagination with the analytic and cognitive that provides a way to take religious experience and mysticism seriously today. For the majority of Friends scholars today, Rufus Jones' theory of Quakerism as "affirmative mysticism" has been discredited historically, and thus mysticism itself has tended to become marginalized among Friends. Yet what Martin has done is to provide a contemporary phenomenology of Quaker mystical experience that can be traced across the broad Quaker movement. In sum, Martin is redefining "experience" in a way that is a major challenge to most academic studies of religion. While this may not be her primary intention, she is clearly challenging

scientific materialism in which consciousness is an illusion, as well as postmodernism, in which subjectivity does not exist. I admire Martin's intellectual honesty and courage.

Martin describes the Quaker path as a “radical, transforming faith” shaped in the classic three-tier way of purgation, illumination, and union, which she terms awakening, convincement, and faithfulness. She then unpacks the path by identifying ten core elements of that journey, describing each as a stage along the way. The culmination of the journey, which comes about through the radical surrender of the self to the loving embrace of God, is named by the often-misunderstood term “perfection.” Martin defines the perfection of early Friends as “a union with the divine Fountain of Love, a state attained after the ‘old man’ was crucified and the person was born anew as a son or daughter of God. Becoming entirely faithful led to being united with the flow of God’s Love for all.” She also translates perfection into contemporary terms as “wholeness,” which “comes when something larger and wiser than the self has taken control, when God becomes the active force in a person’s life and any goal other than loving faithfulness has fallen away.” Other traditional Quaker terms for stages on the way are “openings” (“revelations... of what they called Truth: direct understanding of spiritual reality”); “The Refiner’s Fire” (“the penetrating Light” revealing “everything that was resistant or contrary to God’s Love and Truth. A process of purification and regeneration leading to life as a new kind of person”); and “Living in the Cross” (“to make sacrifices that our limited human will would prefer not to make, and to do so for the sake of God’s greater purposes.”) Other elements use more familiar contemporary language such as seeking, community, and leadings. All of the stages she describes can be found in some form in the literature of the traditional Christian mystical path. They are not necessarily unique to the Quaker experience, but according to Martin, they are foundational.

Martin carefully maps the sequence and the nuances of each stage of the journey, a practice that has a long tradition in Christian spiritual texts from Origen in the third century through biblical allegory, to Bonaventure’s *The Soul’s Journey into God*, to Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle*. Along with these classic texts, Martin clarifies that the journey is not an ascent *to* God, but an entry *into* union with God. And while the journey is presented as a sequentially deepening path, she is careful to remind us that the journey can also be cyclical, may be repeated many times, and often we fall back to earlier stages.

Each element is examined and illustrated by both seventeenth century Quaker figures and contemporary examples, from across the diverse Quaker branches. The juxtaposing of early Quaker spiritual experience with contemporary Quaker experience creates a nice balance between the noble ideas of perennialism (in religion at its essence all people are experiencing the same thing) and constructivism (that all human experience is shaped by local culture, language, history, etc.). Martin demonstrates that mystical experience is both mediated and shaped by context and thus diverse, but also that shared forms of these elements are a part of our common human heritage and transcend culture. Martin reminds us that we have “The Light” as a powerful spiritual force within us that we can tap, as did the early Quakers. We can still be a prophetic voice in our culture. A book like *Our Life is Love* can nourish the mystics and prophets among us, those who live on the outside edges of our Quaker meetings, as well as our wider mainstream culture. She is not writing for a few Quaker scholars, but for the entire Quaker world.

Martin concludes her book by narrating her own spiritual journey and showing how the ten elements weave through her own story. She is clear that each person’s journey is unique, and the elements will be experienced and blended in a particular and personal way for everyone.

Her final section answers the question that every thoughtful reader of history should ask: “So what”—why study the past when all the challenges of the present lie before us. Her response: “The faithful efforts of many Quakers described in these pages...helped to make space for something new in human thinking and being.”

Martin, with her passionate optimism and a strong divine leading, believes that Quakers today, though as a group we are small, hidden and declining, still have a significant role in the healing of the world. Martin follows her call with a holy obedience that will inspire more timid souls. She challenges us to renew the prophetic voice among Friends, powered by a shift of consciousness that transformed early Friends into mystics and prophets so that we too “can fully and joyfully dedicate ourselves to participating in the creation of an evolved humanity and a renewed world.” Although Martin explores the past, she is writing for the future. It is my hope that readers may discover new ways to apply her insights to the renewal of the Quaker movement today, as well as to the challenges of the social and political milieu in which we find ourselves today.

Our Life is Love is a bridge-building book, written by a Friend who has travelled among many faith traditions and the various Quaker branches. It is not written to argue for any one stance or perspective as the one true interpretation of Quaker history. She lets the protagonists speak for themselves, in their own powerful and evocative words and she enters into their stories with empathy and understanding that only comes from someone who has travelled a similar path. And the path she describes may help answer the longing of spiritual seekers of all faiths, far beyond borders of the Society of Friends.

This book is highly recommended for church or meeting study groups, where it has the power to revitalize and deepen both individual spiritual lives and the spirituality of the congregation or meeting. Thought-provoking reflection questions are provided at the close of each chapter so readers can ponder how each element might relate to their own personal experience, or prompt discussion if used in a small group setting. It can speak to contemplatives, social activists, evangelicals, liberals, conservatives, convergents, or whatever group the reader might identify with across the branches of Friends, though not all will be comfortable with all of her claims and interpretations. Many readers may challenge her ideas on both ends of the Quaker theological and philosophical spectrum, yet that is exactly why it is such a useful tool for intra-faith dialogue. *Our Life is Love* is highly relevant to the deeply unsettled and polarized times we live in, both as Quakers and as a nation, but also a book that is full of hope and optimism, reminding us that there is a Light in the darkness.

To conclude, I would like to restate my thoughts on the scope of this book as stated in my preface: “This book begins where all spiritual journeys begin, with longing for God, for the More, for Truth, the Real, the Ground of Being, or whatever inadequate name we use for the Eternal Mystery. And as that inward journey deepens, it will be reflected and actualized in an outward journey of witness and resistance to the values that rule the world.”

A study guide is available at <http://www.innerlightbooks.com/books/files/StudyGuide-OurLifeIsLove.pdf> Martin is also available to lead workshops and retreats. You can find more of her thoughts and witness on her website: A Whole Heart.