**Fieldwork Report: A Study of Leeds Quakers**

This report will outline and analyse recent fieldwork I conducted at the Central Leeds Quaker meeting house during their weekly Sunday meeting on 17th March 2019. The visit was completed with the intention of broadening my understanding not only of the Quaker faith, but of religion in contemporary society - both in Leeds and in Britain.

Within this report I plan to briefly analyse the meeting I attended, whilst noting the most prominent features observed. Demographic of attendees of the meeting was one such feature. Consequently, I have chosen to focus my report predominantly on, mainly age and other, demographic trends, with an emphasis on religious adherence, and how this is impacted by secularisation. I aim to examine how the meeting I attended links to contemporary Britain’s religious trends.

Coming from an agnostic background, having never attended a faith school, nor having a religious affiliation, I lack significant first-hand experience of religious practice. Nonetheless, Christianity is undeniably the faith which I have been most exposed to as a result of growing up in a largely Christian society. Despite this, Quakerism, as a Christian denomination, is a religion I know very little about. My lack of prior knowledge and somewhat increased ability as a result of this to approach Quakerism with a relatively untainted, unbiased mindset was a large factor in my decision to study it further. I was also intrigued to discover more about this unique denomination of a religion I consider myself already fairly familiar.

The Quaker Movement started in the mid-17th Century in England as a denomination of Christianity (Dandelion 2007). It was founded by George Fox, partly as a result of changing social and political culture at the time (Dandelion 2007). Although Quakerism has consistently maintained a relatively small following, members of the faith have been surprisingly influential within British society (Quakers in Britain 2015). This is evident through their continued involvement in national and international politics, and the numerous large-scale corporations founded on Quaker principles, such as Lloyds Bank and Cadburys (Quakers in Britain 2015).

When approaching the task of conducting my fieldwork I was aware of how influential the methodology I adopted would be on the outcome of my findings. Methodological agnosticism is a concept focused on ensuring neutrality within religious research. It argues for “the bracketing out of truth claims and judgements” by adopting an agnostic over theistic or atheistic attitude to achieve neutrality (Knott 2005, p.251). Balancing neutrality with in-depth understanding when researching religions is a common concern amongst scholars; as conceptualised by the ‘Insider/Outsider’ debate. Having considered both sides of this debate, I concluded that adopting a temporary insider perspective by conducting research as a participant observer was the best approach. Not only were attendees of the meeting more likely to be unaffected by my prescence, but by involving myself in the meeting my observations we able to become “more transparent and easily understandable” (Malinowski 1922, p.22). Although the opposing argument questions the ability of an insider to remain objective, I believe my awareness of this debate allowed me to somewhat overcome this limitation and adopt the best methodological approach available to me.

When first approaching the meeting house I was surprised by how simple the building appeared; I have always considered place of worship as elegant and with ornate decoration, believing the intention being to ignite a sense of otherness in worship. The style of the outside of the building was echoed upon entering the meeting room. The décor was simple and plain and lacked significant liturgical symbology, features I have encountered regularly in places of worship. An integral part of the Quaker faith is worship being unrestricted by time or location; they place strong emphasis on the private and internal nature of worship, and consequently require no external factors to aid connection with their faith (Dandelion 2007). Arguably, the increasing simplicity of Quaker meeting houses is a response to social challenges faced in modern society; religions are forced to move away from traditional religious norms in lieu of secularised adversity.

The simplicity I observed was also mirrored in the silent nature of the meeting, another distinct feature of Quakerism. During the meeting the only shared action of all members appeared to be silence and respect of others in the meeting. Apart from this, attendees appeared to act without guidance, meaning no common action was apparent; some members spoke, some read, and some closed their eyes. This reflects typical Quaker values focusing on acceptance and inclusivity, as well as the private nature of the tradition. Quakers believe God can be found in everyone (Durham 2011), but it is up to the individual to successfully channel the ‘light of Christ’ (Dandelion 2007). Active silence is the “language of God” and activates ones ‘inner light’ (Rohr 2004, p.97). In turn, silence is the condition needed to allow individuals to distance themselves from social pressures and further their connection with God (Brent Bill 2005).

The aforementioned demographic makeup of the meeting I attended was instantly noteworthy: low levels of diversity were observable in almost every major demographic category. Principally, there was a very apparent lack of racial diversity: from what I observed attendees were almost exclusively white. Linking to this, we also observed low ethnic diversity. Although we cannot definitively prove this based on our observation, topics covered within the meeting which touched on ethnic diversity, such as dual nationality and parental immigration, mentioned only European nationals. Age was another major demographic category in which low levels of diversity were observable. The meeting was heavily dominated by older generations; out of 30 attendees we estimated a split of 10% children, 10% under 30, 30% between 45 and 55. This left roughly half of the meeting being over the age of 55. Conversely, gender appeared to be the only major demographic category showcasing no majority; an almost even division was observed between male and female attendees at the meeting, with a slight leaning towards a female majority.

A lack of conclusive research in regard to racial and ethnic diversity in UK Quaker meetings limits our ability to make comparisons with national statistics. Nonetheless, such restrictions were non-existent when comparing age and gender diversity trends due to considerably higher levels of aforementioned research. As a result, this has allowed comparisons to be made between Quaker demographic trends I observed in Leeds with those across the UK. Surprisingly, our observations in regard to gender are not mirrored nationally. The majority of UK Quaker meetings host a considerable female majority (William Croan Chadkirk 2014). Differing to this are the trends we observed in regard to age, low levels of youth attendence and high levels of attendance from older generations are echoed in national statistics (William Croan Chadkirk 2014).

Issues of faith retention, transmission of beliefs and youth religious adherence are prevelant within Quakerism, as well as among many other religious institutions in modern Britain (NatCen 2017). These trends prove problematic for religions due to the vital role that transmission and youth membership play in ensuring the survival of a faith. They are also contributing factors to modern society’s movement towards secularisation, the process in which religions’ political and social power and influence diminishes.

As previously stated, I observed few young people attending the 17th of March meeting. Limited youth membership is an issue not unique to the meeting I attended, Quaker meetings across the UK increasingly struggle to maintain high youth faith adherence, with the number of children present in meetings falling drastically from 1,887 in 2006 to 365 in 2010 (William Croan Chadkirk 2014). Numerous techniques have been adopted by Quakers in an attempt to attract more young people to the faith. This was observable at the meeting I attended; young people were given the oppourtunity to join the adult meeting and share the topics of their session, a common practice among all Quaker meetings. Ensuring youth feel engaged and appreciated within the faith can help ensure high youth retention levels due to increased feelings of value and inclusion within the Quaker community. Outside of meetings, the main Quaker attempts to increase youth membership is through youth focused events, viewed to be the most effective format for faith transmission due, again, to an “increased sense of involvement in, and belonging to, the Quaker community” among participants (Best 2007, p.278). This emphasis on fostering a sense of belonging and on value transmission results in Quaker youth events being relatively dissimilar to many youth events conducted by other Christian denominations, which are instead belief and doctrine orientated (Best 2007).

It can be argued that Quaker attitudes towards young people, demonstrated through events tailored towards this group, are as a result of secularisation. Religions loss of social influence is a trend most evident among young people, with 71% of 18-24 year olds in 2016 identifying as having ‘no religion’ (NatCen 2017); consequently, the need to move away from traditional religious practices to ensure youth religious engagement and adherence is apparent. Focusing on morality over doctrine allows Quakerism to be more easily adopted and integrated into everyday life in a secularising society, due to lower levels of conflict existing between an individual’s social and religious identity. Quaker’s somewhat unique approach also showcases efforts taken to combat potential turmoil as a result of religious pluralisation and conflicting beliefs. Religious pluralisation has made it difficult for “religion to be an unquestioned part of the culture” (Woodhead 2016), by placing little focus on absolute truths and advocating acceptance of other belief systems, Quakers are able to reduce conflicts members may feel within modern society as a result of their faith.

 ‘No-religion’ becoming the most popular identification of religious belief throughout all ages of the UK (NatCen 2017) highlights the reality of secularisation. As the foundations of modern society become centred around science and rationality, religion is undeniably losing the social and political power it once held. Although all religions are impacted by secularisation, the extent of the impact has varied. The biggest distinction exists between Christian and non-Christian religions. Christian religions are experiencing high rates of reducing membership levels (NatCen 2017), whereas overall membership of non-Christian religions has been steadily increasing; the proportion of the population identifying with non-Christian religions has in fact quadrupled between 1983 and 2015 (Bullivant 2017). Unequal levels of youth membership between religions plays a big role in these differences; although all young people are becoming increasingly less likely to follow their parents’ religion (Woodhead 2016), denominations of Christianity have significantly lower youth retention rates when compared to non-Christian religions (Sherwood 2017). Lower levels of youth membership, and consequently overall religious adherence, within the Christian community can also be explained by significantly lower birth rates than those of non-Christian communities (Woodhead 2016). Finally, this trend has been linked to young people’s changing perceptions of Christianity; a demographic which is showcasing an increasing tendency to view Christianity as sexist and homophobic (Woodhead 2016). As Christianity is viewed more negatively by younger generations, they are more likely to disengage and distance themselves from a belief system they find unsympathetic. Media portrayal of Christianity has played a significant role in this; the media is widely acknowledged to have the ability to heavily influence social attitudes towards religion, something highlighted throughout *Framing Terrorism* (Norris 2003), a work which focuses on Islamophobic tendencies within the media and the consequential influence this has on social attitudes.

Upon evaluating the manner in which I conducted my fieldwork I am confident in the effectiveness of the process I adopted in achieving my aims; my understanding of the Quaker faith has been enriched and I have had the opportunity to consider the current changing climate of religion in contemporary British society. I was most interested to discover how the Quaker focus on values over doctrine, and on simplicity in their meetings is linked to changes in contemporary Britain, namely secularisation. To summarise, Quakerism, on both a local and national scale, has illustrated current trends within religion in modern Britain.

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