The histories of religions are notable for stories of innovators – people who feel compelled to rebel against the religious beliefs and practices of their time, who come up with novel religious ideas, and, whether intentionally or not, start new religious movements. Theories about the nature of religion need to give an account of religious innovation that accommodates these stories, and most claim that they do, even if only in retrospect. The baffling discovery is that the same historical characters are used to exemplify quite incompatible theories of innovation.

William James’s theory is ‘that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophical and theological formulas are secondary products’. He claims that no better example can be found than George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement.2

Alasdair MacIntyre, who holds almost the opposite theory, that language is prior to, and in a sense formulative of, our religious experiences,3 appeals to the same example. George Fox (with Martin Luther and St Paul) is, he says, a classic example of how a religious tradition originates in the discovery of a new rule upon which a new system of worship and belief can be built.4

This paper will briefly describe the ideas about innovation in religion that emerge from the theories of William James and Alasdair MacIntyre, draw out how the story of George Fox would have to look in order to vindicate them, and then compare these expectations with the life and times of George Fox as recorded in his journals and other contemporary sources.

The conclusion will be that neither philosopher is justified in claiming that George Fox exemplifies his theory. The paper ends by speculating that no theory of religion based on the priority of experience or language is able to produce a satisfactory model of innovation in religion.

William James makes a distinction between the ‘ordinary religious believer who follows the conventional observances of his country’ whose ‘religion has

been made for him by others', and the founders of religious traditions. ‘Churches, when once established live at second-hand upon tradition,’ says James, ‘but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine’.

James believed that concepts acquired by training could subsequently have an active role in the formation of experiences. But there was a more fundamental process, whereby people create concepts in response to private experiences.

James divides religious phenomena into two categories. The first is non-linguistic; it contains what is personal and private in religion—ineffable inner experiences, feelings, inexpressible knowledge and private acts. In the second category linguistic features are prominent; it contains everything that is conceptual, corporate and institutional—ceremonies, and theology, creeds, metaphysics and ecclesiastical organizations. James’ empiricism leads him to say that the first category contains the root and the energy of religion while the phenomena in the second category are derivative, parasitic, divisive and even absurd. For James’ theory the role of religious innovators is crucial, for they are the ones who turn their private experience into theology—by reflecting upon their personal perception of spiritual reality and struggling to construct concepts to help themselves and others understand and respond to them.

If George Fox is to exemplify this theory we would expect to find that his social training was of little importance (except in so far as it led him to attend more closely than his fellows to a special kind of experience), since the beliefs he came to hold and the concepts in which he expressed them would not be inferred directly from his own experience of the unchanging spiritual world.

The legacy Fox left would be these new concepts, which would enable his followers to attend more closely and respond more effectively to their own religious experiences.

Alasdair Maclntyre refers to the founders of religions in a footnote. He has been attacking the role that empiricist philosophers give to experience in religion. What we say about God is not derived from evidence, he says, but

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1 William James, *The Varieties*, p. 29.
2 Ibid. p. 49.
3 Ibid. p. 416, ‘The philosophic climate of our time inevitably forces its own clothing on us’. And see p. 69/70.
6 Alasdair Maclntyre’s arguments about experience as evidence are enlarged upon in ‘Visions’, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. G. N. Flew and A. MacIntyre (SCM, 1955). He says, ‘We could never know from such experiences that they had the character of messages from the divine, unless we already possessed a prior knowledge of the divine and of the way messages from it were to be identified’, p. 256.
grounded in the acceptance of an authoritative rule. The footnote is added to allay misunderstanding. He is ‘merely asserting that in religious practice there are methods of determining which religious utterances are authentic. These methods operate by referring to criteria. The criteria are thus treated as authoritative.’ The presence of authoritative rules does not however exclude the possibility of radical innovation since an appeal to personal religious experience can be counted as an appeal to just such a criterion. MacIntyre continues, ‘The rule, “What I came to feel (or see or hear) on such and such an occasion is what I judge theological utterances by,” is a common enough criterion. Where one is concerned with the origin of a religious tradition (George Fox, Martin Luther or St Paul) such an appeal to experience is inevitable. For from the original experience the tradition which supplied criteria to later believers is itself defined. I am not of course asserting that those who have pre-eminent religious experiences infer their beliefs from their experiences. If they did their inferences would be invalid... What is learnt by the original experience may be used to discriminate between subsequent experiences, some being rejected as non-genuine because discordant with the original. But it is always open to a man to make his own experience his authority and so become the founder of his own religion.’

Commenting on the suggestion that religious expressions refer to inner experiences which only some people recognize, MacIntyre says, ‘To say this is simply to commit a mistake.’ He draws his readers’ attention to Wittgenstein’s demonstration that this cannot be how language is acquired. It is ‘ruled out by the fact that no expressions can derive their meaning this way. It is not that we have private experiences and invent words for them’, he goes on, ‘but we learn the words and find their application in our experience’.1

It would be tempting to see these remarks as a direct contradiction of James, but MacIntyre is not claiming that the propositional language of formulated beliefs is primary in religion, rather that the vocative, performative and metaphorical language of liturgy is where religion starts.2 MacIntyre goes on to say, ‘The existence of an authoritative rule or set of rules is a necessary condition of there being a determinate religion. And if we supplement reference to such a rule by saying that religion is always concerned with how men are to live and with what their fundamental attitudes are to be, we produce as near a satisfactory definition of religion as we are likely to get.’3

James sees religion primarily as a sort of experience – an experience of spiritual reality that innovators feel particularly strongly; MacIntyre sees

1 Ibid. p. 176.
2 Ibid. p. 188, ‘It is not just that as a matter of historical fact the practice of worship precedes the explicit formulation of belief, but that we can worship, without being able to say clearly what we believe...so the language of liturgy is at the heart of the matter.’
3 Ibid. p. 200.
religions primarily as systems of worship and belief, governed by authoritative criteria that innovators can question and change. So James has to account for the continuity of religious faith and MacIntyre has to account for innovation in religion. A dramatic religious experience is an obvious candidate for precipitating a change in the basis of religious authority but how can this work if, as MacIntyre asserts, a belief system cannot be inferred from an experience?

MacIntyre’s answer is that in the case of innovators, a particular experience can itself become the criterion by which subsequent experiences are judged to be authentic and subsequent claims and utterances are judged to be genuine.¹ Not only is this, in MacIntyre’s view, a possible scenario for religious innovation; it is inevitable.²

According to MacIntyre’s theory we would therefore expect George Fox to learn from his religious training (especially from his participation in the liturgy of worship) what God is like and how to distinguish experiences and utterances that are of religious value. Some experience, which might seem irrelevant,³ would lead him by a non-rational route to reject the authoritative criteria on which this religious tradition is founded and, without inferring anything from his experiences, to set up some new criteria—a different way of deciding which experiences, utterance and practices have religious authenticity and value. Fox would leave as a legacy to his followers, a new system of worship and belief, based upon a new criteria of authority—his own religious experience.

GEORGE FOX: THE BACKGROUND TO HIS LIFE

George Fox was born in 1624 into an era of political, social and religious turmoil and anarchy.⁴ The period in which he grew up developed his ideas and set off on his mission was arguably one of the most disruptive periods in English history, and not least in the English church. Between the years 1629 and 1640 England was ruled by Charles I. With the assistance of Archbishop Laud and his bishops he set out to increase the power of the priesthood and impose anti-puritan measures on a largely uncooperative populace.

In 1640, when Fox was eleven, public distaste explodes and Archbishop Laud is impeached and imprisoned; in 1641 a censorship that has been in force for years is lifted; in early 1642 the bishops are excluded from the House of Lords and, by that summer, civil war, with all the consequent extra mobility and disruption of traditional standards and hierarchies, has broken

¹ Ibid. footnote to page 200.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid. p. 210. 'Any explanation can provide an occasion for conversion.' MacIntyre quotes the return of Shatov’s wife in Tolstoy’s The Devils and Wordsworth’s brother’s death. He comments that only those over-impressed by metaphysics would want to suggest that any logical process is involved.
out; in 1643 episcopacy is abolished and a mostly Presbyterian Assembly of Divines is set up to reform the Church of England. By 1644 numerous radical religious movements are beginning to emerge. In 1646 when Fox is seventeen, the Levellers, the first democratic political movement in modern history, develops, led by John Lilburne and in 1649 the first communist community is set up by the Diggers, led by Gerrard Winstanley. (Both of these men are later to become Quakers.) By the end of the year the King is beheaded, Oliver Cromwell has been made Lord Protector and the whole country has been set on its head.

In spite of the fact that George Fox makes no direct mention of these events in his journals, no serious study of his life can ignore the fact that he lived through a period when, for a mixture of reasons, long accepted and firmly fixed forms of social authority and government fell apart and men were forced to rethink the theories they had depended on for centuries.

Another factor, the significance of which cannot be over estimated, was the fairly recent arrival of the printed English Bible and its gradual distribution among an increasingly literate laity. Fox’s parents had grown up under the guidance of an educated priesthood with exclusive access to a Latin Bible. The very idea of lay people having opinions and making judgements in religious matters was a new and important development.

By the time of Fox’s childhood, Puritans, and other Separatists, as well as Calvinists within the Church of England, were preaching the importance of the individual’s conscience and experience over the institutions of the Church. They were pressing for the study of the Bible and questioning Church traditions and ceremonies. They were crying out against the power of the priests and the injustice of their tithes. New ideas were giving men the courage to stand up to their superior and to kick against the authority, traditionally seen to extend from their fathers, through the local gentry, to the King and to God himself.1

FOX’S RELIGIOUS TRAINING

In his journals Fox tells us that his father was known as ‘a Righteous Christer’ and his mother was ‘an upright woman...of the stock of the martyrs’. As a child he ‘had a gravity and stayedness of mind and spirit not usual in children’, and a dislike for seeing adults ‘carry themselves lightly and wantonly...When I came to eleven years of age,’ he says, ‘I knew pureness and righteousness, for while I was a child I was taught how to walk to be kept pure. The Lord taught me to be faithful.’2 This training in godly

1 See for example the reports of Archbishop Laud’s Metropolitan Visitation of the Province of Canterbury in 1934–5, printed in the Open University Course 203 (1982), Seventeenth-Century England; a Changing Culture 1618–1689, Block 3, pp. 9 ff.


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living depended upon the fact that from a young age he had been able to recognize the voice of God.

Up to age of 18 Fox was absorbing the religious practices and concepts of his day from at least three sources; from the ceremonies of the Laudian priests, from the preaching of the Armenians and Calvinists and from his own reading of the Bible.

That this is so is supported by some early entries in his journal. When, at the age of 19, he sets off on a spiritual search at the command of God, he recounts how he pursues his target in several different ways. He 'went to many a priest to look for comfort but found no comfort from them';\(^1\) he 'would get into the orchard or the fields with my Bible by myself',\(^2\) and he 'looked more and more after the dissenting people'. But his search concludes with despair - 'for there was none among them all that could speak to my condition'.\(^3\)

**FOX'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES**

One of the most striking things about George Fox's journals is the small amount of space he gives to descriptions of his religious experiences. In the nearly 800 pages of his diaries in their present edition, the word 'experience' occurs only six times and just over 20 dreams and visions are described in any detail. And yet in another sense Fox's day by day life is described as a continual experience of God's guidance, protection and instruction.\(^4\)

It is important to note here that in the period in which Fox wrote his diary, this early portion was dictated to his stepson-in-law in 1675, the recounting of religious experience was a common, but new, activity. It had become a condition of membership in some independent and sectarian congregations and many people kept diaries and published spiritual autobiographies.\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Ibid. p. 4.  
\(^2\) Ibid. p. 7.  
\(^3\) Ibid. p. 11.  
\(^4\) See as an example, Ibid. pp. 103/4.  
\(^6\) The Journals, p. 3.  
\(^7\) Ibid. pp. 4–6.
Fox Receives ‘Openings’

In 1646 Fox begins to speak about ‘openings’. The four ideas that his early openings express were that Christians must have a personal experience of God, that Oxford-and-Cambridge-trained gentry should not have a monopoly of the priesthood, that the church does not consist of buildings but of people and that God could speak directly to people’s hearts.¹ These represent common solutions to the common problems being faced by English people in the first half of the seventeenth century, nor would they have been seen exclusively as religious ideas, since in that period the religious and secular worlds were irretrievably intertwined.

Lay access to the Bible, the teachings of the Puritans, growing mobility and literacy, and the break up of family traditions were making the intrusive rules of the established Church under Archbishop Laud repugnant. These disruptions were leading the Puritans towards a more personal religion, the ordinary folk towards a suspicion of the gentry and the Calvinists towards a rejection of the hierarchy, censorship and discipline imposed by the priests.

It is not hard to speculate on the way these ideas hang together. For if authority is not to be the prerogative of an elite group, there must be another source of authority that is accessible to ordinary folk. What could be more accessible to them than their own experiences?

That these ideas were common property is confirmed by contemporary documents. Thomas Edwards in 1645 lists the disturbing faults of ten different sects that could well be a description of the path that George Fox had revealed to him in the openings of that year.² And Thomas Hall in 1651 lists the tenets held by the Anabaptists that could easily be mistaken for a description of the beliefs of George Fox and his followers.³ A closer look at the content and language of these insights reveals not only that they are inspired by the intellectual problems of his day, they are answered by Bible truths, expressed in Bible language and defended by reference to Bible passages.⁴

The Resolution

As we look at Fox’s account of this period of searching for religious truth, written, we should not forget, some 26 years later, it is most obviously interpreted as a period in which, in common with many of his fellows, Fox was struggling to establish a religious authority for himself.

¹ Ibid. pp. 7/8.
² Thomas Edwards (1646), ‘Gangrena’, Primary Sources, pp. 131/2.
³ Thomas Hall (1651), ‘The Pulpit Guarded: The Epistle to the Lay Preacher’, Primary Sources, pp. 144/5.
⁴ Fox says, ‘When I had openings, they answered one another and answered the Scriptures.’ This can be demonstrated by comparing his opening that God does not live in temples made with hands, The Journals, p. 9, with Acts 7.48 and 17.24.
There were three factors jostling in contention – the authority of the religious establishment, the authority of the Bible and the authority of his own insights. This personal crisis should be seen in the context of the major intellectual problem of Fox's day – the crisis of political sovereignty.¹

During this period of unrest Fox increasingly rejected the authority of the priests and preachers and turned to the authority of his own openings. The feeling that the priests could not help him, but that Christ could teach him himself, grows and culminates in 1647 in the experience that brings Fox peace and on which the rest of his life is built.

He recounts that he 'heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition,” and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.'

Fox resolved his inner conflict by resolving the question of religious authority. He determined to be guided solely by his own inner light – ‘After this my desires after the Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing. For though I read the Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of God, yet I knew him not but by revelation, as he who hath the key did open and as the Father of life drew me to his Son by his spirit.'²

Although Quaker commentators take this claim of Fox's seriously,³ the influence of the language and thought of the Bible on the content and expression of his openings is so abundantly obvious that not one of them can ignore it. They explain it in terms of another important idea of Fox's – 'the unity of truth'.

John Lampen says, Early Friends 'expected to find that the insight given by the Spirit to one man could not contradict that given to another, nor could it disagree with the teachings of Jesus'.⁴ In practice of course this 'unity' was not so much a discovery as a criterion of authenticity.

Other Experiences

Apart from Fox's openings which continue for the rest of his life, he recounts in his journals dreams, visions and voices, raptures, prophecy, discernments and healings, answered prayer and natural and unnatural events that he sees as God's preservation, guidance and vengeance on his enemies. It cannot be disputed that Fox's journals present him as an extraordinarily charismatic, probably psychic and powerful character with a highly developed conscience. But one of the notable features of The Journals is the lack of description of anything that you could call a religious experience, in the sense in which William James uses the expression. It is not that some experiences in

¹ A crisis which came to fruition in Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan in 1651.
² The Journals, p. 11.
³ See e.g. William Penn's preface to The Journals, p. xliii.
⁴ John Lampen, Wait in the Light, p. 20.
Fox’s life stand out as being from God because of their special quality, but that everything that happens to him, or that he feels and thinks, is seen in terms of his relationship with God.

Fox did not have a different range of experiences from other people; others feel the pull of conscience, have psychic visions and sudden insights. Fox differed from the priests by seeing religious value in a different set of experiences – he saw in the everyday events of his life the hand and the voice of God.

FOX’S RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

Fox’s disputes with the priests were not about creeds and doctrines, but about authority and practice – about the nature of the church, and about how Christians should behave.

Fox describes the mission to which God had called him: ‘I was glad that I was commanded to turn people to that inward light, spirit, and grace, by which all might know their salvation and their way to God...I was to bring people off from all the world’s religions which are vain that they might know the pure religion and might visit the fatherless, the widows and the strangers and keep themselves from the spot of the world...And I was to bring them off from all the world’s fellowships and prayings and singings which stood in forms without power...and from all the images and crosses and sprinkling of infants and from all their holy days (so called) and all their vain traditions.’

Two points emerge – the unimportance of conceptual formulations to Fox – an attitude that continues to be a feature of the Quakers, and his constant use of the language of the Bible.

And yet Fox did introduce some unfamiliar concepts – one of these is ‘the inward light’. John Lampen tells us that this light is identified with the ‘Word’ of John’s Gospel. In fact it comes from John 1.9 and is detailed from John’s other New Testament writing. We should not forget that Fox claimed that all his theology was revealed to him directly from God.

However this strange claim is to be interpreted, the records are not consistent with the idea that he made up concepts to name the things he became acquainted with in his religious experiences.

FOX’S RELIGIOUS LEGACY

If Fox did not leave his followers a new set of concepts, what was it he left that inspired a religious movement still vigorous today? A belief system,

1 *The Journals*, pp. 35/6. It is interesting to note how many phrases in this long dissertation come directly from the New Testament.
3 John Lampen, *Wait in the Light*, p. 6. ‘The religious debates of his time had the advantage of this agreed vocabulary, the language of the Bible.’
creeds and doctrines? Was it a new criterion for religious authority? Or access to a certain sort of experience? Historical records and Quaker commentators seem unanimous. It included all these but only in so far as they were wrapped up in his unique legacy.

George Gorman puts it this way: ‘The unique Quaker contribution in the eighties as in all previous decades, is the manner of their silent corporate worship, for the Quaker meeting for worship is the core of the Religious Society of Friends.’ What Fox left his followers was, in the opinion of these commentators, a practice, a method, an activity with a meaning – an institution. As far as concepts, ideas and beliefs are concerned those that Fox left and have endured are those that relate to the Meeting. Their criterion of orthodoxy is, Brinton says, ‘not facts arrived at but the method used ... The Society of Friends accepts into membership a person who is willing to follow the Quaker method regardless of where this may lead him’.

The process by which the Meeting came to have this authority is illuminating. The idea of each man following his own inner light was bound to lead to crisis in a developing organization, and it did. In 1656 George Fox clashed violently with another emerging Quaker leader, James Naylor. We have in the Journals the letters Fox wrote for general distribution at this time. They reveal him rejecting the one obvious solution and making no attempt to set up his experiences or his teaching as any sort of authority. Fox reminded the Quakers about ‘the witness of God in everyone, in which they come unto peace... and fellowship with one another’. His direct exhortation is that they keep their meetings. Fox repeats his belief in the authority of the inner light of every man and the ‘unity in the truth’, and refuses to set up any other criterion of judgement on what God might reveal to those who wait upon him together.

To this day Fox’s method of reaching truth remains. The principle is not one of the anarchy of individual insight but that ‘of corporate guidance according to which the spirit can inspire the group as a whole... To achieve this unity is always possible,’ Brinton says, ‘and the Society of Friends has practiced the method of achieving it with considerable success for three centuries’.

Fox’s legacy to the world was an institution, justified and explained by a set of beliefs, acting as a criterion of authority and creating a range of experiences, beliefs and behaviour for those who kept it. Fox’s new institution was explained in terms of a very old set of concepts and was inspired by the political movements of his day – movements such as the Levellers, (accused

1 Hoskins and Sharman, *Quakers in the Eighties*, p. 5.
3 See *The Journals*, p. 268, although one must look elsewhere for the whole story.
4 *The Journals*, pp. 280 ff.
5 Howard Brinton, *Guide to Quaker Practice*, p. 3.
in 1646 of ‘setting up the body of the common people as sovereign lord and king’¹ and The Diggers (who believed that the common man ‘needs not that anyman should teach him’).²

**ASSESSMENT**

In the light of this study of Fox’s life William James’ theory appears to be in tatters. Not only does what we have learnt about Fox’s life fail to exemplify it, it is hard to imagine any possible set of facts that could. Fox’s three-pronged training from the established church, the Sectarians and his own reading of the Bible, instructed him in various views about what God is like and how to tell which experiences have religious significance and value. If he had not been thus instructed in the concept of divinity, it is hard to see how he could have recognized any experience as being ‘communication with the divine’.

If we look at the experiences that Fox saw as having religious significance it does not appear that they were substantially different from the experiences of his contemporaries, nor that Fox recognized them by their special spiritual quality. Certainly Fox’s conscience and his sense of calling were highly developed, his psychic visions were clear and frequent and the quiet voice within was strong and consistent, but his decision that these were communications from God is most plausibly seen as an interpretation, only possible because of his training.

It is just contrary to the facts of the case both that Fox rejected the religious concepts of his day, alone, and as a result of his private religious experiences, and that he coined new words to name the things he had experienced. He rejected the practices of the priests and the institutional structures that authenticated them, in common with a great many of his contemporaries, in a direct and logical response to a particular historical situation. He embraced the concepts that he found in sections of the New Testament as they appeared to him to apply to the intellectual and practical necessities of his day.

It is undeniable that his new religious ideas showed a marked similarity to and the influence of many of the secular ideas of his time.

Fox did not teach his followers a new set of concepts for talking about a universal experience; he introduced them to a new institution.

Empiricist biased theories of innovation in religion depending on specially intense or fresh private perception of ‘the spiritual world’ becoming the source of religious concepts and institutions, have been repeatedly discredited by an accumulation of theoretical criticisms of empiricism in general and in relation to religion. Critics argue that the empiricist’s concept of ‘an experience’ is an odd one and their concept of a religious experience even odder;

¹ Thomas Edwards (1646), ‘Gangrena’, Primary Sources, p. 175.
² Gerrard Winstanley (1649), ‘True Levellers’ Standard Advanced’, Primary Sources, p. 188.
that the sort of experiences they describe cannot be recognized as 'religious' prior to the possession of religious concepts and cannot be the source of concepts and beliefs; that they can be used neither as evidence for the existence of a supernatural world nor to criticize and renew religious institutions.¹

Practice seems to confirm the critic’s view for ordinary believers describe among their religious experiences shared events and activities and encounters with a great range of mundane objects and people as well as feelings and emotions and moments of insight; while for both individuals and communities it seems to be the case that the activities of religion precede the formulation of religious concepts and beliefs² and that these concepts and beliefs then play their part in determining both which experiences are seen to have religious value and how they are to be described.

Lastly the empiricist assumption that people can recognize experiences as having religious authenticity and value prior to and independently of the religious beliefs and concepts they have inherited – that is that religious experiences can be distinguished from non-religious by their quality – is without any rational or practical foundation.

Maclntyre’s theory has fared better. It does seem consistent with what we know of Fox’s life that his sharing in the liturgy of the established church, his listening to the Sectarian preachers and his study of the Bible were formative of his religious ideas and of his assessment and interpretation of his experiences. It seems to be the case that something led him to reject the established religious authorities. We can agree with Maclntyre that non-rational factors may have had a part to play in this decision. But I think we must also acknowledge that he found the religious institutions of his day inappropriate for reasons that we can appreciate and understand even looking back several hundred years and that the new institution he introduced clearly and intelligibly fitted the demand of the situation.

Fox introduced a new source of religious authority, but MacIntyre must be wrong when he says that the criterion of authority on which the new tradition was based was one of Fox’s own experiences. For himself Fox took as his authority in religion his own inner voice, but what he accepted as genuine communications from God were in fact rigorously judged by what he read in the Bible.

Apart from the indications of history it is not possible for a memory of an experience to become a test of comparison, even for subsequent experiences


of the same person, let alone those of others.\(^1\) The only thing that could
become such a criterion would be an account of an experience, but Fox did
not leave detailed descriptions of his experiences by which others could judge
their.

Fox never suggested that the quality or content of any of his own
experiences be used as a criterion for others, nor did he teach that everyone
listen uncritically to their own inner voice. The source of religious authority
that he set up for others was the Meeting, to which all had to submit.

Since he will not allow that beliefs are inferred from experiences it is
difficult, within MacIntyre’s theory, to see the role that experiences can have,
both in the decision of an individual to reject the current religious criteria of
authority and in the setting up of a new belief system. But it is not hard to
see why Fox rejected the religious institutions of his day. He was responding
in a rational way to his experience of a particular historical situation. It is
also not hard to imagine how new religious experiences and beliefs, and new
ways of talking about them, can arise from the practice of a new institution
and it is in fact possible to follow this happening in the growth of the early
Quaker movement.\(^2\)

Language-biased theories of innovation in religion based on the idea that
religions, in the first place, belong to communities and are passed on through
language training, which then determines how experiences are interpreted
and evaluated, find radical innovation a rather difficult phenomenon to
accommodate. For if our concept of reality and the meaning of our
experiences are determined by our language training, neither independent
rational deliberation nor experiences of an independently real world can
have a role in the criticism and renewal of language systems. The more
religions are seen solely in terms of language systems and the more arbitrary
and isolated language systems are seen to be, both in relation to one another
and in relation to the world of experience, the more difficult it becomes to
give a coherent account of innovation. For innovators do criticize and renew
religions and they appear to be responding to their experience of changing
historical situations and to produce solutions that are intelligible related to
the problems those situations have set.

MacIntyre, Dewi Phillips\(^3\) and Peter Winch\(^4\) also attempt to tackle this
problem, but to different extents fail to give altogether satisfactory accounts
of radical changes in religious belief that accord with the histories of religions,

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\(^1\) See, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1978), 1 para. 258.

\(^2\) See for example the growth of the Quaker commitment to pacifism under the leadership of William
Penn.

\(^3\) In almost all his writing on religion but notably in D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*

\(^4\) Peter Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, *Religion and Understanding* (Blackwell, 1967) and
‘Meaning and Religious Language’, *Reason and Religion*. 

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the actual role of theology and the stories people tell of their conversions and loss of faith.

The story of George Fox leaves us with a challenge, for although language-biased theories seem unable to come up with a satisfactory account of innovation in religions we must resist the temptation to retreat into any form of empiricism. The need is rather for a closer look at the thought that new religious ideas arise as intelligible developments within interrelated institutional systems that relate in some way to the rules for deciding what is authentic and valuable in religion.

*London*