DISCERNMENT IN THE QUAKER TRADITION

By JO FARROW

I DO NOT WRITE as a Quaker historian. Nor do I write as someone who has had a long association with the Society of Friends. The history I have attempted to trace, the selection I have made from the foundation documents of the Society are my personal excavations and do not represent any kind of official statement about discernment in the Quaker tradition. They are simply my own attempts to understand that tradition and wrestle with some of the internal contradictions and paradoxes which have made its history both fascinating and confusing.

In the wider context of Christian spirituality the term 'discernment' has a number of specialized meanings. It may refer to the charismatic gift of being able to discriminate in spiritual matters, (I Cor 12,10). Or it may refer to the way in which the charism has been developed within the monastic tradition generally, or to the more particular and systematic use made of it in Ignatian spirituality.

A holy experiment in spiritual guidance

I imagine that it would be difficult to isolate discernment in Ignatian spirituality from the tradition itself and this is equally true of the Quaker way. There is a sense in which discernment *is* the Quaker tradition, and in a communal as well as an individual context. The Society of Friends has been described by one of its historians as a 'holy experiment in spiritual guidance'. There is no doubt that early Friends saw themselves as living in a new age of the Spirit, conducting an experiment in Christian community and holy obedience which was designed to be a 'new age' model of Apostolic Christianity, as sensitive and obedient to the leadings of the Holy Spirit as they believed the New Testament Church had been.

Those who have slightly more romantic views of our beginnings would see the Quaker experiment as a quantum leap from formal, institutional Christianity to a dynamic model which represented a new departure, in sharp discontinuity with the faith and practice of the historic Churches. No doubt it felt like that to those who had left the familiar ecclesiastic structures of mainstream

Christianity behind to embark on a spiritual experiment without the aid of formal affirmations of faith, without liturgy or ritual, without priests or spiritual directors, without holy image or ikon or indeed any outward aids to inward devotion.

In retrospect it is easier to see that the leap was less dramatic and represented a logical extension of radical Puritanism, what someone has described as the 'fag end' of the Reformation. The early Quakers or 'Children of the Light' as they called themselves initially, came into existence as a recognizable religious group during a period of intense speculation and excitement about the place of the Holy Spirit in the ordering of Church life. Emphasis on the inward nature of religion, stress on the inner work of the Spirit, speculations about whether the authority of the Spirit was paramount, were part of the ferment of religious thought at the turn of the seventeenth century and in many ways the emergence of the Society of Friends was the logical outcome of passionate Puritan interest in a re-discovered doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Nor, as Geoffrey Nuttall observes, was there anything fortuitous about this return of interest in the nature and activity of the Spirit.

> Only through such a revolution as was effected by the break-up of the Middle Ages was such a recovery possible. The ecclesiastic system, with its centralization in an ultimate, single authority, was dissolved. The Bible was translated into the vernacular, for men to read, unchecked. The Renaissance of learning encouraged men to think for themselves and the spirit of individualism became as potent in theological as in other mental disciplines.[1]

Other influences were at work in Puritan England in the seventeenth century which, combined with a passionate interest in the nature of the New Testament Church, a profound discontent with institutional Christianity and the new spirit of independent enquiry, provided the yeasty ferment out of which the Quaker movement, along with other dissident sects and reformed church groups, arose. It would have been surprising had it been otherwise.

There is no clear evidence that George Fox, whose charismatic gifts enabled the movement to identify and establish itself, had come into close contact with the works of continental mystics and spiritual reformers who had written about the Inner Light, the Seed of God in the human heart, the birthing of God in the inner life of a human being. But the groundswell of spiritual awareness which they represented was making itself felt in seventeenth-century England. The writings of men like Hans Denck, Sebastian Franck, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme and earlier mystics were being translated and interpreted in England during the first half

of the century. It is unlikely that Fox was unaware of this ferment of new ideas and religious exploration. He must have heard reference to them during the period of intense searching when he moved in and out of some of the new religious groups.

> On the continent the movement culminated in the formation of a body of Christians known as 'Collegiants' or 'Seekers'. They had only the loosest organization, no ordained clergy, no sacraments, no creeds, no ritual. They met on Sundays for divine worship, sitting for the most part in silence but having an occasional prayer or public 'message' as someone felt 'moved' to speak.[2]

It was among the Westmorland 'Seekers' that George Fox found the enthusiastic support and spiritual sympathy for which he had searched so desperately. They became the nucleus of the Quaker movement in the north of England and their practice of silent waiting on God for leading became the model for the Quaker experiment in spiritual guidance.

This I knew experimentally

It is impossible to understand the holy experiment in discernment which the Society of Friends represents without knowing something about the spiritual experiences of George Fox and the way in which he interpreted them in formulating his mesage. He was the product of a Puritan family and a Puritan culture and, although he rejected much of its Calvinistic theology, it is not difficult to see the influence of his religious background in the style of ethical mysticism which he developed.

He was a confused and solitary adolescent when he left his childhood home and began to try and find his way to a personal faith. He wandered from one religious group to another, appealing to anyone who might be expected to provide an answer to his questions about reality in religion. None of the answers came near to satisfying his desperate spiritual hunger. Much of the time he spent in solitary bible study, searching the scriptures to see whether there was something in them which would speak directly to his need.

Eventually and, as he observed, without the help of any spiritual director or counsellor, he found the thing he most needed. At the very moment when he felt that nothing and no one could help him, he found himself addressed at the deepest level of his being. A voice deep within him seemed to be saying, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition, and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy! He concludes his account of this experience, 'And this I knew experimentally'.[3]

On the face of it there is nothing to distinguish his conversion experience from that of Christians in every age who discover that the things they have known in theory have suddenly become a matter of inward conviction, a knowing from the inside rather than a knowing about. Why was this particular experience so significant for George Fox that he believed himself entrusted with a new and revolutionary gospel message? At one level perhaps it was like the experience of falling in love. It felt just as overwhelming and novel as though it had never happened to anyone else in quite the same way.

But the thing that seemed most important to George Fox was the way it had happened. It had not taken place in a church or in a revival meeting. No one had been there preaching or giving him counsel. It had not been when he was meditating on some holy book or during a religious retreat or time of formal prayer. He felt that it had come to him when he had nothing outwardly to help him at all. Whatever tutoring he had received had all been done inwardly.

He was not a biblical scholar, though he knew the bible well. He was not at all knowledgeable about Church history or systematic theology. What had happened to him was so vivid and fresh that it seemed like a new beginning or like living in the Apostolic age in the aftermath of Pentecost. His inward conviction seemed to have sprung clear and fresh as if it owed nothing at all to the religious nature of his childhood or his own solitary bible study. It seemed to be the result of an inward process of knowing. It was this profound conviction that he had discovered what he needed to know within himself, his only tutor the inward Spirit, an Inward Light; which led him to the conclusion that this was *all* that was really necessary for salvation. And if it could happen to him, counselled by no one but the Christ within, it could happen to anyone. Like him they could find the scriptures suddenly open to them and it could happen to them at any time or in any place.

There have been few religious reformers or spiritual leaders who have been able to resist the conclusion that their own vivid religious experiences provide general principles or guidelines for others. The more overwhelming or life-transforming they are, the more intense is the desire to transmit them to other people and urge their adoption as a blueprint for a new kind of spiritual life.

George Fox was sure that he had been spiritually equipped to call the whole Church back to Apostolic faith, to 'primitive Christianity revived'. He was able, at least initially, to avoid some of the more obvious dangers of generalizing from the particular simply because the essence of his preaching was an open invitation to others to

rely on Christ to be their inward teacher. 'Christ is come to teach his people himself' was the main burden of his early preaching and his *Journal* is full of references to this aspect of his message and his profound belief that his hearers could find their own way to the truth within.

> I was to turn them to the grace of God and to the truth in the heart.
> I spoke . . . of their teacher within them and how the Lord was come to teach them himself.
> And all the people were very loving and they would have had me come again in the weekday and preach amongst them: but I directed them to their teacher, Christ Jesus, and so passed away![4]

Yet in another sense Quaker spirituality bears the indelible imprint of George Fox's particular, and somewhat peculiar interpretation of spiritual guidance and it continues to suffer from the tensions and contradictions created by his total reliance on unmediated spiritual direction and his deep distrust of human learning.

The politics of paradise

The Desert Fathers believed that in their return to the simplicity of the desert they would re-discover an inward Eden, a new-found paradise of the spirit. George Fox interpreted the biblical promises of re-generation much more literally, believing that they contained the hope that all the consequences of human disobedience could be totally reversed in this life. In his *Journal* he gives us an account of his return to paradise and, although he is aware that what he is describing is a deep spiritual experience, he translates it in terms of its social implications. The ethical content of his visionary awareness has continued to be a major strand in Quaker discernment of the leadings of the spirit.

> Now I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the Paradise of God. All things were new, and all creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond that words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness and innocency and righteousness being renewed up into the image of God by Christ Jesus, so that I was come up into the state of Adam which he was in before he fell. The creation was opened to me, and it was showed me how all things had their names given them according to their nature and virtue. And I was at a stand in my mind whether I should practise physic for the good of all . . .[5]

Eventually it became clear to him that being a physician was not his vocation. Instead he came to understand it as a prophetic one in which he was called to proclaim the politics of paradise.

> . . . to turn people to that inward light, spirit, grace, by which all might know their salvation and their way to God . . . that they might visit the fatherless, the widows and the strangers . . . and then there might not be so many beggars, the sight of whom often grieved my heart.[6]

This blend of mystical experience and social concern has been a characteristic of Quaker spirituality from its beginning. The earliest attempts to formulate a discipline for the newly established meetings emphasized the social implications of commitment to the Quaker way in making practical arrangements for the care of widows, orphans and any who were in special need. Simplicity of dress and life style were not initially attempts to be peculiar or different from others but to show that Friends had identified themselves with the plight of the poor and wanted to protest against the social extravagances of wealthy and more privileged members of society.

Although twentieth-century Friends would find it difficult to interpret scripture as literally or naively as George Fox did, they recognize themselves as being part of a mystical and prophetic tradition which links the experience of living in a new world, (whether it be the apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and a new earth or the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah's vision), with the need to put that vision into practice in quite down to earth ways. In their continued concern for penal reform, care of the mentally sick, for relief work in disaster areas and efforts to mediate between those involved in international conflict they are still concerned with the politics of paradise and would readily agree with William Penn that 'True godliness don't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it'.[7]

Discernment in early Quaker practice was based on a conviction that it was possible for human beings to be restored to the moral perfection of Adam and Eve before their fall into disobedience and to know the mind of God in a direct and unmediated way. All that was required, they believed, was a silent waiting on God, an openness to the spirit and a willingness to be obedient when the inward leading of the spirit became clear. They adopted the 'Seeker' model in their worship because it was judged to be the purest form of worship in which the primal conversation between God and human beings could be re-articulated.

In practice this naive view of revelation proved to be an acute source of embarrassment to meetings who were constantly faced with the problem of those who 'walked disorderly' i.e. whose practice fell noticeably short of an Eden-like purity or whose enthusiasm led them into extravagant or ill-advised ventures. In

order to deal with these problems, more spiritually mature Friends were charged with responsibility for giving counsel to the meetings and a number of tests were formulated to help members to discern the reliability of individual leadings.

A discipline of waiting

'Waiting' is one of the key words in the Quaker understanding of discernment and linked with patience it constituted one of the major tests of whether an individual leading represented a genuine prompting of the spirit.

George Fox was shrewd enough to realize that less mature Friends would often be tempted to imitate those whose spiritual understanding was much greater, and that those who had been given clearer insight or deep spiritual experiences might be tempted to act as pace-makers within the meetings. His pastoral letters to newly established meetings are punctuated with advice about waiting.

> Everyone in your measure wait upon God who is the true Shepherd, and leads his flock into the green pastures; and fresh springs he opens daily. This ye will see and experience.
> . . . wait in the light which comes from Christ that with it ye may receive the life.
> Therefore wait in your measure to know the Scripture fulfilled in you . . . wait in the measure of the Spirit to learn of Him, as they did which gave the Scripture forth . . .[8]

Alexander Parker, a close companion of George Fox, wrote a letter to Friends which is both a classic description of Quaker worship and also illustrates the stress on a discipline of waiting which is still an essential element in Meetings for Worship as well as in Quaker business meetings.

> The first that enters into the place of your meeting, be not careless, nor wander up and down either in body or mind, but innocently sit down in some place and turn thy mind to the light and wait upon God simply, as if none were present but the Lord . . . Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the spirit; so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light . . . Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the spirit are come nearer to God than words are . . .[9]

In meetings for church affairs, at local and national level, it is still important to Friends that they wait until a decision is reached

which commends itself to all members of the meeting. It is the responsibility of the Clerk to be sensitive to what Friends describe as 'the sense of the meeting' and to record a Minute which reflects the unity which has been reached. It may mean that a very long process of waiting and listening is involved that is irksome to those who believe they can see very clearly how things should proceed. But the 'test of unity' is another of the ways in which Friends have judged whether there has been a true discerning of the will of God. It was inconceivable to the first Quakers that being inwardly led by the spirit would lead them into conflict with one another or that the light would contradict itself by prompting people to conflicting actions. They did not perhaps understand that conflict may be creative, or may need to be expressed and worked through, before real unity can be achieved, but they were right in sensing that the fruits of the spirit were those which enable human beings to be in harmony with one another.

Another, and perhaps less wholesome, test of inward leading was whether the way in which an individual was being led was likely to involve them in suffering and humiliation. The 'test of the cross', or of the 'moral purity' of their intention was defined in terms of the degree of self-renunciation involved. If it was the one thing which the person concerned found hardest to do and ran contrary to all their natural inclinations, it was judged likely that their inward prompting was a genuine response to the spirit. It did not seem to occur to them that there was any inconsistency between their image of God as merciful and full of tender regard for them, and the idea that they could best show their obedience by doing only those things which they most disliked or those which would bring them the greatest personal suffering. They had not quite shaken off the more oppressive elements of their Puritan culture at that point and found it hard to grasp the fact that being merciful and kind to oneself might also be a proper response to God.

Laboratories of the Holy Spirit

Douglas Steere, an American Friend, has described Quaker meetings as 'laboratories of the Holy Spirit'. It seems to me to be a very good description of the pragmatic way in which Friends have tested and developed their holy experiment in spiritual guidance. Early convictions about infallible guidance proved untenable and had to be discarded. The emphasis on individual inspiration had to be modified in the light of experience and a form of church government introduced which required of Friends a willingness to submit their personal leadings to the test of corporate discernment.

The Society of Friends, like any movement which lays stress on the inward nature of religion, has always been at risk from the dangers of individual excess and self-deception. But the dangers were minimized to some extent by an emphasis on the ethical nature of the light within. For in spite of its stress on inwardness, discernment in the Quaker tradition has not been about subjective states of mind and very little attention has been given to feelings of desolation or consolation. Unlike Ignatian spirituality which explores both states and draws inferences from them, Quaker spirituality has been very little concerned with the affective life. It is both its strength and its weakness that it has been more preoccupied with the ethical demands of the inward light and has not chosen to concern itself with the emotional life.

One reason for this neglect stems from the way in which George Fox chose to define the functions of the light within. He believed that it had a two-fold purpose as (1) that which shows a person evil, and (2) that which brings people into unity. 'It is the function of the light in convincing a man of sin that Fox uses as . . . his practical working definition of the light.'[10]

Superficially this does not sound very different from the Calvinistic view that it was the grace of God which first convicts people of sin and then allows them to know that through the mercy of God in Christ they are forgiven. There is, however, a crucial difference. Calvinistic theology assumed the depravity of human nature and its continued bias towards evil even after conversion. George Fox, with a more optimistic view of the human potential, assumed that becoming aware of the inner darkness and bringing it into the light was the first crucial stage in a process of transformation which led to wholeness or perfection. The function of the light was to reveal the inward disorder, stimulate the growth of the Seed of God and release the power or psychological energy needed to begin a new kind of life.

There is ample evidence that those who found their way into the early Quaker meetings were aware of this creative energy at work. Isaac Pennington wrote of his first encounter with Friends, 'When I came, I felt the presence and power of the Most High among them and words of truth from the Spirit of truth reaching to my heart . . . I felt the dead quickened and the seed raised.'[11]

In the Protestant mysticism of George Fox the light is the agent of discernment and its function is not to distinguish between inner states or to draw inferences from them about the absence or presence of God, but simply to enable a person to discriminate between good and evil, between right and wrong choices, moral behaviour and that which is out of the light. 'To be a Christian

consists not in feeling, but in following; not in ecstasy but in obedience.'[12]

Friends have not used the language of mysticism which speaks of the union of the soul with God but they have been concerned with unity. The only other function of the light which is stressed by George Fox, and continues to have special significance for Friends, is that it brings people into unity. The unity of creation was an important aspect of his spiritual experience. To be living in the light implied a restoration of the primal harmony of creation as God intended it, a unity between human beings in their relationships with one another, with the rest of creation and with God.

If Quaker meetings are in any real sense laboratories of the Holy Spirit, it is in the sense they provide a space in which Friends can explore the meaning of holy obedience and test their findings in a process which involves every member of the meeting in the exercise of corporate discernment.

Sometimes the unity which is so important to Friends is experienced in a meeting for worship when the discipline of silent waiting on God draws them into a much deeper silence in which they feel bound together in a profound unity of the spirit. Friends describe such meetings as being 'gathered'. Sometimes a meeting never reaches that kind of quiet intensity. When it does happen it is quite indescribable, though I am not as convinced as some Friends that the object of worship is to have such profound experiences as a regular diet.

In meetings for church affairs the sense of unity is often a by-product of the process of searching together to find the right way forward on some particular issue. In an earlier section I have tried to say something about the way in which decisions are reached in Quaker business meetings and how important it is to Friends that no decision is taken unless the meeting as a whole is able to unite with it. I have moments when I wonder about the rather high cost of maintaining our unity. There have been moments in our history (and not too distant) when we have preserved it by the simple expedient of excluding, i.e. 'disowning' the non-conformist Quaker.

In order to survive as a cohesive group Friends accepted a minimal hierarchical structure and carefully formulated guidelines for the conduct of meetings, including the appointment of more mature Friends to have general oversight of them.

Not surprisingly there were some Friends in the seventeenth century who saw this quite minimal superstructure as a betrayal of the early Quaker message and a return to the forms of institutional Church life from which they felt they had been liberated.

A letter from Friends in the Durham area in 1662 articulates this sense of dismay.

> . . . let us all in the simplicity of Truth . . . abide and dwell, and in the liberty Christ Jesus hath made us free, stand fast, that we be not again led back into the errors of those that went before us, who left the power and got into the form . . . that no footsteps be left for those that shall come after . . . but that all may be directed [by] the Truth, in it to live and walk, and by it to be guided: that none may look back at us, nor have an eye behind them: but that all may look forward, waiting in the spirit for the revelation of those glorious things which are to be made manifest to them.[13]

William Charles Braithwaite, commenting on the controversy between the conformists who accepted the necessity of establishing the new structure, and those who opposed it and were regarded as heretical, observes:

> when we remember the quenching of the Spirit, so like the case of the early church, which attended the substitution of Quaker discipline for Quaker faith we cannot help feeling that a more wisely directed criticism might have materially improved the church system, which Fox set on foot.[14]

Was it, as Braithwaite, suggests, a hardening of the spiritual arteries and 'oughteries' of the Society of Friends. Or was it simply the next phase in what he chose to describe as a holy experiment? In his Swarthmore Lecture it is clear that he believed that the experiment had only partially succeeded.

> Inward guidance . . . has during a large part of our history, not been allowed full operation. It has been hampered especially by the over-emphasis on conformity to tradition and by the distrust of learning. Accordingly its best expression has at times been found first in the private affairs of mens' lives, where the difficult choice between the right and wrong path depends . . . upon a single hearted discerning of the light and obedience to its leadings.[15]

Paul Lacey, a contemporary American Friend illustrates very clearly Braithwaite's final comment: 'My first leading . . . was through the evident goodness and effectiveness of a group of Friends and the peacefulness of a meeting'. He describes his continuing association with Friends and the way in which he was compelled to wrestle with the implications of Quaker belief, and in particular the possible implications for him of the peace testimony.

> For weeks I felt haunted by the question . . . this long period of constant worry culminated in one sleepless night which I spent

> arguing with myself, going over the arguments of others, praying for guidance and being afraid that I might have my prayers answered. Finally, early in the morning, I knew I had crossed a line . . . I knew that I would have to declare myself a conscientious objector and give up reliance on force to accomplish things—for the rest of my life. When I acknowledged that the commitment had been made, I did not feel any inner peace, I knew my decision would cut me off from some members of my family and might even require that I go to prison . . . suddenly I was utterly defenceless in a violent world, and for a long time I went through my days fearful of what it meant to have disarmed myself.[16]

It is a classic example of discernment in the Quaker tradition—the ethical demand, the inward wrestling, and the way found to move forward in obedience.

NOTES

[1] Nuttall, Geoffrey J.: *The Holy Spirit in Puritan faith and experience* (Oxford, 1946), p 4.
[2] Jones, Rufus: *The faith and practice of the Quakers* (London, 1927), p 28.
[3] Fox, George: *Journal* ed John L. Nichalls (London, 1975), p 11, entry for 1647. All my references to Fox's Journals are to this edition.
[4] Fox: *Journal*, pp 34, 48, 74, entries for 1648, 1649, 1651.
[5] Fox: *Journal*, p 27, entry for 1648.
[6] Fox: *Journal*, p 35, entry for 1648.
[7] Penn, William: *Christian faith and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends* (London, 1972), no 395. I shall refer to this book as *Christian faith and practice.*
[8] Fox, George: *No more but my love. Letters of George Fox, Quaker*, ed Cecil W. Sharman (London, 1980), pp 5, 13, 29.
[9] Parker Alexander: *Letters of early Friends* ed A. R. Barclay, (London, 1841), pp 365–366.
[10] King, Rachel H.: *George Fox and the Light Within* (Philadelphia, 1940), p 96.
[11] Pennington, Isaac: *Christian faith and practice*, no 28.
[12] Littleboy, William: *Christian faith and practice*, no 81.
[13] *Letters of early Friends* p 288.
[14] Braithwaite, William C.: *Spiritual guidance in Quaker experience* (London, 1909), p 7.
[15] Braithwaite, *op cit.* p 86.
[16] Lacey, Paul A.: *Leading and being led* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp 11–12.