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Adolescent Quakers: A Hidden Sect?*

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Abstract

This paper uses British Quakers as a case study to illustrate how very different perspectives on group identity pertain between the adult group and Quaker youth. While the older Quakers see the young Quakers as a part of 'their' group, the adolescents do not feel the same level of affinity with older Quakers. This paper examines the sectarian nature of both groups and argues that while both groups have sect-like characteristics the sectarian nature of the two groups is differently configured. It argues that the adult group fails to acknowledge the adolescent group as a separate sect within the sect which results in it remaining hidden to all but its own members and ensures its continuing cultural, institutional and theological marginalisation. This paper argues that the study of youth and religion can be confused by scholars who misread the nature of the relationship between the youth and their 'parent' church.

Keywords

Adolescent; Quaker; youth; religion; sect; parent church

1. Introduction

In this paper I use British Quakers as a case study to illustrate how different perspectives on group identity pertain between the adult group and Quaker youth. I argue that there are three different perspectives of the relationship between the adolescent and adult groups; one representing the groups institutional expression, one reflecting the adult perspective of the cultural reality and a third representing the adolescent perspectives of the cultural reality.

I identify sectarian characteristics of the adolescent Quaker group and argue that while both groups operate sect-like characteristics in relation to 'the world', there is a mismatch in terms of the demands made on members. The adolescent group is more demanding, more sectarian and maintains a sectarian attitude towards the adult Quaker group. The paper explores this comparison and examines adolescent Quakers' affiliation with exclusively adolescent Quaker groups and the perceived differences between themselves and the adult Quaker group.

I argue that the sectarian nature of the two groups is differently configured and that the failure of the adult group to recognise this different configuration and to acknowledge it as a separate sect within the sect means that the adolescent Quaker group is a 'hidden sect'.

I describe some of the methodological implications of this paper for the study of youth and religion and I argue that the study of youth and religion can be confused by scholars who misread the nature of the relationship between the youth and their 'parent' church.

2. ADOLESCENT QUAKERS

This paper draws on research that examining the spiritual beliefs and religious practices of adolescent Quakers (Best PhD thesis forthcoming). A total of 418 11 to 18 year olds took part in the research project through questionnaires and focus group interviews.

For Adolescent Quakers, the content of religious or spiritual belief[1] is unimportant and non-definitional; values are broad, generalised and open to individual interpretation and, in some cases, indistinguishable from secular values. Corporate worship[2] is central, internal discipline is strong, involvement is extensive, commitment is high and the sense of belonging great (Best forthcoming).

3. THE ADOLESCENT QUAKER GROUP IN RELATION TO THE ADULT QUAKER GROUP

Argyris and Schön's analytic scheme of theories of action contrasts espoused theories and 'theories in use'. Espoused theories (Argyris and Schön 1996) are the values on which people believe their behaviour is based and to which the organisation has made a public commitment. 'Theories in use' are 'the notional maps which guide action in the organization on a day to day basis' (Robson forthcoming). These co-exist with the espoused theory and may not be so easily discovered.

I argue that there are three different perspectives of the relationship between the adult and adolescent Quaker groups—the espoused theory and two 'theories in use', one representing the adult perspective and one the adolescent perspective of the cultural reality.

3.1. INSTITUTIONAL EXPRESSION

The first perspective is that of the 'espoused theory', illustrated in Figure 1. This is the perspective conveyed by the organisation's institutional expression and made explicit, for example, in public statements by the Yearly Meeting:

> We are glad to record a new understanding that we are one people, irrespective of age, gathered together at Yearly Meeting (London Yearly Meeting[3] 1993, Minute 54).
>
> above all young people are a vital part of our worshipping communities today (Britain Yearly Meeting 2004 Minute 19).

Figure 1: *Institutional Expression*

The institutional expression is that adults and adolescents are part of the same group; it emphasises the structural connections and organisational links between the adult and adolescent groups. The adolescent group is 'tied-in' to the adult group through its need for financial and human resources. In order for the adolescent Quaker group to meet together it requires the financial and practical support of the adult group

An institutional relationship exists through the allocation of resources and the formal expression of connection, which suggests that the adult group sees adolescents as an extension of their organisation and activity; however, the actual feelings of the adult group are more ambivalent and adolescents do not feel the same affinity with the adult group as they do with other adolescents.

3.2. CULTURAL REALITY: THE ADULT PERSPECTIVE

The theory in use which reflects the adult perspective of the cultural reality, as illustrated in Figure 2, is that the two groups are 'the same but separate'.

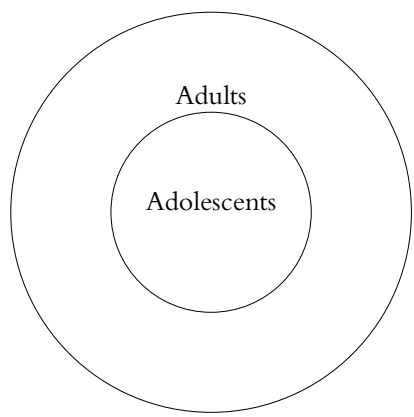

Figure 2: *Cultural Reality: The adult perspective*

This separation occurs in several ways. Adult Quakers are reluctant to be involved in the adolescent Quaker groups or participate in mixed-age groups, demonstrated by the adult who thanked a volunteer running the separate youth programme at an all-age event for 'keeping the little buggers away from us all week' (Field Notes). At all-age gatherings adults are often given the option of not being part of mixed-age groups;[4] similar allowances are not given to adolescents (Field Notes) and the existence of a separate programme for young people from the 'main sessions' at Yearly Meeting (the organisation's annual general meeting) is in itself an act of marginalisation that results in disconnections between the adult and adolescent Quaker groups. As a result of this there is a lack of shared practice between the two groups.

The Quaker activities which adolescents participate in give increased time and opportunity for the sharing of individual beliefs and discussion of social and moral issues with a distinctive Quaker emphasis. This time, however, is not shared with the adult group, where constraints are placed on speaking in worship and a higher value is placed on silence over speech, which fosters a culture of silence within and outside worship (Dandelion 2005: 110). There is, therefore, no common practice of the sharing of individual beliefs, values and spirituality.

Separation occurs particularly in relation to worship, with radical forms and settings for worship being popular with the adolescent Quaker group:

> I find a field in the sunshine much more conducive of spiritual thought than a cold meeting room (Female, 18).
>
> The whole point of Quakerism was that we could worship where we wanted, when we wanted… Meetings do not need to be on a Sunday, and especially they do not need to occur in a meeting house (Male, 17).

Although there is little shared practice between the adult and adolescent Quaker groups, the behavioural demands of the adult group extend to occasions when adolescents are present as part of the adult group and, significantly, to judgments of adolescent Quaker practice by adults. This is exemplified by adults describing semi-programmed worship, which is common for the adolescent group, as 'alternative', and limiting its practice to infrequent occurrences when the whole group is together.

Adult demands on adolescent practice are particularly apparent when considering the group's decision-making process, which is a form of consensus decision making with minority veto, in which all members of the group are allowed to participate. However, Adolescent Quakers are excluded from this decision-making process. Dandelion states that for the adult group 'practice at the Quaker business method is acknowledged as important' (Dandelion 1996: 218) and I argue that adolescents are seen as lacking the required experience or knowledge of the complex procedural rules of the adult group.

Quakers have a long-held acceptance of the ideal of the priesthood of all believers (*Quaker Faith & Practice* 27.35), and while the institutional expression of the group may include adolescents in this, I argue that the cultural reality implicitly excludes them.

3.3. CULTURAL REALITY: THE ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVE

Just as adults separate themselves from adolescents, so too do adolescents separate themselves from adults:

> I've kind of given up going to my local meeting because I think the average age is about seventy (Female, 17).

Adolescent Quakers identify differences in theology, practice and culture between themselves and the adult Quaker group, identifying themselves as

> placing less value on going to meeting/God worshiping but [more on] just holding our own beliefs (Field Notes).

Adolescent Quakers tend to affiliate with exclusively adolescent Quaker groups. The majority of adolescent Quakers (58%) said that the group of Quakers they felt most a part of was an exclusively adolescent Quaker group, compared to 27% who said they felt most part of their local Quaker meeting (congregation).

The theory in use which reflects the adolescent perspective of the cultural reality is of the two groups as being 'separate and different'; this is illustrated in Figure 3.

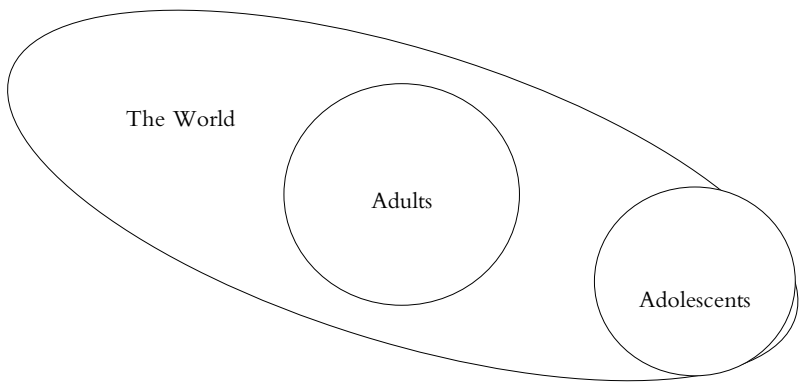

Figure 3: *Cultural Reality: The adolescent perspective*

For adolescent Quakers, participating in communal worship at Quaker events is a means of binding individuals to the group. It creates a separate physical and psychological space in which the adolescent Quaker group operates, and in which adolescents experience both a separation from the world and a sense of themselves as a distinctive worshiping community separate from adult Quakers:

> [Quaker worship] is so different from modern life (Male, 18).

> I enjoy Meeting for Worship at Holiday School because there is a real sense of community and belonging and unity in the silence (Female, 17).

> At holiday school I felt like much more connected to people when I was sat in meeting…cos like I went to meeting the other day to my normal meeting and although I know everybody there I didn't feel as connected to them (Female, 16).

> The silence is different in meeting for worship in Quaker events where you have been doing it for a least a day because everybody is in 'Quaker mode' whereas with meeting everybody is coming in from outside (Female, 15).

4. ADOLESCENT QUAKERS' SECTARIAN NATURE

For adolescents, Quaker values inform a particular worldview which influences individuals' behaviour.

> [Quakerism] affects how I act, think and believe (Male, 14).

> The Quaker testimonies are important to me, living by them (Female, 17).

Adolescent Quakers identify their values and worldview as enlightened over that of other religions:

> We value things more than other young people—because [we are] more educated about people who have less (Field Notes).

> I try and live with the testimonies, I think I am less violent and more honest than most of my friends because of this (Male, 15).

> I feel most Quaker when I see ignorant scumbags, people who haven't had experience of Quakerism (Male, 14).

Despite this, the extent to which adolescent Quakers consider themselves as an 'enlightened elite' is dictated by their particular worldview, which emphasises equality and acceptance. This reduces the extent to which adolescent Quakers explicitly identify their worldview as 'better' than that of others but leads to adolescent Quakers taking the moral high ground:

> A lot of people [young Quakers] are picked on for their beliefs. Other people want to pick on us because not only are we different but they know we're kind of like accepting and they don't understand it and they have to try and take us down to their level. I'm not saying that we're better that them but they try to make us feel small and awkward (Male, 15).

This individual identifies adolescent Quakers as 'enlightened' and at the same time asserts that they are not, because to do so would be to contradict Quaker values. Adolescent Quakers therefore identify themselves as an 'enlightened elite' within the boundaries of their particular worldview, which militates against statements that reject Quaker values of equality and acceptance.

The adult and adolescent Quaker groups operate in different ways and have a difference in the configuration of their sectarian nature. The adult group demands conformity to form and practice of both worship and decision making (Dandelion 1996: 123). Dandelion argues that modern British Quakerism can be described as both 'sectarian in the way high demands are placed on members' in terms of behaviour and unity of practice and denominational in terms of 'low demands… made on members in terms of the content of their belief' (Dandelion 2004: 225).

The adolescent Quaker group exhibits some denominational characteristics, such as the unimportance of belief content and acceptance of individuals joining

the group without specific entry requirements. However, it requires a stronger commitment in terms of involvement in the group, its members have a stronger fellowship than the adult Quaker group, it is more radical in demanding action and has strong internal discipline based on a set of behavioural norms that extends beyond worship and has a self-conception as an enlightened elite. As a result I argue that the adolescent group is ultimately more sectarian.

> The adolescent Quaker group sees itself as in part rejecting the values of the external world (Wilson 1967: 41).

> Quakerism leads us away from a VERY bad lifestyle (Field Notes).

Adolescents also see the adult Quaker group as being more 'worldly' and more like everyone else:

> Older Quakers have their defined Quaker values that they believe in but at the same time they've learnt to live in the world and they've got that balance (Female, 18).

> [Adult Quakers] are not as easily identified outwardly—can't be put into a group [or] picked on (Field Notes).

Wilson states that sects tend to either withdraw from the world completely or restrict the activity of its members in the world (Wilson 1967: 28). Although adolescent Quakers are unable to remove themselves fully from the world, some seek to partially remove themselves by keeping their Quaker identity quiet. The majority of adolescent Quakers (61%) either 'hardly ever' or only 'sometimes' spoke about their Quakerism with non-Quaker peers. This is in part because

> People at school think religion and God are stupid (Field Notes).

5. A 'HIDDEN SECT'

Both the espoused theory and the theory in use which represents the adult perspective of the cultural reality fail to identify or acknowledge differences between the two groups and, as a result, there is a cultural separation. When the two groups operate in the same space, a tension between the two groups becomes apparent.

Such a point of tension arose in 2001 when Britain Yearly Meeting considered the issue of the environment and sustainability. Following consideration in small groups, which included adolescents, a statement was prepared and it was proposed that another committee work further on it (Krayer 2001). However, an adult present stated that 'one of the 14–18 year olds shamed us into an undertaking that the statement would be redrafted in the course of this Yearly Meeting' (Krayer 2001). This was done and a 'call to action' issued by the Yearly Meeting. The Yearly Meeting epistle that year stated that: 'the sense of urgency of the younger Friends at Yearly Meeting, and the anger they expressed, have discomfited the rest of us' (Britain Yearly Meeting Epistle 2001). Discomfort is used by Robson in her work on Quakers and conflict to describe 'the awareness of discrepancy between personal behaviour and the ideal' (Robson forthcoming). Scheff equates discomfort with shame (Scheff 2000) reflecting the comment from an adult

Quaker that the young people had shamed 'us'. Shame occurs 'when one feels negatively evaluated by oneself or others' (Robson forthcoming). Therefore the adolescent Quaker group had negatively evaluated the adult group, which was both unexpected and uncomfortable for the adult Quaker group (Krayer 2001). Scheff states that shame is the marker of the state of the social bond between the individual and other individuals which form the collectivity (Scheff 2000: 3-4). The shame felt by the adult group was therefore a public marker of the state of the bond between the adolescent group and the adult group and indicated that the adult perspective of the cultural reality of the groups being the same was not shared by the adolescents.

The discomfort of the adult group was focused on the 'urgency' and 'anger' of the adolescents, which reflects two elements of conflict within the Quaker group identified by Robson, namely 'identity conflict' and the expression of strong emotion (Robson forthcoming). The adolescent group's sense of urgency showed an unwillingness to act in what the adult group regards as the 'proper Quaker' way, which is 'often focused on procedural matters in the collective method of discernment and decision making' (Robson forthcoming). The referral of matters to another committee is a standard Quaker process for deferring issues that are judged to require further deliberation. The anger of the adolescent group also caused discomfort for the adult group because, as Robson states 'it is unQuakerly to be immoderate, to show strong emotion, particularly anger' (Robson forthcoming).

Since 2001 the adult group has avoided the real source of the conflict, by focusing on the process of inclusion of adolescents while ignoring the content and thereby excluding the values and beliefs expressed by the adolescent group. This exclusion is illustrated by the attitude towards minutes produced by the adolescent group during the Yearly Meeting. These minutes are 'received' by the adult group. However, the adult group practices a strategy similar to the co-option of dissent described by Wilkof (1989: 198). The minutes of the adolescent group are added to the minutes of the adult group; however, they are 'minutes of record' of what has happened in other parts of the Yearly Meeting and are not accorded the same status as other minutes. These minutes are not binding on the adult group, which can choose to ignore their content. Although the adolescents' statements are co-opted by the adult group, it is not asked to consider whether or not it unites with the theological, cultural or organisational content of the adolescents' statements or to accept these as having validity as statements of the whole group. Despite the institutional expression that the adolescent group's minutes are added to the minutes of the Yearly Meeting, the cultural reality is that the adult group is not in the practice of listening to or responding to the adolescent group and the receipt of the adolescents' minutes represents an empty co-option.

There is also a reinterpretation and re-definition by adolescents of the adult group's orthodoxy. For example, adolescents have reinterpreted 'that of God in everyone' to be 'the light in us all' and subsequently redefined it as 'that of good in everyone', and also redefined the outcome of discernment in Quaker meetings for worship for business to be 'the feeling of the meeting' rather than the 'the will of God'.

As a result of the operation of 'empty co-option', the theological and cultural differences between the two groups remain publicly unacknowledged, and in some cases unidentified, by the adult group. To acknowledge these differences would require the adult Quaker group to acknowledge the adolescents as a different group with distinctive values and practices.

There is both 'a failure of the social system [that is the adult Quaker group] to accommodate a particular age group' (Wilson 1967: 33) and also 'a conflict… between genuine separateness from the world and the desire for social respectability' (1967: 41), two reasons given by Wilson for the emergence of sects. Formal institutional statements express a view that adolescents and adults are part of a single Quaker group; however, this places adolescents assumed belonging to the Quaker group as a whole over their 'felt belonging' to exclusively adolescent groups.

The failure of the adult group to acknowledge the adolescent group as a separate and different sect within the sect, together with the different configuration of the sectarian nature of the two Quaker groups and the adolescent group's sectarian attitude towards the adult Quaker group results in it remaining hidden within the Quaker group to all but its own members, and ensures its continuing cultural, institutional and theological marginalisation, and it being a 'hidden sect'.

6. METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

I have identified two different 'theories in use', in addition to an espoused theory, in operation within the Quaker group. I suggest that this has methodological implications for the study of youth and religion. I argue that this raises questions relating to systems of classification of religious groups, particularly concerning the issue of adolescents' relationships with, and attitudes towards, institutional religion. Scholarship relating to religious groups tends to focus on that groups' espoused theory or the adult perspective of the theory in use, which leads to a misreading of the nature of the relationship between the youth and their 'parent' church and an incomplete picture of a religious group. If there is to be meaningful research of youth religion, especially in situations where the youths meet separately, then there needs to be primary research with adolescents, and participant observation of occasions when the two groups operate in the same space or overlap, in order to get a full picture of the group.

7. CONCLUSION

I argue that different perspectives on group identity pertain between the adult group and Quaker youth. I suggest that there are three different perspectives of the relationship between the adolescent and adult groups: the group's institutional expression which claims that that adults and adolescents are part of the same group; the adult perspective of the cultural reality, which is that the two groups are 'the same but separate'; and a third representing the adolescent perspectives of the cultural reality, which acknowledges that adolescents do not feel the same

level of affinity with older Quakers and see the adolescent group as being 'separate and different'.

I argue that although the adult and adolescent Quaker groups both operate sect-like characteristics in relation to 'the world', there is a mismatch in terms of the demands made on members of the two groups. The sectarian nature of the two groups is differently configured and the adolescent group is more demanding, more sectarian and maintains a sectarian attitude towards the adult Quaker group. I argue that the adult Quaker group does not recognise this different configuration and does not acknowledge the adolescent Quaker group as a separate sect within the sect. As a result I argue that the adolescent Quaker group is a 'hidden sect' to all but its own members and is marginalised culturally, institutionally and theologically.

This paper has methodological implications for the study of youth and religion, and suggests that study of youth and religion can be confused by scholars who misread the nature of the relationship between the youth and their 'parent' church.

NOTES

⋆ This paper was originally presented at the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group Annual Conference 'Religion and Youth', held at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, 8–10 April 2008.

1. Religious belief is contrasted with a broader worldview, which may include spiritual, moral and political values. This term is used to make explicit that despite being members of a religious group, explicitly religious beliefs are unimportant for adolescents and are not a basis for individual identity or group unity.
2. In this paper I use the term worship because, although it may imply a shared belief which does not exist for this group, it is a term commonly understood by the group and used to describe corporate ritual. The focus of corporate worship is not on having shared beliefs but on sharing individual beliefs with others. For adolescent Quakers, having shared beliefs is not important (although they may in fact share some beliefs); the sharing of beliefs with each other is important.
3. Until 1994 Britain Yearly Meeting was known as London Yearly Meeting.
4. Typically these mixed-age groups might meet for up to one hour each day during a gathering. The remainder of the programme would be separated, with adolescents being divided into several groups according to age.

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Simon Best is studying for a PhD at the Quaker Studies Centre for Postgraduate Quaker Studies, Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre/the University of Birmingham. His forthcoming thesis is on the spiritual beliefs and religious practices of adolescent Quakers. His article 'Quaker Events for Young People: Informal Education and Faith Transmission' appeared in *Quaker Studies* 11.2 (March 2007). He has worked with adolescent Quakers in a number of roles.

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