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QUAKERLY CONFLICT: THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF CONFLICT IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

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This thesis examines the issue of internal conflict in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) through an analysis of the author's fieldwork findings. It uses a conceptual framework that proposes that individual identity is culturally constructed by its social setting – within any conflict, the dispositions of those involved are bounded by culturally sanctioned parameters. It argues that the Quaker community influences its members' sense of identity by constructing a context that directs thought, awareness and behaviour through narratives, metaphors and symbols. The different layers of meetings – the formal settings in which socialisation takes place – are integrated in such a way as to provide a unique, culturally informed context, where the possession of what is regarded as a 'Quakerly' disposition is valorised. The thesis contends that the ethos of tolerance for diverse individual spiritualities, and the tenet that every individual contains an 'Inner Light', conflict with the belief that voicing disagreement represents an assertion of individuality that is 'unQuakerly' and damaging to the unified community. This leads to structural tensions – illustrated by the number of contradictions that surface within the community. The attempt to resolve these, using the forms of socialisation that create them, produces a unique form of conflict management.

Key words: internal conflict, community, power, socialisation, social contract, conflict management, discernment

Key themes:

A repertoire of expected behaviours and internalised values establishes a common Quaker identity, which frames the way internal conflict is defined, negotiated and resolved

Metaphors and concepts are employed to both constrain behaviour and manage conflict

Of potential interest to: researchers and those with a general interest in the formation of identity within the Quaker community and in its unique conflict management process

Introduction: Aims, Methodology and Thesis Organisation

Aims of the thesis

The author believes that the Quaker community provides an important subject for the field of conflict research due to its public stance on peace: pacifism forms a coherent ideological centre to Quaker beliefs and is the context for its distinct forms of conflict management. The Society holds a deserved reputation as a peace-maker in the outside world, but the question the author seeks to address is whether the system it uses when managing *internal* conflict is effective or whether it reveals underlying structural contradictions. He examines the strategies employed when internal issues conflict with the Society's idea of itself as a peaceful, harmonious community, and explores how these methods arise from the forms of socialisation that influence members' behaviour. By so doing, he aims to discover whether they lead to conflict resolution or to further contradictions.

The role of the researcher

In the course of his research, the author also examines the relationship between the ethnographic researcher and their subject(s). It is generally recognised that the veil of objectivity that often mantles research is an illusion: to conduct productive research, the researcher needs to recognise the internal conflict manifest in the role. For this reason, the author terms himself an 'integrated-participant', due to the fact that he is a member of the Society. He tries to maintain a stance of self-awareness, coupled with the practice of privileging his subjects' voices, in order to understand the way Quakers construct important aspects of their social identity, and how this influences their approach to internal conflict. Hence, he uses the term 'conflict' less as an analytical construct and more as a prompt for his informants to describe their understanding of it.

Methodology

The author based the thesis on 13 months of participant-observation and fieldwork, which comprised 28 semi-structured interviews. Before conducting the fieldwork he reviewed the relevant Quaker literature to gain an informed understanding of the practices of the community in their historical context. Finally, he involved focus groups and invited individual comments on the final draft, using these to enrich and qualify the conclusions he drew from his analysis of the data.

Thesis organisation

This summary concentrates on the author's analysis of his findings rather than providing an account of his fieldwork. However, it has followed his structure, with the early chapters reflecting the

participants' understanding; the later chapters, the author's. He also uses the management of a number of specific conflicts as templates. The summary focuses on the most evident and open conflict, the Trident/Ploughshares 2000 incident (detailed in Chapter Three), the reason being that an exploration of its implications is threaded throughout the later chapters of the thesis.

Chapter One: The General Context

Overview

This chapter provides contextual information concerning potential sources of conflict within the Society. The conflicts the author concentrates on mainly relate to the contested meaning of Quaker identity and practice.

Sources of conflict

Two examples of potential sources of conflict surfaced as a recurrent theme in the fieldwork, the first being the tension implicit in the various interpretations of Quaker symbols and heritage. For example, although Quaker discourse has historically been couched in Christian terms, Quaker belief currently accepts a wide degree of theological ambiguity, provoking concern amongst some that the traditional Christian form of the community is being undermined. The second source of conflict relates to the Society's structural organisation. There is a tension in the relationship of the local Meetings for Worship to the overall organisational structure; in certain instances it surfaces in the attitudes of more locally oriented members towards the moral authority of the decisions taken in Business Meetings. Both these areas of tension are related to the specific cultural context of the Quaker community – although Quakers stress the personal aspects of spiritual understanding, the testing of it, and its practice, are communal. Thus, individual belief is supported by the ideals and practice adhered to by the whole community and upheld by the organisational structures. The ethos of unity this invokes strongly discourages the expression of dissent, contradicting in some respects the freedom and lack of structure that the ability to explore individual beliefs appears to represent.

Invisible boundaries

The relationship between different levels of individual involvement in building and maintaining these support structures sometimes results in a veiled tension between members and 'attenders' (non-members who participate in local Meetings for Worship). The emphasis on equality means the distinction is subdued during the Meetings for Worship, but it is manifest in other areas: for

example, the construction of what it means to be a Quaker takes place not only through the internalisation of its testimonies (or guiding principles), but also through participation in Business Meetings. Attendees are absent from Business Meetings, which means they do not partake in building and developing a communal identity through a process involving discipline, focused listening and a commitment to unity. A definite boundary is crossed when the attendee becomes a member. Where there are boundaries, there is the potential for conflict. Tensions, therefore, surface around the issue of participation, with some members feeling that attendees are a drain on resources, as they do not and cannot form part of the community's support structures.

Chapter Two: Worship and the Communal Identity

Overview

The Meeting for Worship allows individual voices to emerge through reflecting on or expressing the truth of an individual's experience. This can raise issues of identity as the construction of the community takes place through members participating in, and internalising, a shared understanding. When different interpretations arise they are perceived as disrupting this shared experience. This chapter looks at how this is managed through the structures of the Meeting for Worship.

Identity and community

Participating in worship reinforces the individual's 'Quakerly' understanding of the world. Despite the stress on individuality of belief, the community informs the individual's sense of self through the notion of 'Quakerly belonging'. The Quaker culture, however, has strong non-conformist roots, and this gives it a paradoxical aspect that challenges the sense of community. The non-conformist tradition holds to the right to resist prevailing interpretations; individuals within the community constantly negotiate the right to define common symbols of identity. Dandelion (1996), however, believes that 'being Quakerly' has become a 'behavioural creed' that subtly enforces a common identity, resisting individual interpretation. The Quakers' behavioural repertoire reflects the assumptions and values of the community: consciousness is transformed through participation in the community and individuals are led to interpret the world through a communal lens.

The symbolism of the community

The 'behavioural creed' is one of the ways in which the Quaker community is constructed; methods of behaviour are also explicitly directed (for example, worshipping in silence together) and this

forms an aesthetic theme for the practice of the testimonies. As Quakers reject religious symbolism, they often fail to acknowledge the symbolic forms that are used to demarcate them from others and bind them into a unified community. For example, the circular seating and unadorned nature of the Meeting House are themselves symbolic of an emphasis on equality and a disregard for a religious/secular divide. The community embodies this symbolism – in the Meeting for Worship the members reflect on their spiritual understanding using the presence of the community, without overt guidance or authority. They are reduced to an essential Quaker element containing the ‘thought of God’. What is key to this experience is the presence of others seeking similar awareness through the same behaviour.

The use of silence

Silence is seen as essential to this communal act; it provides the environment for the introspective seeking of the ‘still small voice’. Members internalise and incorporate structured silence into their identities and it informs their behaviour. This behaviour, which embodies the Quaker testimonies, is also manifest in the Business Meeting: each individual’s message is to be heard by all (equality) but should be made with expedience (simplicity) in a way that does not harm others (peace). Shared silence represents the sense of communion; displays of anger or frustration risk the meeting’s unity. Even when disagreement occurs – in a Business Meeting, for example – it is expressed in coded terms, avoiding displays of emotion. Silence, therefore, naturally becomes the Quaker way of managing disparity between participants.

Chapter Three: Quaker Structures – A ‘Flattened Hierarchy’

Overview

The subject of this chapter comprises the central focus of the thesis: it examines the conflict surrounding the Trident/Ploughshares 2000 incident. The author explores what the event reveals about the tensions between Quaker ideals and their implementation, and the way the question of power is negotiated through the Society’s organisational structures and its decision-making methods.

Power, ‘redemptive hegemony’ and agency

The theories of power the author employs are those of Foucault (who sees power as related to the manipulation and internalisation of knowledge), Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ (where the individual

internalises specific ways of behaving that are imbibed from the social context), and Arendt's formulation that power belongs to the group as it corresponds to the ability to act in concert. The author believes the Business Meeting is a cogent example of these theories – it is a situation where communal action possesses a moral force. When describing such a case, the author believes 'hegemony' a useful term, specifically in its more subtle interpretation as ideological domination that is filtered through an organisation's structures, which disincline members to take certain actions and encourage them towards others. However, he believes that Bourdieu's concept of 'redemptive hegemony' – which constrains behaviour yet leaves the individual free to choose – is a more accurate description of Quaker practices. The contradictions this particular style of hegemony involves, however, can result in unresolved conflict, as illustrated in the Trident/Ploughshares incident below.

The different tiers of the organisation

The Society manages the problem of power through its highly complex structure, which the author describes as a 'flattened hierarchy'. The Quaker community is constructed in such a way as to allow the participation of as many members as possible – there is no central authority figure, but instead layers of collectives use worship to 'discern' the Inner Light (they wait in silence for the will of God to become evident) in order to determine corporate action. The local levels of the Society are places for 'liberal exploration of spiritual understanding and the sense of community'. However, the most conservative, and in many ways most powerful, section is the regional Monthly Meeting, which controls the memberships and selects representatives to the central body. It negotiates the balance of power between the central and local bodies, and 'tempers the communal voice' of both. The central bodies, which include the Meeting for Sufferings, the Yearly Meeting and the central committees, maintain the outward identity of the Society. The Meeting for Sufferings is the final arbiter of all decisions but, as the Trident/Ploughshares incident shows, it is closely monitored by the Monthly Meeting. The different meetings together form a unified structure where power is negotiated through a decision-making process that allows all voices to be heard. In this sense, they represent a forum within which to react with discipline to the many different voices the Society contains. However, the 'informal jurisdictions' of the meetings that comprise this 'flattened hierarchy' can create tensions when one tier oversteps an unspoken remit. Examples of conflict can therefore be found in all tiers of the organisational structure.

The Trident/Ploughshares 2000 debate

The debate around Trident/Ploughshares 2000 (an anti-nuclear activist organisation, whose activities ranged from vigils to direct action) is an example of how this method of decision-making manages conflict. The Quakers involved in the protest outside the Trident airbase were not participating as representatives of the Society but because of ‘Concern’ over preparations for war. ‘Concerns’, in the Quaker idiom, refer to actions led by the Inner Light, which lead the individual to participate in social issues. The protest evolved into a decision to take more direct, albeit symbolic, action by illegally entering the base and damaging the military equipment. The Quaker participants turned to Turning the Tide (TTT), the part of Quaker Peace and Service (QPS) that specialises in training for non-violent action. TTT agreed to its request for training, and drew up a report for the central decision-making body, Meeting for Sufferings. However, what was intended as a quick synopsis rapidly turned into a challenge over the ‘discernment’ of Turning the Tide, Quaker Peace and Service, and Meeting for Sufferings. Some members of the meeting were concerned about the risks involved to people, property and the Quaker reputation. The result was a conflict that reverberated throughout the community’s structures, from the local and regional levels through to the central bodies. As the decision-making process of the Society allows all voices to be heard, the Trident/Ploughshares case resulted in a ‘tangle of interpretations on issues of violence and peace, authorised representation and the law’. However, at its heart lay a judgement over discernment of the Inner Light. After the issue had been aired at all levels of the Society, including the Monthly Meetings, it was taken back to Meeting for Sufferings. The conclusion finally arrived at was to allow training for non-violent direct action but without endorsing it, leaving the issue unresolved. This episode reveals the tension between the free leading of the spirit and the need for structures to contain an event within the Quaker cultural code of behaviour.

Chapter Four: Power and the Social Contract

Overview

This chapter concerns the tensions that arise between individual freedom and the communal testing of individual experience in Quaker meetings, and the way these are managed through a form of ‘social contract’ between the individual and the community.

Conflict and the ‘social contract’

In the process of constructing their sense of self in relation to the community the individual must negotiate the ideal of the ‘prototypical Quaker’. The many different meetings, which together make

up the complex social structure of the Society, produce persons capable of reproducing the Quaker culture – the archetypical ‘good Quaker’. In these locations the meanings of the key testimonies of simplicity, integrity, peace and equality are internalised and expressed as common behaviours. Notions of control are pre-empted through the repression and sublimation of emotions – the decisions of Business Meetings, for example, are arrived at through the participants’ embodiment of the Quaker virtues of self-discipline and unity. As Quakers emphasise equality, belonging and aversion to hierarchy, the author likens their understanding of ‘community’ to a ‘social contract’ between equals. However, the symbols, metaphors and behaviours that determine the content of the Quaker identity are subject to individual interpretation, and this inevitably leads to conflict as different interpretations vie for control. Conflict provokes discomfort because the Quaker ideal of the relationship between individual and community is one of equality not coercion: rather than the sort of control exerted through an explicit moral code, the individual agrees to participate in the community as a free moral agent (accepting the ‘social contract’). However, as the community’s structures depend on the regulation of behaviour and cognition, they also work to minimise individual control; individually held power is constrained through the ritualised assertion of egalitarian structures – for example, the use of the term ‘servant of the meeting’ for the moderator of the Business Meeting. Egalitarian structures, therefore, direct attention away from the loss of freedom that the commitment to the community and participation in its ‘social contract’ entails.

A template for behaviour

The concept of the ‘social contract’, where agency and socialised discipline are intertwined, helps to interpret the enactment of community in the Business Meeting. The fact that the act of worshipful decision-making is dependent on self-control and adherence to the Quaker method means it becomes the embodiment of the ‘social contract’. This has implications for the form Quaker conflict management takes. The contract is maintained through structured actions – enacting the testimonies and avoiding individual power within the community – which provide a template for ‘Quakerly’ behaviour when disagreements occur.

Chapter Five: The Quaker Cultural Model

Overview

The author considers here how Quaker tropes (organisational metaphors) maintain relationships and the interpretation of behaviours. The open nature of these metaphors leaves them subject to conflicting interpretations, but equally means they can be employed to manage this conflict.

Negotiating the nature of behaviour

Quakers do not have laws to regulate behaviour, but encourage a Quaker perspective through less overt means. A common language of shared metaphors and idioms provides them with a specific understanding of the world. ‘Quakerism’, therefore, could be viewed as a ‘habitus’ (see Chapter Three), which comprises the internalisation of symbols and tropes. The negotiation of what behaviour is deemed appropriate depends on the testimonies, which focus attention on a set of behavioural norms, providing a ‘cultural model’ for members to follow. The values the testimonies represent inform individual actions and thoughts, and add up to the quality of ‘being Quakerly’. However, the fact that this is a subtle, cognitive process that often acts below conscious awareness means it also holds the potential for misinterpretation.

Tropes that invoke and manage conflict

The community has established a grid of discourse – idioms, such as the Inner Light, and secular terms infused with special significance, such as ‘friend’, ‘meeting’ or ‘journey’ – through which understanding is filtered. The success of these lies in their ability to encompass understandings from many different belief systems; the challenge lies in the fact that concepts that are endowed with value can also generate conflict. For example, the idea of the Inner Light is one that encourages a belief in the unity of mankind and a sense of community. Although a predominantly Christian image, it directs the individual towards acceptance of theological differences. However, as some view diversity as a threat (see Chapter One), the trope acts in a contradictory way: highlighting conflict, whilst mitigating it through the valorisation of tolerance. Similarly, the term ‘Friend’ emphasises a common spiritual understanding about the world and how individuals should interact. However, it also illustrates the overlapping circles of power that structure the community, from peripherally involved attenders through to ‘weighty Friends’ (members who possess influence in the community due to their perceived level of spiritual understanding). Distinctions in status tend to be veiled at a local level through the emphasis on equality but become more apparent in the community’s decision-making bodies. The primary unifying trope, however, is that of the ‘journey’. It reconciles the contradictions underlying the other terms. The allusion to the process of spiritual development conveys the idea that each individual is situated at various locations on a journey towards the truth. As such, it can help to manage the tensions of diversity in belief and in status.

Chapter Six: The Construction of Quaker Conflict

Overview

The author considers here the location of conflicts, the way they are expressed, and the practices of conflict management. Conflict is usually associated with violence, and the imagination is automatically guided away from disputes through idioms and tropes that objectify the phenomenon, despite the fact that when conflict occurs, it usually involves subjective motivations and feelings. This means there is a complex interplay of meanings within the Quaker model that needs to be recognised and addressed. However, several cognitive mechanisms are employed to render conflict unthinkable, including the use of metaphors that valorise unity and portray conflict as its antithesis.

Conflict and the cognitive context

Conflict avoidance is constructed through the establishment of parameters of thought. For example, the peace testimony is reinforced by the subtle regulation of locating conflict within formal arenas (for example, in Business Meetings), which limits the general experience of conflict management. Likewise, the trope of the Inner Light, which promotes the ethic of respect for others, infuses the idioms used within conflict situations, making Quakers disinclined to focus on the source of the conflict. Meanwhile, the use of ‘body’ tropes in everyday Quaker language unconsciously links the idea of conflict with violence – for example, a 1993 pamphlet was entitled ‘The Wounded Meeting’. Through such metaphors, conflict is identified as a potential source of divisiveness and associated with harm to the community. More recently, the aversion to disagreement this implies has been counteracted by a conscious move towards re-imagining the meaning of conflict by relating it to the metaphor of the journey, and thus reinterpreting it as an opportunity to learn and grow. However, as the author points out, the play of metaphors and the structuring of thought is less intentional in informal contexts, where the Quaker disposition of avoidance continues to be reinforced by the association of conflict with violence.

The Quaker way of dealing with conflict

Along with the social structures and cultural rules, the way the concept of conflict is framed and the metaphors used to describe it suggest particular conflict management strategies. The discussion of conflict (for example, in Business Meetings) is undertaken in the disciplined language of Quaker idioms. As such meetings avoid emotionally charged language, personal disputes are cast in the

language of spirituality, and conflicting positions come to be viewed as moral statements, representing a challenge to the community. The formal forums for the management of such conflicts – such as the Meetings for Clearness – work through such situations, but the author contends that their mission appears to be to contain rather than resolve conflicts, and to keep others in the community unaware of their existence.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions – Quaker identity and conflict management

Overview

The thesis concludes that there is a specifically Quaker approach to internal conflict, and its constraints infuse Quaker thought and behaviour. Furthermore, the author argues, there is a subtle dialectical relationship between the Society's interpretation of conflict, the language and concepts it employs, and its unique form of conflict management or resolution.

The perception of conflict

The automatic association of conflict with violence promotes avoidance and dissuades members from turning to other forms of conflict management: when a dispute arises, they withdraw from it in both informal arenas and in the ritualised setting of the Meeting for Worship, and yield to others in the Business Meeting. Added to this, the practice of limiting the areas where the acknowledgement of conflict is permissible (Business Meetings and the central bodies that handle disputes), and of constraining the form of language used to discuss conflict, creates a perception of harmony. Avoidance means that a general ignorance among members of internal disputes allows this perception to go unchallenged. This was confirmed by the author's fieldwork. The result is that conflicts that appear resolved can reappear in different forms; many issues are under continual negotiation. The author contends that the way the Society managed the complex issue of Quaker involvement in non-violent direct action that was aired in the Trident/Ploughshares dispute, and the contestation over discernment it provoked, is an example of how, for the sake of unity, conflict is averted but not resolved.

The Business Meeting and the 'social contract'

The form the organisational structures take means that the discussion of internal conflict is generally directed into the Business Meeting and central committees, which then work to contain the dispute. The Business Meeting is where the multiple layers that make up the structure of the community are

at their most concentrated; it provides the context in which members enact their belief and sense of identity. The author believes that the internalisation of the Quaker form of the ‘social contract’ between equals that takes place in this meeting, through the production of a minute by a process of ‘convincement’, tells another story about Quaker identity that balances the one illustrating their propensity towards avoidance of conflict. The problem he identifies, however, is that this method of dealing with potentially conflicting individual views and positions does not factor as strongly as avoidance does in the Quaker imagination.

A unique form of conflict management

The way the language and idioms structure thought and behaviour at a deep level, with the emphasis on a Quaker ‘behavioural creed’, acting in concert with the idea of individual spiritual freedom, can lead to diverging interpretations of the nature of ‘Quakerly’ conduct and identity, and hence to conflict. Equally, however, the author suggests that the belief in equality and the individual spiritual journey supported by a process of collective discernment, which lie embedded in the Quaker identity through the use of symbols and language, allow for a unique form of conflict management. Thus, the Society possesses the potential to resolve internal conflict through its specific understanding of diversity within community.

Summary prepared by Fran Cetti (2012)