

English Revolution and the Quakers*

The Quaker method of making decisions takes us back to the origins of the Quakers themselves and the conditions which led them to develop their procedure for making decisions. The Quakers have their origins in the aftermath of English Revolution of 1642-1649. This same Revolution was the birthplace of modern ideas of egalitarianism and the rights of the individual which are in play whenever a group of people discuss collective action, so we should widen our lens somewhat to look at the range of ideas about collective decision making which appeared during the Revolution, and how the Quakers resolved problems arising from these ideas.

After this historical digression, we shall follow Quaker decision making to modern-day America and how the Quakers see what we call Consensus.

The English Revolution

Civil War broke out in England in 1642 when the king entered the House of Commons accompanied by 400 soldiers to arrest five members of Parliament. Parliament refused to give them up and the country rapidly descended into civil war and a New Model Army was raised by Cromwell to fight for Parliament against the king's forces.

The population of England expanded rapidly during the 16th and 17th centuries, while arable land remained locked up for the benefit of the gentry. London became a refuge for victims of enclosure, vagabonds and criminals. Discontent was rife, bitterness and contempt for the nobility was all-pervasive, exacerbated by the royal obsession with costly military adventures. The economic hardships of the years 1620 to 1650 were among the most terrible in English history. By 1640, censorship and the authority of both government and Church had completely broken down.

The growth of a stratum of people without land or master had given birth to guilds in late Anglo-Saxon England. The continuing growth of trade, urbanization and technical innovation had in turn gradually eroded the authority of the guilds, and it was now undermining the stability of the entire kingdom, its economy and its system of rule.

Beneath the stability of rural England, then, the vast placid open fields which catch the eye, was the seething mobility of forest squatters, itinerant craftsmen and building labourers, unemployed men and women seeking work, strolling players and jugglers, pedlars and quack doctors, vagabonds, tramps: congregated especially in London and the big cities, but also with footholds wherever newly-squatted areas escaped from the machinery of the parish or in old-squatted areas where labour was in demand. (Hill, 1972, p. 39)

Widespread economic distress, the breakdown of social support as well as law and order, the end of censorship, giving rise to an outpouring of political and religious pamphlets, inflamed political and religious dissent among the large mass of individuals who were no longer tied to any plot of land nor owed allegiance to any master. The king was losing control of the land and the Church had lost control of the people's souls. The

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Puritans, who no longer looked to the church for moral guidance, could only look into his or her own heart or to their local preacher to know what was right.

Not only was the growing number of masterless forest-dwellers and slum-dwellers undermining England's political economy – it was also nourishing the growth of Puritan religious consciousness and was to fill the ranks of the New Model Army.

The Levellers and the New Model Army*

The New Model Army was no mere mercenary army; it was the common people in uniform, moving back and forth across England for a decade overturning the power of the local landowners and the royalist clergy, and stimulating political discussion under conditions in which every utopian dream seemed to be a real possibility. Free discussion within the ranks of the Army itself led to a rapid development of political ideas.

In these times, political discussion was inseparable from the religious questions which were the subject of passionate debate, and indeed, for the majority, the religious problems would have been primary, as political principles were derivative from religious principles.

The numerous religious sects were strongest in the towns, where religious communities provided comfort for itinerant and displaced people, including poor relief and all manner of social support. Here voluntary ties were formed on the basis of shared religious sensibilities which rejected the need for any mediator between the individual person and God. Meanwhile, itinerant preachers were subject to the same harsh penalties for vagrancy as any tinker, unemployed tradesman or beggar. These were the social strata which signed up to fight the king, and as soldiers in the New Model Army, the boot was on the other foot.

The leaders of the Army – Oliver Cromwell, Henry Ireton and Sir Thomas Fairfax – did not share the political perspectives which came to be widely embraced by the soldiers, but they did share many of the religious precepts which underlay the democratic political ideals that the soldiers were developing. That soldiers could be and were convicted of offences, even including *lèse majesté*, committed while acting under orders during the Civil War, illustrates the social gulf separating the rank and file from their generals. The world had never before seen such a politically self-conscious army as this one; the soldiers knew what they were fighting for even better than their generals, and the New Model Army soon began to inflict defeats over numerically superior Royalist forces staffed by professional soldiers and the military elite.

Cromwell did not set out to dethrone Charles I, far less put him to death. After Charles had surrendered in June 1646, he was allowed to remain free while Cromwell 'negotiated' with him. Keeping in mind that, as a proportion of the population of England, twice as many people had died in the civil war as would die during the first world war, this refusal to deal decisively with the enemy was intolerable for the soldiers. At the end of March 1647, the rank and file took matters into their own hands calling on their officers "to go along with us in this business, or at least to let us quietly alone in this our design"[†]. The troops elected Agitators, two for each regiment, starting

* My principal source for this section is Baker, P. (2007). Ed. *The Levellers. The Putney Debates*, including an introduction by Geoffrey Robinson.

[†] *An Apologie of the soldiers to all their Commissioned Officers*, anon, 1647, cited in Hill 1972, p. 49.

with the cavalry, and by the middle of May, “every soldier gave four pence apiece” towards the expenses of meetings. The troops wore a red ribbon on their left arms, as a symbol of solidarity till death.

The Agitators called on Fairfax to order a general rendezvous, otherwise, “we ... shall be necessitated ... to do such things ourselves,” a warning which the Army leadership took seriously and acted upon. On 3 June 1647, the day before the rendezvous, on a plan initiated by the Agitators without the authority of Cromwell, Joyce, a junior non-commissioned officer and “a party of horse sent from the committee of troopers” arrested the king.

It was this situation that gave rise to the Putney Debates, in which elected representatives of the soldiers, the Agitators, debated with the generals in what was called the Army Council. The Agitators presented their arguments in a series of pamphlets which they had printed in large number in London, and circulated widely among the troops and citizens. At stake was the form of government to be instituted by the Army following their victory over the king.

The term ‘Leveller’ was invented by their opponents to describe the political sentiment which permeated the New Model Army and spoke through its elected Agitators. They were not ‘levellers’ in the sense of being advocates of economic levelling, but they were consistent advocates of a thoroughgoing *political* egalitarianism based on universal adult-male suffrage. While a much wider program is reflected in their manifestos published at Putney – an end to the monarchy, complete freedom of religion and an end to all tithes, annual parliaments, reform of the judicial and education systems which discriminated against the poor – the debate with Cromwell and his generals never got past their demand for one-man-one-vote. The Levellers reasoned that since the state had broken down, a state of nature existed and military force could justly be used only to hand power back to the people, from whom it had been stolen by William the Conqueror and his heirs. Although the Levellers had no shortage of supporters amongst the civilian population, and indeed some of the Agitators were civilians, the Levellers essentially expressed the political aspirations of the rank and file of the New Model Army. All the dissident religious sects of the period were represented within the ranks of the Levellers: Everard the Digger, and the Quakers James Nayler and William Dewsbery among them, and probably John Bunyan.

Charles I was executed on January 30 1649, but in April/May 1649, the Leveller leaders were arrested, and the radical regiments provoked into an unsuccessful mutiny, which was crushed at Burford leaving Cromwell in undisputed power. Army democracy was finished, and so were the Levellers.

We have no record of the discussions which led to the formulation of the Leveller demands and the election of the Agitators. Notwithstanding the bewildering diversity of religious views, all the religious sects supported the political program of the Levellers, which after all, expressed nothing more than the basic principles underlying bourgeois democratic society today, even if more honoured in the breach than in observance.

Although we have no record of the camp-fire discussions which formulated this program, much of the formal debate at the Army Council between the Agitators on one side and Cromwell, Ireton and Fairfax in the other was recorded verbatim. The aim was to come to an agreement on the form of the new government, but the debate could not get past the Levellers’ demand for universal adult male suffrage, with the Generals continuing to insist on the vote being restricted to property-owners.

In the immortal words of Colonel Thomas Rainborough:

For really I think that the poorer he that is in England has a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to the government that he has not had a voice to put himself under; and I am confident that, when I have heard the reasons against it, something will be said to answer those reasons, in so much that I should doubt whether he was an Englishman or no, that should doubt of these things. (Baker, 2007, p. 69)

The Levellers compromised on this point, eventually granting that those of weak mind or in prison should not have the vote and finally conceding that beggars and servants should not vote, on the basis that they were not *independent*. However, Ireton and the others continued to insist on a property qualification and no progress was made beyond this point. Facing an impasse, General Ireton said:

I am agreed with you if you insist upon a more equal distribution of elections; I will agree with you, not only to dispute for it, but to fight for it and contend for it. Thus far I agree with you. On the other hand, to those who differ in their terms and say, 'I will not agree with you except you go farther,' I make the answer, 'This far I can go with you: I will go with you as far as I can'. If you will appoint a committee of some few to consider of that, so as you preserve the equitable part of that constitution that now is, securing a voice to those who are like to be freemen, men not given up to the will of others, and thereby keeping to the latitude which is the equity of constitutions, I will go with you as far as I can. And where I cannot I will sit down, I will not make any disturbance among you. (Baker, 2007, p. 91)

Ireton thus raises the *paradox of the status quo* in which one partner consents to the status quo but the other does not, and the status quo is taken to be the default position in the event of failure to agree. This is a paradox because consensus is pre-empted by the status quo. Thomas Rainborough responded:

But the end wherefore I speak is only this: you think we shall be worse than we are, if we come to a conclusion by a sudden vote. If it be put to the question we shall at least know one another's mind. If it be determined, and the common resolution known, we shall take such a course as to put it in execution. This gentleman says, if he cannot go he will sit still. He thinks he has a full liberty to do so; we think we have not. There is a great deal of difference between us two. If a man has all he does desire, he may wish to sit still; but I think I have nothing at all of what I fight for, I do not think the argument holds that I must desist as well as he. (Baker, 2007, pp. 91-2).

The question was ultimately resolved in the Generals' favour by force. And our review of collective decision making procedures has to encompass this situation: sometimes there is simply no agreement, and if the status quo is not in itself an agreed position, and the default position is the status quo, then there is no justice. No vote, no amount of discussion or communal prayer could have persuaded Cromwell and Ireton to concede.

However, it is evident that Cromwell took the debate seriously and negotiated in good faith at the time.

One important fact which comes through in the debates at Putney is that the soldiers and their generals shared the conviction that their victory against the monarchy which had ruled England since the Norman Conquest was solely thanks to the fact that God was acting through them, that they were the instrument of Divine will. So it is not surprising that they saw their debates in the same terms, that is, that when they spoke at the Army Council, *God spoke through them*, and a resolution to the debate, if achieved, would express the Divine will.

Accordingly, at Cromwell's suggestion, each session of the debate was prefaced by a morning spent in silent prayer, "to seek the guidance of God, and to recover that presence of God that seems to withdraw from us."

In the last recorded session of the debate on 29 October 1647, Cromwell said:

Truly we have heard many speaking to us, and I cannot but think that in many of those things God has spoke to us. I cannot but think that in most that have spoke there has been something of God laid forth to us, and yet there has been several contradictions in what has been spoken. But certainly God is not the author of contradictions. The contradictions are not so much in the end as in the way. I cannot see but that we all speak to the same end, and mistakes are only in the way. (Baker, p. 100)

So if God is speaking through us, and since we all share the same end, how can it be that there is contradiction? Anticipating Immanuel Kant, he is sure that "*God is not the author of contradictions.*" Cromwell's resolution of this problem was this:

Thus far I find us to be agreed; and thus far as we are agreed, I think it is of God. ...and truly when we have no other more particular impression of the power of God going forth with us, I think that this law and this word speaking within us, which truly is in every man *who has the spirit of God*, we are to have regard to ... (Baker, p. 100-1, emphasis added)

But on the other hand, Leveller John Wildman held that:

I observe that the work has been to inquire what has been the mind of God, and every one speaks what is given in to his spirit. ... consider what is justice and what is mercy, and what is good, and I cannot but think that *any one* does speak from God when he says what he speaks is of God. (Baker, 2007, pp. 102, emphasis added)

Oliver Cromwell was an Independent, that is, one of those Protestants who held that each congregation should have control over church matters affecting them, and were therefore opposed to a state church, but were not Dissenters in theology. The Royalists were High Anglicans, and the majority of Parliamentarians were Presbyterians, both of whom favoured a state church, though they contended on which it should be; Anglicans were to be found on both sides of the Civil War, and among the rank and file as well as officers. The Levellers, however, were Dissenters. In terms of the problem of collective decision making, the question which separated the Dissenters from all the others was this: does God speak through *every* believer, or only *some* believers? And if, as the Dissenters believed, the Light shone within every heart, how was contradiction to be understood theologically and how was it to be dealt with in practice?

With the king executed and the Levellers suppressed, in 1653, Cromwell established himself as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. After his death in 1658, his son, Richard, took control, but at the end of the next year instability threatened again, and the English ruling class called an end to its experiment in republicanism and invited Charles's son to return from exile in Holland and restored the monarchy in 1660. Charles II was suspected of being a Catholic, and when his Catholic son, James, assumed the throne in 1685, England was faced with a return to religious warfare. Parliament invited the Dutch Protestant William and his wife Mary (James' daughter) to invade England, overthrow James and to jointly assume the throne of England, Scotland and Ireland, thus in 1688 returning England to Protestantism and securing the supremacy of Parliament forever after. The period from the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 to the Act of Toleration in 1689 was a period of severe repression for the Dissenters. It was during this period that the Quaker movement took shape, and the development of dissenting religions during this period is the main line of my narrative. However, I cannot continue our narrative without first pausing to look at Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers, or 'True Levellers'.

Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers*

Gerard Winstanley had had little education was a small tradesman in the clothing trade and had probably been a member of one of the London Companies discussed in an earlier chapter. He fell on hard times and in 1649 he was eking out a precarious living pasturing his neighbours' cattle.

The Levellers had been political liberals. Winstanley, on the contrary, was a communitarian, adopting mutual aid and cooperation as his principle. Whereas the Levellers idealised Anglo-Saxon England before the Conquest, as he wrote to Lord Fairfax, Winstanley's aim was:

not to remove the Norman *Yoke* only, and to bring us back to be governed by those Laws that were before *William the Conqueror* came in, as if that were the mark we aime at. No, that is not it; but the Reformation is according to the Word of God, and that is the pure Law of Righteousnesse before the fall, which made all things, unto which all things are to be restored ... (Winstanley, 1965, p. 292)

The Fall, according to Winstanley, made "one part of Mankind to be a Task-master, and to live Idle; and by the beast-like power of the sword, does force another part of Mankind to work as a servant and slave," (p. 423) whilst Winstanley held that "Israel shall neither take Hire, nor give Hire." (p. 161) Everyone would work the earth.

And further, "Shall we have no lawyers? There is no need of them, for there is to be no buying and selling; neither any need to expound laws, for the bare letter of the law shall be both judge and lawyer, trying every man's actions. And seeing we shall have successive *Parliaments* every year, there will be rules made for every action a man can do." (p. 512) So, no lawyers or judges (because laws would be framed in terms which would be clear to the common man) and no buying and selling. Goods would be

* My principal source for this section is Winstanley, G. (1941). *Works*, with an introduction. Ed. G. Sabine. Cornell U. P.

supplied to stores from which people could take what they needed, without buying and selling.

But despite the utopian character of this program, it was not based on an idealisation of human nature: the law would be enforced ruthlessly. After a first warning, transgressors would be dealt with harshly, punished by overseers with anything from hard labour to the gallows. Persistent buying and selling was punishable by death and anyone wishing to escape justice would be hunted down and put to death.

According to Christopher Hill:

The whole Diggers movement ... can be plausibly regarded as the culmination of a century of unauthorised encroachment upon the forests and wastes by squatters and local commoners, pushed on by land shortage and pressures of population ... by lack of employment for casual labour in the depression of 1648-9. Winstanley has arrived at the one possible democratic solution which was not merely backward-looking, as all other radical proposals during the revolutionary decades – an agrarian law, partible inheritance, stable copyhold – tended to be. (1972, p. 104)

Winstanley believed that half to two-thirds of England was not properly cultivated, and despite the confiscation of Church and Crown lands, “though there be land enough in England to maintain ten times as many people as are in it, yet some must beg of their brethren.” Throughout 1649 and 1650 the price of land was discussed frequently in Parliament, the misery and discontent among the poorer people being a manifest threat of disorder and rioting, not to say of insurrection. The danger posed by the Diggers was that they called on the poor not just to vote, but to organise themselves and take *direct action* to remedy their situation.

Winstanley’s vision came to him in a trance in January 1648.

I heard the words, Worke together. Eat bread together; declare this all abroad. Likewise I heard these words. Whosoever it is that labours in the earth, for any person or persons, that lifts up themselves as Lords & Rulers over others, and that doth not look upon themselves as equal to others in the Creation, The hand of the Lord shall be upon that labourer: I the Lord have spoke it and I will do it; Declare this all abroad.
(Winstanley, p. 190)

He claimed that he received inspiration from no man and no Book. God had spoken directly to him, and he believed that this direct access to the Word of God, unmediated by priest or Bible, was available to every man and woman.

He announced his project and on 1 April 1649 half-a-dozen men began digging in waste land at St. George’s Hill, about 30km from London. The Settlement at St. George’s Hill was broken up by local landowners with assistance from Fairfax. Still, the settlement grew to 45 by June. As a result of continued harassment by local landowners assisted by a magistrate, they moved to land owned by the wife of a sympathetic clergyman about 30km away in West Horley. By April 1650, more than 50 men were cultivating 11 acres of grain and had built 6 or 7 houses. There were sympathetic colonies in Northampton, Buckinghamshire and Kent, but in April 1650 all were driven out by landowners and hired thugs. All that is known of Winstanley’s life after the writing of the *Law of Freedom* in 1652 is that he became a Quaker and was living at Cobham in 1660.

The only insight we have into Winstanley's approach to decision making is what is set out in his utopian writings, most particularly in *Law of Freedom*. Such utopian proposals do not usually count even as norms. It is worth noting though that Winstanley shared the view of all the Dissenters that God spoke directly and truthfully to every man and woman, were they to listen to that Spirit within them. This view was associated in the instance of the Levellers with a relatively liberal, individualist position in politics, so it is noteworthy that Winstanley saw no incompatibility of this idea with his extreme communitarianism. Direct unmediated access to the Spirit may be consistent with strong communities as well as individual rights, for as Cromwell himself had said: "God is not the author of contradictions."

Winstanley and the Diggers are of interest in a history of communism, but are a footnote in English Revolution and in British history altogether. However, taking Winstanley as a representative of the extreme Left of the Revolution, he can shed some light on our theme in two respects.

Winstanley was himself a member of a London guild at a time when they were still at the height of their powers. Of interest, firstly, are his views on the guilds, given the part they played in the history of Majority; secondly, his views on how Parliament can legitimately make decisions on behalf of the whole country. Finally, Winstanley's fellow Diggers did not have the same sense of history as Winstanley himself, but the views of an anonymous Digger on decision making are enlightening.

The abolition of wage labour which Winstanley advocated entailed the preservation of apprenticeship and management of the labour process along lines modelled on the London Companies.

And truly the Government of the Halls and Companies in *London* is a very rational and well ordered Government; and the *Overseers of the Trades* may very well be called *Masters, Wardens, and Assistants* of such and such a Company, for such and such a particular Trade. Onley two things are to be practised to preserve the peace. The first is, *That all these Overseers shall be chosen new ones every year*. And secondly, the old Overseers shal not chuse the new ones, to prevent the creeping in of Lordly Oppression; but all the Masters of Families and Freemen of that Trade, shall be the chusers, and the old Overseers shall give but their single voice among them. (Winstanley, p. 549)

His ideas for discipline were even more draconian than those of the guilds:

If any refuse to learn a trade, or refuse to work in seed-time or harvest, etc., reproved openly ... if he still continues idle, he shall then be whipt, ... if still he continue idle, he shall be delivered into the taskmasters hand, who shall set him to work for twelve moneths, or till he submit to right Order. (p. 593)

The "agricultural trades" would be organised along parallel lines and:

Likewise this Overseership for Trades shall see That no man shall be a House-keeper, and have Servants under him [i.e. run a workshop], till he hath served under a Master seven years, and hath learned his Trade. (p. 550)

So we see that the extreme left wing of 17th century England had no trouble with the structure of the guilds and with making decisions by majority voting – only that

elections had to be annual and that provisions for rotation of offices had to be strictly adhered to, so as to avoid the formation of cliques, hereditary succession and hierarchy. Even the restriction of the franchise to Masters he approved of.

Winstanley did not foresee that there would be fundamental divisions within the Parliament of his Commonwealth, and he gives us no particular guidelines about Parliamentary debate. His concerns were in relation to consultation with the electorate:

It is now the work of Parliament to search into Reason and Equity. How relief may be found out for the people in such a case, and to preserve a common Peace; and when they have found out a way by debate of Council among themselves, whereby the people may be relieved, they are not presently to establish their Conclusions for a Law. But in the next place, they are to make a publicke Declaration thereof to the people of the Land who chose them for their approbation; and if no Objection come in from the people within one moneth, they may then take the peoples silence as a consent thereto. And then in the third place, they are to enact it for a Law, to be a binding Rule to the whole Land. (p. 559)

All Overseers and State-Offices shall be chosen anew every year, to prevent the rise of Ambition and Covetousness; for the Nations have smarted sufficiently by suffering Officers to continue long in an Office, or to remain in an Office by hereditary succession. (p. 596)

So much for Winstanley's vision which we can see was consonant with that of the politically conscious of tradesmen of his time. Winstanley was indeed a 'true leveller'. The harsh labour discipline of this utopia can only be reconciled with what Winstanley evidently imagined prevailed "before the Fall" and the institution of class society, if we accept that this reflects an element of realism, and that it would take discipline and time for these habits to be normalised.

A hint as to how Diggers *actually* made decisions is suggested in the utopian vision in the anonymous Digger pamphlet, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*:

The government to be by Judges, called Elders, men fearing God and hating covetousnesse; Those to be chosen by the people, and to end all controversies in every Town and Hamlet, without any other or further trouble or charge.

This sounds like the witenagemot of Anglo-Saxon England: decisions to be made by *wise men*, so that there should be no controversy and dissension – dependent of course on the prior eradication of all class differences. Winstanley knew better than this, but the anonymous author may reflect how the Diggers actually made their decisions, an approach no doubt similar to those described by St. Benedict.

After this digression, we now return to the main line of our narrative, the development of the Dissenting sects in England after the crushing of the Levellers in 1649.

Ranters and Seekers^{*}

Like Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of the Quakers, George Fox, was a relatively uneducated man who experienced what he took to be a Divine revelation, which he genuinely believed came from neither person nor Book. Our narrative requires us to follow the emergence of the Quakers out of the milieu of dissenting sects in England following the Revolution, following the inner logic of that development, and the subsequent development of the Quakers themselves. However, the features of Quaker practice and belief which interest us were not fresh creations, but were to be found in embryo in pre-Revolutionary England.

The first Baptist congregation was founded in Holland in 1609 by the English pastor, John Smyth, and from there reached England and America prior to 1642. They were called “Baptists” because they baptised only adult converts who could make their own confession of faith, not infants. Although Protestant in origin, the English Baptists were heavily persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant regimes. Many Baptists emigrated to America where they could worship free of persecution, and flourished up to the present day. The Baptist ministers in England did not settle and foster a congregation in their community, but travelled incessantly, thus enhancing the authority of the local deacons and the relative autonomy of the local congregations. Unlike in any previous denomination, women were allowed to preach as Baptists.

The Quaker writer Robert Barclay (1640-1690) describes a business meeting of a Baptist congregation, in which all those present “had free liberty of voting decisively, and of debate,” yet “nothing must go by *number or plurality of voices*, and there must be no moderator, or prolocutor, for the order of their action.” (cited in Sheeran, 1996, p. 127) The Baptists introduced the idea of Divine guidance for communities seeking God’s will together. The idea of a ‘Light within’, which we came across in connection with the debates at Putney was introduced to England by a Baptist sect known as the Family of Love, or the ‘Familists’. Although we may recognise in all these features of Baptist practice elements which would come to be seen as distinguishing features of the Quakers, there is no evidence that the founding fathers of the Society of Friends knowingly appropriated Baptist meeting procedures. All these ideas would have been in circulation among those who were later to become Quakers.

Among the dissenting sects abounding in England at the time, the line of religious development I am following runs in succession through the Ranters, the Seekers and the Quakers. Most of the early members of these currents had been either soldiers in the New Model Army between 1642 and 1649, or were sympathetic to the political program of the Levellers. Once all hope of political reform faded, the ideas which had motivated the Revolutionary Army moved from politics into religion, from whence they had come, in the Dissenting congregations of England.

The period of the Civil War saw an upsurge in millennial enthusiasm but as the possibility of political liberalisation receded, a conviction that the end of the world was near came to be widely accepted. If the New Model Army could not deliver freedom, one could look forward to the Final Judgment.

^{*} My principle source for this section is Hill, C. (1975). *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*.

At one time, only a few gentlemen would perceive the Light within, and this posed no danger to the social order; now any artisan or labourer was as likely to receive the Divine Light, throw away their Bible, denounce their pastor and follow their own Light, rather than a theology of sin and hell-fire fashioned for the purposes of social control.

The world exists for man, and all men are equal. There is no after-life: all that matters is here and now. 'In the grave there is no remembrance of either joy or sorrow after ... Swearing i'th light, gloriously', and 'wanton kisses', may help to liberate us from the repressive ethic which our masters are trying to impose on us – a regime in which property is more important than life, marriage than love, faith in a wicked God than the charity which the Christ in us teaches. (Hill, 1972, p. 273, glossing Lawrence Clarkson, 1660)

In harsh times, rather than discipline and self-control, the Ranters (as they came to be called) emphasised love and pleasure. But the Ranters posed no *political* threat, because they never formed a sect and had no motivation to risk their life in political contention.

The Ranters' ideas did pose a threat to labour discipline and law and order however. Nothing was sinful to Ranters, if only you truly followed what God spoke to you. But the Ranters were very difficult to suppress, because they would not hesitate to compromise or recant, and yet silently remained of the same opinion.

The logic of the Ranters stands up well to criticism. If a person requires no mediator – neither priest nor Bible – to hear the Word of God, if every person has an equal claim to know what God wills, then why not do whatever brings pleasure? The end of the world is coming anyway, there is no afterlife and no eternal damnation. At that time, no great feats of oratory or evangelism were required to convince a person of this doctrine.

The harshness of the times began to re-assert itself. The masses were forced by economic discipline back into a life which brought little pleasure, leaving Ranterism the privilege of a few gentry, and there was nothing to fill the void. For a Ranter there was no point in risking persecution by publicly preaching their beliefs. And in any case, proselytising made no sense if *every* person had access to God's will.

The Ranters were gradually displaced by the Seekers. Since the end of the world was probably near anyway, a resigned withdrawal from sectarian controversy and a rejection of all sects, and of all organised worship made more sense. Among the Seekers were the Leveller pamphleteer William Walwyn (whose views were close to Winstanley's), the poet John Milton and according to Hill (p. 154), possibly Oliver Cromwell himself. They held that no true Church existed in their age, and worshiped together in silence awaiting a new Revelation.

With no clergy, no Bible and no doctrine beyond the anticipation of a second coming, this movement had a limited life expectancy. As time went by, no Saviour came nor any new Revelation, the social order re-stabilised and even the king was restored to the throne. Not only was the entire established church discredited, but even the Bible was widely regarded as neither the Word of God nor historically truthful. Sin and the afterlife were no longer believed in, but life brought little pleasure and little light of any kind. People needed comfort and they needed social support and they needed something to believe in and above all, some guidance as to how to live a good life.

But so long as every individual had their own unmediated access to the true Word of God, it was impossible to embark on any collective venture or construct a community of faith.

The Quakers *

George Fox (1624-1691) came from a moderately well-off family in Leicestershire and was apprenticed to a local shoemaker and grazier. He had only basic schooling but as a youth formed a very low opinion of the churchmen of his time. Between 1643 and 1647, he travelled through civil war torn England, meeting with the various Dissenting preachers in search of answers to the religious questions which troubled him. In the course of this search Fox heard a voice speak within him. He took this to be the voice of Jesus and with the continued guidance of this inward voice, he developed his own teaching.

Any man, woman or child can understand Scripture and preach, *provided only* that the Spirit guides them; all the rituals of church life, ornate church buildings and costumes were meaningless; all that mattered was that one experience God's presence. The book which you should read was not the Bible, but the Book within your own conscience.

Fox began preaching publicly in 1647 and soon gathered a following of 60 converts, who toured the Dissenting communities across England, and in 1652, he met James Nayler, who had experienced his own revelation. Though Fox is rightly remembered as the founder of the Society of Friends, in the early days, Nayler would have been seen as as much a leader as Fox, and played an important role in the early years. Fox and his Friends opposed tithes and all the privileges, doctrines, pretensions and immorality of the clergy of the established church and they were formidable orators, denouncing their religious opponents, and stalwartly standing up to the sometimes violent reception with which they were met.

The practices and beliefs of the Quakers underwent a development, driven by the contradictions within this central idea of the Light of Jesus within every person, at the time by no means unique to the Quakers, and the changing social context in which they lived.

Politically, Quakers were radicals in the 1650s, and Friends would generally have supported Parliament in the civil war. Even apparently innocent eccentricities, like refusing to remove their hat or to use the second person plural before social superiors, confirmed suspicions that they harboured radical political designs. Winstanley had done likewise. In 1656, the Leveller hero "Freeborn John" Lilburne himself became a Quaker. Quakers were also suspected of being immoral Ranters disguising themselves as upright citizens.

The early Quaker movement was, in fact, far closer to the Ranters in spirit than its leaders liked to admit, and a great deal of effort was expended distinguishing themselves from Ranters. However, unlike Ranters who would recant under persecution, the Quakers' principles led them to declare their faith openly, in public, and stand by that faith. Consequently, they were very vulnerable to persecution by the magistrates.

* My principal source for this section is Sheeran, M. J. (1996). *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*.

Although Fox believed his revelations to come direct from Jesus, he did not discount Scripture. As the Familists had held, the Quakers believed that it is only thanks to the spirit of Christ within that the believer can understand the Scriptures. Fox reported, for example, that “Yet I had no slight esteem of the Holy Scriptures, and what the Lord opened to me I afterward found agreeable to them.” Thus a Quaker could give his own sense to the stories in the Bible.

This mode of thought of which the Quakers were a part was not necessarily anarchistic and individualist. It had two sides to it: on one hand the reliance on *experience*, referred to at the time as “experiment,” and on the other hand, reliance on the holy spirit within one’s *own* heart, as opposed to traditional or institutional beliefs and book knowledge. These same authorities marked the development of secular philosophy and natural science at the time, transposing struggles between empiricism (Bacon) and rationalism (Descartes) into the domain of religion. As such, it was cutting edge at the time.

In 1651, Fox toured the North of England meeting congregations of Ranters, Seekers, Anabaptists, Familists and other displaced persons who had been left without hope following the defeat of the Levellers and he met with outstanding success. Fox and the other Friends continued to gather converts, and Quakers reached one per cent of the population of England before emigration to America to escape persecution began to reduce their numbers.

To understand the development of the Quakers and the particular features of their practice which are of interest to us, we have to consider the “James Nayler Crisis” of 1656. This event precipitated processes to which Fox had already begun to turn his attention and the contradictions within the Quakers’ founding principle would have manifested themselves sooner or later and been resolved in much the same way, whoever had been in leadership at the time.

Quakers believed, like the Ranters, that any believer could receive the Word of Jesus. But the Quakers did not hear a voice leading them to follow their own desires, but rather actions which were difficult and contrary to desire. In 1656, to make the point that every believer could hear and give witness to the Word of Jesus, James Nayler rode into Bristol – the second city of the Kingdom at that time – on the back of a horse, with women strewing branches before him. Nayler had made no secret of his eight or nine years’ service in the New Model Army, and at this point, the Quakers were sweeping up recruits among Dissenters and former Levellers across the country. This was not some eccentric preacher who needed to cool his feet in prison for a few weeks! Nayler’s gesture was a provocation of the first order. A frightened Parliament spent six weeks debating what to do with Nayler before having him savagely flogged through the streets of London, his forehead branded, his tongue pierced with a hot iron and then sent to Bristol for a further flogging and flung into prison. Unlike the adoring crowd which had sustained Lilburne through his flogging in 1638, Nayler’s punishment was observed by a hostile crowd. He bore his ordeal with fortitude, but he never recovered. He was imprisoned for three years, released in 1659, but was attacked on his way home and died. The fear and vitriol which had been sparked by Nayler now fell upon the entire Society of Friends.

This incident confronted Fox with the fact that individual believers *could be mistaken* in their perception of the Light within, and not just trivially so, but to an extent which had the potential to destroy the Society, and in particular to expose them to prejudice and persecution. Secondly, it demonstrated just how vulnerable they were to persecution

whilst congregations remained autonomous and had no check on individual 'leadings' and no structure to offer guidance or support to Friends.

Fox was doing one of his innumerable stints in prison at the time and when he was released he toured the country and became alarmed at the intensity and frequency of negative reactions to such Quaker ways as refusing to show conventional deference to social betters, refusal to take oaths and refusal to pay tithes whilst denouncing the immorality and deceit of clergymen and public officials. And over and above these routine Quaker provocations to authority, one could never say when some Friend might be led to emulate James Nayler's provocation. Fox urged "patience" and a less "aggravating" public witness and asked that firm guidance be exercised by more mature Friends over those who may "go beyond their measure" and suggested monthly and later quarterly regional meetings with the specific aim of discovering and dealing with "disorderly walkers" and promoted the dissemination of "reliable" books and generally a campaign of consolidation and unification of the Society. (Sheeran, p. 12-13)

Despite their vulnerability though, the Quakers did not cease advocating social reform. The Levellers, Ranters and Seekers who had been recruited to the Society were the most individualist of all nonconformists. How was Fox to impose discipline in such a Society? For they could not otherwise survive.

Quaker ministers had already been making a practice of checking their 'leadings' (or revelations) with fellow ministers. These cautious measures were all very well, but what Fox was faced with was a fundamental challenge to the basic principle of his ministry – the reliability of the voice of Jesus within every believer. Practical measures were one thing, but the crisis also posed a problem for Fox's teaching.

The reliance on the Light within was not unique to the Quakers. It was shared to one extent or another by all Protestants. But other denominations had Scripture, as interpreted for them by an educated clergy, and an institution – buildings, rituals, a hierarchy, moral proscriptions – 'objective religion' which acted as a check upon and a guidance for the 'subjective religion' of the heart, and a history which included precedents and 'inherited wisdom'. The Quakers were new, they had little traditional knowledge to fall back upon and in any case eschewed tradition; they held the Scriptures to be open to interpretation by the believer themselves; rituals and trappings were discounted. How was Fox to form a disciplined, united sect out of this rabble of ex-Ranters without the objective guidance normally provided by the Church? It could no longer be maintained that the Spirit of Jesus spoke to each Friend independently.

Letters from the Quaker writer Edward Burrough in 1662 describe how Quakers were urged to conduct their business meetings:

First, that the meeting do consist of just and righteous men... not limited to a number of persons; but freedom for all friends ... But if any person out of the Truth, and of another Spirit, contrary to the faith of Christ professed and practised by Friends, come to the meeting, such are not members thereof, but are excluded from having their advice and judgement taken ...

Secondly, ... to hear and consider, and if possible to determine the same, in justice and truth. *Not in the way of the world*, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspoke and overreach one another in discourse; as if it were controversy between parties of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion, in the way of carrying on some worldly

interest for self advantage; *nor deciding affairs by the greater vote or the number of men*, as the world, who have not the wisdom and power of God: that none of this kind of order be permitted in your meeting. But in the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord (submitting to one another, in lowliness of heart and in the Holy Spirit of Truth and Righteousness,) *all thing coolness, gentleness and dear unity*, I say, as one only party, all for the truth of whatsoever ability God hath given. And to determine of things by a general mutual concord, in assenting together as one man, in the spirit of truth and equity, and by the authority thereof, *in this way and spirit all thing are to be amongst you, and without perverseness in any self-separation, in discord and partiality*. This way and spirit is wholly excepted, as not worthy to enter into the assembly of God's servants, to give an judgment or counsel amongst them, in any case pertaining to the service of the Church of Christ: in which his spirit of love and unity must rule.

Thirdly, if at any time, any matter or occasion be presented to the meeting *which is doubtful, or difficult, or not within the judgment of friends then assembled* (they not having full knowledge or experience of the matter depending) that then, on such occasions, *the judgment be suspended ...*

Fourthly, But if at any time any strife or division shall happen to fall out amongst friends, ... to seek mediation, ... etc. (Burrough, 1834, p. 137-8)

This is historically the first formulation of Consensus, clearly distinguished from Majority, Counsel and Negotiation. These practical directions urged upon Quakers brought about a modification in the Quaker teaching on the Light within. The Spirit's voice could be reliably heard only when Friends were gathered together *with an awareness of the presence of God in their midst*. Individual leadings had to be subordinated to the Spirit's voice in the gathered community, only then could it be heard reliably. By the zealous observance of the practical directions as outlined in Burroughs' letter, fostered by silent communal prayer, Friends could indeed feel the presence of the Spirit covering them. Through this practice, Quakers would be led to consciousness of the "sense of the meeting."

Thus every person did have direct access to the Word, but only on condition that they sought divine guidance in the humble presence of a community of believers. This provided the check upon the anarchy of every individual having an independent access to the Truth, so long as the Quakers lacked the structure, rituals, full-time clergy and sanctions available to the state church.

Whereas in the early days, revelation for Quakers entailed challenge and trial, now the touchstone of right guidance was the "presence of inner peace," fostered by quiet undemonstrative speech, and protracted silences in meetings.

The decisions made in such meetings carry a great deal more conviction and engender more commitment than the individual intuition. Meetings were not *just* silent prayer, but entailed giving reasons and discussion, so the voice of Jesus comes to function very much like Reason. But whether you believe Reason or Divine Light is at play, decisions arrived at by participation in a group carry considerably more commitment and legitimacy than an individual intuition, and prepared the Quakers to withstand the heat of persecution with fortitude.

And amongst already like-minded people, in those times, God did in fact say similar things to the members of the same congregation. Further, according to Christopher Hill:

In time of defeat, when the wave of revolution was ebbing, the inner voice became quietist, pacifist. This voice only was recognised by others as God's. ... Once the group decided this way, all the pressures were in the direction of accepting modes of expression not too shocking to the society in which men had to live and earn their living. ... [and] asked only to be left alone.

The openness of the religion of the heart, of the inner voice, to changes in mass moods, to social pressures, to waves of feeling, had made it the vehicle of revolutionary transformations of thought: now it had the opposite effect. The 'sense of the meeting' accepted the 'common sense' of the dominant classes in society. (Hill, 1972, p. 299-300)

The second line of action by Fox to ensure the unity, solidarity and coherence of the Society of Friends was the institution of regular quarterly and yearly meetings of representatives of each of the local communities. Once ad hoc, now the very regularity of these meetings soon raised them to a position not unlike the structure of the mainstream churches.

Nonetheless, not only were Fox's measures successful in curbing disorderly behaviour, the Friends proved able to withstand the persecution that came down on them, and even their enemies noted with admiration their stoutness under persecution. Furthermore, the Quakers continued to hold their meetings publicly and openly, with unflinching tenacity and calmness. The local Quaker communities continued to flourish in spite of the persecution and on the whole congregations maintained their autonomy.

However, the persecution had an impact on the development of the Quaker faith. In the estimate of Christopher Hill, the intensification of persecution as the Restoration approached and the singularly brutal suppression of the Quakers under Charles II, persuaded Fox to adopt a public stance of unambiguous pacifism and non-participation in politics. Ten leading Quakers wrote to the king:

All Bloody principles and practices, we as to our own particulars, do utterly deny, with all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. (cited in Sheeran, 1996 p. 14-15)

Sheeran points out that at least two of the signers had advocated the use of force as late as 1659. He goes on to demonstrate that in order to defend the Society against persecution by discreet lobbying of parliamentarians and magistrates, the Committee of Sufferings, established to care for the dependents of Friends in prison, had morphed into a national coordinating committee controlling the activity of local congregations. Sheeran says that this went much further in displacing the Divine guidance of sovereign communities with a central polity, but claims that this move did not follow the Quakers into emigration in America where persecution continued, but was bearable. (p. 15)

The first serious schism took place in the 1670s over these measures, with what is known as the Wilkinson-Story separation opposing subordination of the individual Light within to the sense of the meeting, and objected what they saw as an hierarchical structure. Over the succeeding centuries there were a number of schisms, and in any case, the local communities always retained a degree of sovereignty, and while there

remained little in the way of theological doctrine, over time the Quakers did accumulate a considerable body of traditional wisdom.

Many left the Society under the weight of persecution. They despaired of seeing the political reform to which Friends had once been devoted, but with their communal solidarity and reputation for uprightness and honesty, despite repression, they did prosper. With a ban on exogenous marriage, their numbers declined, and the Quakers became a self-selected elect.

What the Quakers created was not a new doctrine or theology so much as a *practice*, a practice of conducting meetings, whether for worship or to make decisions. And what made a Quaker a believer was not the satisfactory answers given to theological questions, but the *experience* of discovering the Spirit within together with others.

Neither George Fox nor John Wesley sought to convince converts of a theological argument or system, but offered *organisational* innovations which met the needs of their times which in both cases have proved to be of enduring value irrespective of religious or metaphysical conviction.

Like other Dissenters, many Quakers fled persecution by emigrating to America in the 1650s, establishing Quaker communities in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. While they remain a tiny minority, there are today over 100,000 Quakers in North America, mainly concentrated in New England alongside the descendants of other Nonconformist immigrants from Restoration England. My theme leads me to follow the Quakers to Pennsylvania where I will rely on Sheeran for a description of how Quakers made decisions in twentieth century America, and on Barry Morley for a defence of Quaker decision making as opposed to how Consensus is practised among non-Quakers.

The Quakers in Twentieth Century Pennsylvania

In 1983, Michael Sheeran made an extended study of the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting, that is, the Quaker community in Pennsylvania, of which the annual meeting is the peak body. This is the largest Quaker community in America, being founded on land owned by the Quaker William Penn in 1681. Sheeran is a Jesuit, and his account is that of a sympathetic outsider which has been received with approval by the Quaker community.

The Quaker historian at the University of Birmingham, 'Ben' Pink Dandelion, confirmed to me that there is no difference in the practice of 'sense of the meeting' between England and America:

Quakers have practised this method from the beginning and it is still one of the shared practices worldwide today. I have not heard of any ... distinction between US and British Quakers on this. Only very exceptionally have Quaker Meetings voted on a matter and it would not be seen as theologically appropriate. (personal email, 11 Feb. 2014)

Sheeran's report confirms that the practice of collective decision making has been transmitted from 17th century England to 20th century Pennsylvania essentially intact. Here is a Quaker overview of the conduct of meetings, from the London Yearly Meeting's 1960 *Book of Discipline*:

As it is our hope that in our meetings for Discipline the will of God shall prevail rather than the desires of men, we do not set great store by rhetoric or clever argument. The mere gaining of debating points is found to be unhelpful and alien to the spirit of worship which should govern the rightly ordered Meeting. Instead of rising hastily to reply to another, it is better to give time for what has been said to make its own appeal, and to take its right place in the mind of the Meeting.

We ought ever to be ready to give unhurried, weighty and truly sympathetic consideration to proposals brought forward from whatever part of the Meeting, believing that what is said rises from the depths of a Friend's experience, and is sincerely offered for the guidance of the Meeting, and the forwarding of the work of the Church. We should neither be hindered from making experiments by fear or undue caution, nor prompted by novel suggestions to ill-considered courses.

Neither a majority nor a minority should allow itself in any way to overbear or to obstruct a meeting for church affairs in its course towards a decision. We are unlikely to reach either truth or wisdom if one section imposes its will on another. We deprecate division in our Meetings and desire unanimity. It is in the unity of common fellowship, we believe, that we shall most surely learn the will of God. We cherish, therefore, the tradition which excludes voting from our meetings, and trust that clerks and Friends generally will observe the spirit of it, not permitting themselves to be influenced in their judgment either by mere numbers or by persistence. The clerks should be content to wait upon God with the Meeting, as long as may be necessary for the emergence of a decision which clearly commends itself to the heart and mind of the Meeting as the right one. (Sheeran, p. 48)

The Quaker way of doing meetings generally depends on having a group of limited size who know and respect each other. Members of this group must be willing to listen to each other with open minds and to learn from each other. After an individual has stated his or her own insight, his responsibility is over. On the other hand, the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting has 1,100 people making collective decisions together, made possible because all of them believe in and are committed to the process. The Quaker Stuart Chase lists nine principles of Quaker decision making:

1. unanimous decisions – no voting;
2. silent periods – at start of meeting and when conflict arises;
3. moratorium – when agreement cannot be reached;
4. participation by all with ideas on the subject;
5. learning to listen – not going to meeting with mind made up;
6. absence of leaders – the clerk steers but does not dominate;
7. nobody outranks anybody;
8. factual-focus – emotions kept to a minimum; and
9. small meetings – typically limited numbers. (Sheeran, p. 51)

The normal way discussion proceeds is as follows (Sheeran, pp. 66-70):

- the clerk states the question to be discussed;
- there is a preliminary phase which resembles what non-Quakers often call “brainstorming”, where proposals are put up merely as possible starting points for discussion;
- there is a transitional phase in which participants “test the waters” to see if a proposal is going to “float” as we say, before
- the “serious” discussion gets going;
- participants may express their “unity” with a proposal or may express shades of dissent which Sheeran listed as follows:
 - “I disagree but do not wish to stand in the way”
 - “Please minute me opposed”
 - “I am unable to unite with the proposal”
 - Absent from the meeting.
- the clerk attempts to enunciate the ‘sense of the meeting’.

“It is the clerk’s task ... either to find a resolution with which the assembled Friends can largely agree to follow the Quaker rule, ‘when in doubt, wait’. ... if the tide is running in one particular direction ... propose a tentative minute embodying the agreement as the clerk understands it from listening to the discussion.” (Sheeran, p. 65, quoting Douglas Steere) ... the clerk will either again propose the original minute or offer a substitute. And finally, the *paradox of the status quo*: no change is made until agreement is reached. (p. 50)

It is very clear from this that the success of the meeting and the long-term maintenance of the culture in which trust is vested in the process depends on the clerk. The meeting chooses the clerk in advance of the meeting data from among those Quakers known to be ‘gifted’ as clerks. The clerk’s ordinary duties include the following, all potential levers of power (Sheeran, p. 91):

- compiling the agenda;
- stating the questions;
- evoking comments from the silent;
- maintaining discipline;
- diplomacy dealing with difficulties;
- judging what is important;
- judging the sense of the meeting;
- neutrality and self-restraint.

The clerk's role begins prior to the meeting as items for the agenda are brought to their attention and may involve other preparatory work, as well as side-discussions and problem-solving outside the meeting and in follow-ups. Claims for the special qualities of the Quaker way of running meetings clearly hinge on the whether or not the clerks use these levers of power strategically. It is clear that the Clerk acts as a facilitator, not a Chief. Together with the commitment to equality this marks Quaker Consensus off from Counsel.

Sheeran's investigation showed that there were only minimal formal constraints on the clerks' exercise of their responsibilities but that "abuse of power seems curiously rare" (p. 97). Further he found that the clerks themselves "exhibited an impressive sensitivity to the clerk's possible abuse of power" (p. 98). While there were "horror stories" about previous generations where such abuses did occur, it seems that accounting for the character and success of Quaker meetings requires us to take account not only of the high level of mutual trust among members of the community, but the raising of a stratum of people possessing the admirable qualities demanded of the clerks, and the recognition of those qualities by others in the community, such that clerks deservedly enjoy the unqualified trust of participants in the meeting.

Sheeran's report also dealt with the belief systems underlying Quaker decision making. We have seen that Quakers are not united by a theological doctrine, but rather by the *practice* of Quaker worship and communal decision making and the *experience* of that practice. Without a full-time clergy and the rest of the paraphernalia of an 'objective religion', Quakers have been free to develop divergent theological and metaphysical views. Decision procedures which are reliant on participants having a shared metaphysical belief cannot meet the demands of 'public reason', to use John Rawls' terminology, or of discourse ethics, to use Habermas's terminology.

Sheeran found that Quakers had a variety of interpretations of what in Quaker discourse is referred to as the voice of Jesus and the idea of awareness of the presence of God in a 'covered' meeting, that is, of God 'leading' a meeting or of a 'gathered' meeting.

For a start there were different senses in which Philadelphian Quakers spoke of Jesus. For some, he was the historical Jesus who died two millennia ago, and for others 'Jesus' was another name for the Creator and had the capacity to be really present in a meeting. For others, however, the presence or voice of Jesus was simply taken as a metaphor which could mean simply the *feeling* derived from a successful meeting and a good decision, or could refer to the impersonal force manifested by the joining of minds, without ascribing any extra-mundane significance to it.

Sheeran also found that many (including those who for whom 'Jesus' was involved in Quaker decisions) understood the Quaker practice in terms of the Society of Friends

being 'democratic', that is, in terms of the will of individuals being moderated by organizational practices, rather than in terms of a Spirit or any such religious conception.

Sheeran found that these differences in metaphysical belief had no impact on the way Quakers participated in meetings or related to one another. The main difference which could be seen between Quakers relevant to the quality of their participation in meetings was that some experienced the condition of the 'gathered meeting' and awareness of the presence of a Spirit in the meeting, and some simply didn't. And this difference cut across differences in metaphysical belief. During Sheeran's investigation, he did witness meetings in which that special quality was experienced, but the "great majority" did not reach the "gathered" condition (p. 88). At the same time he found that negotiated compromise, as opposed to the achievement of a genuine and fully satisfactory unity, was the "occasional exception to the rule" (p. 54).

From what has been said already it will be very clear that the style of meeting which is nowadays generally known as Consensus decision making is not the same as the Quaker meeting. I think it is an entirely open question as to whether any of the paradigms of decision making – Counsel, Majority and Consensus – can achieve creative decisions which provide a genuine basis for unity to which the Quaker meeting aspires. In my experience, under the right conditions and with skilled leadership, chairmanship or facilitation, *any* of these paradigms can produce very satisfactory and creative decisions. Quakers, however, invariably insist on the distinction between 'sense of the meeting' and Consensus, though what Quakers refer to as 'Consensus' is what I have called 'Negotiation'.

The Quaker Critique*

A defence of the Quaker way is given by Barry Morley (1993). Morley says that "Sense of meeting is a gift. It came to Quakers though their commitment to continuing revelation. They discovered that the Light which had come to teach the people could lead them to revealed corporate decisions," and regretting the extent to which young Quakers have accepted the identification of sense of the meeting with Consensus, he says: "I don't know how or when Quakers came to believe in consensus, but it happened recently and has spread across us like an oil slick" (p. 1-2).

Morley explains the difference as follows: "consensus is achieved through a process of reasoning in which reasonable people search for a satisfactory decision. But in seeking the sense of the meeting we open ourselves to being guided to perfect resolution in Light, to a place where we sit in unity in the collective inward presence ... we turn our decision making over to a higher power. Consensus is the product of an intellectual process. Sense of the meeting is a commitment to faith" (p. 5).

As is common among Quakers, 'Consensus' is understood in a very impoverished sense, what I call 'Negotiation' or 'bargaining', as "a process in which adjustments and compromises are made for the purpose of reaching a decision that all of us can accept. It brings us to an intellectually satisfactory conclusion. But sense of the meeting reaches beyond that. ... It is a process that cares for the whole of the corporate body" but by

* My principal source for this section is Morley, B. (1993). *Beyond Consensus. Salvaging Sense of the Meeting*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill.

contrast, “because everyone has given up something to attain consensus, commitment to the conclusion is often shallow. In one way or another we make decisions by ‘going along’. ... Sense of the meeting, on the other hand, fosters powerful commitment.” (p. 6) As I remarked above, my experience has been that the achievement of a genuinely creative and satisfying decision depends more on the mutual trust between participants and the skill, insight and patience of the facilitator(s) or principal protagonists. Unfortunately, many non-Quakers mistakenly refer to the process of striking a bargain as ‘consensus’, so it is hardly surprising that Quakers should form such a low opinion of it.

Morley points to three components which he sees as essential to revealing a sense of the meeting:

1. Release. After an issue has been presented to the business meeting, Friends should allow Friends whose feelings have been aroused to release those feelings. ...
2. Long Focus. ... we should focus our attention beyond the immediate discussion *toward* the sense of the meeting. ... Sharp edges are blurred. ... A period of silence is sometimes suggested when discussion gets difficult, angry, or competitive. ... Contention and compromise, though sometimes appropriate in early stages of discussion, narrow our focus.
3. Transition to Light. ... as we lay aside any need to win, as we turn increasingly inward in order to transcend differences, long focus brings us to the Source of resolution and clarity. ... Silence is an inward and outward sign that the process has been completed. A sensitive clerk will allow the silence to linger. (pp. 16-19)

I suggest that we accept the Quaker view that Sense of Meeting is a distinct paradigm of collective decision making, marked by its Quaker origins, with silence rather than dialogue as its mark. This does not contradict the possibility that the Quaker Sense of the Meeting may have been the *inspiration* for the invention of the practice of Consensus amongst social change activists in the USA in 1959-61. The Quaker Sense of the Meeting relies upon the mutual trust fostered between members of the Quaker community and the raising of Clerks who have confidence in this process and are skilled in facilitating it – conditions which do not exist among the broad population of participants in social change activism.