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# An Evaluation of the Doctrine of the Inward Light as a Basis for Mission - as exemplified by Quaker approaches to Jews and Muslims in the seventeenth century

Kathleen Thomas

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## *Abstract:*

The concept of the Inward Light, variously understood, was the basis for Quaker missionary activity in the seventeenth century. Quakers made attempts to convert Jews and Muslims, both by going out to meet them and by writing tracts and epistles. Considerable use was made of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the Qur'an. The conversionist approach proved unsuccessful, and this led to a change in the Quaker understanding of mission.

## *Keywords:*

Quaker, Inward Light, Mission, Collegiants, Jews, Muslims.

The best known saying of George Fox comes from his *Exhortation to Friends in the Ministry* (1), and runs: 'Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one' (Nickalls 1952:263). These words express both the

fundamental tenet of Quakerism and the conviction that this message is valid for the whole world.

The principle of the Inward Light, or 'that of God' in everyone, was adopted by George Fox at the outset of his ministry (ibid:29, 33, 88), but was expressed in slightly different ways by different Quakers. Indeed, in 1672, John Faldo, a severe critic of the Quakers, wrote *A Key to the Quakers Usurped and (to most) Unintelligible Phrases*. 'The Light Within', as he termed it, was one of these. He listed thirty-four ways in which Quakers used the words and declared there was 'an abundance more' (Faldo 1672:71).

Fox declared that he had been called to 'turn people to that inward light, spirit, and grace by which all might know their salvation' (Nickalls 1952:263). However, he equated this 'Light' with Christ, proclaiming that Christ was sufficient for him. Other Quakers had a wider view: Samuel Fisher, one of the few university educated of Fox's fellow workers, - he had been a member of the clergy of the established church - spoke of 'that Light, Word, and Grace of God that is nigh in the hearts of all', and continued:

even Gentiles as well as Jews, Heathens and Indians as well as Englishmen and Christians (so-called) ...all have some measure of that Grace nigh them, which in the least measure is sufficient to heal and help them (Hooks 1660:656).

In 1663 a paper was published in London, a translation by the Quaker Benjamin Furly of a tract which had appeared about a year earlier in Holland. This tract was given the English title of *The Light upon the Candlestick* (Quaker Universalist Fellowship 1992). It was readily adopted by Friends as an exposition of their doctrine. It was most likely

written by a member of the Collegiant community whose members rejected the accumulations of tradition and Calvinist predestination, emphasising instead the free action of man and the spirit of love in an invisible church. Spinoza, after his excommunication by the Jews, lived with this community from 1660-1663, during which time *The Light upon the Candlestick* was written (2).

The author wrote:

We exhort everyone to turn unto the Light that's in him . . . the Light is the first Principle of Religion, for seeing there can be no true Religion without God, and no knowledge of God without this Light, Religion must necessarily have this Light for its first Principle (ibid: 9,11).

The author assured his reader that he had no intention of trying to draw him to any new sect. Instead: 'We invite thee to Something which may be a means to attain salvation and well-being' (ibid:8). In 1722 William Sewel printed Furly's translation at the end of his *History of Friends* to show that 'some have commended the Quakers or defended their doctrine though they themselves could never resolve to join them publicly' (Sewel 1811:xvii).

Robert Barclay, the Quaker Apologist, writing in 1675, defined the universal church as being a gathering of 'such as God hath called out of the world and worldly spirit to walk in his Light and Life' (Barclay 1886:194). It followed that there might be members of this church among heathens, Turks and Jews, as well as all kinds of Christians, though, he added, they all might be blinded in some matters (ibid:195). Barclay thus extended the concept of the universal church beyond the boundaries of Christendom. He here seems to be following

the line of thought in the '*Light upon the Candlestick*', though it is clear from the whole *Apology* that he had no doubt but that the Quakers possessed the Light in greater measure than anyone else.

How did this doctrine of the Inward Light affect practice?

The first contact of the Quakers with people of another religion was with the Jews. The Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 and a number of other European countries followed suit, but by the beginning of the seventeenth century there was a significant group of Jewish settlers in Holland, refugees from the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition (Parkes 1964:114). The Quakers arrived in Holland in 1654 and there are accounts of visits to the Sephardic synagogue, where Samuel Fisher was actually invited to speak, as William Caton reported in a letter to Margaret Fell (Popkin and Signer 1987:7-8). Quakers not only preached but also wrote tracts addressed to Jews, the most important of which were those by George Fox and Margaret Fell, discussed below.

Fox's early attitude had shown some ambiguity. In the late 1640s he spoke out against 'Jewish ceremonies, heathenish fables and windy doctrines', yet at the same time he could declare that 'he was not a Jew that is one outward, but he was a Jew that is one inward' (Romans 2:28; Fox 1990:114), thus admitting the validity of the spiritual heritage of the Jews.

In 1655 Cromwell set up a committee 'To consider Proposals in behalf of the Jewes by Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel, an Agent come to London in behalf of many of them, to live and trade here, and desiring the use of their own Synagogues' (Katz 1982:1, and ch.5). The Council of State elected

twenty-eight members, some lawyers, some church leaders, one being Henry Jessey, a Baptist, who wrote an account of the proceedings. Fox chose this time to write two tracts: *A Visitation to the Jews* and *A Visitation to all you that have long had the Scriptures* (Fox 1990:vol 1V 53,76). Fox based his arguments on quotations from the Old Testament, citing numerous references to a second covenant and to the light that should dawn in Israel for the benefit of all nations. He appealed to Jews to turn to this light, the light that united Jew and Gentile together, so that 'there would be one people, one God, and one mediator between God and man' (ibid:75). Fox also warned the Jews:

To the light in you, I appeal, if you go on in your evil deeds and unbelief, not believing in the light, the light is your condemnation (ibid:74).

He finally declared that belief in Christ was essential, for Christ was 'the light that lighteth every man' (ibid:75).

Margaret Fell also wrote two tracts in 1656. The first was in the form of a letter and bore the title *For Menasseh ben Israel* (Fell 1710:101). This Rabbi had already written a mystical work in which he described his vision that when Jews were in every country in the world including England the Messianic Age would begin (Roth 1978:155). The more practical purpose of his approach to Cromwell was his concern for the settlement of Ashkenazi Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe.

Margaret Fell quoted even more extensively from the Old Testament than Fox. Her main point was that Jews were scattered because they did not obey the law of Moses. They had not been faithful to their own law but had practised all

kinds of idolatrous ritual as a substitute for obedience to God's will. She claimed that it was the Quaker way which was in accordance with the Ten Commandments, because no rituals had been substituted for obedience. She too made the distinction between the Jew outward and the Jew inward, and spoke of England as a 'Land of gathering' (ibid:105), a point which linked in with Menasseh's vision.

Her second tract was *A Loving Salutation to the Seed of Abraham among the Jews* (Fell 1656:33). The tone was strikingly different from Fox's. It was indeed 'a loving salutation' - from one People of God to another. She was humble in her approach. 'Is there not even a bowing down unto thee in this invitation', she asked Menasseh, 'even a licking of the dust of thy feet?'... 'Our soul's desire', she continued, 'is that ye might be gathered and come into this Covenant of light and love' (ibid:33). She seemed more deeply aware than Fox that the Light was present in Jews.

Towards the end of her first tract Margaret Fell charged Menasseh ben Israel to see that the letter 'be read and published among the Brethren' (Fell 1710:123). Obviously it had to be in a language that Jews could understand. One of the missionaries in Holland translated her first tract into Dutch, and it may have been translated into Hebrew: certainly her second one was, before being published both in Holland and in London. Reports in letters between Fell and the Quaker leaders in Amsterdam have led scholars to conclude that the translator was Spinoza (Carrington 1956). It has even been suggested that one of the reasons why Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community was his association with Quakers (Kasher and Biedermann 1982).

Some hundred Dutch versions of Fell's first tract were sent to synagogues, rabbis and scholars (Cadbury 1938:152). William Caton wrote to Fell saying that he could not understand that 'they had anything against it', but only that 'the author doth judge that the Messiah is come and they look for him still to come' (ibid). In spite of this lukewarm reception Caton later reported that 170 copies of the second tract 'were willingly and greedily received -(they being in the Hebrew tongue)' (ibid:153). In 1660 a parallel version in English and Hebrew of the *Loving Salutation* was published in London, prepared by a poor immigrant rabbi from Poland, who apparently came to some Quaker meetings (ibid:155) (3).

Some five years later Fox wrote: *A Declaration to the Jews* (Fox 1990 vol. iv:291). In this he introduced a new argument, one based on an interpretation of parts of the book of Daniel. By calculating as years the weeks numbered by the angel Gabriel, Fox claimed to show that the birth, death and resurrection of Christ occurred at just the time foretold as critical to the Jewish people. In a later tract he interpreted the boulder in Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the four monarchies as Christ. The fact that the Jews did not accept such interpretations proved, said Fox, that they were a 'stiff-necked people' (ibid vol. v:80).

Fox addressed several more tracts to the Jews (Fox 1990 vol. v), but no new arguments were put forward. He became more tolerant over the years and had open and apparently friendly discussions with Jews, on one occasion visiting a rabbi in Friedrichstadt where he was shown their Talmud (Cadbury 1938:159). Fox, Fell, and other Friends, made great efforts to convert Jews, both in speech and writing, always basing their arguments on the Hebrew Scriptures. The

Jews showed interest in the idea of the light being present in everyone including themselves, and were pleased with the respect shown to their sacred texts. Spinoza may have attended one meeting, the immigrant rabbi certainly did. There are reports of visits to synagogues and ghettos in Italy as well as Holland and Germany, but any personal relationship on a day-to-day basis between Quakers and Jews was virtually non-existent and there were no known converts (4).

In the early 1660s Fox wrote a number of open letters to rulers, ranging from the King of Spain to the Emperor of China, including one addressed *To the Turk and all that are under his Authority, to read this over, which concerns their Salvation* (Fox 1990 vol. iv:216). The tone was conversionist throughout. 'By your Mahomet', he declared, 'have you been deceived' (ibid:216). The tract described God as a mighty ruler and creator, men as under the power of Satan, and Christ as the Son of God, whose light was the only salvation. Another point raised was that 'now [was God's] day of gathering of all nations' (ibid:219), a theme already met in Fox's and Fell's letters to the Jews.

Four years later Fox was praising the 'noble spirit' in Turk and Persian (ibid:359-360). He wrote a paper *Concerning the Act, that prohibits, that not above four or five may meet* (ibid:355), that is, the Conventicle Act of 1664. In this he contrasted the liberty of conscience granted to Jews and Christians living in lands under Turkish, Mogul and Persian control where they were permitted to worship and keep their own Sabbaths, with the persecution practised by the dominant churches in the West towards Dissenters, let alone those of other faiths. Fox claimed to have this information from 'one who travelled there' (ibid:360).

Quakers who had direct contact with Muslims were limited to a handful of missionaries and to sailors trading in the Mediterranean. John Perrot was one of four missionaries who set out to the East. He got no further than Italy where he was imprisoned, but while there in 1658 wrote *A Visitation of Love and Gentle Greeting to the Turk* (Perrot 1658). In this he begged the Turk to 'incline thine ear in due time to that in thee which is not of the Kingdoms of men' (ibid:4), and declared that his love was 'more constrained towards the Seed in the Turk' (ibid:22) than to men in the flesh in England. George Robinson, after numerous setbacks, actually succeeded in reaching Jerusalem. He had discussions on religion with Jews, Turks and Armenians in Gaza, and it was with the help of Turkish officials that he reached his destination (Sewel 1811 vol i:292-297). Another missionary, Mary Fisher, got as far as Adrianople in Western Turkey, where she was courteously received by the Sultan Mahomet IV. He listened sympathetically to her message 'from the Great God' (ibid:434), and even invited her to stay for a while, an invitation she declined.

Piracy and the enslavement of captives was commonplace. One Quaker captain, George Pattinson, is known to have exercised remarkable restraint. When his ship was taken by Turks, he managed to gain control by a mild piece of trickery, but later refused to sell the now captive Turks to Catholics in Malta, finally setting them down free on the coast of North Africa. A considerable number of Englishmen, Quakers among them, were sold as slaves in Algiers, where according to most reports they received brutal treatment. When they refused to act as male prostitutes, they were robbed, tortured, and required to pay sums well beyond their means to obtain release (ibid vol. 2:81-89). When such reports reached Fox, he wrote a letter of complaint *To the*

*Great Turk and King in Algiers* (Fox 1990 vol. vi:77), appending an account of Pattinson's generous actions as described by the First Mate.

During the twenty years since he wrote *To the Turk*, Fox had obviously taken trouble to find out more about the Turks and their religion. In approaching the Turkish ruler this time he set out from his principle that there is a measure of light in everyone, and assumed that some truth was therefore to be found in their scriptures. He showed in this letter that he had a remarkable acquaintance with the Qur'an.

The first English translation appeared in 1649, entitled '*The Alcoran of Mahomet, translated out of Arabique into French by Sieur du Ryer, and newly Englished for the satisfaction of all those who desire to look into Turkish vanities*' - a somewhat unsympathetic approach, not alleviated by an essay printed with it on the 'dangers of reading the Alcoran' (Ross 1649 n.p.). This version was probably the source of Fox's knowledge: a warning of danger was unlikely to deter him.

Fox began his letter to the Great Turk by calling on Moses and other Old Testament characters, then on John, son of Zechariah, and Jesus the Messiah, all as mentioned in the Qur'an, and lastly on Mahomet himself, to witness against the Turks and the practices carried on in Algiers. Fox cited the story of Lot, told twice in the Qu'ran, in order to show that such practices were condemned by the Turk's own faith. He quoted the injunction in Sura II to redeem slaves, cited references to God's goodness and bounty, and used the passage in Sura V, where God is said to have sent Jesus to confirm the Torah and to present the Gospel to be a light and guidance on the right path, as proof that the Turks' own

scripture directed them to accept the teaching of Jesus, in particular to love their enemies and to pray for them.

Fox's entreaty of the Sultan may just possibly have borne some fruit, for, according to Sewel, some Quaker slaves were able to serve their masters so well that they were allowed 'to go loose in the town' (Sewel 1811 vol. 2:89), and to hold their meetings for worship. Their masters:

would sometimes come to see what they did there, and finding no images or prints, as Papists made use of, but hearing that they reverently adored and worshipped the living God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, they commended them for it and said it was very good (ibid:375).

Fox wrote a second letter to the Sultan in order to refute statements made by him in a challenge to the Emperor of Germany in 1683 (Fox 1990 vol. vi:372). He confronted the Sultan's threat to persecute Christians on grounds similar to those he used in his protest against the treatment of slaves. In his last threat the Sultan spoke of 'your crucified God' (ibid:375), a phrase which led Fox away from ethical questions to one concerning the nature of God.

In this paper Fox repeatedly referred to God as eternal, invisible, incomprehensible and immortal, attributes accorded to God in the Qur'an, and argued that such a being could not be crucified. Fox at one point takes the Nestorian view of the nature of Jesus, a view that Muslims had been known to find more reasonable. Jesus, son of Mary, had suffered in the flesh; Christ, the Word, was raised. Fox moved from this position towards western orthodoxy, claiming to prove from statements in the Qur'an, that Muslims must accept that 'there are three that bear witness or

record in heaven, the Father, the word and the holy ghost, and these three are one'(1 John 5:7; Fox 1990 vol. vi:381). But Fox at the same time referred to Christ as the Son of God, a statement which no Muslim could accept.

Fox's familiarity with the Qur'an is shown not only by arguments based on its contents, but also by the style he adopted. The first letter begins with a phrase imitating the *bismillah*: 'In the name of the Great God and Lord, Creator of all things in heaven and earth do I write to you' (ibid:77). God is referred to over twenty times in the first letter and fourteen times in the second, prefixed by many of the qualities attributed to God in the 'beautiful names' given to the deity by Muslims. In the first letter the attributes mentioned are those of a mighty judge - 'great, terrible and righteous' while in the second the more metaphysical terms appear - eternal, invisible, incomprehensible. Five times Fox referred to Jesus as 'son of Mary', a phrase frequently used in the Qur'an, but not one normally used by Fox. Another way in which Fox attempted to establish immediate rapport with a Muslim believer was by developing the dominant themes in the Qur'an - the Day of Judgement, the right path, guidance, the laws of God. References, nearly all with the number of the Sura, are prefaced by such phrases as: 'Mahomet saith in your Alcoran', 'in your Alcoran you write', or 'as you confess in your Alcoran', phrases which, although a misunderstanding of the Muslim belief about the source of the Qur'an, were intended to direct the minds of Turks to the light within them, to insights they themselves had received.

The last part of each letter is an explicit call to Christian belief, both in the teachings of Jesus and in the nature of his person. Fox had no doubt that if Turks gave earnest attention to the light within them, they would inevitably accept his

version of Truth. Alas for this conviction, there is no record of any Muslim being converted to Christianity either by Quaker missionaries or by Fox's writings.

Was the attitude of the Quakers towards other peoples markedly different from that of their contemporaries? The increased study of the Old Testament among Protestants, especially Puritans, had led to an interest in the Jews and their religious practices. Many more people were now studying Hebrew, some believing that it was the language of Adam in the Garden of Eden, some were observing Saturday as the Sabbath, and some even undergoing circumcision (Katz 1982:ch.1). Quakers were not the first people to visit the synagogue in Amsterdam. The diarist, John Evelyn, wrote a detailed account of his visit in 1641 (De Beer 1955 vol. i:31), and Queen Henrietta Maria was there in the same year (Katz 1982:160). In 1663 Samuel Pepys visited the six-year-old synagogue in London, where he found the service 'in part absurd' and returned home, he said, 'with my mind strangely disturbed with them' (Latham and Matthias 1971 vol. iv:335).

Interest in millenarianism was widespread. The mathematician William Oughtred made calculations from estimated dates of the Creation, the Flood, and Christ's Birth, which convinced him that something extraordinary would happen in 1655: the Jews would be then be converted when the Saviour appeared to judge the world (De Beer 1955 vol. iii:157). The eccentric Welsh preacher, Arise Evans, declared that Charles II would be the Messiah and lead the Jews back to Israel (Hill 1974:55, 58).

Inevitably Quakers were affected by these ideas. Fox, too, developed an interest in Hebrew, and some of the Quaker

'peculiarities' in speech were the result of a notion of a 'pure adamic language' (Katz 1972:50-52; Bauman 1983:1, 3). Any idea of copying Jewish rituals, however, was, quite abhorrent to him. Fox made calculations based on the Old Testament, but his message was always that Christ had come and was present in men's hearts.

The Whitehall Conference provided a forum for the voicing of arguments for and against the readmission of the Jews. The majority believed that readmission would be good for the country's economy, though some feared competition in trade. Most were anxious to encourage conversion and felt that, for this to happen, the Jews needed to be present in England. Quakers supported the readmission but not out of economic self-interest, and although they wanted to convert Jews, they were prepared to travel anywhere to bring people to their view of Truth. They were, for obvious reasons, in favour of toleration.

Already in 1648 the Council of Mechanics proposed that toleration should be granted to all 'not excepting Turkes, nor Papists, nor Jews', but the Levellers' Agreement of the People, while appearing to propose toleration to all in 'matters of faith, Religion or Gods worship', also included a clause debarring those who 'maintain the Pope's (or any other forraign) Supremacy' from taking public office (Roth 1978:152-154). The diarist clergyman, Ralph Josselin, makes reference to a book of Welsh prophecies which asserted that Cromwell was 'the great Conqueror that shall conquer Turke and Pope' (Macfarlane 1976:412). This suggests that the other foreign supremacy in people's minds was that of the Sultan.

Some outstanding people in the preceding centuries had studied the Qur'an in Latin translations, including John Wycliff, Nicholas de Cusa and St Ignatius Loyola. The last-named encouraged his men to study its theology so as to be ready with arguments to convert the Moors (Caraman 1990:175). Interest grew in Islam in the seventeenth century when translations of the Qur'an into the vernacular and lives of the Prophet Mahomet began to appear. He was painted in very unfavourable colours. Louis Moreri, writing in 1674, recounted the most derogatory traditions about Mahomet's parentage and his life, and summed up thus:

So his Religion, made up in part of Judaism, in part of Dreams of the Hereticks, and fitted to the sensual Appetites of corrupt Nature, was embraced by Thieves and wicked People, who knew neither God nor Justice (Moreri 1694:n.p.).

The general populace repeated and embroidered absurd legends about the prophet. In *Hudibras*, Samuel Butler repeated the ridiculous tales of the pigeon dictating the words of the Qur'an into Mahomet's ear and the suspension of his coffin by magnets (Wilders 1967: Part 1:229; Part 3:625). Yet the appearance of an English translation of the Qur'an indicated that interest was awakening in the religion and culture of the Turks instead of only in their political and military power.

Fox clearly ignored all the defamatory accounts, and took a view nearer to that of St Ignatius Loyola. Fox, however, went a step further, in that he assumed a measure of Light in the hearts and minds of Muslims, and in quoting from the Qur'an, tried to lead them on towards Christian belief from passages in their own scriptures.

A deep conviction that there is 'that of God in everyone' made, and still makes, for ease of approach to all fellow human beings. This must have two different effects on missionary activity. On the one hand, a religion proclaiming this belief would surely be attractive since it ensures the possibility of spiritual well-being for all without any imposed authority or restrictive practices. On the other hand, if each individual possesses a measure of light 'sufficient to heal and help', then, as the writer of *The Light upon the Candlestick* assured his reader, there is no need to become a member of a specific group or to convert from one religion to another.

Light was to be found in the sacred texts of both Jews and Muslims. The arguments used by Fox and Fell in their attempt to convert the Jews were based however on the early Hebrew scriptures, the basic law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets, where idolatry was condemned in all its forms. They failed to appreciate the development of Judaism and the value of the practices which united the scattered communities of the diaspora. Islamic society too had its well-established law and practices which created social bonding. It was only gradually that Fox began to see the need for a strong organisation to unite and strengthen the widespread meetings of Friends, and not until the 1660s was a structure put in place which, by the end of the century, had resulted in the movement to reform all Christendom, and even those outside its boundaries, becoming a well-defined sect with simple rituals and strong community ties.

The Quakers were clearly unsuccessful in their proselytising activities aimed at Jews and Muslims, so attempts at this type of mission were practically abandoned when the Quakers entered their Quietist period around 1700. Their mission ceased to be conversionist and eventually became a mission

of service to the oppressed and suffering, and one of mediation in conflict.

#### Footnotes

1. Friends have no ordained or paid Ministers. A Minister was a Friend who felt a call and was considered by his or her Meeting to be worthy to speak and travel on behalf of Friends generally.

2. The title page of the English translation ends with the assertion: 'Treated of, and written by Will Ames. Printed into Low Dutch for the author 1662 and translated by B.F.' Wiliam Sewel, however, the son of Dutch parents who were convinced by Ames, assures us that 'it never proceeded from his pen' (Sewel 1811:xvi). He believes that the original Latin version *Lucerna supra Candelabram* was written by Adam Boreel and translated into Dutch by Peter Balling (ibid:xvi). Braithwaite accepts that the author was a Collegiant (Braithwaite 1912:410) as does Jones who names him as Balling (Jones 1914:123). The Quaker Universalist Fellowship agrees with Jones in attributing it to Balling (Quaker Universalist Fellowship 1992:xvii).

3. A comprehensive account of Fell's work to convert Jews is given by Bonnelyn Young Kunze in her recent work *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism* (1994:211-228)

4. Some contacts there must have been: the architect for the Bevis Marks Synagogue, built 1701, was a Quaker and is said to have taken no payment.

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Wilders, ed., *Hudibras*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967 (Samuel Butler, 1662).

Kathleen Thomas gained an M.Litt. in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for a thesis on 'Quaker Symbols', 1990, and was awarded the Canterbury Papers Prize for this work in the same year.

Mailing Address: 32 Keyes Gardens, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE2 3QX, England.