

KATHERINE A. MELLOR

**CHRISTIAN BELIEF IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS): A RESPONSE TO THE CLAIM
THAT BRITISH FRIENDS ARE POST-CHRISTIAN**

(University of Birmingham: unpublished MPhil dissertation, 2010)

This dissertation comprises an investigation of the description by Dandelion (1996) of modern British Quakerism as 'post-Christian'. The author investigates whether the findings of Dandelion's sociological study – that British Quakers now profess a wide variety of beliefs and are increasingly divorced from their Christian roots – would be replicated in a survey of the same population, but with a different structure, wording and stated aim. Her initial premise is that neither Dandelion's, nor Rutherford's (2003) later survey, provide a compelling enough argument to rewrite the Quaker guiding texts, which continue to describe the Quakers as a Christian sect. In order to substantiate her theory, the author conducted a quantitative survey of a group of Quakers. She used a questionnaire constructed in such a way as to allow her respondents to identify whether they considered themselves to be Christian, and used their self-identification as her definitional parameters – in distinction to Dandelion, who interpreted his findings according to his own minimum definition of the term 'Christian', which he did not disclose to his respondents. An analysis of her findings reveals that a majority of those the author surveyed identified themselves as Christians, leading her to draw conclusions that challenge Dandelion's 'post-Christian' theory.

Key words: Christian, post-Christian, religious identity, self-identification, theism, 'explicit Christians', 'implicit Christians', 'Christian atheists'

Key themes:

The relationship between the radicalism of Quakerism's Christian roots and the claim that modern British Quakers possess a post-Christian identity

The unique Quaker interpretation of Christianity, its experiential and individual nature, and its definitional challenges

Of potential interest to: researchers and those with a general interest in modern British Quaker belief, Quaker Christianity, the development of religious identity, the 'post-Christian' debate among Quakers

A copy of the full thesis can be downloaded at: <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/682/1/Mellor10MPhil.pdf>

Introduction

The research aims and findings

This study arose as a response to Dandelion's (1996) claim, based on his comprehensive sociological survey, that Quakers are now post-Christian. The author conducted a short survey in 2005 and 2006 of the same population, which produced very different results: fewer than 5% of those who took part could be considered unequivocally non-Christian. Of the 1,035 Quakers who responded to the questionnaire, 83.4% indicated that they believe in God, 72.6% considered themselves to be Christian, and 80.5% indicated that they would identify themselves as Christian if asked in an anonymous poll. She highlights the fact that she included in her research both members and 'attenders' (those who take part in local Meetings, but have not yet chosen to become a member).

The positive and negative aspects of insider research

The author also draws attention to the fact that, as an active member herself, she is an 'insider researcher'. One of the benefits of this position was the fact that her specifically Quaker perspective on Christianity enabled her to frame the questions in ways that Quakers would readily understand. However, she was aware that insider research also holds the potential to compromise the researcher's ability to place herself at a requisite distance from her subject or to remain sensitive to the connections between religious experience and social context. In the attempt to mitigate these negative aspects, the author strove to maintain a position of neutrality when constructing her research and interpreting the results – although she also remarks that the possibility of attaining pure neutrality in research is something of an illusion.

Organisation of the study

The dissertation considers the background of the debate; examines other surveys of Quaker belief; analyses the findings of the author's survey; introduces the three categories of Christian that emerge from her analysis; investigates the concept of 'toxic language', the nature of Quaker belief and the importance of 'Truth' to Quakerism; and summarises her conclusions.

Chapter One: Quakers and Christian Identity

Overview

The author believes that the revolutionary beginnings of the Religious Society of Friends, with its overturning of established definitions of Christian theology, is manifest in its unique form of Christianity. Yet doubts that Christianity remains the wellspring of Quakerism began to surface in the late 20th century. The author therefore surveys the background of Quaker theology, and introduces the contemporary debates concerning the religious grounding of Quakerism.

The background of Quaker theology

The Society of Friends in Britain bears little theological similarity to other Christian denominations. The author maintains that, although Quakers generally describe the experience of their faith in terms of positives, it is helpful, in order to arrive at a comparative definition, to describe them by a series of negatives – that is, Quakers have no spoken creed, do not (universally) consider the Bible to be the word of God, and do not accept that God is part of a Trinity. The origins of the movement lay in the revolutionary desire to recreate the form of original Christianity: Quakerism is a mystical faith, based on direct and personal revelation, and defines its faith in inexpressible terms, such as the ‘Inward Light’. Meetings for Worship are conducted in silence, without ritual or ceremony, and Quakers are moved to speak out of this silence without preparation or emotive eloquence. To this day, it continues to maintain its unique stance on what it means to be a Christian.

The current debate on Quaker Christianity

The debate concerning the nature of Christian belief among the Quakers began in the late 1970s, when concerns were raised about the gradual loss of Christianity amongst the community. The author mentions Janet Scott’s 1980 Swarthmore Lecture, which brought the question to wider attention by proposing that Quakers were in the process of creating a new theology which was more monotheist than Christian. Dandelion’s survey, conducted in the late 1980s, appeared to provide evidence to support the claim that Quakers had moved away from their historic and unique Christian identity – although his findings were not universally accepted. As the author comments, current official Quaker publications and documents continue to present Quakerism as a Christian sect: the *Advice and Queries of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain (1997)*, for example, contains many references to Quakerism’s basis in Christianity. As a consequence, the debate has continued into the 21st century.

Chapter Two: Surveys of Quaker belief

Overview

Before turning to her own work, the author looks at the two studies (Dandelion's and Rutherford's) that compelled her to undertake her research. By analysing their survey design (Rutherford followed Dandelion closely), and their professed goals, she raises the question of whether these could have influenced their outcomes.

Dandelion's and Rutherford's surveys

Dandelion's (1996) survey was the first sociological attempt to understand the nature of Quaker belief. Rutherford subsequently conducted a second major survey in 2003, using Dandelion's research as a 'pilot study'. Although this study is unfinished and unpublished, the author includes it alongside Dandelion's as she considers it an important contribution to the debate. Dandelion believes that contemporary Quakers are post-Christian, on the basis that many Friends use non-Christian language to describe their religious experience, and therefore it would be 'intellectually dishonest to claim the group as Christian'. In addition, his research showed that only 66.2% of his respondents felt Christ's ethical teachings to be an important part of their spiritual life. Rutherford's sampled survey complemented Dandelion's findings: her research found that 46% of her respondents considered themselves Christian. The author notes that the subject continues to be a cause for concern for many Quakers, pointing to the high volume of correspondence and articles on the question that regularly appear in Quaker publications. As the author comments, 'without outward sacraments or a creed [that would positively identify Quakers as Christian], the answer does not seem clear'. However, both contemporary official documents (see Introduction) and Quaker history present a picture of Quakerism as firmly embedded in a unique form of Christianity. This raises the question of whether Dandelion's and Rutherford's research can be seen as an exhaustive refutation of established Quaker writings, or whether the post-Christian views that they perceive to be prevalent are in fact the expression of a minority. The author, therefore, examines their research process: the design of their questionnaires, and the choice and phrasing of the questions, their order and transparency, to ascertain whether this could have affected the results.

Dandelion's and Rutherford's questionnaire design

Dandelion's survey comprised 72 questions with 436 response categories, and contained pages for additional comments. Both his and Rutherford's questionnaires confronted their respondents with a

major undertaking: Dandelion estimated that his survey would take up to an hour to complete. His aim, however, was broader than either Rutherford's or the present author's: to produce a comparative picture of contemporary Quaker belief in Britain by identifying their normative belief systems, patterns of belief, and the process by which these belief systems are imparted. His questions about Christian belief and belief in God (theism), therefore, are not discrete units but part of a larger endeavour. His minimum definition of the term 'Christian' (which he did not disclose to his participants) was a belief that Jesus was unique; whether his respondents identified themselves as Christian was only a part of his overall definition of Quaker Christianity. Apart from a direct question about self-identification, the rest of his questionnaire was deliberately oblique – as a result, this often elicited what Dandelion concedes could be described as 'ambiguous' responses. Rutherford followed Dandelion in placing her most sensitive question on individual belief amongst less direct or potentially threatening questions. Her sample produced much the same results as Dandelion's.

Summary of the examination

The author concludes by suggesting that Dandelion ordered his questions and chose his wording to provoke the fullest possible range of responses; he wished to receive multiple responses for the purposes of comparison, thereby building a comprehensive picture of the nature of modern Quaker belief. His stated aim was to discover whether Quakerism could continue to be considered a predominantly Christian sect, but his additional goal was to create what the author of this dissertation terms 'a varied montage of [Quaker] belief'. She was left unconvinced by the results, and believes that both Dandelion's and Rutherford's results were influenced by their aims.

Chapter Three: Survey Methods and Findings

Overview

The author relied on Dandelion's and Rutherford's research questions to provide the groundwork for her own survey. However, she not only used a far smaller sample but also took a quantitative rather than qualitative approach, using spreadsheet analysis, employing the data analysis programme SPSS, and this approach influenced the questionnaire's design.

The structure of the questionnaire

The author designed her questionnaire to be as brief (she estimates it could be completed in as little as five minutes), transparent and comprehensible as possible. For this reason, it comprised 22 'yes'/'no' questions, with no room for comments (although, in practice, she found that many respondents added separate sheets of comments in order to clarify or qualify their responses, and these added texture to her analysis). She sent the questionnaire to everyone within a small survey population of local members and attenders in Poole, Dorset. This initial questionnaire found that 91% of her respondents identified themselves as Christian and 96% professed a belief in God. As this was a small sample, the author hesitated to claim that its results could be extrapolated to the wider community, and subsequently sent the same set of questions to other local meetings (in Bournemouth and Swanage), which produced responses of 92% and 84% respectively. She also distributed it nationally to Monthly Meetings, using the same questionnaire – although, she concedes that this entailed sending a questionnaire designed for a small group to a much larger one.

The aims of the survey

The author relates how she deliberately (and transparently) phrased her questions to prompt an affirmative response, in the hope that her subjects would be more likely to define themselves as Christian if given a flexible definition congruent with modern Quaker writings. For this reason, the participants were asked directly if they would consider themselves Christian, there were no multiple-choice questions, and the author restricted the number of alternative choices by giving few non-Christian references. She also believed that this structure would encourage others less sure of how to define their belief to show themselves to be what she terms 'implicit Christians' through their responses to the more indirect questions. Thus, both the construction of the survey and its aims differed markedly from Dandelion's – the author's goal was not to produce a comparative picture of Quaker belief but a direct reflection of the topic under consideration.

The definition of Christian belief

The author's definition of Christianity was straightforward: if a respondent identified themselves as a Christian, she accepted their self-definition as hers. The participants were free to distance themselves from any mainstream definition and to use a specifically Quaker one – it was this freedom, she believes, that contributed most to the high incidence of positive responses. However, besides these 'explicit Christians', she also identified a high number of 'implicit Christians'. These she categorised as such due to their stated belief in the importance of the ethical and spiritual content of Christ's teaching, and its exemplary qualities which rendered it particularly relevant to their lives.

Only those who answered that they followed another faith were categorised as non-Christian. Her definition, therefore, was based on an 'undefined low-Christology framework'.

Reflections on the initial data analysis

The data revealed there was no urban/rural or North/South divide – those who considered themselves to be Christian were evenly spread. Neither was the size of the surveyed population a factor. However, it did reveal that members were significantly more likely than attenders to identify themselves as both theist and Christian. The author collated the percentage details for each question and also subjected the answers of members and of attenders to closer analysis to identify some of the differences – she illustrates her findings by way of a number of pie charts and charts showing the percentage, frequency and cumulative percentage of the various responses. She found that 11% more members replied that they believed in God, and twice as many attenders did not answer this question (86.9% of members answered in the affirmative, 5.2% declined to answer and 7.8% replied in the negative, as opposed to 76%, 14.3% and 9.6% respectively of attenders). A cross-tabulation of those who identified themselves as Christian with their responses concerning belief in God produced a much lower result of 66.5% who answered 'yes' to both, but only 6% replied 'no' to both questions. Of the remainder, 4% described themselves as 'Christian atheists', 12.5% were not Christian but were theist, and 11% did not respond or were undecided.

Summary of the findings

The author believes that her sample size of 1,035 out of a population of 25,600 was large enough to generate general predictions. She received a higher incidence of those who identified themselves as Christians and believed in God than either Dandelion or Rutherford. However, she comments that the written comments on her questions proved more revealing than the statistical frequencies.

Chapter Five: Qualitative Analysis of the Survey Responses

Overview

The research was based primarily on the quantitative results of the questionnaire. However, the author found many of her respondents used additional notes to clarify or expand on their answers. She subsequently used these unsolicited responses to refine her findings. They proved essential when deciding on her categories of 'explicit' and 'implicit' Christians, and 'Christian atheists'.

Explicit and implicit Christians, and Christian atheists

The author categorised a respondent as an 'explicit Christian' if they answered 'yes' to the direct question of whether they considered themselves to be Christian. The additional written explanations to the responses, however, showed a wide range of views: one, for example, believed that Christianity forms the only sound basis for Quakers to engage in issues of social justice and conflict resolution, while others added qualifiers such as 'loosely' or 'in values'. 'Implicit Christians', on the other hand, comprised those who answered 'no' to the question but still complied with the author's criteria for the category of 'Christian', which was informed by the definition of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. This suggests that a credal statement is not a necessary prerequisite; simply 'following Christ' as distinct from following another faith is enough to qualify for inclusion. On this basis, the author found that 22% of this category were nearly indistinguishable from 'explicit Christians', the only difference being that they did not label themselves as Christian. For example, one respondent replied, '[I am not Christian] in the conventional sense ... however, I would say my Quakerism is becoming more Christ-centred'. This group exhibited a commitment to Christianity whilst rejecting the label. The 'Christian atheist' category was included in the statistics as 'explicit Christians' because of their self-definition as Christian. Their lack of a theist belief was qualified by comments such as 'there is a loving spirit' or 'I believe in Harmony'. Those who were clearly not Christian comprised only 5.4% of the survey. The author notes that 16 of these respondents, however, professed a belief in God (however tentatively) and of these, nine indicated that they were Universalist (that is, holding a belief in the universal nature of all religions). She also comments that many did not answer some of the questions as they considered the issues to be too complex to express in simple binary terms (see Chapter Four for the reasons behind the survey's structure).

The unique nature of Christ

The author deliberately included the question 'Do you believe Jesus was unique?' as it mirrors Dandelion's minimal definition of a Quaker Christian. The percentages were similar to those of Dandelion's survey (51% 'no' and 49% 'yes'), but she found this was the question most likely to be qualified by her respondents, leading her to the conclusion that it was too open to interpretation to qualify as a minimum definition of Christian belief within the Quaker population.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Overview

The author explores the reasons why Quakers do not necessarily admit to their personal Christianity, all of which are influenced by the Quaker adherence to truth and honesty. Since Quakers have no spoken or written creed and worship in silence, individuals are able to create their own personal theology. Hence, whether they are or are not Christians appears to be irrelevant, although it is of importance in so far as the official face of the Society is concerned. However, if the various reasons for the difficulties Quakers find in expressing their Christian belief are taken into account, the author concludes that modern British Quakers cannot be labelled post-Christian.

The problems of definition

The nature of Quaker belief is unlike that of other Christian denominations. The content of belief has been individualised whilst behavioural and organisational rules (the 'behavioural creed') maintain an outward conformity. Hence, definition poses a problem: some members compare their personal beliefs with those of other denominations, and the differences they find lead them to conclude they cannot be Christian, in the mainstream understanding of the term.

Toxic language

The author concurs with Dandelion when he explains the aversion to the use of the term 'Christian' is due to the fact that some Christian terms can have 'toxic affiliations', particularly where 'people have fled their past [religious] affiliations rather than having made peace with them'. The author further maintains that this phenomenon is possibly due to the fact that evangelical churches have given the term an image that does not accord with the way many Quakers experience their faith: 58% of respondents replied 'yes' to the question of whether they felt evangelical churches had 'hijacked' the term. A further indirect question asking how respondents would reply if asked to identify themselves as Christian on a census, confirmed her supposition: more Quakers were willing to choose this census category than identified themselves as such in the survey.

The nature of Quaker belief

As Dandelion points out, whether Quakers are Christian both matters and does not matter. It matters in the official sense that the Society is a member of the Christian organisation Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and also in terms of the necessity for Quakers to define themselves to others. However, it is of less consequence than it is to other denominations as Quakers follow

their own individual spiritual paths or 'journeys' to the 'Truth'. Quakerism is experiential: religious conviction is validated through personal experience. Relating this experience, as opposed to acknowledging a credal belief, is part of the essence of Quakerism, and is also fundamental to the corporate decision-making process. The author cites Dandelion as saying a Quaker model based on a central core of belief would therefore have to be '...a model in which theological belief would entail all Quaker organisational life. [A theology-driven] model is problematic because ...theology is both individualised within the group ... and marginalised ...' Quakers also gain insight from other religious and spiritual traditions – in the survey, 45% identified themselves as Universalist, while 53% described themselves as both Christians and Universalists. Thus, whether Quakers are Christian is important for their 'public face' but irrelevant when considering their personal spiritual journey.

Pilgrim's 'heterotopia'

Pilgrim (2004) argues that modern Quakers exist in a kind of internal 'heterotopia' (occupying an alternative space that exists in juxtaposition to the wider world), which inverts feelings of marginality into an identity. However, since Quakers have become open to an increasingly diverse range of beliefs, reflecting the trend in Western society towards pluralism and individualism, it finds itself no longer in juxtaposition to its surrounding social environment. For this reason, according to Pilgrim, they attempt to maintain an 'exaggerated sense' of the uniqueness of their alternative vision at the expense of their Christian identity. Although the author disagrees with the underlying basis of this theory – that Quakers are therefore no longer Christian – she nevertheless believes that it helps to explain some of the differences in responses she encountered in her survey. Pilgrim identifies a group of Quakers she calls 'Syncretists', who are attracted to Quakerism by the 'utopic space' it offers, in which differing ideas and theological concepts can be expressed. The author believes this may be true of those who were 'clearly not Christian', as well as those who expressed reservations about answering her 'yes'/'no' questions. However, rather than accepting Pilgrim's idea of the breakdown of the religious paradigm, she believes Ambler (see below) provides a more workable paradigm of Quaker Christianity.

A false dilemma

Ambler (2004) also believes a sense of ambivalence regarding Christianity is inherent to modern Quakerism. The original Quaker radical message broke with the prevailing interpretation of Christianity (it comprised 'a new Realisation'). In the context of this heritage, he believes it essential for Quakers to find an alternative definition that will differentiate them from the mainstream, so that they can continue to be Christian at the same time as continuing to participate in this

'Realisation'. Without such a definition, Quakers find themselves faced with a false dilemma, as they are forced to either identify directly with an orthodox definition of Christianity or reject the norm established by the 'dominant Christian group' because it does not accord with their experiences.

The importance of honesty and truth

The author believes that the above reasons are also affected by the Quaker emphasis on truth and honesty, which is central to Quaker practice. The author takes this as the foundation for her classification of 'implicit Christians' – those who did not identify themselves as Christian yet produced similar answers to the 'explicit Christians'. She proposes that many individuals in this group perceived that a positive answer to the question would be dishonest (for example, their definition of Christian, formed according to mainstream ideas, did not fit with their view of their beliefs). Modern British Quakers cannot conform to many of the tenets held by other faith groups, such as a belief in atonement or resurrection. Despite understanding why 'implicit Christians' hesitate to commit to a Christian definition of their faith, the author respected each individual's definition of the concept when it came to her analysis.

Conclusion

Dandelion's and Rutherford's research aims were basically different to the author's. She believes their questions were deliberately phrased in a more provocative way, producing answers that confirmed their theory that modern Quakerism represents a wide spectrum of spiritual beliefs and therefore could be termed 'post-Christian'. Her survey, in contrast, had a more transparent and simple aim: to determine whether Quakers consider themselves to be Christian. She believes the way she framed her questions, presenting them in a form that was sensitive to the unique Quaker understanding of Christianity, and in a language congruent with Quaker terminology, helped elicit a far more positive response. Her research findings lead her to believe that Quakers may not be post-Christian in Dandelion's sense, and she suggests a productive area for further research would be the exploration of the complex nature of modern British Quaker Christian belief.

Summary prepared by Fran Cetti (2012)