

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRADITION

Reflections on the Writing of Quaker History

Introduction

I would like to begin by saying what a pleasure it is to be here, to come to Yearly Meeting and see so many old friends and acquaintances, but also to be present at this Presidential session of the Friends Historical Society - still more, actually to be the President of the Friends Historical Society. This distinction does not lead to positions of considerable emolument, like the study of Greek, as Dean Gaisford once remarked, but it is the nearest one gets to an honour in the Society of Friends, and I would like to extend my great gratitude to the Friends Historical Society for recognizing me in this way.

I also now have the opportunity of paying tribute to the Friends Historical Society and the enduring value of the *Journal*. In the course of what I have to say, I shall be mentioning the various reasons people have for both reading and also writing Quaker history, and the ways in which the styles of doing this have changed over the years. The *Journal of the Friends Historical Society* is one of the best places to note how these changes have come about. It has always been the forum of the gifted amateur and the dedicated localist and never the preserve of the academically high-and-mighty. That is its great strength. It is, like the Friends Historical Society itself, a monument to faith seeking understanding, an expression of concern for the well-being of the Society of Friends at large, and a concern that when we speak of the past we try to maintain our testimony of being truthful.

There is also the great pleasure of occupying the same platform as many other people down the years whom one has known or whose work one has benefited from. One can't really name names, because the process would be endless, but it is a source of great satisfaction to us all, I am sure, that the line continues and shows no sign of coming to an end.

So that you will know what is coming, let me say that after a few more introductory remarks about my approach to writing Friends history, I want to look briefly at each of my own books as illustrations

of the process. One is an outright history, of course, but the others, while having a different focus, are strongly influenced by historical considerations, and reflect the interests of a mind which finds meaning, significance and wisdom in the events and personalities of the past. I then want to look at three matters where history and theory have approached one another productively, and finally to draw some general conclusions.

I chose this rather catch-all title for a variety of reasons, of which the first is personal. I am almost seventy, and have reached the point at which I am interested in assessing the significance of the things that have happened to me during my life. I am interested, so to speak in the nature of my own history. This is not introspection, and the centre of my attention is not my responses to the world, but the nature of the forces that have acted upon me. I have seen the end of fascism and communism, survived Hitler's War and the Cold War, been through the sixties revolution and the Thatcherite and Blairite revolutions. I have seen the rise of conceptual art and the therapeutic culture, South Bank Religion and liberation theology, the internet and cruise control. Plainly, because of my own temperament and inclinations, my main interest has been in religious matters.

I must hasten to say that I am not really a historian. The Dean of Earlham School of Religion nearly fell off his chair when he heard me say that once, but it is perfectly true. Actually, I prefer to see myself as a high class journalist rather than an historian, because I am a populariser rather than an originator. I am interested in the big picture rather than the painstaking build up of fact and inescapable inference that real historians deal with. History is a discipline with its own methods and standards, of course, and I have tried to practice and respect them. But I guess I stand in the same relationship to real history as a literary critic does to works of literature. My main interest has always been the contextualisation of Quakerism against its historical and cultural background as well as its particular internal developments.

I don't regard that as something negative, be it said, because serious critics are of a constructive disposition. At their best they teach us how to appreciate what we read, and give us insights that we might otherwise have overlooked. We don't have to go the whole way with modern theories of meaning to accept that writers can say more than they either intend or know, and traditionally, the task of the critic had been to reveal some of these meanings. Though it is a parasitic craft, it has its own standards, and we all know good and bad criticism when we see it.

My critical insight, such as it is, has two principles. The first is that history has its disciplines and they need to be respected. There is a world of difference between trying to write as accurate an account as possible, and being seen, subsequently not to have managed it, and on the other hand, to set out to write an account of an event, a life, a period or a development from a recognized but unacknowledged point of view. I think that the first kind of historical writing can in certain cases aspire to art, but I see the second as special pleading rather than a scholarship. My second principle is expressed in two *bons mots*. As Clemenceau said, "War is much too serious a thing to be left to the generals." and as George Bernard Shaw said, spelling out the reason why this is, "All professions are conspiracies against the laity." This is how I justify my position as a critic. History is about the world which encircles the historical profession, and I am a part of that world. An outsider, but a sympathetic outsider.

I am concerned for historical writing among Friends and about Friends at two levels also because these two levels affect one another significantly. At the lower level there is what I might call the heritage effect. By this I mean that one is surrounded wherever one looks by historical assumptions in the normal course of one's Quaker life. "Ah, the trip to the 1652 country!" "Ah, why haven't we retained the enthusiasm of the early Friends?" "Ah, I don't know what George Fox would have said about that!" But popular historical assumptions are not necessarily good history, and many of those I hear and read are either erroneous or given a context that fits the predilections of the speaker. In the same way that every Friend is his or her own theologian - the one occupation that for Quakers requires no previous experience or training - many Friends are also their own historians - with similar consequences.

But higher up, in the academic headwaters, changes take place which take time to filter down to the popular level. Though part of my argument is to say that historical interest and concern is the lifeblood of our Society, (or has been up to now), the other part is to draw attention to some of the radical changes that have occurred in our understanding of the basic disciplines of history in the last forty years. One occasionally reads references to 'the crisis in the humanities'. I see this manifested in the often unconscious struggle taking place between modernism and postmodernism in the minds of many liberal Friends.

What I mean is this. Faith communities in general, and the Society of Friends of Truth in particular, are now being faced with a fundamental cultural challenge that says that even if there is a truth, it is inaccessible to us with the intellectual instruments we have at our

command. We might be willing to concede that there may be different aspects of the truth, or that some may discern one aspect and others another. But suppose we remove the category of 'truth' from our minds entirely? What then? A radical reappraisal of our history no less than our theology will then be called for.

If postmodern ways of thinking have any merit at all, and they do, we are entering a significant, and, if you pardon the word, historical, debate about the fundamental basis of knowledge, and that necessarily implies historical knowledge. Britain Yearly Meeting becomes part of the debate in this way. Escaping from the restraints of evangelical theology in the late nineteenth century, the Yearly Meeting opted for a form of liberal theology which was in turn based on Enlightenment rationalism, the great merit of which was that it substituted dispassionate enquiry for superstition, claiming that it is possible to establish universally valid truths.

But now, in many quarters, notably in the professions from which many new Friends come, this universal principle, which can alone establish the truth, is under question, with the result that it is increasingly difficult to maintain any sort of corporate commitment as postmodern subjectivism begins to enter the Society. And without a creed of some sort, there is no obstacle whatever to Britain Yearly Meeting relinquishing its liberalism for a new form of subjectivism. Towards the end of this talk, I want to suggest that this is the point we have reached, and to argue that if we see ourselves as a historical people, we have a lot of serious thinking to do about the basis of our historical understanding. If we got our identity from our past, and our assessment of our past is untrustworthy, where does that put us? That is the challenge postmodernism faces us with.

To reveal my hand in advance, I have to assert my conviction that history is one of the humanities, which is the name we give to studies which take human beings, their societies and activities as their subject matter. Not only are they an important source of knowledge, but what makes them distinctive is their moral quality - they civilise and improve us. They therefore have an inherent tendency towards liberalism and tolerance, and they also reveal to us the deep sources of our own personal and corporate identity. Quaker history is therefore of very great importance, and without a knowledge of it our corporate life is diminished. To understand our history is to understand ourselves. It also requires us to be able to defend the integrity of the discipline.

How I Write History

Let me now turn briefly to explain the approach I take to the writing of Friends history. The most obvious fact is that I am committed. I am writing from the inside rather than the outside. This is a challenge, of course, because this situation has advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that one knows in one's bones the reality about which one is reading and writing. The drawback is that commitment breeds sympathy and Quaker history sometimes becomes hagiography. Indeed, in recent years the early period has been revisited by a number of historians and a very different picture is emerging from that given in the Rowntree series. We can't escape our background, of course, but we need a certain vigilance with our commitments.

I am also interested in people, because, fundamentally, history is something that happens to us. We join it when we are born, and it accompanies us through life. This is why I said that I regard history as one of the humanities. Consider the following topics:

- (a) the average age of Quaker marriages in the eighteenth century.
- (b) the number of Quaker meeting houses licensed under the Toleration Act in 1715.
- (c) the rateable value of the houses of Hicksite and Orthodox members of Philadelphia YM in the run-up to the 1827 separation.
- (d) the number of recorded ministers per meeting in Indiana YM 1870 and 1890.

These matters are interesting for a variety of reasons, but one of them is that they rest on some sort of statistical analysis. Underneath statistics, however, there are the lives of real people and the convictions that animate them. The topics I have mentioned involve a number of other matters that are thereby thrown into relief -

- the theology of marriage in the eighteenth century.
- the size and distribution of the Quaker population in England on the eve of the so called Quietist period.
- economics factors influencing the Great Separations in America.
- and the genesis of the pastoral system in the nineteenth century.

The broad stream running beneath the statistics and the interpretations is the corporate experience of our co-religionists in all its complexity. What were their lives like? Were they creatures of habit or discipline? Were they attuned to what was happening in the outside world, and if so how? If a hedge was planted and maintained between the meeting and the outside world, what ideas crept under the hedge, and what compromises had to be made between inherited wisdom and contemporary experience? That is where my interest primarily lies.

I think you can see that my standpoint is that of a classical liberal, in the sense that I believe that there is an historical truth to be discovered. There is a difference between explaining and explaining away, and the attempt to write 'scientific' history can lose that distinction. Keats wrote that "'Beauty - Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' - that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Well, I fully accept the need for discipline, consistency, accuracy, attention to detail, willingness to face uncomfortable conclusions, willingness to be corrected, and all the academic values without which we do not have integrity, but ultimately, I think history has to tell us, to the best of its ability, what it was like to be alive *then*. That is its magic and that is where it approaches most closely to what Keats called beauty.

And this it does primarily by telling stories. I want to look at what a story is a little later, but I guess most of my own work falls into this category - if not the main narrative of the Society of Friends, commentaries of particular parts of it. So I would now like to look at my own four books from this perspective. They contain history, none of them is original, but they attempt to find meaning and significance by viewing factual information through the lens of other concerns and interests that arise out of the continuing experience of Britain Yearly Meeting, in which my life as a Friend began, and Indiana Yearly Meeting to which I now owe my religious allegiance.

Portrait in Grey

The first book I wrote was, of course, *Portrait in Grey*, which I suppose is a straight story book into which I put everything I thought an informed Friend ought to know or a newcomer might like to know. It began its life as a series of four general talks arranged by Warwickshire Monthly Meeting. When preparing these talks I had to make a choice about what information to include and what to leave out, but also, what kind of shape I was going to give the material so that people might remember something more than just a few disconnected facts. I was not as well-read in the subject then as I later became, but I think, with the resources available to me, I was able to present the history of Friends in such a way as to suggest what really was generally agreed, and also where the areas of controversy were.

When the Literature Committee asked me to write *Portrait in Grey*, they asked for a trial chapter. I knew the Committee were open to new light, but I reckoned it wiser not to shock them over much by writing about the (by then) fairly well established theory about the Puritan origins of Quakerism. So I wrote about the eighteenth century, a suitably uncontroversial period that everybody knows was the heyday of Quietism, (if that isn't a contradiction in terms),

the period when Friends retreated into a refined inwardness which withdrew them from the world and created the 'hedge', the set of practices which kept them isolated from the mainstream of religious life and perhaps betrayed the original world-transforming spirit of the early period.

Now I had an unorthodox view of the significance of this period. It seemed to me to be very creative. The families which later came to the fore as the great capitalists and philanthropists of the nineteenth century were beginning their rise to eminence and were symptomatic of that creativity. It is hard to see how these achievements would have come about without the restrictions on dissenters, objectionable though they might have been on other grounds. Some people will never learn that a university education is not a panacea for all social ills and can actually hold people back, but that is another argument. No, I began to see the shortcomings in J.S. Rowntree's 1859, argument. It is not that I did not feel their force, but rather, as those of you versed in hermeneutics will understand, I felt that there were points that were omitted, and others that were not given the right weight. I hasten to add that I not offering a criticism of Rowntree - simply saying that my criticism occurred to me a century later and would never have occurred to me then. History does, in fact progress.

Anyway, I managed to satisfy the committee, and I am quietly proud that *Portrait in Grey* has held up well, and is in common use as the standard textbook of Quaker history in many of the Friends Schools and Colleges in the United States. But it is curling at the edges a bit, and when someone comes up with a new framework of interpretation, it will get a well-earned retirement.

Encounter with Silence

The way I came to write *Encounter with Silence* was quite different. In 1984, when I was on sabbatical leave at the Earlham School of Religion, I was invited to bring the message (you either take the service or bring the message in pastoral Quaker circles) at the Friends Church in Winchester, Indiana. After meeting I went home to lunch with the pastor and a number of Friends from the meeting. The extempore grace offered by our hostess at that meal was one of the most beautiful prayers I have ever heard. After the meal we got round to talking about worship. Silence punctuated the religious life of the people there, but they had no extended experience of the silent meeting. Out of this conversation came the impulse to write something that would enable the noisy Friends, many of whom feel

the loss of silent worship, and would like more of it, to understand what those of us who are quiet Friends actually do.

So how was one to frame such an account? Obviously I could write from personal experience, but I am afraid personal experience has more drawbacks than most Friends are willing to allow. When someone uses 'experience' as an authority for some proposition or other, particularly religious, I always ask, "Experience of what?" The reason is that this answer, 'experience', raises more philosophical questions than it answers. My experience was that of urban England; theirs of rural America. What common terminology might one devise to make communication between denizens of these two Quaker worlds easier? Personal experience? Surely not.

So I devised an approach that contained two elements. The first was obviously the stories I could tell, the experience part of the package. We were all Christians, so the imagery and terminology of the faith was a suitable vehicle. When I talked about Christ, we all knew who we meant - the Son of God who is our saviour. No need to agonise there. So I decided that I would deal with the great themes of Christianity - life, death, salvation, judgment as I had meditated on them, and had my sensibility conditioned by my practice of silent worship in the Society of Friends.

The second element had to be historical. Winchester Friends are who they are because of a sequence of events stretching back far beyond the lifetimes of any of the current members. The same was true of Cotteridge Friends in Birmingham, my then meeting. So to write a book, to conduct a dialogue, to communicate effectively with my Friends in a different tradition, I had to take account of these two sequences of events, and that brought me up short. I could not write effectively about silence without an historical perspective. This obliged me to think about both the similarities and the differences of the two branches of Friends in America in the years following the Civil War of 1861-65. Before the Second Great Awakening reached its peak in the Holiness Revival of that time, silent worship was universal among Friends, traditional, liberal and evangelical alike. There is therefore a period of common Quaker culture lasting, notionally, for 213 years (1652-1865) and then the 119 years from then to 1984 when this lunch took place. So what I had to build on, though I did not realise it at the time, was a common Quaker ancestry and the divergence of the two styles of worship after the 1860s. That is how I first encountered the majority tradition among Friends.

Testimony and Tradition

My Swarthmore Lecture, *Testimony and Tradition*, still in print, contrary to all my expectations, took the theme of worship and put it in a particular context. This book also had a definite beginning. In the 1980s, it was the practice of what was then the Quaker Home Service Literature Committee to have a meeting every year to look at what was selling, what wasn't, what needed reprinting and what sort of unmet demands the bookshop was aware of. One year it was reported that there was a demand for some sort of book about the testimonies. I said what I thought should be in it and the Committee then and there asked me to write it. For some reason I forgot, this was impossible, so I was able to resist the committee's pressure and heard no more about it.

Until, some time later, I was in Boston and I received a letter from the Clerk of the Swarthmore Committee. How they knew I was going to be there I do not know. It read “**Dear John, at the last Swarthmore Lecture Committee meeting we thought that at this time the Yearly Meeting might like to hear from you about some matter of contemporary concern. We are sure that there are many things that you would like to say to us, and we would not wish to influence your choice in any way. Nevertheless, the topic of the testimonies seems to us admirably suited to the present concerns of Friends.**” Well, there you are. You can never escape the clutches of the Quaker Mafia, and by the way, I lay claim to being the originator of that term. I won't explain. You know what it means. That is how I came to give the Swarthmore Lecture for 1990.

Underlying the lecture was the sense that our understanding of ‘testimony’ is moving away from the religious towards the political frame of reference. I think this is mistaken, and I tried to present what we call ‘testimony’ in terms of two basic conceptions - ‘church’ and ‘tradition’.

Lets take ‘Church’ first. Historically, the concept of testimony arose out of the standards of discipleship maintained by Friends and codified, naturally enough, in the Discipline. Discipleship itself rested on the spiritual condition of faithfulness, not works, righteousness, or ‘success’ and that is why the word ‘testimony’ is used. Now this is something that must be corporately maintained, and the question arises, ‘by what authority are these standards made the basis of Friends’ corporate commitment?’ I found an answer in one of the things I learned while writing *Portrait in Grey*. Of all the different models we can hold up to early Quakerism, the one which fits it best is that of the slightly earlier continental Anabaptist

movement. How, to use specifically Quaker terms, does the Light lead to corporate discernment? Now the Anabaptist part of the argument is that in settling this question there is no question of historical legitimacy. The Church is constituted by Christ directly, here and now, in the gathered community, because they have been gathered by the contemporary word, not the tradition that has been handed down.

This raises a number of questions which were answered in certain way in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, but a hundred years or so later, when the forces of the Protestant Reformation struggled free in the mid-1600s, we were on the eve of recognizably modern times, and the full consequences of freeing the Christian conscience were being worked through. The radicalism of the Anabaptist movement is clearly discernible among Friends - pacifism, simplicity, egalitarianism, the separation of church and state, but the corporate discipline that sustained this witness in the face of persecution proved difficult to maintain as society moved towards toleration, and the equivalent court and country parties appeared in the Society. In other words, we have always had strong internal differences of opinion. In America this has led to separations, but in England, they have usually been contained.

But how? This was the second component of any Swarthmore Lecture, which I want to touch on later. I had for some time been wrestling with the thesis in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, and it struck me that his conception of a tradition was clearly exemplified among Friends. A tradition is not necessarily consistent. Indeed, its lack of consistency is in some senses its life blood. From one point of view a tradition looks like the agenda of a group which has - and here is the point - a recognizable historical continuity - but which is in continual debate over the significance of its doctrines and values. This might help Britain Yearly Meeting, I thought, to see itself more clearly at this point in its history.

Reasons for Hope

To understand the background to my latest book, Friends need to understand a little about World Quakerism. There are roughly 338,000 Friends in the world and about 278,000 (or just over 80 per cent) belong to meetings which have a pastor and a programmed worship service with hymns, choruses, scripture readings and sermons, mostly evangelical in outlook. That means four out of five Friends. That is what I earlier called the majority tradition. Within this group there are two main associations, Evangelical Friends

International, the stricter body, and Friends United Meeting, partly American, but having the bulk of its membership in Kenya.

As a matter of contemporary Quaker politics, i.e., tomorrow's Quaker history, there is a constituency of opinion which thinks that these groups should coalesce, and another which does not. Now I, (in common, I imagine, with a number of others), was approached some time ago for my opinion about this matter. I said that I thought FUM had a distinctive voice and that a realignment at this point would be undesirable. One of the reasons that body is troubled by this proposal is that it is not clear what its identity is and how, if at all, it differs from the yearly meetings in the Evangelical Friends Alliance.

Reasons for Hope is an attempt to define that identity. The problem I faced here was to construct a theology of Quakerism from an evangelical perspective which would mirror the many theologically liberal theories of Quakerism that are on the market. It is an essay in the history of ideas of course, as well as being a theological work. But because the book was for evangelical Friends, it has nothing to say about the unprogrammed tradition, which is why it will be of only limited interest to the members of Britain Yearly Meeting.

The first task I faced was to show the continuities and discontinuities between early Quakerism and silent, unprogrammed, but evangelical type of Quakerism which dominated Britain Yearly Meeting throughout most of the nineteenth century and which gave rise to the programmed pastoral tradition in the USA as the century drew to its close, and which is now, as I have just indicated, the majority tradition in the world Society of Friends. Secondly, I had to make an argument from the nature of contemporary American Christianity that the way forward for Friends was a renewed emphasis on their tradition and not a compromise with the spirit of the age.

The immediate historical question is why the pastoral system and the programmed meeting developed out of silent worship and traditional Quaker church organization. The answer, I think, lies in social factors and not theology, since evangelical principles had resided quite happily in silent meetings for half a century before this development. There are two branches to the explanation, of which the first is that this development co-incided with the decline of subsistence agriculture on the frontier, the new demands of farming for the market, and the problem of distance in the middle western states of Ohio, Indiana and Iowa. Quite simply, people did not have the time to operate a system that was suited to more compact neighbourhoods, even by American standards, in Pennsylvania and the states east of the Alleghenies. Stage one, the problem, was one of personnel.

Stage two was the solution. Friends of an evangelical persuasion were already associated with other evangelicals through their common campaigns for social improvement, the abolition of slavery, temperance, prison reform and so on. Attending other people's religious services, and reading non-denominational, progressive, but evangelical books and other printed material, drew them into the revival movement. Meetings began to organize their own revivals, many new members were attracted, but the traditional system proved unable to cope. The practice emerged of Friends (and others) who conducted a revival, to be asked to stay on to give pastoral and other ministerial help to meetings. Silence declined in importance. Then, quite soon, meetings began to call pastors, and the system emerged.

It must be noted though, that the whole panoply of clerks, ministry, eldership and oversight remained in place, which to this day poses problems to Quaker pastors that those serving in other denominations often do not face. The enthusiasm of the revival meeting led to the adoption of the programmed meeting, but I want to discuss that under another head, because, surprisingly, there is an intimate connection between the teaching of George Fox and John Wesley on the subject of perfection, which I believe had been seriously overlooked by Quaker theologians and historians hitherto, partly because so many of them come from the liberal side of the Quaker divide.

So that gives you some idea of how I have approached the history of Friends. The sympathetic bystander's view of Quaker history if you like. The generalist attitude has its advantages, but the renaissance of Quaker history which I suspect is under way with all the new educational opportunities open to Friends wishing to study their own faith community, will result in much new information and new perspectives which I am sure we should welcome and not greet with suspicion or fears of unorthodoxy.

I would now like to turn and open up some of the theoretical questions I mentioned earlier and see what light they can throw on our understanding of ourselves. I want to do this with reference to three topics, unconnected with one another, that are suitable for the purpose. Each of them will illustrate some controversy, and thereby some general principle underlying the writing of Quaker history. I shall be making reference to:

- (1) the question of how sects become denominations,
- (2) the place of perfection in Quaker doctrine,

(3) how the origins of Quakerism might best be interpreted. I shall be circling round the central problem of what agreed narrative, if any, Quakerism has.

Sect and Denomination

First there is the question of variations within the tradition. There are now two main groups of Friends in the world, as we have seen, those which employ the pastoral system and those which assemble for the more traditional silent meeting. Nobody worships, behaves or believes as the early Friends did, so each of these groups is in fact a variant of the original stock, and the question arises, how did this come about?

The short answer is, the impact of the Evangelical Revival, but, I would argue, in its social not its theological consequences. The early nineteenth century was the time when Friends on both sides of the Atlantic were drawn into the range of philanthropic activities I have just noted, and acquired a wide circle of acquaintanceship outside the Society. It seems that in some circles, this form of co-operation reduced both differences and the desire to be different.

We usually use theological categories to discuss this period, and opinion is divided between those who see it as a declension from the purity of Friends traditional faith and practice, and those who see it as a revival of Friends original enthusiasm. Each of these viewpoints was vigorously debated in the early nineteenth century, but the argument draws our attention away from another way of looking at the phenomenon which may have instructive consequences.

When Weber and Troeltsch brought the disciplines of sociology to the classification of religious organizations, they conceived a fundamental difference between churches and sects. The Church is an ideal type exemplified by the state churches of Europe. It claims to include all members of society, has historically sought to preserve its own monopoly and to eliminate opposition. It is hierarchical, closely allied with the state and a patron of education and culture. On the other hand, sects derive from the lower classes and gather round charismatic self-appointed leaders. Commitment is more important than learning. Sects develop distinctive dress and speech codes, rigorous internal discipline, and provide guarded education for their offspring.

Over time, however, sects tend to turn into denominations. Economic mobility, social and religious toleration, and education draw them towards the mainstream. While denominations have a certain historical defensiveness, they tend to adopt the educational

and professional standards of the church type of organization, and almost inevitably, some form of ecumenical consciousness and a longer view of Christian history than sects customarily have.

So the phenomenon of evangelical Quakerism, usually regarded as a theological development, can now be seen in rather a different light. Since there has never been a state church in the United States, religious history has a very different dynamic, for there is no need for self-definition against a massive and monolithic religious establishment. It was therefore far easier there than here for Quaker meetings of an evangelical persuasion to join with others for a whole range of social and philanthropic activities rather than seek to maintain their distinctive testimonies when there seemed to be no contemporary need for them. The evangelical branch therefore began to experiment with, and then adopt the pastorate and the programmed meeting not for theological reasons, but because, socially, it was moving away from the posture of a defensive sect towards that of a comparatively open denomination.

My own feeling is that we can see the stirrings of this kind of movement towards the end of the nineteenth century in Britain, when it was the theology of liberalism that drew Friends into such bodies as the Free Church Federal Council and led to the Scarborough Summer Schools, the setting up of Woodbrooke, the foundation of the Swarthmore Lectures and so on. But this movement was contemporaneous with the rise of the mystical interpretation of Quakerism which satisfied simultaneously the liberal impulse, the sectarian impulse and the world view of Edwardian progressivism. While there are denominational tendencies in Britain Yearly Meeting, my own estimate is that in general the sentiments of British Friends are now indifferent to, rather than sympathetic to the churches at large, and preserve a certain measure of the old sectarian spirit, exemplified by the tendency to say what they are *not*, when asked what they *are*.

Holiness and the Second Blessing

The next matter I want to mention is, in my opinion, of crucial importance in the understanding of American Quaker history, but is almost entirely unknown in this country. My curiosity was first aroused at Woodbrooke, when I came across a book in the library entitled, *The Quaker Methodists of Warrington*, by Arthur Mountfield. It was written in 1924 about two or three little chapels in the Warrington area that grew up in the villages of Stretton, Whitley Reed and Statham and formed an independent connexion at a time

when Methodism was becoming more organized (and authoritarian) and a number of Friends were looking for revival and found it among the Wesleyans. I wondered why.

At the same time I was pondering about the nature of what we call 'convincement' and exactly how it differed from conversion. I thought there had to be such a difference because the people to whom the experience came were already quite experienced Christians and it is inconceivable, at any rate to me, that there had not been some point at which they would have acknowledged Christ's claims upon them. So what was the nature of this subsequent experience? In *Reasons for Hope* I looked at the writings of Mary Penington, Charles Marshall, John Crook, William Dewsbury, Joan Vokins, Francis Howgill and Fox himself, and certain things appeared to me.

Those who experienced convincement went through a period of deep spiritual distress, sometimes years in duration, in which the regular observances of the Church were useless. They turned inward for solace but in fact met a new and different kind of spiritual pain, in which they felt they were being tested and all their secrets revealed. After considerable further distress they emerged triumphant. Not everybody uses the same words, but Fox is characteristically bold, "I was come up to the state of Adam which he was in before he fell." This is, of course, a claim to personal perfection.

Now John Wesley, in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* claims that perfection is the outcome of the Christian life, and can be expected and looked forward to. There is a significant difference, of course, in that Wesley sees it as a gift of the Spirit, a second blessing followed the first blessing of conversion, to be sharply distinguished from the normal growth in grace which every Christian should seek. Wesleyan perfection can be seen in different ways, but it is to say the least remarkable that both Quakerism and Methodism make the same claim. Is this fortuitous, or is there something in the dynamic of Fox's teaching which was shared by John Wesley?

Several things immediately spring to mind. Fox and Wesley were both Arminian and rejected the doctrine of predestination. In addition, early Friends rejected the idea of imputed righteousness, and it is hard to see on this basis how one can be saved if one has not been convinced, or in some sense perfected. Quakerism and Methodism were both movements of popular revival, often accompanied by ecstatic behaviour. Both deferred to a charismatic leader, and both devolved pastoral and preaching responsibilities to

the local level. They both valued plainness and equality and maintained high standards of personal conduct.

I am just flagging this as a matter of interest, and something that I would like to see explored at some length. In my estimation, much American evangelical Quakerism has a Wesleyan flavour. Part of the reason for this is the movement towards denominational status that I have just outlined. But that is not all. I am sure that while they are not the same thing, there are some strong points of comparison between the doctrines and values of the two groups, and a comprehensive theory of Quaker history would need to give proper weight to these connections.

The Origins of Quakerism

Third, and perhaps most familiar, there is the question of Quaker origins. Quakerism developed rapidly at a time of revolutionary change which marks the end of the *ancien régime* in England and the first faltering steps towards representative government. At any rate, this is what the sequence of events in national history might suggest. But this is hindsight, since not many of the protagonists then had this sort of thing in mind. Can we say we know better by imposing such a scheme on these events? In part, of course, we can, because in many senses we are in fuller possession of the facts.

Friends like W.C. Braithwaite took a Whiggish view of English history which saw representative democracy on the Westminster model as the democratic outcome towards which our political history was tending. This was an idealistic view, but none the worse for that. But this secular idealism also made an idealistic interpretation of Quaker origins possible in the spiritual sense. Out of the loins of the Whig interpretation of history came the mystical interpretation of the beginnings of Quakerism, which until fairly recently had no serious competitor.

But one of the weaknesses of idealistic theories is that not every historically significant person is high-minded, and we must take account of a range of human appetites and desires on a historical process. Also the pressures people are under, particularly the range of available options dictated by social and economic status. Not many of the first Friends had influence or position, being mainly of the yeoman or artisan class and they evince the social and political attitudes we would expect, being highly critical of wealth and many sympathetic to, if not supporters of, the programme of the Levellers.

So from the 1950's an alternative theory gained ground which saw Quakerism as a radical, populist movement with serious political

significance. Marxian, or as I would prefer, materialist social theory places the Quaker movement in the middle of the seventeenth-century crisis of authority. Personally, I don't doubt that this period can be explained in terms of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. From this standpoint, purely religious factors, while not absent, move to the back of the stage as another protagonist, social revolution, moves to the fore.

Quite obviously, if we take our history seriously, who we were then will influence what we think of ourselves now, so these controversies are far from just academically interesting. To confound the picture further, there are new voices offstage which say that neither of these grand theories is necessary to explain the period, and we must look instead to the financial and administrative challenges faced by the governments of the day rather than to ideology or economic circumstances. In other words, if this period in our history is not as distinctive as we have been brought up to think, the almost mythological power that early Quakerism has on our imaginations, is a diminishing force, as one would expect as the surrounding culture is entering a markedly ahistorical phase, and new recruits to the Society bring such presuppositions with them.

So where does the truth lie, when a similar set of data is interpreted in a variety of ways? I remember when I was at Woodbrooke and we arranged a conference to commemorate the tercentenary of the Toleration Act of 1689, one of my colleagues came out of interest and was shocked at the divergence of opinion. "I thought historians knew what had happened!" he said in bemusement. We didn't need to enlighten him as to why. But the question is a real one, people ask it, and I think have a right to be told. So where *does* the truth lie? Can we devise some theory of Quaker history that will do justice to the whole?

Conclusions

The answer to this question, which I want to sketch in this final part of what I have to say, is obviously a contemporary one, with the drawback possessed by everything contemporary - it is in the process of becoming out-of-date. While it may not be a final answer, it may help us to engage with our own history at this particular juncture in a way that makes sense. Process is important for Quakers, because history has a different role in our community than, say, Methodist or Baptist history has for them. We construct our identity through history and the sympathetic recreation of what we believe to be the values and frame of mind of our precursors.

Narrative is particularly significant to us as the controversy over origins shows. The mystical, materialist, revisionist, (and, one should add, the evangelical revivalist theory which I have not discussed) all see different significance in the events of the seventeenth century. So, innocent though it may be, we, or I, find myself asking, 'Which is right?'

There are several possibilities. One can simply say there is truth in each and leave it at that. But this is not the answer a *discipline* can be content with. To maintain this view it is necessary to have some theory of multiple meanings, which is hermeneutically speaking, perfectly possible. Personal taste is insufficient, and to decide the matter by preference won't do.

It is always possible to say, of course, that the question is unanswerable as it stands, because it is bound to be laden with preconceptions. We should consider this seriously. The materialist theory emerges out of a Marxist view of reality, and granted its truth, the historical portrayal is bound to be correct. Likewise with the mystical theory of origins. Please understand, this is not to say that people will find what they are looking for. The very idea that we can be independent of our preconceptions *is itself* a preconception. This argument raises the important point that in the humanities we are dealing with human beings as they are, and it would be contrary to reason to think that we can study ourselves without *being* ourselves. It does not follow from the fact that people have different opinions about the truth, that there is no such thing as the truth to be found.

Unless of course, one is some sort of postmodernist. Postmodernism rests on several propositions. Our experience of the world is held to be constituted by our linguistic experience. Language, terminology, and conceptual frameworks are constructed by dominant groups to serve their own purposes resulting in the exclusion or marginalisation of subordinate groups. This being the case, the historical tradition and the literary canon must be deconstructed to show up the ulterior motives and purposes of the dominant group in order to facilitate their replacement. Chief among these instruments of domination is the 'grand narrative', the overarching interpretation of historical experience which gives self-identity to the group. Now if the sources we have available to us are filtered through the dominant narrative, we will not be in a position to recognize the truth at any level of abstraction such as a grand narrative requires, because we are precluded from the data which might make this a possibility. So goodbye to overall interpretations of history, and goodbye to the possibility of 'Quaker' history in the sense that I have been talking about it.

There are three responses to postmodernism, I think, each of which is important to Quaker historians. The first is simply a defence of traditional ways of thinking. Although one can accept that people write about the past with conscious and unconscious biases, it does not follow that the consensus of critical professional opinion cannot make allowances for these things and come to a reasonable conclusion about the truth of any matter.

The second response flows from this. History is certainly written from particular standpoints, usually in the form of the assumptions brought to the task and the weight given to different parts of the evidence. Suppose we were to say, yes, there is no unbiased history, the best history is written with biases and why not? We don't need to make the postmodern move and say that *therefore* we cannot get at the truth through the barrier of presuppositions. We can say that the real field of history is revealing and then debating the presuppositions, because the question of truth transcends history and we know it when we see it because we have a prior understanding of the conditions on which it is revealed to us. This is the proper way to contextualize our *religious* story.

I think that this is what Friends have always done. Britain Yearly Meeting has had serious divisions in the past, and the minority groups have simply faded away. In America the divisions are real and permanent, and many of the minorities have survived, so no grand narrative of Quakerism can be established unless it is firmly based on the reality of the divisions. I have to stress this point. Herbert Morrison used to say, "Socialism is what a Labour Government does." With equal insouciance, British Friends tend to think, "Quakerism is what Britain Yearly Meeting says it is." Both propositions are equally false, though one suspects that Morrison, at any rate, had his tongue in his cheek.

No, I think that we can do a lot worse than turn to Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of a tradition as the vehicle for our thoughts. Let me put it like this. Any group such as Friends will have its own contemporary standards, but at the same time represent a tradition, possessing all kinds of beliefs, customs and practices that have come down to it. That is the usual sense of the word. But suppose we define it as "An argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed, and by whose progress a tradition is constituted." (*After Virtue, Notre Dame, 1978, p.86*)

Now if we are aware that Quaker history has often been polemical or ideological, we could nevertheless conceive a history written on these principles which would both give due weight to the controversies that animate us, past and present, but also school us into a fuller appreciation of alternative points of view through what is essentially a dialectical process. Judgments as to truth are still possible, but we are clear what the hurdles are which they must jump in order to be tenable and capable of withstanding criticism.

To conclude, may I sound a note of warning and encouragement. These remarks have been reflections on the activity (I won't call it "work") of an historically engaged person. I find it increasingly difficult to communicate with those who have been educated more recently than I, because they seem to lack both knowledge and interest in the past. We have a Prime Minister, for example, who believes that history cannot pose us any problem we cannot solve. But sadly, as Cicero said somewhere, to be ignorant of the past is to remain a child. I am sure we are living in a profoundly ahistorical age.

This is a standing challenge to Friends, who have always been a profoundly historical people, once for theological reasons, when they posed an alternative reading of Christian history to the larger Christian community. Now, however, because they lack that previous theological consensus, they have to look to some other source to understand their character and identity. And it is to their history that they have looked. So where is that history to be found? Since we do not have people specially charged with the duty of providing it, the responsibility falls on all of us who have ever received the Muse's summons to do our bit. I congratulate the Friends Historical Society for its great achievements in the past and conclude by saying that it has never been needed more.

John Punshon

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