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**THE QUAKERS: WHERE DO THEY GO TO FROM HERE? SOME THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH AND  
BEYOND**

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This study sets out to discover how Quakers (the Religious Society of Friends) fit into modern patterns of belief concerning life after death. Contemporary Quaker literature appears to provide no answer to the basic question of what Quakers believe happens after death. This prompted the author to investigate whether her theory that the reason lies in the nature of the Society as a non-credal religious community holds true. As part of her investigation she conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with individual Quakers, and held two comparative discussion groups with Quakers and Anglicans. The analysis of the findings from this fieldwork supports her theory; however, she also found that, although the Quakers she studied did not conform to the beliefs expressed by those committed to a credal faith, neither did they fit into the sociological categories composed of those holding secular beliefs. The conclusion the study arrives at is that the Quaker community is located 'on a cusp' between Christian credal denominations and secular society. As such, it offers a unique form of spiritual solace, with the emphasis on living according to the tenet that 'all of life is sacramental', with little need for a belief in an afterlife.

**Key words:** Afterlife beliefs; death; credal religion; Universalism, Christianity, salvation, secular society

**Key themes:**

The strong belief in life after death is most often attributable to adherence to a religious creed; the lack of a credal belief means Quakers are more open to a diversity of religious and spiritual understandings, and this influences their attitude towards death.

Quakers cannot be categorised either with other denominations of Christians nor with secular groupings due to their emphasis on leading a spiritually guided life, free of the concepts of sin and the possibility of redemption in a life beyond death.

**Of potential interest to:** those interested in Quaker beliefs on death or with a general interest in attitudes towards death and beliefs in an afterlife.

## **Introduction**

### **Overview**

In her introduction, the author analyses the results of a number of studies – notably those of Davies (1997) and Jones (2000) – into contemporary British attitudes to death. Finding that Quakers were absent from these studies, she begins her research with a brief survey of the background of the Society, and the way this influenced its unique form of belief and open structure.

### **20<sup>th</sup> century concepts of life after death**

The responses to Davies's series of interviews with British citizens form the basis for his system of contemporary beliefs, in which he categorises his respondents as materialist (no belief in an afterlife); those who believe in the immortality of the soul; orthodox Christians (resurrectionist); those believing in reincarnation; and those with a vague belief that 'there is more to life [and death] than we know'. Jones, on the other hand, focuses on 'lived experience' rather than theological beliefs. She found that individuals inhabit a spectrum of beliefs, ranging from contemporary 'pick and mix' impulses to more formal theocentric ideas; where they fall on the spectrum is related to the interconnected variables of age, gender, religious belief, circumstance and life experience, and which particular variable(s) holds precedence at any one time in an individual's life. The author also takes into account a number of opinion polls. This includes a 2000 newspaper survey, whose finding that many British people maintain a residual religious faith prompts the question of how the decline in religious attendance can be reconciled with a continuing belief in God, and whether belief in an afterlife is therefore unrelated to formal religion in modern secular Western society.

### **Quaker background**

The Quaker community arose as part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century emergence of non-conformist sects – a revival of primitive Christianity – and, as such, it was centred on a belief that every individual has the potential to gain direct experience of God, without the need for the mediation of a clergy. The Society's cohesive nature was based in the commitment to a lifestyle of peace and equality – supported by a community of peers who were united by the belief that 'all of life is sacramental' – rather than by a form of worship bounded by dogma, ritual and hierarchy. The principle of equality means that Quakers today recognise individuality of belief and stress tolerance of diversity. Dandelion (1996) calls Quakers 'post-Christian', with an aspiration to be the 'pure' manifestation of a universal church, although the acceptance of both Universalist and Christocentric beliefs is a continuing point of contention. However, there appears to be a general understanding of the community's shared Christian heritage. In this sense, the author believes that it could be termed an

'open religious society'. This leads her to formulate the idea that belief in an afterlife may be dependent on experience rather than dogma – a theory she then sets out to test.

## Chapter One: Literature Review

### Overview

The author explores the question of whether the lack of a creed or set of religious dogmas allows the Quakers to be more attuned to today's attitudes towards spirituality and belief, and if so, whether this holds true for the subject of death. With this in mind, she structures her literature review – the theoretical basis for her fieldwork – around a series of comparisons between other Christian denominations and Quaker beliefs, and the questions these provoke.

### Orthodox Christian and Quaker beliefs compared

***Discarding its Christian roots?*** Davies (1997) terms Christianity a 'salvation religion', primarily concerned with 'words against death'. Christianity provided the original Quaker grounding, but its lack of adherence to a creed begs the question of whether Quakers would accept the tenet of salvation embedded in Christian teaching. In distinction to the afterlife beliefs of other denominations, modern Quakerism is open to a wide range of other influences. The question this prompts is whether the Quaker attitude to death relates to a current discarding of Christian teaching or to its historical lack of association with established credal beliefs.

***Funeral rites:*** Funeral services imply the need for an 'insurance policy' against death, representing a comfort to the bereaved. Jones (2000) believes that discomfort with the technological and bureaucratic nature of the modern funeral industry may account for the fact that, although there has been a secularisation of death, the responses to it are still religious. However, the solace of 'words against death' and the outward trappings of religious belief are not found in Quaker funerals, where the focus is on thanksgiving for the life of the deceased. Elaborate mourning is deemed out of place – as in life, Quakers exhibit simplicity in their dealings with death. There appears little concern with what happens to the body after death. The question that arises is, if Quakers do not believe in religious assurances, does this relate to their specific beliefs or is it a sign of their simplicity of life?

***Reassurance of salvation from sin:*** Hamilton (1995) believes that religion offers individuals an existential answer to the question of life's purpose (living a life free of sin will ensure salvation after death); death is perceived as a 'nagging spectre' that needs to be 'conquered'. Priestland (1982), however, remarks that Quakers are relatively 'unoppressed by wickedness'. This gives an insight into their attitude to death, which in Christian theology is intimately bound up with sin and salvation. The

final question this raises is, does the lack of threat mean that there is little need for the reassurance of an afterlife? If Quakers believe they are living with Christ now, death and resurrection may not seem so important. For modern Quakers, as Lampen (1979) points out, belief in resurrection is not a prerequisite, but is something to be achieved over the course of an individual's spiritual 'journey'.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

### **Overview**

As the author's study rests on her fieldwork findings, she illustrates in this chapter how, besides her survey of general sociological and Quaker literature as background to her research, she set up an interview process with 28 Quakers, followed by two group discussions. She also considers the advantages and constraints of her position as a researcher who is also a Quaker.

### **Interview structure and group discussions**

The individuals who took part in the process were volunteers drawn from five local meetings and from among a group of senior pupils at a local Quaker school. Her grouping was balanced in terms of gender, but not in age (the participants were mainly middle-aged, which she points out is indicative of the age of the membership). She concludes that a more prolonged study would ideally focus on younger members, but adds that the fact most of her respondents were older held the advantage that they had devoted more thought to the subject of death. The purpose of the interviews was to discover in what way their life history and Quaker beliefs influenced the respondents' thoughts on death and the possibility of an afterlife. The interview structure was open-ended: the questions followed a pattern, but left space for individual observations. The author subsequently led a group discussion with local Quakers, 70% of whom had been interviewees, and compared this with a similar sized discussion group of Anglicans.

### **Insider research: advantages and constraints**

The advantages of being an 'insider' researcher include ease of initial contact with potential interviewees, an atmosphere of mutual trust, and a knowledge of the specific language used by Quakers to express themselves, as well as a grounding in Quaker history. The constraints, on the other hand, arise from the fact that too much 'inside knowledge' may mean unperceived assumptions and biases creep into the work, and can unwittingly tempt the researcher to say too much in the interview process, giving it an inappropriate slant. The author attempted to counter

these problems by consciously placing her role as a sociologist at the forefront during the research process.

### **Chapter Three: Discussion Group Findings**

#### **Overview**

The author compares the results of her discussion on the subject of belief and death with a group of Quakers with those of a group of Anglicans, and finds marked differences of attitude, with the Quakers placing more emphasis on living according to the guidance of their spiritual understanding than on death, exhibiting little belief in an afterlife.

#### **The aim of the discussions**

The author's purpose is to identify the similarities and differences she found in the responses from both groups to the same questions. These covered a number of themes, including whether the assurance of a life after death or the experience of ethical living was more important; whether beyond-death beliefs were central to the respondents' spirituality; whether their faith was entirely personal or conformed to Christian teachings; and whether their way of thinking affected the form in which they contemplated or spoke of death.

#### **Summary of the findings**

The contrasts the author found were vivid: the assurance of a life after death, as laid down in their creed, was of prime importance to the Anglicans, whereas the Quakers were not concerned with an afterlife but with the way they lived their life now, albeit with an emphasis on Christ's teaching or belief in a universal God. Equally, there appeared to be agreement among the Quaker group that belief in an afterlife is not essential to Christianity, and that the emphasis on an afterlife could 'pollute' motives for following the gospels. In contrast, the Anglicans expressed the belief that it was not possible to be a Christian without such a creed. The Quakers were sympathetic to individual beliefs; the idea of the presence of the 'Inner Light' in everyone encouraged the acceptance of diversity. They emphasised that faith may be expressed through different channels (all are 'Seekers after Truth'). Neither did they mention sin nor retribution, whereas the Anglican replies showed an expectation of a reward after death for professing their faith, as well as the need to find ways to God before death, with the implication that hell awaits those who do not. The Quakers also had a high level of awareness of other religious ideas about death, expressing the belief that, as life is a spiritual journey, it does not follow an individual will begin and end this journey with the same beliefs. The

Anglicans, however, did not admit to other influences; none of the participants had any experience of faith outside their own church. There was also a marked contrast in the way each group expressed themselves. The Anglicans used biblical quotations and scriptural references. The Quakers, on the other hand, who had reached the Society from various spiritual paths, and whose unstructured Meetings for Worship are conducted in silence without scriptural teaching, gave varied, individual replies. They proffered no 'words against death'.

## **Chapter Four: Interview Analysis**

### **Overview**

This chapter comprises a comparison of the analysis of the findings from the interviews the author conducted against Jones's (2002) sociological survey of afterlife beliefs (see Introduction). The unique pattern of Quaker belief and form of worship appears to set them apart both from other Christian denominations and from those without a religion.

### **A sociological template**

Jones's study of the motivations behind afterlife beliefs formed a rough template for the author. She argues that Quaker community is a worthwhile subject for the sort of sociological research Jones carried out, because they appear to neither conform to wholly secular or to wholly religious categories. They have few outward appearances of religious denomination and do not adhere to a creed or centrally directed belief system – prompting the question, if afterlife beliefs are central to credal belief, can they be accommodated within the Quaker non-credal sense of the spiritual?

### **Similarities and differences**

Jones grouped her subjects according to the categories of materialists, 'hopeful agnostics', anthropocentrics and theocentrics. The author wished to discover if her respondents fit into any of these categories. In terms of materialists (believing death to be the end), she discovered six Quakers who expressed their appreciation that Quaker belief allows for doubt. Jones found that afterlife beliefs tended to be the staple of the old and of church-goers. Within the Quaker group, however, there was a number who, although they described their beliefs as Christocentric, nevertheless declared a belief that life would come to an end. Jones also found an anthropocentric group, who awaited a heavenly reunion with those close to them, while the author could find no such group within the Quakers. Some did express a belief in an afterlife (described as a 'spiritual' life after death) but did not relate this to their attendance at Quaker worship. The author believes the breadth of knowledge which many Quakers possess of comparative religion and anthropology

influences their personal beliefs, although she finds it hard to decide whether it was this openness to alternative ideas that led them to become Quakers, or whether becoming a Quaker acted as a catalyst to seeking out a wider framework of understanding.

### **'Words against death'**

Credal belief has no part to play in the Quaker community, which is united in its diversity, and where 'all of life' is believed to be 'sacramental'. However, the Quakers appeared to find difficulty vocalising what their faith consists of. The author equates the lack of 'words against death' to the lack of a vocabulary with which to describe their religious or spiritual way of life. The Universalists among the Quaker group called themselves 'Christian Universalists': their belief was grounded in Christ's teachings, but they used these as guidance for living rather than a credal reassurance of a life to come. Jones, by contrast, found her theocentrics were well-armed with salvationist metaphors and none rejected the concept of heaven. Some Quakers had come to the Society at times of stress or bereavement, which appears to affirm Jones's view that currently religion is essentially a way of making sense of one's life. However, their lack of belief in an afterlife means they failed to conform to her idea that many seek the comfort provided by the notion of a life after death when turning to religion.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion – A New Set of Questions**

The author began the study with the question of how Quakers view death, and concludes with the finding that they are more engaged with the idea of living a 'truthful' life, and that this appears to be related to the absence of a credal belief. This conclusion, however, poses a further set of questions.

### **Conclusions from the findings**

The author found there was little concern about death among Quakers (which coincided with the lack of material on the subject in Quaker literature); they appear content to live ethically and be involved with occupations and organisations that contribute to society. On the other hand, although they lack the assurance of a creed, their lack of a credal belief leaves them more free-thinking and unafraid to express their beliefs than their Anglican peers – her sample showed a particular honesty in the expression of their varied, individual 'beyond death' beliefs or lack of belief. However, the author's review of Quaker history revealed that in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, despite a belief in the potential of the individual to experience an intimate and personal relationship with God, devoid of the idea of sin, retribution and atonement, Quakers expressed themselves in biblical language. The

literature of the time, in fact, speaks of an afterlife and the resurrection of the body. In this sense, her research illustrates how far removed modern Quakers are from their earlier doctrinal certainty. The persecution the early Quakers suffered, she concludes, may have left them with a greater need for such reassurance.

### **The problem of a non-credal belief**

The minimal requirements for Quaker membership allows for wide variety of beliefs (and afterlife beliefs) – some come to the community with no convinced religious belief – but most Quakers could be described as either Christocentric or Universalist. The author points out that some members believe this diversity threatens the Society's Christian bedrock, with the consequence of a growing lack of understanding of the term that 'all of life is sacramental'. Dandelion (1998), on the other hand, is optimistic about the Quakers' Christian foundation, and the opportunity for a relationship with afterlife beliefs. The author believes that the lack of a stated belief in an afterlife holds little importance for those who seek out the Society, particularly those who turn to it for solace; instead, the Meeting for Worship provides an atmosphere in which individuals arrive at their own solutions in silence. No 'words against death' are spoken, but comfort is found in the awareness of a deep level of communal spiritual support.

### **Further questions and research possibilities**

The author's conclusions pose further questions that focus on both the qualities and the shortcomings of a faith 'on the cusp'. For example, if the Quaker community offers a unique form of solace, why is it not more popular? She proposes that it may be more challenging to join a minority, who have no words for belief or 'words against death'. Her findings have also led her to wonder whether Quakers have to work harder at their unexpressed beliefs than those who profess credal faiths, or whether, in today's secular environment, all Christians are equally doubtful. She surmises that perhaps it is only Quakers who are able or willing to openly state their doubt in an assured trajectory from life to afterlife.

**Summary prepared by Fran Cetti (2012)**