

# The Light Within - then and now

by

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The Light Within is a fundamental concept of our Quaker faith. We could say that it was the central concept, around which the others revolve. But it is also a remarkably vague concept. Friends use it quite freely to refer to a whole range of ideas and experiences, but there is little sense of a secure and lasting meaning, grounded in our history or in our own experience. This ambiguity affects all of us. How do we make sense of our faith, intellectually, without clarity on this central idea? How do we communicate our faith to others? If you were asked by a non-Quaker, for example, to explain what we Quakers mean by it, what would you say?

Listen to this definition of the Light from Margery Abbott in the recently published *Historical Dictionary of the Friends (Quakers)*<sup>1</sup>:

LIGHT: The Light is within though from without, and if a person stands in the Light, responds to Christ, and is obedient, the power will be given to the individual to end all his or her wrongdoing.... In the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued unease exists among some (Orthodox) Friends when the term is used without a clear indication that the Light is of Christ as identified with the historic Jesus. Liberal Friends have taken to heart the early Quaker assertion that the Light is available to all people even if they know nothing of Jesus....The Light, often spoken of as the Inner Light, has become a unifying phrase among liberal Friends because of the multiple ways it can be interpreted, ranging from views similar to those of George Fox to the more frequent sense of the Light as a universal force of Love and discernment which is present in the human heart.

It is, I think, a fair account of the variety of Friends' understanding, so long as we include among Friends the more conservative and evangelical wings of the movement in America

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<sup>1</sup> Edited by Margery Post Abbott, Mary Ellen Chijioke, Pink Dandelion and John William Oliver Jr., published by The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford, 2003 (a revised edition out shortly).

and elsewhere. But it does not come across as a coherent concept. It is 'within though from without'. It is 'of Christ as identified with the historical Jesus', yet it is a 'universal force of love and discernment'. Even if we take one of these definitions, we can still ask with some puzzlement 'What exactly does the Light refer to, then?'

What I want to suggest to you today is that we cannot answer that question because in the course of our history we have forgotten. We knew once, when our movement started, but life has changed since then, and we can no longer recall what our distinctive language meant, and might mean today. So let us begin our enquiry by taking a brief look at what happened.

### **A brief history**

If George Fox's writings were clearer we might have kept that original meaning in mind. This difficulty has been something of a frustration for me personally, since I have seriously wanted to know what George Fox was trying to say, so I have studied those writings in detail with the hope of understanding what he meant by the key concepts that he used. It has been something of a revelation. I'll try to explain that meaning in the course of this talk, but I want now simply to indicate how the meaning could have got lost.

The first thing to note is that Fox's message, and that of other early Friends, was very new and radical. It was, you might say, a radical answer to radical times. With the king deposed, the church divided and even the Bible called in question, there was a desperate search to find something or someone that could really be relied on. People looked to new and different theologies and political ideas, but Fox had something new and different altogether. He said, 'Your teacher is within you, look not forth',<sup>2</sup> that is, 'Your teacher is inside you, so don't look outside'. Don't look to preachers and books, not even to the Bible, but look to the resource you already have inside you. This will teach you what you want to know. Or better, this will *show* you what you need to know, because the reality of it is already there if you have eyes to see and a light to see by.

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<sup>2</sup> George Fox, a paper of 1652 in *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John Nickalls, Cambridge University Press, 1952, p.143; also in my anthology of George Fox, *Truth of the Heart*, Quaker Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2007, (hereafter *TOTH*) 1:1.

There's the point. As Fox said in two of his simplest definitions:

The light is that by which ye come to see.<sup>3</sup>

For with the light man sees himself.<sup>4</sup>

The Light, as he understood it, was not something you saw in the distance, like a beacon or a lamp to entice you on. It was something you saw *by*, like the light of the sun or moon. It enabled you to become aware of the reality around you, and indeed of the reality inside you, but which you couldn't normally see because of the dark. He was using 'dark' and 'light' metaphorically, of course. They were in fact regular metaphors of the time for the human condition of knowing or not knowing the truth. The great English reformer, William Tyndale, had said a century before, 'All that lie in ignorance are called darkness'.<sup>5</sup> And one Francis Rous, writing some twenty years before Fox, but anticipating him, said, 'The soul has two eyes – one human reason, the other far exceeding that, a divine and spiritual Light.... By it the soul doth see spiritual things as truly as the corporal eye doth corporal things'.<sup>6</sup> Like Fox too, he was echoing the language of the Gospel of John, where light and darkness are described as the opposing realities of human life, so that it is only when humans are healed of their blindness or come out of the dark, that they will see 'the truth' that will 'set them free'.<sup>7</sup>

For all that Fox was anticipated by other spiritual writers of his time, and indeed by the Bible itself – when read in the light and with open eyes! - Fox's message was new and startling. He was telling people that they had the light of God within them and that, if they could open themselves to it, it would show them all they needed to know. On the questions that most deeply concerned them in life, nothing else was essentially required. The corollary of this brave declaration was that until that inner awakening took place, people were living in the dark. They may have been learned, pious or experienced in the ways of the world, or of religion, but if they didn't really experience the reality they were talking about, they were of no help to themselves or to anyone else. In fact, trusting preachers, books or religious rites to get you where you really wanted to be was a positive hindrance.

This message was not welcome in the hierarchy of church and society, as you can imagine. It was far too subjective and individualistic. It was disrespectful of learning and

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3 George Fox, Epistle 34 (1653), in *The Works of George Fox* (hereafter *Works*), 7:42; in *TOTH* 1:68.

4 George Fox, Epistle 149 (1657), *Works* 7:142; in *TOTH* 1:81.

5 For reference see 'darkness' in my glossary of Fox's terms, *TOTH* p.155.

6 For reference see 'light' in my glossary of Fox's terms, *TOTH* p.161.

7 See, for example, John 1:1-18; 8:32.

authority and, what was worse, it threatened to undermine the given structures of society by persuading people to trust themselves. The result was inevitable. The church and state persecuted the Quakers with the full intention of eliminating the movement altogether. They nearly succeeded. But fortunately (for us) the Quakers held out, trusting the inner Light which had done so much for them. And they put out a strong defence. The educated among them wrote some impressive books setting out their case, explaining that the Quaker movement was a recovery of the original intention of Christianity, 'primitive Christianity revived' (William Penn), and soundly corroborated by the Bible itself, which Christians generally accepted as the basis of their faith. Robert Barclay's book, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1676), was the most effective, a brilliant piece of theological argument, which did as much as anything to establish Quakerism as a respectable, law-abiding, Bible-reading religion. But it also had a negative effect. It established the idea that Quakerism was not only compatible with reason and the Bible, which had been Barclay's intention, but also *based upon* them. By defending the Quaker way so successfully by the criteria of the society against which Quakers had protested, he seemed to be accepting those criteria as the most important for him, and for Quakers. Although accepting in theory that the Quakers depended on the Light within them to show them the truth<sup>8</sup>, he interpreted this truth by drawing it from scripture<sup>9</sup> and the theologians who had interpreted it in the past. The Light was then reduced to a God-given faculty in humans which enabled them to recognize the truth of what these authorities had said, very much as Calvin had said in his pioneering work of the Reformation. The Light was 'a real spiritual substance, which the soul of man is capable to feel and apprehend'.<sup>10</sup> It was an 'organ' that enabled people to see spiritual realities, a secret 'vehicle' within them that bore the divine spark.<sup>11</sup> The crudity of these descriptions must indicate that Barclay had lost the sense he had once had of seeing his whole life lit up by a mysterious source within him. In the flurry of argument with the

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8 E.g. 'Therefore the object of faith, and revelation of the knowledge of God to every true Christian, is inward, immediate and objective', *Apology* Proposition 2, ? 11.

9 E.g. 'Though then we do acknowledge the Scriptures to be very heavenly and divine writings.... yet we may not call them the principal fountain of all truth and knowledge, nor yet the first adequate rule of faith and manners; because the principal fountain of truth must be the Truth itself, i.e. that whose certainty and authority depends not up another' (*Apology* 3:2), yet Barclay insists, later in this section, 'We do look upon them [the Scriptures] as the only fit outward judge of controversies among Christians, and that whatsoever doctrine is contrary unto their testimony, may therefore justly be rejected as false. And for our parts, we are very willing that all our doctrines and practices be tried by them' (3:6).

10 *Apology* 5 and 6:14.

11 A good scholarly discussion of this can be found in Leif Eeg-Olofsson, *The Conception of the Inner Light in Robert Barclay's Theology*, Gleerup, Lund, Sweden, 1954 (available in the Woodbrooke library, stack F11).

thinkers of his time, he had to think of something that would have meaning for them.

We can also see in retrospect that what Barclay did in trying to defend his persecuted people was to play down those elements of their faith that had provoked the persecution in the first place, that is, their rejection of external authority and their affirmation of their own internal resources. This softening of the critique appealed to Friends too, naturally enough, since by now they were weary of persecution and worried for their future survival. For the next 200 years or so they accepted Barclay's defence of their faith as the very best guide to the meaning and basis of their faith. They continued to affirm the Light Within, and they continued to 'wait in the Light' for illumination and guidance, but it had ceased to have the dynamic and transformative role it had had at the beginning. They continued to affirm the Truth that the Light revealed to them, and to live by it, but it was no longer the truth of their own life, the reality of everyday, which each Friend could see for him or herself, but a distinctly religious truth about God and his will, somewhat abstracted from their everyday experience.

We can see this change in outlook in Friends' attitude to behaviour. In the beginning they relied on the inner resource to illuminate their life so that they could see what to do. Even when they checked with the Meeting, or with Scripture, that they were doing the right thing, it was still this inner, divine resource, speaking through the Meeting or through Scripture, that guided their actions. With the onset of persecution, however, they became vulnerable to attack when individual Friends followed their own Light without checking with the others. Nayler's riding on a donkey in imitation of Christ was the first of these provocative actions. So Friends began to insist, and increasingly through the next hundred years, that *all* their inspirations should be checked with the Meeting and that, accordingly, Meeting should prescribe rules for the whole of Quaker behaviour.<sup>12</sup> It was an understandable development, and possibly necessary if Quakerism was to survive, but its effect again was to dampen and stifle the Spirit that had given it life.

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12 On this development see the insightful lecture by William Braithwaite, *Spiritual Guidance in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (the Swarthmoor Lecture), Headley Bros, London, 1909; and Pink Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 68, 221ff, where he describes the shift over the centuries from 'truth' to 'rules' to 'values'.

It is therefore not surprising that there was a reaction against this 'quietism' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Friends were seeing signs of spiritual life in other churches, in the wake of the evangelical revival, and some of it was promoting social reform, like the anti-slave trade reform. So, many Friends too began to turn to their Bibles and a personal relationship with Christ, rejecting ideas of the Inner Light which they associated now with merely human resources. If they talked about the Light at all, it was 'the Light of Christ', that is the Light that shone from the exalted person of Christ down into the hearts of those who believed in him. Hence the phrase used by Margery Abbott to define the Light as it is understood today: 'The light is within though from without'. And what they trusted was not so much an inner experience as an external communication of truth, that is, the Bible as interpreted in their evangelical doctrine. This evangelical move brought some life into the Quaker movement, it has to be said, but it took Friends down a road that led further and further from their own historic faith. So when evangelicalism clashed with science in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – both evolutionary theory and biblical scholarship – Friends knew they had to turn back to their roots and rediscover the inwardness and openness of their fundamental faith. That great 'renaissance', as we have come to know it, took place at the turn of the last century. It was able to embrace biblical scholarship – for example, setting up Woodbrooke for the study of Quakerism in the widest context of history and modern knowledge – because it was no longer tied to a doctrinal faith in the Bible, but committed to an Inner Light which enabled Friends to be open to all truth, 'from whatever quarter' it might come.

How then did they think of the Light Within? They certainly restored it to the centre of Quaker thought, but they wanted to see it as an innate capacity in human beings, and not as something given, supernatural, imported from outside. They knew from experience that the Light was already there, within people, waiting to be recognized, because whenever they turned to it, it illuminated their lives and their world. Rufus Jones, who was perhaps the most effective and prolific of these 'renaissance' Quakers, made a special point of this in a pamphlet of 1932, *An Interpretation of Quakerism*, which begins:

The Light Within, which is the central Quaker idea, is no abstract phrase. It is an experience.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rufus Jones, *An Interpretation of Quakerism*, 1932, p.1; in the pamphlet box in F10 at Woodbrooke Quaker library, under H-K.

He continues later, in describing the distinctive character of the Quaker movement,

Every person, male or female, is assumed, in this bold experiment, to possess a spiritual capacity and, since God is Spirit, can come without mediation into direct living relation with Him.<sup>14</sup>

For this reason he was very critical of Barclay, who had dominated Quaker thought up to that point. In his Introduction to Braithwaite's great history of that time – the time of Barclay and the Quaker response to persecution – Rufus Jones took Barclay to task for not recognizing this unique Quaker insight, and giving way instead to the dogmatic way of thinking that was characteristic of his time. Jones' criticism is surprisingly harsh – perhaps too harsh for the editor of the revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1961) who saw fit to leave it out.

This proposition [in Barclay's *Apology*, 4:1:2] regarding the dogma of man's sinful nature is established, after the usual manner of dogmatic theologians, by a judicious selection of Scripture texts, treated in a similar way to that employed by Calvin to prove his theories of 'man'.... No attempt is made to sound the deeps of human experience itself. It does not occur to him that this is a question to be settled by the testimony of the soul, and that first of all one ought to investigate actual human life as it is and to build the theory on facts of experience. He piles up instead a structure of texts and considers that the far-reaching conclusion has been proved.<sup>15</sup>

Jones wants to say, on the basis of experience and the better philosophical understanding of his time, that the Light is an integral part of human nature itself, indeed that God and humans are much closer than Barclay had imagined, so that it is only to be expected that humans should find something of God in themselves, if they chose to look.

This more confident, liberal view carries a danger as well, though. How is this different from telling humans they should be confident in themselves, like the secular moderns had been saying for some time? We can see this danger in another Quaker writer of the time, Edward Grubb, who was doing for Friends in Britain what Jones was doing in America. Notice the subtle contradiction that emerges in this quotation from his book *Authority and the Light Within*. He criticizes Barclay, much as Jones does, for accepting the philosophical dualism of his day, but then generalizes further:

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<sup>14</sup> Op.cit. p.2.

<sup>15</sup> William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, Macmillan, London, 1919, p.xxxiv f.

The early Quakers failed, then, to see through some of the fallacies that were universal in the religious thought of their day, and hence were unable to find a true way of expressing the new truth they had discovered.... What might the Society of Friends accomplish for the saving of men from unbelief and sin, if only it could, in life as well as in words, proclaim worthily the truth for which it stands, and find in the best philosophical thought and knowledge of the present day, a place for the presence of the Light Within?<sup>16</sup>

I think Grubb is right to suggest that the early Quakers failed to find an adequate way of expressing (intellectually) the truth they had discovered. They relied too much on the religious and philosophical structures of their time.<sup>17</sup> But then he suggests that the Light would be better understood if we interpreted it in terms of the 'best philosophical thought' of our time, by which he clearly means the philosophical idealism that was predominant in his time. But what place could philosophy then give to a 'light within'? The obvious answer was the human capacity for reasoning, which had been the basis of the philosophy. So once more this precious, unique insight of the Quakers is being taken over by a philosophical system which really has no place for such a thing.

Fortunately, we have not taken up the suggestion that we look to philosophy for our understanding of Quaker truth, but we have, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adopted the modern, liberal attitude that, to make any good changes in ourselves or the world, we have to look to our own, recognizably human resources. We may call it intuition rather than reason, or conscience or love, but it is understood as a deep part of our human nature which

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16 Edward Grubb, *Authority and the Light Within*, James Clark, London, 1909, pp.86f.

17 I agree too with Rufus Jones on this point, in his 'Introduction' quoted above, p.xxxiii: 'A wholly different type of interpretation would have been far better for the "truth". It was unfortunate to lock up this new idea in that old system'. It is not strictly fair to Barclay, or to the other early writers for that matter, to suggest that their 'new idea' was 'locked up... in that old system', and for two reasons. Barclay drew on the philosophical system of his day only to the extent that he needed (or felt he needed) to defend his Quaker faith against its philosophical critics. His great book was an 'Apology' after all, that is, a formal defence of the faith against those who were attacking it. And like all good defences in argument it appealed to the common ground, the ideas and principles that could be shared by all. So inevitably Barclay's argument will sound like a capitulation to his opponents' view. What we might miss is that Barclay also managed to demonstrate that even with those philosophical assumptions the Quaker view made sense. The other point is that when Barclay was not defending his position, but expounding it, he wrote in a quite different way, drawing on experience, for example, and speaking of his being 'touched' and 'moved' by the life of God. Chapter 11 of the *Apology* stands out from the others as a genuinely Quaker way of articulating our truth, though, surprisingly, Barclay himself does not seem to have recognized the incongruity, or the immense potential for a new way of thinking to accompany and articulate the new way of being. So his own way of expressing Quaker faith was (generally) distorted by his strategy for defending it. See R. Melvin Keiser, 'Touched and Knit in the Life: Barclay's relational theology and Cartesian dualism', in *Quaker Studies*, vol.5, issue 2, March 2001, esp. pp.158-163.

we are familiar with already, and which only needs the attention we give it in a silent meeting for worship. It is, as Margery Abbott well summarizes it, 'a universal force of love and discernment which is present in the human heart'.

This liberal turn has done much for our self-confidence, and for our sense of responsibility in the world. Friends have always been concerned with the social problems of their world, and done much to pioneer reform. Now they have begun to feel, along with other liberals and socialists, that they could be part of a movement to change the world fundamentally. But they have also felt increasingly burdened by the world, and by their own sense of guilt and inadequacy in the face of its great suffering, so they wonder if there is not more to their faith than believing in something true and good in the people they meet. Where is the power of God in all this? Where is the light and truth that can free us from our impotence and anxiety?

The lack of clarity in our basic understanding as Quakers is still a problem, therefore. We have been attracted to one philosophical or religious position after another, as we have faced different crises and challenges in our history. But in the process we have lost our distinctive understanding, and therefore much of the vibrancy and power of our distinctive faith.

### **A closer look at the original meaning**

The meaning has not been entirely lost, however. In the various changes in our history, that I have briefly reviewed, some earlier understanding has been revived or renewed, even as something else has been lost. We have enough of a sense of what our faith is about to stay with it and practise as best we can. We also have enough of a sense of it to recognize it when we meet someone who really lives it, or read a spiritual writing, even of a non-Quaker, which seems to express it well. I have found this myself in my study of Hindu and Buddhist writing, especially of Gandhi. But I have also found it in the writings of the very first Friends, and this has been doubly exciting for me: not only have they told me what it might mean for me to be a Quaker (and what the Quaker movement might be) but they have shown me the richness and depth of our own tradition, that we could learn to draw on again.

At the centre of their understanding, as I have shown already, was a clear understanding of the Light of God within people – clear at least until Barclay tried to make it clearer to the intellectual opponents of the Quaker faith. They knew what it meant to 'turn

to the Light', and to 'walk in the Light'. They also knew that as and when they did so, it gave them great clarity in their lives, and a deep resolve to live by its truth even when this was opposed by the society in which they lived. It gave them a sense of unity too, a real Friendship, as they discovered 'in the Light' the deeper bonds that held them together. All this they 'knew experimentally', even without a clear *intellectual* expression of their truth.

Let me try to articulate what that understanding was – we can consider later how that understanding might be valid for us. I have described it already in broad outline, emphasizing those features which provoked opposition and persuaded Friends eventually to change their view. So let's look in more detail at what it meant for those very first Friends, and for George Fox in particular. I think I can describe it under three general statements.

**1. The Light was a capacity for awareness in every human being.** We have already heard Fox's brief definitions:

The light is that by which ye come to see.

For with the light man sees himself.

It is of course a practical definition of 'light' in a quite literal sense: the light of the sun, for example, is what makes the world visible to us, what makes us aware of it. So Fox is using a quite ordinary sense of the word when he uses it metaphorically to describe our experience of deeper realities. We have noted too how those deeper realities can be *invisible* to us because we have turned a blind eye, or chosen to live in the dark. The reality of life can be very demanding and even scary, so we don't normally take it all in. We select what we want, and we make up the rest to suit our needs and desires. It is an innocent enough ploy to deal with harsh reality, but it is devastating in its results. It detaches us from reality, and our images and ideas come to stand in for reality – and to get in the way of our seeing it, even when we need to and want to. Fox called this 'living in deceit', which is rather close to what we would mean today by 'living in denial'. And it is 'deceit', in Fox's mind, rather than 'disobedience' in the conventional Christian sense, that leads to all the suffering and misery we experience in life. 'When once you deny the truth then you are given over to believe lies.... O, therefore, tremble before the Lord ye hypocrites, and mind the light of God in you,

which shows you the deceit of your hearts, and obey that.<sup>18</sup> By the same token, though, the suffering and misery can be overcome if we can see through the deceit and get to the truth. That may not be so easy, of course, if we are really attached to the ideas and images we have come to rely on in life, and if our normal thinking capacity is bent on justifying these ideas and bolstering our self-image. In Fox's time people were wedded to the ideas of theology as an explanation of life and they were determined to see themselves as 'righteous', that is, as justified in the eyes of God. For Fox himself, though, as with others who became Quakers, these stand-ins for reality were no longer adequate. Reality was asserting itself in the form of serious doubts about what they were taught, and serious worries about how righteous they really were, or could be. They were open to some deeper or more immediate experience of life that would finally disclose the truth of it. This is precisely what happened to Fox as he became aware within himself of an insight that had nothing to do with what others had taught him but everything to do with how he lived life and experienced it himself. Let me give you one dramatic example from his own account in *The Journal*:

But oh, then did I see my troubles, trials and temptations more than ever I had done! As the light appeared, all appeared that is out of the light, darkness, death, temptations, the unrighteous, the ungodly; all was manifest and seen in the light.... And then the spiritual discerning came into me, by which I did discern my own thoughts, groans and sighs, and what it was that did veil me, and what it was that did open me.<sup>19</sup>

The Light showed his 'darkness', and what it was that 'veiled' him, that is, what it was that obscured his vision so that he could not see things properly. It didn't give him knowledge of certain general truths about life, as Barclay suggested, it faced him with the particular reality of his own life, directly. It made him *aware* of what he was doing in himself, with himself and with other people, and what the dire consequences of this were. 'I did discern my own thoughts, groans and sighs', these deep, inarticulate desires and longings that had motivated his behaviour but which he had quite failed to understand or control. To see it all now, 'in the Light', was his liberation, for he could see now what he really wanted and how he could get it. He could see himself as he really was, and others as they really were, without the

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18 George Fox, *Journal* (for 1652), ed. John Nickalls, p.135; also in *TOTH* 1:45. Cf. Romans 1:26. On the suffering this leads to see Epistle 223 (1662), *Works* 7:238, also in *TOTH* 1:49: 'Everyone keep on their watch and guard, against the enemy that led out from God, out of life and truth. For all the sufferings are by and through him that is out of the truth.'

19 George Fox, *Journal* (for 1647), ed. John Nickalls, p.14; also in *TOTH* 1:75.

distortion or 'veiling' of his anxious ideas and images. He was in touch with reality, and reconciled to it.

This experience gave him the confidence to tell others what he had found. They didn't have to rely on what was handed down to them by others, he told them, for they could see the truth for themselves. And they didn't have to rely on external mediations like the Bible or the liturgy, for they had the resource they needed within them, as a God-given capacity for awareness and insight. As Fox wrote jubilantly in *The Journal*,

The Lord God opened to me by his invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the light of Christ; and *I saw it shine through all*.<sup>20</sup>

He is using biblical language to describe this insight – in this case the Gospel of John – but he is not basing his claim on the Bible. It is something he can see for himself, as his eyes are 'opened' by the God within him.

As people responded to his message and found that indeed they could access this source of insight within them, they were launched on a journey of discovery together to find the truth of life that could make them whole. Like the explorers who were sailing the high seas to discover a new world, these Quakers were searching themselves with an inner light, and a whole new world was being discovered – within them. 'As there is a world without you, so there is a world in the heart,'<sup>21</sup> Fox assured them. And like the new scientists of their day they were building up their knowledge on the basis of experience, having seen the inadequacy of external authority to establish what is true and right. It was indeed an experimental religion<sup>22</sup>, comparable to the new, experimental science, and anyone could try it for themselves, testing the validity of their insights against the facts of their experience,

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20 George Fox, *The Journal* (for 1648), ed. John Nickalls, p.33, emphasis mine.

21 George Fox, 'A Word from the Lord to all the World' (1654), in *Works* 4:38; in *TOTH* 1:16. In another tract of the time Fox refers explicitly to the 'new world', and he may well have had in mind, as an analogy, the physical new world that was then being discovered in what became known as America. He is writing to the intellectuals of his time who mocked his 'silent waiting'. 'All you that be in your own wisdom and in your own reason, you tell that silent waiting upon God is famine to you; it is a strange life to you to come to be silent, you must come into a new world' ('An Epistle to all People upon the Earth', 1657, in *Works* 4:132; in *TOTH* 1:63.

22 William Penn described it as such at the time, in what is still a convincing and penetrating account of the new movement: 'Not that thou shouldst believe upon my authority, nothing less; for that's not to act upon knowledge, but trust; but that thou shouldst try and approve what I write: for that is all I ask, as well as all I need for thy conviction, and my own justification. The whole, indeed, being but a spiritual experiment upon the soul, and therefore seeks for no implicit credit, because it is self-evident to them that will uprightly try it' ('Epistle to the Reader' in *Primitive Christianity Revived*, (1696), reprinted in William Penn, *The Peace of Europe, the Fruits of Solitude and other Writings*, ed. Edwin Bronner, Everyman, 1993, p.228.) John Wilhelm Rowntree had described the great history of the movement which he had intended to write with Rufus Jones and William Braithwaite as exhibiting 'Quakerism as a great experiment in spiritual religion', in Preface to the first edition of Braithwaite's volume, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, 1912, p.v. It is quoted in Hugh Doncaster's Foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1955, p.v.

both in the silent meditation of 'waiting in the light' and in the living out of their insights in everyday life. As Rufus Jones wrote, 'Friends... have endeavoured to build their religious faith upon the inherent authority of truth. They come back for their basis to the test of experience – to the laboratory of life'.<sup>23</sup> They do not so much *believe* a set of truths or values, as *trust* a source of insight that can show them the truth, and then live according to that insight.

**2. The Light was revealed first as self-awareness.** This should be obvious from what I have said so far about the Light, but it is one of the most neglected themes of Quaker faith, and has been since the days of Barclay<sup>24</sup>. Even the 'renaissance Quakers' who brought so much of the early understanding to life again, failed to see that the Light first worked its magic on people by opening up the truth about themselves. I think the reason for this must have been that they lacked the dark view of humans that saw them as trapped in their own, egocentric ideas. Jones and Grubb and the others had such an optimistic view of human nature, like many in the Edwardian era, that they could see no real obstacle to humans seeing reality, provided they sat quietly and paid attention to it. A hundred years on, with two world wars behind us and too many examples of oppression and conflict, we are not so likely to be optimistic. We can recognize the huge unconscious drives and motivations that turn people down these destructive ways of life, even while they convince themselves they are doing the right thing. So we are more likely to be open to the early Quaker insight that human life is blighted by deceit and make-believe, and that therefore the best thing we can do for ourselves and for the world is to find a way of seeing ourselves as we are, free from the anxiety that persuades us to see ourselves differently. If we can, and do, we will surely then be in a better position to see how the world is, and what we may do effectively to improve it.

Fox himself was emphatic that the awareness had to begin with us. 'If all men would come to a knowledge of the truth they must come to that which doth reprove them, and lead

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<sup>23</sup> Rufus Jones, *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers*, Methuen, London, 1927, p.52.

<sup>24</sup> There is a remnant of the original idea in Barclay, in his fine chapter on worship in which, for once, he allows experience to dictate what he says: 'There being also an inward quietness and retiredness of mind, the witness of God ariseth in the heart, and the light of Christ shineth, whereby the soul cometh to see its own condition,' (Barclay, *Apology*, 11:7). This could have been a starting point for his consideration of 'the truth' that 'comes to have victory and dominion over their souls' (in the following sentence), but no connection is made. In fact 'seeing one's own condition' seems to play no further role in his setting out of the Quaker path to truth and life.

them into all truth'.<sup>25</sup> The implication is that the obstacle to our seeing the truth of life is our idea of ourselves, which tends to leave out those aspects of our life which we find distasteful or accusing or threatening. We have honed our self-image to make it acceptable to ourselves and others. So what we have to do to get a sense of reality, and to become real ourselves, is to pay attention to those neglected parts of ourselves and accept them as part of the whole picture. Not easy! There will be much resistance to any such subversive enquiry, and the ego will defend itself vigorously. And how are we expected to become aware of feelings or relationships or actions of ours that we have firmly shoved under the carpet? The early Quakers were very aware of the problem, and they knew it took courage and patience to face the truth about themselves. But they also knew they had the Light as a resource within them that would enable them to see and to accept what they saw. The Light was not involved with the ego or the personality. It would give a detached and holistic view of things, unaffected by fear and prejudice. Its effect then, if followed, was extraordinary. It exposed the pretences of the ego as biased and self-serving, and so freed a person from egocentricity and 'sin'. 'Which light being owned,' said Fox, 'self and the righteousness of self come to be denied'.<sup>26</sup> And again, in one of my favourite passages from Fox, it is so clear about this inner, liberating process:

Neither lay open one another's weaknesses behind one another's backs.... But every one of you in particular with the light of Christ (which he hath enlightened you withal) see yourselves, that self may be judged out with the light in everyone. Now, all loving the light here no self can stand, but it is judged with the light; and here all are in unity, and here no self-will can arise, no mastery; but all that is judged out.<sup>27</sup>

The self can't stand up, you see, because it has been exposed by the Light ('judged out'). It thought it was central and important and flawless, but it can be seen in the Light to be none of these things. It can only flourish as it finds its centre in the source of life itself. Being rooted there, in the deeper self within, it will find it is bound up with others in the unity of life. This truth, of course, which must have alarmed the self-centred ego, is in fact far better for the ego, if it can accept that its true centre lies elsewhere. So the inner dynamic is quite simple: the Light frees people from self-imposed restrictions by showing them the truth, and by enabling them to be truly themselves. Which brings us to our last point.

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<sup>25</sup> George Fox, 'Truth's triumphant in the Eternal Power over the Dark Inventions of Fallen Man' (1661), in *Works* 4:284; in *TOTH* 1:72. Cf. John 16:7-13.

<sup>26</sup> George Fox, a paper off 1657 in *The Journal* (ed. Thomas Ellwood), in *Works* 1:344.

**3. The Light revealed the source of life and unity.** When they let go of the self, and all the ideas and people and objects they had clung to to bolster the self, they discerned a deeper reality in them which felt like their real self. But this deep self had a most unusual quality. It manifested itself initially as a light, making them more fully aware of themselves. And this light was giving them a view of themselves somehow from outside themselves. It was objective and clear, but also – as they accepted what was shown them of their failures and weaknesses – it was accepting and compassionate. Fox could even say in *The Journal* that it was 'love' that had shown him the truth about himself. 'That love let me see myself as I was without him'.<sup>28</sup> These qualities of an all-seeing, truthful and compassionate spirit within him were what Fox understood as the qualities of God. He certainly felt himself being enlightened and empowered by something of God within him, 'that of God' as he liked to describe it, suggesting the mystery. And by opening himself up to its truth and accepting it, he was connected with God, the source of his own being.

It is because of this experience, I would say, that Fox and the first Friends did not want to say that the Light was 'human'. Barclay may have confused matters by saying that the Light was implanted by God in some kind of miraculous intervention, but he was right in thinking that this inner resource was quite different in quality from normal human capacities and that it was in important ways opposed to the typical ego-centredness of human behaviour. This opposition between God and humans was not, we should add, a 'metaphysical dualism', as Jones and Grubb called it<sup>29</sup>, suggesting it was built into the nature of things and that it was inherently impossible that humans should be at one with God. It was what we might call a moral or existential dualism, that is, a tragic sense that humans are cut off from the ultimate source of their life because, out of fear for their egos, they have turned away from it. But when they turn back to that reality, however it is manifested to

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27 George Fox, Epistle 48 (1653), in *Works* 7:61; in *TOTH* 1:84.

28 George Fox, *The Journal*, ed. John Nickalls, p.11.

29 Cf. Edward Grubb: 'For them [the early Quakers] as for other Christians of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the world was an *unmixed dualism*. The "natural" and the "spiritual" stood confronting one another but never mingling. God and the world were separated by an unbridged chasm.' (*Authority and the Light Within*, p.80). It is surprising then that he didn't rethink this judgement when he quoted William Penn, a contemporary of Barclay, as saying both that the Light was 'in man but not of man' *and* that it was 'natural to man to have a supernatural Light', op.cit., re. William Penn, *Primitive Christianity Revived* (1696), iii, ?? 1,2.

them, and find their true centre in 'that of God' within them, they are freed from the tyranny of the ego and can experience their oneness with God.<sup>30</sup>

But you can see also how this would affect their attitude to other people. Having discovered deceit in themselves they would recognize it more easily in other people.

Here's William Penn with a remarkable insight and a wonderful image,

God, having given them a sight of themselves, they saw the whole world in the same glass of truth, and sensibly discerned the affections and passions of men, and the rise and tendency of things.<sup>31</sup>

So, with the help of the Light, the 'glass' or mirror that reflected the truth, they could see through the poses and pretences in which people liked to present themselves to the feelings and attitudes that really motivated them. In this way Friends got to know the world well, from inside as it were, and they knew then how to act in the world so as to make a real difference. But in seeing through others' presentation of themselves, they could also recognize that core of truth and rightness that they had discovered in themselves. As Fox said, 'I saw it shine through all'. It was a strange double perception. They could see the root of evil in others, in their denial of the truth, but they could also see the root of goodness in others, in their deep (if unacknowledged) awareness of truth. The Light in Friends enabled them to recognize and acknowledge the Light in others, even if the others were unwilling or unable to recognize it. So the Friends discovered their mission in the world: to bear witness in word and deed to the Light in every human being so that they could become aware of it in themselves and live their lives on the basis of it.

Stir abroad whilst the door is open and the light shineth; and so go on in that which letteth you see the world, to comprehend it and to see what is imprisoned by it and

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30 The sense that the Light is beyond our normal human faculties might be part of what is meant by saying that it is 'within but from without'. But this phrase is misleading. It suggests that the Light is shining *into* us from an outside source. This fits in with an evangelical and protestant idea that there is nothing good in us humans and we need a Christ outside us to help, but it does not fit the distinctly Quaker insight that we humans already have this potential within us: 'the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9). It is perhaps an understandable reaction against those liberal Friends who talk of the Light as if it were little more than reason or intuition, but it doesn't add to our understanding. It is also sometimes said that 'the *inward* Light' that early Friends spoke of is not 'the *inner* Light' of liberal Friends: it is a dynamic movement from outside, rather than a potential within. But this too is a confusion. 'Inward' could indicate a direction, as in 'inward journey', but could also indicate location, as in 'truth in the inward parts' (Psalm 51:6 in the AV of 1611), which was its predominant meaning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The 'inward Light' was therefore simply 'the Light inside', as distinct from a physical light outside. But it was nevertheless different from the light of reason or conscience, which were merely 'human': it was the Light of God, 'that of God in everyone', the Light of Christ within.

31 William Penn, *The Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers*, first published as a preface to Fox's *Journal* (1694), but later published separately; recently republished in William Penn, (ed. Edwin Bronner), *The Peace of Europe the Fruits of Solitude and Other Writings*, Everyman, 1993, p.286.

suffereth by it. So the Lord give you an understanding in all things.<sup>32</sup>

The Light does all these things, and many more things that I have not described, by making people aware of who they really are. It is as simple – and as difficult! - as that. It shows up all sorts of conflicts and hurts and miseries, but these are seen to arise from a denial of some part of ourselves (or of society), so that seeing them and acknowledging them serves to integrate them into a new kind of unity (both in ourselves and in society).

All they that are in the light are in unity; for the light is but one.<sup>33</sup>

Through the light that enlighteneth them they have life... they have salvation, they have truth, they have peace with God.<sup>34</sup>

So the Light is known by what it does. And it does many things, beginning with those promptings in our conscience that there is something in our life that needs attending to. As we attend to it, in silence and stillness, we begin to see the truth of what's going on. And the more we open ourselves to its truth the more the Light does for us. These various aspects of the Light's activity, and the sense of a process as we move from one to another, was brought out well by another early Friend, Elizabeth Bathurst. In her work *Truth's Vindication* she set out to defend the Quaker faith by showing how it arose from experience and how it was confirmed by Scripture. The opening words of Part 2 can serve as a summary of that early understanding, using the biblical language that would have been familiar to her as well as her opponents:

Concerning the Principle of Truth

What it is, from whence it comes

and whereto it leads.

It is a principle of divine light and life of Christ Jesus, placed in the conscience, which opens the understanding, enlightens the eyes of the mind, discovers sin to the soul, reproves for it and makes it appear exceeding sinful, quickens such as accept and believe in it, though they were dead in trespasses and sins, makes them alive to God, and brings them into conformity to the image of his son Christ Jesus, that he may be the first born among many brethren.... [Cf. Ephesians 2 and Romans 8]

Christianity does not consist in the belief of so many doctrines, articles and

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<sup>32</sup> George Fox, Epistle 135 (1657), *Works* 7:132; in *TOTH* 3:12.

<sup>33</sup> George Fox, a paper of 1654, in *Doctrinals*, *Works* 4:43; in *TOTH* 2:18.

<sup>34</sup> George Fox, 'To the Turk' (1660) in *Doctrinals*, *Works* 4:219; in *TOTH* 1:121.

principles (as some suppose) but in conformity unto that one eternal principle, to wit, the light of Christ manifest in the conscience, and yet leads into a heavenly order both in doctrine, principle and conversation.<sup>35</sup>

### **A reflection on its meaning today**

I have tried to interpret the early Quaker understanding in a way that makes it intelligible and accessible to us. So in that sense I have already answered, or half-answered, the question of how that profound understanding of early Friends might be relevant to us. In using words like 'awareness', 'reality' and 'acceptance' I have translated their thought into modern English, hoping to rescue it from a language in which it could easily get lost. Meanings can get lost, after all. Language changes over time, and if this is not recognized the language of the past becomes unintelligible. Translation is necessary from one age to the next. So I hope my translation works.

One obvious point of relevance in that early understanding is that it brings the great questions of life very close to home. It deals with such imponderables as our human loneliness, our anxiety, our conflicts with one another and within ourselves, our experience of oppression, pain and despair, but it does not give us ready-made answers. It tells us to look first to ourselves, to see ourselves truthfully in the light of the resource we have deep within us, and promises that in this Light we will find a way through. It is both very hopeful, since it trusts every human being to be able to find a way through, and very challenging, since it expects every human being to face the truth about themselves, for themselves.....

But what I have not done is address the issue of how the world itself has changed. It is obvious that we need to understand a bit about the world of the first Quakers in order to understand their writing.<sup>36</sup> But we also need to understand how their world changed into ours. The science and technology that have become so much a feature of our world was then only just beginning. So too was modern democracy, which made a halting start with the English Commonwealth, and was severely criticized by the Quakers for not going far

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35 Elizabeth Bathurst, *Truth's Vindication* (1679), reprinted in her collected works as *Truth Vindicated* (1695), part II, p.72; republished in part in eds. Mary Garman, Judith Applegate et.al., *Hidden in Plain sight: Quaker Women's Writings 1650-1700*, Pendle Hill Pubs, 1996, p.381.

36 I have written more about this in what was originally a talk to the Quaker Life Conference of 2008 on 'The prophetic message of Early Friends (and how it can be interpreted for today)', now published in a Quaker Life Study Pack, *Quaker Identity and the Heart of our Faith* (2008).

enough. The church, which was such a power in the land in 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain, has lurched from one crisis to another so that now it is relatively weak and ineffectual, as other religions find room to move in. The old hierarchies have gone, and in their place we have a more open and fluid society, though no less driven by the quest for power, status and wealth. Does it make sense in such a world to speak of a 'light within'?

I think it does. If the Light within speaks of a capacity for awareness in everyone that enables them to discover themselves and empowers them to live what they truly are, then it is certainly as relevant now as it was then. Our society can be confident in many achievements over the centuries, from parliamentary democracy to clinical medicine, but it is significant that our achievements and preoccupations are focused on external things. We have neglected, and still neglect, the inner life, the reality of our own inner experience. (This is true of the West in general, it seems.) We therefore lack knowledge of ourselves and are relatively superficial in our judgement of others. The inner life is seen as a dark area in which it is risky and even dangerous to venture. When people do venture there, like spiritual teachers or psychotherapists, they are regarded with suspicion and sometimes pilloried. So, lacking self-awareness, we act from feelings that we do not understand. We get into conflicts, within ourselves and with others, or in society at large, that we have no way of resolving. We are involved, even without knowing it, in a destructive way of life which seems to have no prospect of ending. People are losing confidence in the institutions that govern us and provide for us, and yet they have little confidence in themselves to make up for the loss or to find an alternative.

I think you will agree that in such a world we need to find a way of discovering ourselves, and others, as we really are. There are many ways of doing this, and many ways are no doubt needed to meet the very different capacities of people in our present-day society. But the Quaker way is one such way, and it seems to respond directly to the needs of many people in our society - far more, I suspect, than those who have so far shown an interest in it, since most people do not know about the Quaker way and what it has to offer.

To begin with, *it makes the divine reality accessible*, without the need of intermediaries and authorities. By finding the light 'in the conscience' Friends have discovered a way of accessing it quickly and surely, and at the same time, a way of living by it in everyday life. Similarly, it includes everybody on an equal footing, enables decision-making with a sure-footed 'discernment', encourages dialogue with those who differ from us, religiously or otherwise, and encourages us to live our witness because it will 'answer that of

God in everyone'.

Even for those of us who do know the Quaker way and follow it, there is still a lot to be learned from the first Quaker teaching. If we could learn from them what is meant by the inner Light, we might be able better to access it for ourselves and find the immense resources it contains. It would also clarify our understanding of our faith. Much of our confusion as modern Friends derives, as I suggested at the beginning, from a lack of understanding of our basic faith and practice, focused on our confusion about the meaning of 'light'. If we can understand that basic concept, and the experience and practice it refers to, we shall have a better grasp of our commitment as Friends and of our identity as a Society of Friends. We might even be able to describe ourselves again, as they did at the beginning, as 'Friends of the Truth' and 'the Children of Light', that is, as a community devoted to truth and to the deep source within us that can enable us to see the truth. And since it is a practical and personal commitment it does not require agreement on beliefs. We find our unity in opening ourselves up to one another in courage and honesty, so that others, so that all of us, can be aware of who we are and what makes us really tick. It doesn't matter so much if we have different 'opinions' or different 'backgrounds'. We can rise above these as we see things and see one another in the Light. This makes diversity a resource rather than a problem, but to draw on that resource requires a discipline of selfless listening and honest talking. This is the Quaker way, and in the modern world there is nothing quite like it. The Light itself is universal, as we know, but our approach to it as Quakers is unique, and remarkably effective.

The challenge, of course, is that all this works only to the extent that we live by the Light within us. It helps if we can clarify what that means intellectually, and I hope that what I have said in this talk will be helpful in that respect. But we have always insisted throughout our history, quite rightly, that we cannot rest on an intellectual understanding. To gain the insight we need we have to open ourselves to the experience, and to the life that it leads to.