On the 19th of February 2017, I visited the Central Leeds Quaker meeting house, located on Woodhouse Lane, during their weekly Sunday meeting. The decision to participate in an observation here was mainly due to having very little knowledge and understanding of the faith. In this report, I shall reflect critically on my visit by focusing on theme of gender to gain an understanding of the major characteristics of religion in Modern Britain.

This denomination of Christianity intrigues me, therefore the main objectives of my visit was to observe Quakers practicing their faith by directly participating in and experiencing the meeting. I was curious to discover how silence is included in the meeting and whether it is enforced. Another objective was to witness how the faith functions in daily life and society. Regarding gender equality, same sex marriage was accepted by the Quaker faith in 2009 (Abbott et al., 2011, p.214) suggesting that they accept people’s individuality. I was interested to view any potential gender divisions or inequality as the Quaker faith values gender equality.

Prior to my visit I researched the popularity of Quakers in Britain today and discovered there are approximately 500 Quaker meetings in Britain, attended by more than 20,000 people (Quakers in Britain, no date). The history of the Quaker movement in Europe, dates from the 17th century then extended to North America and beyond (Abbot et al., 2011,p.2). George Fox, one of the founders of the Quaker faith (Sharman,1991,p.1), became interested in religion from a young age and encountered several visions where he learnt the “truth of human nature and the Truth and love that is Jesus Christ” and believed everyone can “live without sin in the perfect love of God” (Abbot et al., 2011, p.2). Fox travelled across England and the faith grew as they discovered that the ‘Light’ was present in everyone and hence their focus on equality (Abbot et al., 2011, p.2).

Originally Leeds Quakers met in Carlton Hill Meeting house, where the first meeting was held in 1868 (Mortimer,1987). However, after the First World War membership declined and the meeting houses became expensive to run, resulting in smaller meetings developing within Leeds (Mortimer, 1987). During the 1930s the Carton Hill property was renovated and the meetings were held in rented accommodation until 1987 when they built a meeting house on Woodhouse Lane which is still in use today (Mortimer,1987; Leeds Quakers, no date). The building incorporates the dyslexia centre and the rooms are available for hire as it is an integral part of the community.

The method of contacting the Meeting House was through e-mail. I received a prompt response and was invited to attend a welcoming lunch where they were eager to share information about their faith.

O’Reilly (2012, p.17) in her publication ‘Ethnographic Methods’ discusses Malinowski’s methodology of participant observation by stating the importance of participating with those being studied. Malinowski believed that a participant observer can “become part of the natural surroundings or the setting so those being observed aren’t affected by their presence” (O’Reilly, 2012, p.17). In addition, the researcher can “experience things as the insider and understand them better” (O’Reilly, 2012, p.17). In view of this I believed participant observation was the best approach to fully benefit my visit.

On the day of my visit I arrived 20 minutes early to introduce myself and I immediately received a warm welcome from the warden. This eased my nervousness at entering an unfamiliar environment. The entrance hall contained a table with a variety of information leaflets regarding events in the community focusing on promoting peace. Several informative pamphlets adorned the wall from the ‘Quakers in Britain’ organization. I was encouraged to take the leaflets I required for my research (see appendix A). As people arrived, they greeted me warmly although I was an unfamiliar face and they were interested in my studies. It occurred to me that if being an outsider mattered at all, it did not seem to influence their attitude towards me in a negative way. The members greeted each other with a hand shake, indicating their openness and friendly approach which was extended to myself.

As soon as the first person entered the meeting room the service began. People were permitted to enter the room in their own time. I was directed towards the entrance and observed the room layout. The chairs were placed in circular rows facing a wooden table in the centre of the room. A Bible, ‘The Quaker faith and practice’ book and ‘Advices and queries’ book were placed on most seats. During the meetings, the books can be read and according to a member they offer guidance for those who seek a deeper understanding and to develop a focus for their thoughts.

By 10:45am most people were seated in silence and some were reading, others reflecting individually. Some had their eyes closed while others held their head in their hands in deep thought. The silence was prolonged and lasted throughout most of the meeting. I was aware that an individual could express a thought or feeling through a ‘ministry’ where they would stand up and share a reflection (Ralph,2016,p.11). Towards the end of the meeting an individual stood to speak, explaining that she had written a poem for a birthday celebration of a family member. Whilst writing the poem the individual, who had not always had the best relationship with this family member, became aware of the many noble qualities this family member had. This realisation expressed a key belief within the faith that God is present in everyone and highlights the good in everyone although it can be challenging at times to see through our ignorance. Durham (2011, p.98) explains that by accepting equality one can fully understand truth, simplicity and peace and states that if we acknowledge everyone as truly equal “based on the light of God being found in every person, you share a Quaker view”.

When the meeting ended at 11:45 everyone stood, shook hands and greeted each other, myself included, which indicated the meeting had ended. Everyone returned to their seats while the notices were read. A new member was welcomed into the faith and a book was presented to him which was to be signed by the other members, as a welcoming gesture signifying the warm sense of community. Notices were read, including details of community events, the refugee crisis, asylum seekers and prison work. Many members documented this information in their diaries, demonstrating their involvement and devotion. Visitors introduced themselves to the group at this point, followed by provision of refreshments. This provided an opportunity to participate in informal discussions with members and many were willing to share their beliefs and views. People were ready to discuss the openness of the Quaker faith and their willingness to accommodate people from all backgrounds, gender, age and ethnicity. I understood that some also shared other religious beliefs and participated in other religious practices, such as, Buddhist ritual, whilst others were agnostic.

I engaged in conversations with people of all ages who taught me about the faith and their enthusiasm was clear. A member discussed that she previously held Catholic beliefs, but changed to Quakerism as it accommodated her current beliefs about being mindful, understanding and accepting of people. During lunch, we participated in a minute silence to give thanks for the food. I was surprised to observe the members greeting each other as ‘friends’ rather than by name, and before speaking they waved their arms in the air, to receive everyone’s attention. It was clear this created an atmosphere of friendliness and warmth.

Reflecting upon my visit I was surprised by the natural silence and stillness in the room. Ralph (2016, p.11) discusses the silence of a meeting and states “at its best the silence is not just an absence of noise; it is a seeking for quietness of mind, of body and of spirit”. Reflecting upon this allowed me to realize that during the silence, “people’s selfish thoughts dematerialise” and therefore create a clear path and way forward (Durham, 2011, p.27). As I participated in the silence I felt a sense of spirituality and as Durham (2011, p.27) believes, an outsider wouldn’t realise the difference between gathered meetings and any other Quaker event but for an insider, meetings “can be the impetus for spiritual renewal and lasting change”.

It is known that the community is significant to the faith and I questioned how this is expressed through silent meetings. Ralph (2016, p.11) explains that the silent meeting is a shared occasion where everyone present aims to achieve the same objective which makes this “a collective experience”. Also during my informal conversations with members, it is understood that everyone present at the meeting support each other spiritually and the ‘ministry’ helps to guide others.

The meeting was held in a room with simple and plain décor, the walls were plain white, without visual symbols or decorative features. Traditionally this has always been integral to Quaker meetings as Dandelion (2007, p.35) states outward sacraments weren’t needed to assist people to remain faithful and the simplistic nature of the worship meant it could happen anytime at any place for any amount of time and the silence was “a response to God and not to human agency”.

During my visit I focused on the theme of gender as I was aware equality was of high importance to the faith. I found that both genders were treated and given the equal opportunity, as there was an absence of a leader and no overruling dominant gender group. People were permitted to sit anywhere without restriction, and everyone assisted in food preparation and tidying up. Genders were equally divided within the meeting, however a female supervised the children and the meeting house warden was male. Having said this, there was no dominant figure, suggesting that there is equality among the Quakers. I believe my visit was an honest portrayal of the faith as documented in academic publications. Gender in Quakerism is regarded as equal and neither superior to the other with genders expected to participate in the leadership roles within their community (Kenschaft et al., 2016, p.285).

Evaluating the process of my research, on reflection I should have recorded events during the observation as I was unable to recall every detail after the visit. Having said this, as I was observing a place of worship rather than conducting formal interviews, I felt it was inappropriate and difficult to write notes while engaging in conversation. It was difficult to select an appropriate method however, I gained an extensive insight into the faith as I participated and directly experienced the events of a Quaker meeting. The faith is open to everyone, with some becoming official members and pay a fee, but the faith welcomes all visitors whether they become members or not. The welcoming environment highlighted that my background was irrelevant as everyone is treated equally. Their attitude could have been influenced negatively knowing that I was a student observing their faith and documenting my findings, nonetheless they were very accommodating and encouraging.

As a result of my visit, I remain interested in the faith and would like to extend my understanding into how the Quaker faith and beliefs are taught to members and visitors given that the meetings are held in silence. I remain curious regarding the effects that the faith has on everyday life and whether it causes restrictions. However, I understand the faith places great emphasis on equality, peace and self-reflection but can be open to interpretation.

I am privileged to have attended and experienced a Quaker meeting, which has enhanced my understanding of their beliefs. I discovered what their practices entail and the significance of their silent meetings. Having reflected on the theme of gender, I recognise equality is central to the faith. It is apparent from the welcome I receive that the Quaker faith practices in a non-judgmental atmosphere. It is clear the faith is thriving and functions in society today offering support and assistance those in need.

Appendix:

A: Pamphlets collected from the Meeting House.



Reference list:

Abbott, M P, Chijioke, M E, Dandelion, P and Oliver, J W. 2010. *Historical Dictionary of the Friends (Quakers).* 2nd Edition. Maryland: Scarecrow Press.

Dandelion, P. 2007. *An Introduction to Quakerism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Durham, G. 2011. *Being a Quaker*. London: Quaker Quest.

Kenschaft, L, Clark, R and Ciambrone, D. 2016. *Gender Inequality in Our Changing World: A comparative approach*. New York: Routledge.

Leeds Quakers. [No date]. *A short history of Leeds Quakers*. [Online]. [Accessed 16 April 2017]. Available from http://www.leedsquakers.org.uk/meetings/\_c\_hill-history

Mortimer, J. 1987. *A brief history of Leeds Quakers.* [Leaflet]. Leeds: [No publisher]

O’Reilly, K. 2012. *Ethnographic Methods*. 2nd Edition. Oxon: Routledge.

Quakers in Britain. No date. *How Quakers Worship*. [Online]. [Accessed 16 April 2017]. Available from: https://www.quaker.org.uk/about-quakers/our-faith/how-quakers-worship

Ralph, G. 2016. *Living our beliefs: An exploration of the faith and practice of Quakers.* London: Quaker Books

Sharman, C. 1991. *George Fox & The Quakers.* London: Quaker Home Service.