THE PROBLEM OF QUAKER IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper constitutes a summary of my attempts, during the past 15 years, to understand contemporary Quakers and Quakerism. The issue on which I focus is the difficulty in representing Quaker identity given the heterogeneity of Quaker belief. During the last decade I have found three approaches useful in analysing this problem. In the first place, I found that Quaker identity is revealed through their talk in and around Meeting. Although each individual friend has a unique biographical trajectory, this talk tends to be both storied and thematic. Furthermore, such narrative discourse is coloured by one particularly pervasive character of canonic Quakerism: the plain. Quakers have always preferred the plain to the embellished or ornamented—both in their theology, their speech and in their material culture. I extend my earlier work on plaining here by reference to the work of Webb Keane and Bruno Latour. Third, and finally, I describe how the work of Pierre Bourdieu and especially his work on habitus and practice theory has contributed to the way in which I understand the enduring character of the Quaker Meeting.

INTRODUCTION

'What is a Quaker?' This is the apparently simple question that I have been trying to answer for over a decade. It is a question which I believe requires a multi-perspectival approach. Quakerism is a subtle and complex process, one that cannot be determined either by individual or social agency. Furthermore, I assume from the outset that in order to understand Quakerism it is necessary to understand Quaker faith *and* practice and this is only possible in terms of the individuality of particular Quakers. As Tony Cohen avers in a different context, how can we possibly understand the social (Quakerism) if we make no effort to understand the individual (Quaker) (Cohen 1994)? How, indeed?

The issue of Quaker identity is problematic in two senses. On the one hand it would appear to be a problem, a *practical* problem one might say, for Quakers themselves. This is so because of the heterogeneity of Quaker belief. Indeed,

Quakers seem often to see the problem as a solution or in any case as a cause for celebration (Dandelion 1996). It is a celebration with distinctly postmodern over-tones in that a creedless Quakerism allows considerable scope for variation in belief and practice. With its explicit avowal of the importance of individuality, Quakerism would seem to be a religion for today. Quaker identity is, further-more, sociologically problematic. Given that the Religious Society of Friends has sustained its identity for 350 years, how has this been possible? How can a voluntary organisation like the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) sustain a coherent identity without charter or creed—without an overt, unifying ideology? In this article I revisit three perspectives that I have myself developed during the past ten years or so: 'narrative', 'plaining' and 'habitus'. Together, these quite different means of interpretation when brought together result in a synergy that helps us further understand Quaker identity and may illuminate religious identity more generally.

MEETING NARRATIVES

During ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in a Quaker Meeting in the north of England (given the pseudonym 'Dibdenshaw') I was struck, at first, by the irony of the sheer quantity of talk at Meeting. I later described this talk in typically anthropological terms, as a tripartite event comprising a 'before', a 'during' and an 'after', each relating to the 'fixed point' of worship itself (Collins 1994). The quantity of talk was both intriguing and, from a fieldworker's point of view, alarming. How to make sense of it? After many months of fieldwork, it was clear that the talk was neither heterogeneous (i.e. not entirely random) nor homogene-ous (i.e. determined by some narrow purpose, e.g. spiritual development). The idea eventually dawned on me that that the talk was purposeful and orderly: the Meeting was, I found, alive (and enlivened) with stories. I argued for the first time (Collins 1994) that however else one might characterise the Quaker Meet-ing, narrative is at least partially constitutive of it. In other words, without stories the Quaker Meeting (and necessarily therefore, Quakerism) is nothing. I sketched out nine 'threads' (it is interesting how often the metaphor of weaving is used in presenting narrative analyses). However, I further noticed that while talk tended to be about straightforwardly substantive topics (music, Meeting, 'business', football, gardening, family, travel, and so forth) they could be more interestingly characterised in terms of certain tensions: inward/outward, inclusive/exclusive, sacred/profane, faith/practice, unity/diversity, individuality/corporate, tradition/ change, equality/hierarchy, unity/diversity (Collins 1994: 416). All talk, I argued, could be characterised as an exploration or attempt to resolve these tensions. I argue, further, that these particular tensions have characterised Quaker faith and practice since the beginning of the movement in the 1650s. Although talk may have varied as to precise subject matter, Quakers have *always* been talking these tensions and it is that, above all else, which determines their identity as Quakers. Quakers are less interested in resolving these tensions than they are in exploring them—they constitute what is centrally important to Quakers as Quakers. At the

time I imagined that I was mapping the foundations of Quakerism but realise now that this, despite its analytical 'looseness', is still too deterministic. My theory was that all religions might be characterised by the 'tensions' their talk exposed. This may be true but would take considerable comparative work to prove.

In my first published paper (1996a) I attempted to develop further the idea that Meeting is constituted primarily in and through narrative. Although I discovered that the Quaker Meeting could be modelled in a variety of more or less fruitful ways, narrative seemed increasingly to be that which bore the greatest verisimilitude to Meeting as I experienced it as a participant observer. Developed as a strategy for understanding texts in literary criticism, narrative analysis had become, during the 1980s and 1990s, an increasingly widely used means of social analysis; for instance, in sociology (Franzosi 1998), history (White 1987), psychology (Sarbin 1986), psychiatry and psychotherapy (Spence 1983; Schaefer 1992), law (Jackson 1990), political theory (Roberts 2004), economics (McCloskey 1990) and organisation theory (Roe 1994). One characteristic shared by these disciplines, however, is their focus on written texts. In each case, it was a matter of merely applying a mode of analysis common in interpreting novels to other forms of printed texts. Extending this mode of analysis to talk was a relatively straightforward second step to take.

Indeed, in my initial analysis I took what can now be seen as a rather conservative view of narrative form, placing it entirely in talk, conversation and spoken dialogue. As I continued to rake through my fieldwork notes, I saw that narrative threads were sustained through the material culture of the Meeting House. I realise that this is not, at first, at all easy to understand and that empirical examples are more likely to convince. For example, the narrative 'pacifism' was communicated not only through discussions of the annual peace vigil and related issues, but also through the peace vigil itself, in which 'pacifism' as discourse was embodied by those Quakers who processed from the Meeting House to the steps of the town hall where they lined up alongside one another and behind banners. I might add here (after Cohen 1986) that this was indeed a vernacular narrative as it presented itself to onlookers and also to those in the procession—in the case of the latter, in particular, there were just as many prototypical narratives as there were individuals—in other words, there is demonstrated an external homogeneity (the message of pacifism) and simultaneously, an internal heterogeneity—though some individual narratives would be bound to overlap. The story of pacifism was further narrated through posters around the Meeting House (one including a quote from Martin Luther King) and from leaflets and flyers deriving from organisations like QPS (Quaker Peace and Service), CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and CAAT (Campaign Against the Arms Trade). I have already written in rather more detail about the pacifism narrative as developed during the weeks preceding Remembrance Sunday—indicating how the three narrative levels come together, both substantively and analytically (Collins 2003: 257-58). Each of these elements contributes, constructs, reconstructs the narrative 'pacifism'—a single instantiation can be plotted on the model, indicating the extent to which it is individual, vernacular or canonic.

These narratives, spun with varying degrees of vigour and creativity by all participants in Meeting, were not, however, 'free-floating'. They were threads which no sooner spun were woven into the social fabric of the Meeting and of Quakerism more generally. They are woven (either by the narrator or audience, and most often by both) into the fabric of Quakerism, into the testimonies—those fundamental narratives which are grounded in the faith and practice of the first Quakers and rehearsed in innumerable ways since then throughout the Quaker movement. I became increasingly interested in what appeared to be different 'levels' of narrative. Clearly the stories I heard were presented by individuals, either alone, or in consort—family members, for instance, might present an almost choral performance telling of a holiday in Spain. Then there were those stories which seemed already to exist, or rather which formed an existing context into which the narratives of individuals were embedded. These contexts were, I argue, of two kinds—the local and the national—although I feel it is rather misleading to base them on crude spatial co-ordinates. This is the primary reason for calling them 'vernacular' and 'canonic' in that these terms speak more of 'reach', 'status', 'authority' and 'power'. Local or vernacular narratives include 'Oak House' (a Quaker nursing home situated not far from the Meeting House), 'the old Meeting House' (out of which the Meeting moved in the 1960s), 'Meeting history' and so forth. National or canonic narratives coincide approximately with the 'testimonies'—a moral code including 'pacifism' and 'social justice', for example. These narratives are codified in texts legitimated by the group as a whole. I have outlined the ways in which these stories (and 'story levels') are articulated—and would argue that they have been, and indeed are, brought together under one religio-moral roof—an important issue which I return to below.

Although I suggested earlier that Quaker narratives might be understood in terms of their 'distribution', it took me some time to work out how to plot these 'levels'. I came eventually to plot Quaker discourse within a space bounded by three points, each representing a 'level' of discourse: the canonic, the vernacular and the prototypical (or individual). This model was helpful in that it pointed to a means of transcending the individual/social dichotomy which has always plagued sociology and anthropology. In this model, each narrative spun by an individual Quaker is always and already a part of a vernacular and canonic narrative (Collins (2002a, 2003, 2004). The point in this triangular space at which a narrative is plotted in inevitably approximate, and indeed different agents might plot each narrative differently. In any case, each narrative is necessarily prototypical, vernacular and canonic—and what is more, has in every case the potential to become more or less any of these. At the same time, it is true that the model is misleadingly static. It is the work carried out constantly by Quakers that provides for and ensures the vernacular and canonic character of the narratives generated by individuals.

Let me provide an ethnographic example. An established Quaker testimony related to the 'right use' of the world's resources: this is a canonic narrative. One way in which this is so is its presentation and development in the text *Quaker Faith and Practice* (*QFP*). Crucially, then, this means that the discourse of

'sustainability' is a component part of *QFP*. It has been legitimated (given authority) at Yearly Meeting, that is, at the highest tier of Quaker decision making, and is therefore incorporated into *QFP* which commits to writing what might be seen as 'essential Quakerism'. The text, substantially revised every 25 years or so, comprises texts extracted from a variety of Quaker sources, including minuted decisions and comments recorded during Business Meetings, passages from the writing of individual Friends and so forth. *QFP* is distributed both to Quaker Meetings and to individuals—most often when they are accepted into membership. In the current edition, Chapter 25 is entitled 'Unity of Creation' and deals especially with environment or 'green' concerns. For instance, the first extract is from the works of John Woolman (a noted eighteenth-century Quaker), who wrote in 1772: 'The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an inquiry to the succeeding age' (*QFP* 1995: 25.01).

During the course of my fieldwork, discourse relating to the right use of resources (green issues) was being generated through a number of initiatives. For instance, several Friends persuaded the Meeting to establish a 'wild garden' at the rear of the Meeting House. This involved a good deal of discussion both within and outwith formal Business Meetings. Reference was made both to Quaker testimonies (primarily as presented in *QFP*) and also to local agencies involved in sustainability issues. Before very long, an idea mooted by an individual participant had become a local or vernacular narrative. Further threads woven into this narrative was the decision to replace all bulbs in the Meeting house with 'long-life' bulbs which, it was agreed, were less objectionable than the existing high-wattage bulbs. During the same period, reports were given to preparative Meeting relating to green issues discussed at various Quaker Meetings, conferences and workshops. In this way, the individual's stories and those of the Quaker movement as a whole are mediated (and sometimes metamorphosed) by the Meeting, that is, at the level of the vernacular.

PLAINING: FROM PRODUCT TO PROCESS

Although I believe that the creation and exchange of stories is a key element of Quaker faith and practice, I suspect that there is something more, something which patterns these narrative threads so that each derives from and contributes to the more or less coherent discourse called Quakerism. The pattern is 'plain'. Quakers have always exhorted one another to be 'plain' and others have often characterised Quakerism in terms of the plain. Indeed, the proscriptions multiplied to such an extent in the late seventeenth century as to stir Margaret Fell/Fox to rail against the whole shebang. And, certainly, the plain (or simple) is well represented in the key canonic text. For instance, the 41st of the current Advices and Queries:

> Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford. Do you keep yourself informed about the effects your style of living is having on the global economy and environment? (*QFP* 1995)

Let us focus on the first sentence, which urges the reader to 'Try and live simply'. Clearly, this calls for an extraordinary interpretive effort on the part of individual Quakers, given the steady growth of consumer capitalism at least since 1900. The question is whether it is possible in any absolute sense to live simply in the Britain of the twenty-first century. Is it possible, nowadays, engulfed as we are by consumer culture, to make consistent choices between the plain and not plain any more: do we have the cognitive powers to make the millions of choices necessary to fulfil properly our obligation to 'live simply'? There seems little doubt that early Friends believed they were up to the task—with a little help from their Friends. It must have been a help to individuals to be told which commodities could be acquired without blighting one's attempt to live the simple life. Even so, predominantly middle-class Quakers were left to make innumerable choices. Up until now, it seems that we are clearly dealing with particular products—with individual items (from coats with cross-pockets to umbrellas, from the use of certain pronouns to playing the flute) that are deemed 'prohibited'!

This is a claim built on empirical grounds and is hardly controversial. The common-sense view would have it that the world comprises two types of thing: the plain and the not-plain. This resolutely objectivist view holds that it is the world (comprising complete and clearly delineated 'things') that imposes itself on the individual. There is a disturbing inevitability about characterising Quakers in this way. One becomes a Quaker and is then taught or told which bits of the world are plain and therefore acceptable. In this view, Quakers are almost entirely passive individuals, except that they need to identify and set aside those things which are intrinsically 'not-plain'. The corporate character of Quakerism must once have been of practical help here, at least up until the mid-nineteenth century. There then came a point at which Business Meetings could no longer name the not-plain on a case-by-case basis: is gaslight plain or not? And what about bicycles, automobiles, patios, aubergines and cameras? Given the rapid increase in the number and variety of consumer goods, naming the not-plain on a one-by-one basis became an impossible task.

After the mid-nineteenth century, what had been implicit was necessarily made explicit: the centrality of 'the plain' to Quaker faith and practice gave rise to the associated *process*, that is, *plaining*. Plaining is a learned and cognitive tendency to classify the world in terms of the distinction plain/not-plain. Quakers, as they mature, become more or less conscious of practising such discrimination. I remember a long conversation between Friends after one Meeting for Worship in 2003 which was explicitly about the pros and cons of various cars. I have time here only to note that the comments could only be understood in the context of the Quaker tendency to plain. The fact that each Friend involved in the conversation preferred a different car in no way weakens my argument: plaining is a process which enables Quakers to justify the choices they make. For instance, a

commodity which might seem far from plain to one Friend can be justified as plain in terms of its good safety record, because of the savings it will generate in the long run or because of the employment its manufacture provides. The criteria used to define the plain or not-plain are neither fixed nor essential. There is nothing necessary about, or inherent in, those things which are perceived to be plain. Things are constructed as plain by Friends.

I have tried to show the relevance of this idea to our understanding of Quaker identity in two ways—by giving empirical examples, that is, by presenting examples of plaining in action as it were; and by showing how Quaker plaining meshes with processes that have been identified as more all-embracing. I will present three examples of theories which seem to lend plausibility to my idea of plaining, two of which (the work of Peter Auksi and Wolfgang Welsch) I have presented before (2001), while the third (drawing on the work of Bruno Latour and Webb Keane) is presented here for the first time.

It was something of a revelation to come across Peter Auksi's brilliant *Christian Plain Style: The Evolution of a Spiritual Ideal* (Auksi 1995). In this book, Auksi places 'the plain' in its historical context, arguing that the plain and not-plain (elaborate, ornamented) have been implicated in struggles between people ever since the Ancient Greeks, and especially in religious disputes. Auksi supports my claim that 'the plain' is more usefully reconstituted as a process, that the term is better conceived as a verb rather than a noun.

A second connection with modern social theory occurs at the point at which we realise that plaining is not merely a pragmatic response to the complexity of modern life but can also be regarded as spiritual, moral and ethical. Furthermore, plaining provides a singular opportunity for Quakers to stand in the vanguard of those who are able to critique one of the more damaging consequences of modernity: aestheticisation (Collins 2001). Astheticisation is the glossing of our environment with the thinnest veneer of 'the beautiful'—a gloss so pervasive that the German philosopher Welsch has argued that it blinds us to the difference between the beautiful and the ugly (and probably between 'the good' and 'the bad') (1997). I argue that the propensity to plain might provide Quakers with the means to see through this process and avoid the an-aestheticization that is its harmful result.

I shall go on, now, to introduce a third contextualisation. The French sociologist, Bruno Latour, argues that the term 'modern' (used to describe life in the West since around 1750) designates two very different sorts of practice: first, *translation* creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture; second, the set of practices he calls *purification* creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: human beings on the one hand and nonhumans on the other (1993). Purification and translation, so long as they are kept separate, define what it is to be modern. In this section I draw out the parallels between what Latour calls purification and what I call plaining.

Webb Keane, an American anthropologist, argues that a key question that we moderns have had to consider is 'What beings have agency?' (2007), a question which can only be answered by sorting out the proper relations among words,

things and subjects. This sorting out is fraught with moral implications and involves the work of purification. The paradigmatic case is the antiritualism of Reformation Protestantism, though such reform movements have taken place in all major world religions. Such reformers aim to purify religion by replacing ritual with beliefs and the resulting reforms are identified with modernity itself. Several groups helped to complete the Protestant Reformation through their explicit rejection of ritual (or liturgy). Quakers purified the practice of worship through denying the possibility of the eucharist and of the sacraments in general. It was primarily the fetishistic elements of the eucharist, the principle of 'real presence' or transubstantiation, which Friends objected to: material things (Kantian 'things-in-themselves') are just that, *they cannot also be God*, no matter how this is couched, theologically. Things cannot be agents and it is the possibility of this (awful) misconception that drove some protestants, Zwinglians and Salvationists as well as Quakers, to deny the capacity of things to bear the weight of the sacred. In Quakerism, ritual is replaced, from the outset, primarily by practice ('let your lives speak').

Keane goes on to make two important points: first, that the assertion of purification can never be entirely successful. He refers to Latour, who observes that even while moderns are trying to separate things, hybrids are proliferating, things that mix nature and culture, things and humans: psychotropic drugs, hybrid corn and frozen embryos, for example. But Latour tells us little about why this is happening. Keane suggests that both the ubiquity of so-called hybrids and the sense of scandal they can generate have sources beyond the history of science and technology and can be traced, ultimately, to the religious sphere. Signs terminate in things after all. The materiality of semiotic form cannot be entirely eradicated and to the extent to which it mediates even inner subjectivity, it renders full purification impossible. Things endure and plaining requires such things in order to make them symbols of less material qualities.

Keane's second point is that there is a significant moral element to Latour's characteristion of modernity, specifically, that purification is driven by 'the sense that there is something scandalous or threatening about the mixing of humans and things, culture and nature' (Keane 2007: 23). Modernity, he argues, is often represented as the outcome of a story of moral redemption (as in Quaker plaining). Latour, in focusing on the role of science in the creation of modernity, largely ignores (according to Keane) the significance of religion by assuming that it is just one more thing affected by purification. God, he observes, is eliminated from the public scene and exiled to the individual's heart ('the light within' in Quaker terms). Keane argues that if we place the work of purification within the context of the Reformation attack on certain aspects of semiotic form (of Catholic faith and practice, for example), we may recognise a major source of its moral impetus. It is not only the sociologist and anthropologist who position themselves where roles, actions and abilities are distributed, those that make it possible to define one entity as animal or material and another as a free and conscious agent—this is also the task of the religious reformer, of George Fox and his proseletyzing supporters, for example, who, perceiving themselves as standing on

the religious frontier, set about making these distinctions. In doing so, they make some of the core assumptions of their Euro-American world visible and reveal some of the moral imperatives and anxieties these entail. And in struggling with the proper place of objects in the lives of individuals, with the possibilities and limits of human agency and with what is ethically acceptable, or even simply believable, they take on problems which lie at the heart of modernity.

At the time of the Reformation, if words were bodily forms for meanings, they were nonetheless superior to nonlinguistic forms—ritual, for instance. It became a major issue to understand the nature of words and their distinction from concepts and from things. However, in considering the Quaker case we must further consider the belief that there is that which is beyond words. The proper treatment of language called for purification, which in the Quaker case meant its eradication—at least up to a point. Language cannot be suppressed entirely and in Quaker liturgy (for there are vestiges of liturgy remaining) language forces its way back in through spoken ministry. Here we glimpse, at very close range, the parallels between what I call plaining and what Keane (after Latour) calls purification.

However, the Reformation churches had the creed, a paradigm for subjective agency. By taking the textual form, the creed makes religion highly portable across contexts (it relies far less on material context). Although Quakers eschewed creeds, they generated other forms of textualisation, including minutes of Business Meeting, advices and queries and testimonies. The point is, however, that Quakers, like other contemporary believers, opted for codification (Collins 2002d). Whereas Keane talks of the 'creed paradigm', we may talk of 'the codification paradigm'—which is, in the same way, a part of the purification process identified by Latour. But the work of purification goes well beyond the content of doctrines. Creeds, or if we wish to include Quakerism here, codification, make beliefs available in the foreground. To put it bluntly, codification (along with socialisation) serves to operationalise belief.

The view accorded to transcendance in traditions like Calvinism encouraged efforts at abstraction, to play the materiality of semiotic form in order to arrive at a disembodied spirit, a pure idea or an unsullied faith. This goal, however, cannot reproduce itself without generating new semiotic forms. Latour says that the work of purification inadvertently produces new hybrids. But why should that be? Well, once semiotic forms are introduced into a social world, they become available as materials for experience on which further work is carried out. They can become objects of reflection, sources of disciplinary practice, points of contention or sources of anxiety. In 'doing away with' the material aspects of religion, the reformers could not help but produce new forms—creeds, sermons, hymns, houses of worship—even clerical garb. Such forms could never be fully confined to their original contexts or definitively subordinated to their 'true' immaterial meanings. They risked being fetishised, producing new hybrids. So, while purification contributed to the creation of the modern world, it can never, as Latour argues, entirely succeed. The impossibility of attaining complete purification lies precisely in the materiality of semiotic form—note the continual attempts to achieve religious purification by the religions 'of the book'. The efforts of

reformers, such as Fox, to 'strip away superstitions, instrumental reason, idolatry, and fetishism' (Keane 2007) are justified in the name of greater spirituality on the part of individuals. Even the most mystical of religions are bound to involve some semiotic medium; in the case of Quakerism, the very denial of words begins as a response to words and includes various ways of displaying that denial. Semiotic form requires material instantiation and even though purification can never fully succeed, it continues to appear. This helps us understand why plaining is necessarily a process—it is a project than can never reach completion.

MEETING/HABITUS

Quaker identity is learned and the learning process continues for as long as the individual wishes it to. Some are, of course, more eager and diligent learners than others. Having convinced at least myself that it was the economy of narrative grounded in an obligation to plain that best characterised Quakers and Quakerism, I began to wonder increasingly about the details, and especially the details relating to the social processes through which these things are learned. In recent years, the term 'socialization' has fallen out of favour among sociologists. The reason for this, most probably, is the rise and rise of Bourdieu's influence on the discipline. In elaborating his theory of practice, Bourdieu wrote prolifically on a wide variety of subjects (education, elites, photography, TV, suffering, art, social stratification—to name just a few) but in doing so always drew on the same small group of analytical constructs or 'tools' as he preferred to call them: habitus, practice, capital and doxa. Habitus is not easy to define, and Bourdieu's often dense, sometimes obtuse, prose does not help. He explores the idea in considerable detail in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). Here he writes :

> The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 78).

Given that Bourdieu specifically endows the habitus (and not the individual) with agency, those who criticize the concept for its determinism would seem to have a point. His attempt to transcend unhelpful dichotomies which have stymied progress in social theory, such as those generally abbreviated as objective/subjective and agency/structure, ultimately fails. However, there is much in his development of the notion of habitus which is thought-provoking and helpful. Probably the most significant strength of the habitus as a means of representing the process of socialisation is the fact that is it embodied, and that Bourdieu, himself, paid a great deal of attention to this particular characteristic. Secondly, the habitus is clearly established partly through interactions with the (built) environment. In relation to the Quaker Meeting and its participants these are extremely useful insights. In relation to Meeting for Worship, the epitome of what Dandelion (1996) economically calls 'Quaker time', both body and environment play a significant part,

in both the generation of stories and in acts of plaining. This mode of analysis (focusing on the habitus) confirms my earlier argument underlining the role of nondiscursive interaction in and around the Meeting House. One's habitus is itself embodied (one carries it around in one's head, as it were), but is embodied in a more complete and convincing sense: Bourdieu introduces a second term *hexis* to fix this aspect of embodiment. In the following passage he relates the embodiment of the habitus directly to socialisation:

> The child imitates not 'models' but other people's actions. Body *hexis* speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole subsystem of techniques involving the body and tools, and charged with a host of social meanings and values: in all societies, children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eye, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult—a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could it be otherwise?) a certain subjective experience (Bourdieu 1977: 87).

Let me comment on this extremely provocative account. First, much of this rings true in relation to my fieldwork among Quakers. I would substitute 'newcomers' (or some such term) for children in that everyone new to Meeting embarks on what is colloquially know as a 'steep learning curve'. Although, it is possible that hexis may on occasion be a motor function purely and simply, that need not always be the case. It is apparent in Meeting for Worship that participants observe one another, sometimes cautiously but on other occasions boldly—children may jump down from their chair, walk across to another (adult) participant and stare at them, quite unselfconsciously. Which raises another point—the degree to which hexis is assimilated consciously. During Meeting for Worship, Quakers sit in a circle—the chairs or benches prearranged thus. Hexis (orientation of body in this case) is 'given' and is adopted largely unconsciously by all but newcomers. My field-notes suggest that the process cannot be entirely unconscious at least. It is possible for a participant to be 'disciplined' (spoken to by another, usually senior, Member) if they transgress the norms of behaviour during Meeting for Worship. Having said that, it is equally possible that one's posture in Meeting, after attending for several years say, may well be adopted unconsciously on each occasion. The point is that I think we must at least allow for the possibility of the conscious assimilation of hexis by Quakers in Meeting. Clearly, hexis is a means of not only representing but of constructing one's identity whether as a Quaker, a Sikh, Muslim or Shaker. In each case, the bodily disposition of the adept (at least during worship) speaks of one's belongingness to this or that community.

An interesting coda to this argument relates to Dandelion's interesting argument that the unity of Quakerism depends not so much on an overt, unifying theology but on a behavioural creed. It is an argument that chimes strongly with Bourdieu's idea of an embodied habitus. Dandelion is quite correct in pointing out that Quakers appear to be doing the same thing (in Meeting for Worship) so long as he acknowledges that participants in Meeting are *not* doing the same thing,

and perhaps not even the same kind of thing. Participants in Meeting for Worship at Dibdenshaw claimed to be praying, worrying, drawing up shopping lists, reading, breathing evenly, meditating, puzzling things out and so on. Whatever can be said about them, they are not doing the same thing, despite appearances to the contrary. Dandelion's own fieldwork bears this out (see, for example, Dandelion 1996, 111; see also the booklet produced by Newcastle Meeting in 1998).

Bourdieu establishes a close link between the embodiment of habitus and the built environment:

> But it is in the dialectical relationship between the body and a space structured according to the mythico-religious oppositions that one finds the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship which leads to the em-bodying of the world (1977: 89).

The extent and depth of socialisation processes would be far greater in the case of the Kabyle among whom Bourdieu conducted fieldwork; however, the processes described by Bourdieu are present in the Quaker case though less explicit. Practically speaking, the Quaker habitus is at its most overt on Sunday mornings. And although Quakers remain Quakers when they leave the Meeting House, the habitus is reduced: they may be the only Quaker in their family, they may work in a place where membership of any religious group is derided. Historically, however, the Quaker habitus would probably have been as all-embracing and homogeneous at the Kabyle during the first 150 years of the movement.

I have written a good deal on the topic of the Meeting House and I do not intend to repeat those arguments and observations here (Coleman and Collins 1996, 2006; Collins 1996a, 2006). I have tried to show how the narratives of Meeting are manifested in the very fabric and furnishings of the Meeting House itself—as I have already argued briefly above. The Meeting House concretises the identity of Quakers. Habitus, as presented by Bourdieu, manifests both strengths and weaknesses when applied to actually existing communities but it is far too monolithic to account entirely for individual identity in the twenty-first century (Collins 2008a).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: UNDERSTANDING QUAKER IDENTITY

In Dandelion's terms (Dandelion 2008), plaining, habitus, narrative or heterotopia, for that matter (Pilgrim 2008) may be relatively stable tropes manifested by Quakers across the centuries and I believe that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that they are. However, the point I wish to emphasise here is that there can be no single overarching interpretation by which we can come to understand Quaker identity. The research undertaken by Simon Best (Best 2008) on adolescent Quakers and by Giselle Vincett on 'Quagans (Vincett 2008) is of particular interest here. The practice of adolescent Friends and Quaker Pagans seems in various ways to confound any attempt to generalise about Quakers. Understanding or even describing the identity of individuals in the first years of the twenty-first century is a difficult, perhaps impossible task. Nevertheless, this is the project in which I have primarily engaged during the last decade. It just so happens that in

my case, it was the Quaker Meeting and its participants that sparked this interest and which provides my starting point for each new excursion into identity. Quaker identity is sustained primarily through the generation and regeneration of stories, primarily in and around the Meeting House but also elsewhere: these stories, it should be remembered, are presented not only through the spoken and written word, but through many other media: the body, the built environment, clothing and other consumables, leisure pursuits and so on. It is just *this* concatenation of stories which comprise the Quaker Meeting and which lends an individual their Quaker identity, their Quaker self. While Quakers live in the world and interact both with those who are Quakers and those who are not Quakers, this does not mean that Quaker narratives are suspended away from the Meeting. However, when presented they are more implicit than they once were and are therefore far less likely, nowadays, to be acknowledged and regenerated, restored, rejuvenated, revitalised. In the seventeenth century, Friends manifested Quakerism very explicitly; to wear the Quaker grey, to eschew the standard greetings, to refuse to doff one's hat, to thee and thou everyone one met regardless of their social status, was to allude to narratives which were widely recognised, and more often than not, condemned. The response of the non-Quaker, though sometimes violent, was often equally overt and necessarily served to regenerate those narratives. Nowadays, religious faith and practice is primarily private: the stories that are woven are primarily for the consumption of the group itself, and are legitimated by further stories, by those drawn from the canon, which are, of course, also generated from within the group. Whatever the advantages and disadvantages of this process are for Quakers, fewer and fewer people find it fulfilling, and membership has been in decline since the 1960s. Meeting narratives have always been, at least to some extent, interwoven with those threads spun in the context of wider society. Writing both as social scientist and Quaker, I believe that it will be this process which, if sustained, may yet revitalise what remains an extraordinary group.

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