

PEACE IN THE POWER AND THE LIGHT

By DAVID LONSDALE

Our peace testimony is much more than our special attitude to world affairs; it expresses our vision of the whole christian way of life; it is our way of living in this world, of looking at this world and of changing this world.¹

WHEN GEORGE FOX submitted peaceably to being beaten, pelted with stones and rolled in the mire by the people of a small town in the north of England he cannot have known that his passive acceptance would have lasting repercussions three centuries later. By this submission to suffering on account of his religious activity he thought he was doing two things: giving witness to the presence in himself of the divine 'Light', and trying to call forth in other people a particular kind of religious experience, a form of conversion. This dual purpose, so it seems to me as an outsider, takes us close to the heart of the quaker 'peace testimony', the stand and struggle for peace that has consistently characterized the Society of Friends. A. Neave Brayshaw wrote in 1921:

The quaker testimony concerning war does not set up as its standard of value the attainment of individual or national safety, neither is it based primarily on the iniquity of taking human life. . . . It is based ultimately on the conception of 'that of God in every man' . . . following out a line of thought and conduct which, involving suffering as it may do, is . . . the most likely to reach to the inward witness and so change the evil into the right mind.²

The special feature of the quaker stand for peace lies in this: that it is not trying to achieve by peaceful means what war tries to achieve by violence; but it is working towards results which war, by its nature, cannot reach — the inner conversion of both ally and foe to a life characterized by christian love, peace and friendship. In this article I will examine the quaker peace testimony in relation to the spiritual

experience of George Fox and the early Quakers. Then I will look at the particular quaker contribution to the modern struggle for peace.

George Fox: the 'Inner Light'

To appreciate better the place of the peace testimony in quaker spirituality it is as well to return to the religious experience of George Fox himself. By his own account, his conversion brought about in him a change from an inner state of turmoil and conflict and turbulence to one of enlightenment, joy and peace. It radically changed his life. Before this event he was a man full of conflict and unrest:

I was a man of sorrows . . . and when I myself was in the deep and under all shut up, I could not believe that I should ever overcome; my troubles, my sorrows and my temptations were so great that I thought many times that I should have despaired.³

But all was changed:

Now I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God. All things were new, and all the creation gave unto me another smell than before, beyond what 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 say I was come up to the state of Adam which he was in before he fell.⁴

The cause of this change, in Fox's own view, was that he had become aware of the presence in himself of the divine 'Inner Light', the direct presence and working of Christ in the soul. As a result, he enjoyed a hitherto unknown sense of inner peace. It is not that conflict no longer occurs in one who possesses the Inner Light, but the Light itself offers a way of resolving conflicts:

And, Friends, . . . afterwards you may feel winter storms, tempests and hail and be frozen, in frost and cold and a wilderness and temptation. Be patient and still in the Power and still in the Light that does convince you to keep your minds to God; in that be quiet . . . for by the Power and the Light you will come to see through and feel over winter storms, tempests and all the coldness, barrenness, emptiness . . . you will see the Lord's strength, you will feel the small rain, you will feel the fresh springs in the Power and the Light.⁵

Fox's use here of the image of Adam and paradise points to another of his beliefs about the Inner Light. One of the causes of lack of peace within a person is sin; by possession and awareness of the Light a person is set free from sin, united to Christ: the effect of the Fall is reversed.

Fox also believed that this Light, which he had discovered in himself and by whose guidance, that of Christ himself, he believed he lived, is to be found in all men and women. But in most it lies latent: since they are unaware of it, they do not experience its power or its peace. His mission from that time onwards was to proclaim its presence in himself and call it forth in others.

I have stressed Fox's discovery of an inner state of peace because it seems to me an essential part of the Quaker peace testimony in its different forms. Moving out from this inner, personal sense of peace, Quakers discover and develop a fellowship, a unity and harmony with others based on a shared religious experience. The fellowship and unity that they experience in meeting for worship spread into other areas of life. Thus, one way in which the peace testimony has grown seems to be by a desire among Friends to share this peace experience increasingly with others. But in the Quakers' early days, things were less clear-cut.

The early Quakers: the stand against war

When a man falls in love, it is often only gradually that he feels the repercussions of this event in different areas of his life and conduct. It may take months or years. It is also commonly so with people who experience a religious conversion, and so it was with George Fox and the early Quakers. The peace testimony grew as a conscientious refusal to take part in war, but that decision was reached only gradually. Initially, a mixture of motives and circumstances led to Quakers quitting the army, and some of these had nothing to do with what we think of as pacifism. Some Quakers found their army service cut short by their refusal to take the oath of allegiance which Cromwell demanded of all soldiers in 1654. Others, by refusing, in early Quaker fashion, to distinguish, by speech or gesture, persons of superior rank, were found guilty of subverting army discipline and had to leave. But gradually a distinctive anti-war stand emerged. Individually or in groups, Quakers came to see that taking part in army service or in war was incompatible with the Inner Light. Fox himself was offered a

command in the army of the Commonwealth as an alternative to what he described as 'a dungeon among thirty felons in a lousy stinking place without any bed'. With a commission in the army he would at least have had a bed of sorts. With characteristic disdain for grammar, he replied that 'I lived in virtue of that Life and Power that took away the occasion of all wars; and I knew from whence all wars did arise, from the lust, according to James his doctrine . . . I told them I was come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strifes was'.⁶ His emphasis at this time was not that war contradicts the explicit teaching of Jesus but rather that he, living in the 'Spirit' and 'Power' and 'Light' of Jesus Christ, felt compelled to love and to live at peace with all. In 1662, William Bayly, another early Quaker, made a similar point, writing that Friends partake in some measure of 'the Spirit of Christ' which 'destroys the ground of enmity in man'.⁷

Other early Quakers give various reasons for finding it impossible to engage in war. Some of these are general evangelical or christian reasons and do not refer explicitly to the Inner Light. William Bayly, again opposes war because 'God hath made us all of one blood to dwell upon the face of the earth . . . all the workmanship of one creator'. William Dewsbury testifies that he was commanded by God to put up his 'carnal sword' into the scabbard because 'the enemies was [*sic*] within . . . and my weapons against them must be spiritual, the power of God' (see Eph 6,10-20). Isaac Pennington on the other hand refers to Adam, as did Fox: he argues that since fighting entered human life through man's fall, it is fitting and necessary that those 'redeemed from the fall and chosen to be examples of peace' eschew all war.⁸

Fox did not claim, therefore, that the peace testimony was a 'revelation', as was the teaching of the Inner Light. But in a time of civil war at home and constant battles at sea, gradually, as a result of religious experience, individual Quakers felt their way towards taking a stand against war. The document that they presented to Cromwell in 1660-61 summarizes their views at the time:

Our principle is and our practice always has been to seek peace and ensue it . . . seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all. . . . We certainly know and do testify to the world that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ nor for the kingdoms of this world.⁹

I have traced the connection between the early Quakers' reaction against war and what one may call their spirituality because, quite apart from the intrinsic interest of the reasons that they give for their stand, the same themes and ideas recur right through the Quaker tradition to the present day. An official *Printed Epistle* of 1779 reminds Friends that:

the kingdom of Christ is a peaceable kingdom; and though his servants walk in the flesh they do not war after the flesh. He commands them to love their enemies; and many who have followed him in the regeneration . . . have found themselves restrained from all wars and fightings; which are not of the Spirit of the Saviour, but that of the destroyer of mankind.

And a similar letter of 1809 speaks of 'the root of our testimony against war':

It is no other than Christian love, and that righteousness which produces peace, quietness and perpetual assurance. . . . This draws the mind away from those passions and desires, in which are laid the foundations of contest,

and refers to Jesus as 'a Master who was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners'.¹⁰

The testimony of the early Quakers has both positive and negative sides: on the one hand a refusal to take part in any war or conflict (apart from the 'spiritual combat' of the New Testament letters); and positively to seek peace by repaying evil with good, to submit unflinchingly and without recrimination to ill-treatment for the sake of their testimony, and by these means to try to bring both friend and enemy to a better life, marked by friendship, simplicity, peace and the fellowship of the Inner Light.

An enthusiastic version of this 'spiritual combat' was proclaimed by one William Smith in *The Banner of Love* which he wrote in Worcester gaol. As men and women learn more of the love of God, they enlist under God in the war of righteousness:

And they are conquerors through him that loves them and spreads his banner over them, and their weapons are love and patience by which they overcome . . . and they seek to save men's lives and not to destroy them . . . they are marching under the banner of love, and in love meet their enemies and quench their fury.

In time this army will swell to great might and 'war will cease and cruelty come to an end and love will abound'.¹¹

The peace testimony: the twentieth century

Modern quaker attempts to keep alive the torch of peacemaking have included and gone beyond a refusal to fight in wars. In all its different forms, the central aim of the peace testimony seems to remain constant: negatively to purge 'the seeds of war — pride, prestige and lust for power and possessions — from our personal and corporate ways of living', and positively to foster forgiveness, reconciliation, friendship and christian *agape*. Here I wish to focus upon three forms of the modern peace testimony: non-violent resistance, pacifism and 'creative peacemaking', and especially on how Quakers justify these forms of witness and relate them to their 'spirituality'.

Non-violent resistance

In 1939, Carl Heath, in an attempt to link quaker loyalty to the Spirit of Christ with contemporary events, sent out a call for 'non-violent resistance':

... the first and immediate demand is that (aggressive tyranny) be *opposed*. . . . Hence the call to christian peacemakers for non-violent resistance to violence. . . . While massed might resists and kills and aggression is hurled back *perhaps*, there is in it no redemption. But the other has a deeper purpose of conversion while it resists.¹²

It will easily be seen that this call has the quaker ingredients: its intentions are not merely pacifism but active peacemaking and the deeper purpose of redemption and conversion, a change of heart. But one questions how true it is to the radical spirit of George Fox. Resistance is still resistance. To resist the enemy, even non-violently, is still to treat him as an enemy, to oppose him. What George Fox was in search of was that men and women should cease altogether from conflict. Moreover, the line between violent and non-violent resistance is a thin one, if one accepts that economic and social pressures and structures can be a form of violence.

Pacifism

A second form of the Quakers' peace testimony in this century is that of radical pacifism. Here, as elsewhere, the Friends' thinking and action has had to try to keep pace with the broadening scope of war, from George Fox's refusal to take part in the Civil War's battle of Worcester to the threat of global nuclear war, with a range of battles and wars of varying magnitude in between. Among many Friends this form of the peace testimony has remained consistent: in time of war a refusal to participate in the fighting force, even in defence of one's country against an aggressor. Some have been imprisoned and even tortured through refusing to share even indirectly in the combat.

When, in the seventeenth century, Isaac Pennington faced the question of pacifism he put it in this form: if the nation were invaded and no one fought to defend it, families would be wiped out and the land ruined. The implication is that the better way, or at least the lesser of two evils, would be to take up arms in defence of home and country. His answer falls into three parts. First, he calls upon Friends, after offering no resistance to the invader, to begin by word and example to convert the enemy to peaceful ways and to a life ruled by christian *agape*. Secondly, he argues that the objection against radical pacifism betrays a lack of trust in God. The Scriptures teach that a nation must wait on the Lord for its preservation as (it is said) Israel did of old (he refers to Isai 30,15):

It is far better to know the Lord to be the defender, and to wait on him daily, and to see the need of his strength, wisdom and preservation, than to be never so strong and skilful in weapons of war.

His third point is that the Old Testament offers proof that the power of God alone avails to protect those who trust in him.¹³

While one might doubt the accuracy of his view of Old Testament history and modern Quakers' acceptance of the force of his arguments, Pennington's words do highlight a consistent quaker trait: the willingness to take this pacifism to a radical conclusion and, both individually and collectively, to accept defeat, suffering and death in the cause of non-participation in war. During World War I a group of women Friends in Manchester issued a statement in which they asked their husbands and sons 'not to use force to defend us . . . but to trust God with us and for us. . . . We did not

feel that we could lightly ask this of you until we had faced it for ourselves . . . and we realize that to ask you to be willing to do this is a very great thing to ask'.¹⁴

A hypothetical example may highlight the radical nature of the modern problem. If Russia, as is sometimes said, were to try to overrun western Europe, the Quaker tradition would say that Friends may not offer resistance to the invader in order to defend their families, homes, country, way of life. Writing in 1950, Konrad Braun showed that Quakers are not insensitive to the dilemma that this poses:

Shall we set violence against violence and defend the society to which we feel bound by duty and affection, the lives and the future of those we love — or shall we reject violence and allow the aggressor to do his worst?

But he leaves no doubt about his own position:

. . . we must accept the way of the Cross not only for ourselves. If we believe in non-violence as the true way of peace and love, we must make it a principle not only of individual but of national and universal conduct. It would be too easy to take the position of people who are specially called for an absolute obedience to the law of love and be content with remaining a small and ineffective group while the majority of our fellow-men defend themselves and us too. . . . We must endeavour to win (those who in conscience decide to fight) . . . to the way of non-violence, whatever the consequences.¹⁵

The reasons which modern Quakers give for such a position are sometimes religious, sometimes pragmatic. Some refer to the idea of the brotherhood of mankind. Here it must be remembered that for the Quaker the brotherhood of mankind is no mere humanitarian belief or ideal: all are human, hence all are brothers and sisters. It is founded on and explained by the idea of the Inner Light, and is therefore a deeply religious conviction:

We believe in common with all other Christians that in Jesus Christ the Divine Word, which in all ages had been the Light of men, took human form. We have seen in him the priceless worth of manhood in the sight of God, and know that in virtue of his Light shed abroad in every human soul all men . . . are brothers.¹⁶

All men and women are brothers and sisters precisely because, in

quaker theology, Christ lives in them all. Other Quakers refer to the explicit teaching of Jesus in the gospels as the ground of their pacifist stand (e.g. especially, Mt 5, 38-39; Lk 6,27-36) enlarging what Jesus is reported as saying in those passages to the national and international arenas. Some also cite other parts of the New Testament (e.g. 1 Pet 3,17-18) as the early Quakers cited Paul's images of spiritual warfare. Not only the teaching but also the example of Jesus is put forward as a model of pacifist conduct: Jesus willingly submitted to violence and death with the result that he brought about reconciliation between God and man and among human beings (cf Gal 3,28).

More pragmatically, Quakers also argue that it is only by non-resistance to violence that mankind at large, little by little and world leaders included, can be persuaded to abandon war and live in peace, through the necessary conversion of heart. But Friends' most pragmatic claim on this score in modern times is that violent resistance to an aggressor does not in fact achieve what it sets out to do. In war, one purpose of taking to violence in defence of home and country is, besides physically defending one's fellow countrymen and their property, to preserve the moral and spiritual values by which they, or many of them, live. The Friends' claim is that defence by violence does not in fact do that: violence both harms those against whom it is directed and, of its nature, corrupts those who use it. When used in defence of family or country it corrodes one's own moral and spiritual values. It damages and destroys the very things and people that it is designed to defend and preserve. It is the convergence of these religious and pragmatic arguments that provides the base on which Friends' modern pacifism is built.

Creative peacemaking

A third modern form of Friends' peace testimony has been aptly named 'creative peacemaking'. (In fact several forms of activity can conveniently be grouped under this heading). The aim still being the inner conversion of as many people as possible to the ways of peace and christian love, it is logical that the Friends' activity, in what we misleadingly call peacetime, should have this positive and constructive side. The ideal is that all relationships of life, individual and personal, local, national and international should be marked by friendship and christian *agape*. The Yearly Meeting of 1915 reminded Friends:

Of this doctrine (of the indwelling Christ) our testimony as to war and peace is a necessary outcome, and if we understand the doctrine aright, and follow it in its wide implications, we shall find that it calls to the peaceable spirit and rule of love in all the broad and manifold relations of life.¹⁷

Preparatory Papers for the Fourth World Conference of Friends (1967) may be quarried for suggestions about ways in which they might contribute to 'creative peacemaking'. One paper, 'Truth and Love in a World of Conflict', offers guidelines by which the peace testimony could be applied in the areas of personal dealings. Most of them are reasonably obvious: communicating openly but peacefully about disagreements; having a commitment to peace as a goal, since this affects how one deals with all disagreements and conflicts; being willing to examine honestly how much one is oneself at fault in a conflict; living personally in such a way as to remove the occasions of war and conflict. In addition there are the specifically quaker ways: having the courage to 'speak to that of God in the other', and a willingness to love one's opponent, trusting in God and 'that of God' in the other.

More politically, Friends are also encouraged to support international organizations whose aim is to make and keep peace. (Here the UN would be an obvious choice for support did it not maintain a peace-keeping *force*). In another paper, recognizing that economics and social exploitation and oppression are also forms of violence, Lawrence Scott argues that Friends should initiate and participate in organized, large-scale, non-violent action against all forms of violence. The first step is, in his view, to overcome distrust and fear which are the sources of violence. Again a specifically quaker note appears in the belief that non-violent action is not just a political or social tactic; its power is 'the power of the Spirit', the same power as was evident in the life and action of Fox.

Other proposals for 'creative peacemaking' are far less immediately practicable. Suggestions for how to 'overcome evil with good' include: to stand out against any argument justifying war on the grounds of policy, expediency or military necessity, whatever the cost; to work out the ethics and politics of peace on the basis of forgiveness, generosity and active goodwill with sacrifice; to help build a world community based on friendship, understanding and co-operation, and to draw into this fellowship even those who have hitherto relied on falsehood, self-aggrandizement and violence.¹⁸

Conclusions

The Quaker way of peace is essentially the 'discovery of a way of peace within as a prelude to its pursuit without',¹⁹ as we have seen. The peace within comes by way of a religious experience, in the classic quaker tradition, believed to be an experience of direct contact with God. The Friends' fellowship moves outwards from this experience in seeking to share it with others, and thus bring others into unity and peace 'in the Light'. The Friends, again traditionally, try to bring others into this gift of peace by evoking in them the religious experience, begun by 'waiting in the Light' or 'waiting on God' in silence, which gave rise to it in themselves. In this process, deep-rooted prejudices and fears, causes of distrust and conflict, as well as established and entrenched selfish attitudes, will, it is hoped, be overcome. The search for peace in the quaker tradition is the search for a conversion in which selfishness comes to be replaced by christian *agape* centred on God and others.

The peace testimony has as its ultimate aim a peace which is a gift of God, a 'peace which the world cannot give'. As well as a movement outwards, to share this gift with others, there is also, at certain times more marked than at others, a movement of withdrawal from the world. By this I mean a movement towards creating a haven, a refuge of peace from the storms of the world, a gathering together in harmony and fellowship and mutual support to share the same material and spiritual gifts with like-minded folk. Penn's attempt to found a quaker state in America is perhaps only one conspicuous example of this tendency to look for a peaceful haven, in a shared life of simplicity, integrity and honesty, protected from violent inimical forces without.

It is the Quakers' absolute loyalty to the Inner Light that makes their radical pacifist position open to criticism from many sides. The refusal to fight in defence of one's country has led to charges of treason, though Friends have been conspicuous in relief and medical work both in peace and war in modern times. Morally, it is sometimes said that quaker pacifism is unjustified in making faithfulness to the Inner Light more important than the claims of social justice. If you refuse to fight in defence of your country, you are exposing not only yourself but also your countrymen and women to defeat, humiliation and perhaps death in the cause of peace. It is one thing to offer oneself as a martyr for peace; it is quite another to expose others to the same fate.

The quaker peace testimony, however, has the strength of giving

expression to some deeply christian convictions. It claims that the struggle for peace can succeed only if it speaks in a christian way to the minds and hearts of individual men and women. If present social structures, nationally and internationally, are to be changed into structures of peace, the deepest dispositions of men and women must first be changed by religious conversion, by the discovery of the Inner Light. In all its forms, the peace testimony is trying to light lamps in a dark landscape. But Friends recognize that this is truly a work of grace, its power the 'power of the Spirit'. The lasting peace for which Friends are looking is in God's power alone to give.

The Friends' peace testimony is also a reminder that active love of enemies is a paramount and privileged expression of the spirit of Christ (cf Lk 6,27-36). The outcome of such love could well be, often has been, defeat, humiliation, loss of possessions and power. But the aim of the peace testimony is not safety, security, status and power, and the way of humiliation and defeat at the hands of violent men was the way that Jesus accepted. This paschal pattern is a movement to life through limitation, apparent defeat and death, and Jesus did not hide the fact that those who try to take him seriously can expect that their lives will follow the same pattern.

NOTES

¹ Friends' World Conference 1952, cf *Christian faith and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends* (London, 1972), no 606. I shall refer to this book as *Christian faith and practice*.

² *Christian faith and practice*, no 606.

³ Fox, George: *Journal*, ed. John L. Nickalls (London, 1952, 1975), entry for 1647. All my references to Fox's journals are to this edition.

⁴ Fox, *Journal*, entry for 1648.

⁵ Fox, *Journal*, entry for 1656.

⁶ Cf Hirst, M. E.: *The Quakers in peace and war* (London, 1923), ch 1, 'Early peace testimony, 1643-60'.

⁷ Hirst, *op. cit.*, ch IV.

⁸ These quotations from Dewsbury and Pennington can be found in Hirst, *op. cit.*, ch IV.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf *A selection from the christian advices* issued by the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends held in London, 1818, pp 125-26, 127-28.

¹¹ Cf Hirst, *op. cit.*, ch IV.

¹² *Christian faith and practice*, no 608.

¹³ Cf Hirst, *op. cit.*, ch IV.

¹⁴ Cf Hirst, *op. cit.*, 'Conclusion: the twentieth century'.

¹⁵ *Christian faith and practice*, no 611.

¹⁶ From the Yearly Meeting 1912; cf *Christian faith and practice*, no 623.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no 620.

¹⁸ Cf Orr, E. W.: *The Quakers in peace and war 1920-67* (London, 1974), ch VIII, 'A theological symposium'.

¹⁹ Sykes, John: *The Quakers* (London, 1958), p 77.