

QUAGANS: FUSING QUAKERISM WITH CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM

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ABSTRACT

Quaker Pagans are a relatively new phenomenon. Since no detailed description of the spirituality of Quaker Pagans has yet been done, to make a modest beginning this paper situates Quaker Pagans within the contexts of British Quakerism and contemporary paganism. It extends Pink Dandelion's concept of a 'behavioural creed' (1996) by arguing that Quaker Pagans have a 'practical belief' system and a performative theology, and outlines how Quaker Pagans hold together their dual religious identity. Building upon Peter Collins' (2008) work on Quaker narratives, the paper looks particularly at the way in which Quaker Pagans utilise story and metaphor. Finally, it draws parallels between the emphasis on experiential seeking in both Quaker and Pagan ritual.

KEYWORDS

Quaker Pagans; paganism; religious identity; belief system; narratives; ritual

There is a vital and growing practice of Quaker Pagans made up of Pagans of various traditions who have found a second home within the Religious Society of Friends, and of Quakers who have found the same within the Pagan movement. Because those who are drawn to Quaker Paganism tend to be drawn to simplicity and silence in their spiritual practices, their presence in both the Pagan and Quaker community can be overlooked (Cat Chapin-Bishop, www.quakerpagan.org, accessed 20 July 2006).¹

INTRODUCTION

The Quaker dislike of creeds and formal doctrine has opened the door, in the Liberal Quaker tradition (both in North America and in Britain), to the fusing of contemporary paganism with Quakerism. Though there are no formal statistics, my own research based upon interviews and observation of web-based resources is that Quaker Pagans or *Quagans*,² as they sometimes (tongue-in-cheek) call themselves, are a growing phenomenon. In this paper I situate Quaker Pagans in

the context of British Quakerism and contemporary paganism,³ I extend Pink Dandelion's theory of a Quaker 'behavioural creed' (1996), and I outline how my Quaker Pagan informants creatively hold together their two religious identities, particularly looking at the Quagan use of story, metaphor, and ritual.

My research is based upon 50 semi-structured interviews with Christian and pagan women (specifically, Goddess Feminists⁴), as well as participant observation of two ritual groups (one Christian, one Goddess Feminist), participant observation of feminist Christian and Goddess activities (conferences, festivals, and public rituals), and monitoring of the literatures associated with both these groups (insider generated and academic). Participants were scattered throughout England, Wales, and the Isle of Man.⁵ During interviews and fieldwork it became clear that the Christian and pagan groups were not discrete and that there was a significant portion of participants who to a greater or lesser degree straddled the boundaries between groups.⁶ This group of people I call *Fusers*, and I subdivide them into *Fusers proper* and *Quagans*. This paper will deal solely with my Quagan findings. I interviewed four Quaker Pagans, and observed two Quaker Pagan email lists and several Quagan blogs.⁷ The Quaker Pagans whom I interviewed were white women in their mid-40s to 60s with middle-class backgrounds; as such, they fall into a category of people who, whilst they are disaffected by traditional religion, are searching for spirituality and meaning, a category predominately female (Berger *et al.* 1974; Roof 1993; Heelas *et al.* 2005).⁸

QUAGAN PROFILE

Gay Pilgrim has written of three different types of British Quaker: Exclusivists, Inclusivists, and Syncretists (2003, 2004, 2008). Pilgrim's description of Quaker Syncretists loosely fits Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's description of self or holistic spiritualities (Heelas *et al.* 2005). She writes that Syncretists have a 'personal spiritual quest', are disconnected from 'traditional sources of meaning', 'sceptical about fixed systems of belief', and 'seek and value comfort, healing and hope' (2003: 153).⁹ Whilst my Quagan participants tended to seek these qualities, they were also emphatic that their Goddess Feminism was not 'just sweetness and light', but a spirituality that 'recognises the dark and the painful' (Elise).¹⁰ Further, participants emphasised that Goddess Feminism was for them 'quite solid and grounded, and hard work, but very inspiring as well' (Alison).

The emphasis Pilgrim finds on 'healing' amongst Syncretists may partly be attributable to gender.¹¹ Susan Starr Sered found in her study of women's religions that healing was a key theme (1994). Linda Woodhead argues that women in holistic spiritualities search for healing as both a way of helping them cope with the stresses of life and in particular, the 'second shift' which many women find themselves working,¹² and as reflective of women's emphasis on relationality (healing always being part of the greater wholes of body, mind and spirit, *and* community and world) (2008). For example, consider what Alison said of what the goddess Aphrodite means to her. Aphrodite is love, but that

is not some waffly thing that says 'oh I love you'. It is something very strong and basic and fundamental, and it is to do with sweat, and it is to do with dirt, and it is to do with the stuff of life that if you love your child you wipe its snotty nose and you wipe its messy bum and this is love. This is how love is... So that Aphrodite is something very sort of basic, and incredibly strong.

Whilst women in holistic and alternative spiritualities *may* be seeking 'escape' from 'the routines of everyday life' as Pilgrim suggests (2004: 220), Goddess Feminists tend to emphasise that their spirituality empowers them to cope with and fight against that which is 'oppressive, soulless, ethically and morally unsatisfying' (2008: 61). Pilgrim suggests that Syncretists belong to what Hamilton and others have characterised as 'pick-and-mix religion' (in Pilgrim 2004: 222).¹³ The 'dominant discourse', as Aupers and Houtman call it (2006: 201), within the sociology of religion on 'self-spiritualites' (Heelas 1996) is that they are so individualised that they lack any coherency (Bruce 2002): 'Luckmann emphasises that such personal meaning systems remain strictly private: by their very nature and unlike church-based Christian religion in the past, they lack wider social significance' (Aupers and Houtman 2006: 202). Several scholars have begun to challenge these assumptions (Heelas 1996; Hanegraaf 1996; Heelas *et al.* 2005; Aupers and Houtman 2006, 2008).

Quagans are, in Pilgrim's terms, syncretistic, but the supposition that their syncretism is either superficial or without coherence is unfounded. As one Quaker pagan blogger recently wrote online: 'I am syncretistic, not because I'm picking and choosing from the smorgasbord of spirituality, but because I'm *not*'. That is, she has not consciously chosen two paths, but feels she has been 'drawn' to each. As she wrote, 'Something without a name called me so powerfully I could not do anything but follow' (Cat Chapin-Bishop, <http://quakerpagan.blogspot.com>, accessed 29 August 2006). Chapin-Bishop refers to an inward experience of an immanent divine which leads her. In my observation of Quaker Pagan email lists and blogs, the use of Quaker language and theology to authorise fusing is common.

There is a well-known phrase which contemporary pagans use to describe coming to paganism: 'coming home' (Eller 1993; Harvey 1997; Rowntree 2004). It refers to the sense that participants have, not of conversion, but of finding a name or group for what they always were. As one pagan said to me, 'I think I was born this way'. Similarly, Alison said, of both Quakerism and paganism, that she knew immediately 'this was my stuff'. This recognition involves more than an attraction to 'lifestyle' (Pilgrim 2004: 221), although the importance of that cannot be underestimated, but also an attraction to ritual style, theo/theologies, symbolism, and other belief systems. Quagans demonstrate long-term commitment to *both* Quakerism and paganism for all of these reasons; these are no passing fancies to be dropped in favour of something new tomorrow, nor are they identities which are picked up in a facile manner. If a substantial number of British Quakers are 'post-Christian', as Dandelion argues (1996), the two traditions being fused here (Quakerism and paganism) are not necessarily 'logically opposed to one another' (Pilgrim 2004: 222).

Pilgrim admits that there is some ‘overlap’ between Inclusivists and Syncretists, but argues that Inclusivists adhere to Dandelion’s ‘behavioural creed’ (and that Syncretists, by implication, do *not*) (2004: 220, 221). By this definition, my Quaker Pagan informants would appear to be on the ‘overlap’ between types, as it is quite clear from my data that Quagans take the behavioural creed very seriously, both as the term is used by Dandelion *and* as I extend it below.

PRACTICAL BELIEF

An email from one of my research participants announced the formation of the ‘Quaker Goddess Network’ in Britain: ‘for people whose spiritual journeys overlap two paths: a love for goddess spirituality, stories and ritual, and the practice of silent Quaker worship together with the disciplined Quaker way of making decisions’.¹⁴ The logo for this new network is revealing: a large Q, in the middle of which is a picture of the ‘Venus of Laussel’.¹⁵ In this logo, the Q of Quakerism surrounds a figure representative of my participants’ Goddess Feminism. That is, their Goddess Feminism is shaped by and enclosed within their commitment to the Religious Society of Friends.

Pilgrim claims Syncretists ‘are drawn by a lifestyle but not a religion’ (2004: 221), but it is clear to me that for Quaker Pagans, Quaker lifestyle cannot be separated out from religion. That is, Quaker practice *enacts* (often unexpressed) Quaker belief systems, including theology. Dandelion has demonstrated that what Quakers say they do *not* do, ‘can also be a shorthand way of identifying features’ (1996: 302). For example, the Quaker opposition to creeds is long-standing. When Quakers object to creeds, they do so often on theological grounds:¹⁶ Friends object to the stasis of revelation implied by formal adoption of creeds (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 27.23). Divine revelation is ongoing for Quakers and undergirds the unprogrammed liturgy of British Quakers who wait silently for the promptings of Spirit. Ongoing revelation is one reason Elise reported (unlike the Christian women in my research sample): ‘I’m quite comfortable with the idea of...a Goddess that is constantly changing’. It is also another reason why Quagans find it easy to exist in the Quaker context. As Alison said of Quaker Meeting for Worship:

Out of the silence people speak when the spirit moves them...it is what the spirit is telling you *now*. And so if you have that basic frame of reference in relation to the worship of the divine, to your spiritual practice in relation to the divine, um then how the divine is going about its business of relating to *you* is really your own affair.

The emphasis Alison placed on ‘now’, which Molly also stressed (‘the now is very important to me, the *power* of now’), also stems, I argue, from the Quaker concept of on-going revelation, and is indicative of Liberal Quaker belief in limited, contextual revelation; that is, the claim that the divine reveals itself in many ways to many people at different times. As Alison put it, ‘we all need different things from our gods and goddesses...that is, different individuals need to relate to the divine in different ways’. As an entry in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (QFP) stresses,

Quakers adopt ‘not so much a set of propositions [as in a Creed], as the discipline of working out in one’s life and experience the consequences of the truth one has espoused. The value of the beliefs lies solely in their outworking’ (1995: 27.25).¹⁷

When Dandelion writes of a Quaker ‘behavioural creed’ (1996), he refers to the corporate form of Quaker Meeting for Worship and Quaker Business Meetings. The quotation from *QFP* is very clear that the form of Quakerism extends to the whole fabric of one’s life. My participants confirmed this. As Alison said, ‘being a Quaker is really *how* you are, rather than what you believe in. Um...and I think that is pretty widely accepted’. As Dandelion (2008) relates, in the Swarthmore Lecture of 1980 given by Janet Scott, she answered the question “‘Are Quakers Christian?’” by saying that it does not matter. What matters to Quakers is not the label by which we are called or call ourselves, but the life’ (Scott 1980: 70). The ‘how’ of Quakerism, insist my informants, extends to

- how Friends interact with others (which for Quaker Pagans includes other-than-human-beings¹⁸),
- the Quaker emphasis on ‘justice’ (Gwen),
- on ‘being active’ (Molly), by which she meant what would be called pastoral ministry in other contexts,
- social, eco-justice, and peace ‘activism’ (Gwen).¹⁹

This way-of-life behavioural creed is informed by Quaker tradition, particularly the Testimonies which *QFP* states ‘are not abstract qualities, but vital principles of life...[and] ways of action’ (1995: 19, preamble)²⁰. Thus what Quakers, and by extension Quaker Pagans, *do and do not do* are highly important to their belief systems.

This behavioural creed does not simply encode ideology (e.g., pacificism), it encodes or *performs* theo/theology.²¹ Participants repeatedly stated, ‘Goddess is not into power over, but power with’. Quaker Pagan social and eco-justice activism and their feminism reflects their notion of a divine that is non-hierarchical, shares creative and other powers, and is (self) limited in power. ‘Power with’ may also imply a divine which is revealed in on-going participation with Creation (although many of my informants would not use this particular word).

Peter Collins argues that there are certain ‘narratives’ canonical within Quakerism:

[these narratives] were threads which no sooner were spun were woven into the social fabric of the meeting and of Quakerism more generally. They are woven... 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 (2008: 41).

Collins points to ‘plaining’, which he argues undergirds all of these narratives, and which he says is ultimately “‘a verb’”: a tendency to approach the world in a particular way’ (2008: 44). Similarly, Jackie Leach Scully (2008) uses virtue ethics to demonstrate how Friends perform through embodied behaviour their ethical beliefs and thus their Quakerism.

Edward Schieffelin points out that in the West, people tend to interpret *performance* to mean acting or illusion (2005: 131), with the implication that a performance is not *real* or *true*. As Schieffelin writes, performance ‘embodies the expressive dimension of the strategic articulation of practice’ (2005: 130, emphasis in original).²² When Quaker Pagans attend Meeting for Worship or participate in social justice activism, they *perform* Quakerism. When they participate in Goddess Feminist rituals, or tell a Goddess story, they perform their Goddess Feminism and they create new meanings of and improvise female becoming. Performing Quakerism and Goddess Feminism for Quaker Pagans creates and reinforces certain ‘embodied dispositions’ (Coleman and Collins 2000: 318) or ways of being in the world.

FUSING QUAKERISM WITH GODDESS FEMINISM: COMING TO GODDESS FEMINISM

All of my Quaker Pagan participants found a home in Quakerism, but as Elise said, ‘I don’t find that Goddess Feminism is a rejection of Quakerism, but Quakerism cannot do everything, and I was searching for something that the Friends could not provide’. In the same way, Alison wrote, ‘As a spiritual person I had found my spiritual community among the Quakers, but as a worshipful person I had nothing to worship’ (Leonard 2003: 11). The paganism of participants thus specifically turns their Quaker way of life into a Quaker Pagan (enacted) theology.

The women’s peace camp at Greenham Common during the 1980s was formative for several participants. For Molly, Greenham was an entrée into Quakerism, ‘women’s spirituality’, and feminism. It was a powerful experience that changed her world:

I can remember going up to women who were clearly not the little wife at home, who were in touch with much bigger things than the female space I’d squeezed myself into before. And they were talking about the feminine principle in the divine. I felt something was really moving for me... It was like a freeing up... After that I became *the* feminist at school—I taught for 13 years. My marriage was foundering then, everything was shifting.

Feminism, women’s spirituality, and the introduction to new kinds of ritualising at Greenham were all confirmations that Quakerism could not provide informants’ spiritual answers *in toto*. Below I explore some reasons why these particular issues shift everything for Quagan participants.

Though Quakers have traditionally rejected ritual as empty (Alison, Elise), Dandelion has argued eloquently that Meeting for Worship, though silent, is still ritual (2005). Further, while many Goddess Feminists of Christian backgrounds find Goddess Feminism affirming because it heals the pain of feeling other to the divine, Quakerism is founded on the notion of ‘that of God in everyone’.²³ British Quakers have no priesthood, but practice (like most feminist Wiccans or Goddess Feminists) a priesthood of all believers (Starhawk 1999: 21; Dandelion 2005: 28, 29; Alison). Indeed, as Elise related, ‘I’ve found that questions are encouraged in

Quakerism. And women are very present and strong in Quakerism'. That said, Molly implied that Goddess Feminism provides non-traditional models of being a woman which Quakerism does not necessarily model. Despite the egalitarianism of Quakerism, Goddess Feminism showed Molly new ways of enacting femaleness.

For Alison, her attraction to Goddess Feminism came first through its bodiliness, its affirmation of embodied life (especially the *female* body) and its sensuality. As she has written, '...rediscovering the childish pleasure of skinny-dipping in lakes and streams, [I] found it was a spiritual pleasure too' (2003: 17). So despite the positive role for women in Quakerism, I read Alison's story as discovering that the emphasis on Spirit in the Friends meant a lack of celebration of embodiment, which she finds in Goddess Feminism and through participation in Goddess Feminist rituals.

Quaker participants find in Goddess Feminism a religion which mirrors many of their ethics. First, Goddess Feminists and contemporary pagans are always keen to emphasise that there are many routes to the divine. Second, pagans would also generally ascribe to the idea of the divine in everyone (here this would extend beyond humans) (see, for example, the website of the UKs Pagan Federation, <http://www.paganfed.org/paganism.php>, accessed 12 October 2007), which for Goddess Feminists is also based upon the broader feminist concern for social justice and egalitarian structures and methods (e.g. in decision making or ritual). Third, the Wiccan teaching 'Do what you will, if it harms none'²⁴ has been read by many (the American activist feminist witch Starhawk being probably the most influential of these) as an injunction against violence, and a call to working for social and eco-justice.

Above I situated Quaker Pagans in the differing contexts of their dual identities; below I give a few examples of how Quakers explore Goddess Feminism in a particularly Quaker fashion.

STORY AND METAPHOR

As a writer, Alison is drawn to story. Indeed, story for Alison is substantive. That is, story is a way of calling things into being. Story is thus *real* for Alison, and she spoke of 'the truth of story'.²⁵ In this she reflects the Quaker approach to the voicing of spirit in ministry during Meeting for Worship, and the way Quakers make real canonical narratives or practices through their enactment. However, it was the *many* stories of Goddess Feminism that was a big draw for Alison, as it was also for Elise. Dandelion has written that one consequence of the 'culture of silence' (1996: 238) that exists within the Religious Society of Friends is that Quakers rarely have opportunities to discuss with each other what they really believe. Alison said, '[in ministry] I might refer to something that has happened in my sort of—in the Goddess arena, but it is much more likely that it would come out in a way that didn't have any particular frame of reference at all'. The post-Christian context of Liberal British Quakerism is such that the stories which originally undergirded the group (i.e. the Bible) are rarely read in many Meetings

for Worship now (Dandelion 1996 cites that 36.7% of his respondents never 'feel moved to pick up the Bible' during Meeting for Worship). Although Alison's approach to story reflected her Quakerism, Goddess Feminism provides a way to develop and celebrate story in a way not possible in the Friends. For example, Alison pointed to the 'fluidity' of goddess story, the 'magic' in them, and their use of symbolism.

Story also images—indeed it invokes and shapes images—and several Quagan informants pointed to the emphasis on (a diversity of) imagery as being an important attraction for them to Goddess Feminism and paganism. Quakerism has traditionally been anti-imagery (Elise),²⁶ not wanting to limit the divine in any way. But the openness of Liberal Quakerism, and the multiplicity of images of the divine in Goddess Feminism result in a similar acceptance of diversity.

In Goddess Feminism, there is considerable diversity between what is meant by the term *Goddess(es)* (Long 1997). The most important issue for this discussion is whether Goddess is metaphor or real. However, even for those for whom Goddess is metaphor point to the real effects that metaphor has on the lives of women (Culpepper 1987, 1997; Morton 1989; Long 1997). Two Quaker Pagan informants (Alison and Molly) claimed that goddesses are 'metaphor' (Molly) for them, that they 'don't really experience them um as an active force in my life', but as 'powerful stories which influence my thinking' (Alison).²⁷ Molly and Alison's use of the word metaphor to describe goddesses reflected their Quaker dislike of anything which seems to *define* or limit the divine. However, both experience metaphor in a real way. For example, Molly's use of 'the void' as image and metaphor for the divine is lived and embodied; she experiences the void in meditation when the divine 'mystery' 'comes up through me'.

I asked Alison whether story and writing were invocation and ritual for her, and she said, 'I think it is becoming the case, and I think in some way it has always been the case without my recognising it'. I suggested above that story for Alison is a way of calling things into being; in this way, Alison participates in the creative action of the divine, or rather, as she has written, 'It often seems to me that my job as a writer is not to "create" as such. It's to keep that channel clean and clear... If my channel is clear, then the mystery will flow through it and down it' (1995: 90). In Meeting for Worship she is aware of 'waiting in the void, waiting in the light' (1995: 88), and she writes that the *process* of beginning to write is also a process of 'wait[ing] patiently in discipline' (1995: 92). Alison, then, has conflated the form of her Quakerism with the form of writing, and experiences the creative action of writing as the creativity of the divine working through her. That is, Alison experiences writing in charismatic Quaker terms. Story and metaphor become for Alison real expressions of the divine.

In this context, goddesses may be metaphor, but their stories are also channels for experience of the divine, and in that sense they are real. Like Molly's experience of the void, goddesses and their stories become lived and embodied. Story is not simply a mental experience for Alison, but is something she experiences in an embodied way. Furthermore, like the Quaker 'narratives' identified by Collins (2008: 27), Goddess Feminist stories impel participants to live in a certain way.

Let me give an example. The cauldron of Cerridwen was referred to by all of the Quagan participants²⁸ and is an important lived metaphor for the divine. Alison described Cerridwen's cauldron as 'this great pot of life'. And participants emphasised that Cerridwen's cauldron contained 'everything stirred up together' (Molly), the hard parts of life included (Alison, Elise). Alison related the cauldron back to the earth by saying it is 'a symbol of this amazing sort of composting thing'. Cerridwen, then, is 'an agent of transformation' (Elise), and the cauldron her main *instrument* of transformation. It is a polyvalent metaphor because it represents the physical spaces of the earth and the ritual circle (in which Goddess Feminists ritualise transformation), and the mental or cognitive space of transformation or change. Participants embody and enact the metaphor of the cauldron by applying it to the life-cycle of 'menopause', 'healing' (Elise²⁹), and to the process of inspiration in writing (Alison).

CONTACT WITH THE DIVINE

Molly suggested there is 'energy' in effective metaphors, and that Cerridwen's cauldron is 'about knowing the mystery'. 'Mystery' for Molly is a way of referring to the divine. The fundamental possibility that, as Molly put it, the divine can 'come up through me', of 'being a channel for the divine', is something that is common to both Quakerism and Goddess Feminism. For example, some Goddess Feminists ritualise embodying the Goddess(es), though they would usually balk at the word 'channelling' because of its implied passivity.³⁰ Gwen also said that one of the reasons she originally became a Quaker was that she was interested in 'the mystical aspect of Quakerism'.

Contemporary paganism is often described as a 'nature religion' because it places great stress on humanity being part of (and dependent upon) the natural world (Harvey 2007: 4). The earth, as well as elements of the natural world such as rocks and trees, is seen as sacred and often as a personal divinity.³¹ This outlook was particularly evident during my interviews with Gwen and Molly, both of whom spoke of having communication with other-than-human-beings. For Gwen, these contacts were relearned in adulthood, but experienced spontaneously in childhood. She recounted of her childhood in Australia,

In the bush, there's a plant—it's like a tall tree fern with a large velvety spike, like a bulrush... And I remember one of those bowed to me, or waved, anyway it made contact with me. I assumed this kind of relationship with living things was normal at first. I also remember having contact with Golden Mimosa—it's the spirits of these plants that make contact with me.

I asked Gwen if these were 'simply spirits, or would you call them deities?', to which she replied, 'Yes, yes! All I know is that I have contact', but she later confirmed that she considered them 'divine'. Rather than define these spirits, Gwen wanted to emphasise 'the inner transformations that result from making contact'. She stressed that contact with the sacred pushed her into 'activism' on the part of the natural world, but also that it brought 'compassion, and clarity into

my everyday life'. For Gwen, it was necessary to ground her experiences of the sacred in living them out and she pointed out that this active spirituality tied in with her Quakerism.

Although the Quaker practice of waiting silently on the divine to speak through them places Friends (potentially) on the charismatic end of the religious spectrum, the 'culture of silence' militates against charismatic testimony such as is found in Pentecostal churches (Dandelion 1996). So whilst Gwen and Molly's experiences of communicating with nature spirits may be acceptable in Quaker terms as the divine speaking through them, these experiences are not likely to be vocalised in Meeting for Worship. As Pilgrim writes, 'those who [speak] of [unmediated experiences of God] as real [are] likely to be misheard and misunderstood, if not (politely) ignored' (2004: 206). The reticence I found amongst my Christian feminist participants toward this kind of religious experience (even, or especially, amongst those who had had such experiences whilst in charismatic denominations) is not present amongst Quagan participants for whom the practice of 'waiting upon God' is familiar.³²

RITUAL

Probably the most striking difference between unprogrammed Quakerism and (other) Christian churches, the silent Meeting for Worship, is also the most striking difference between Quagans and contemporary paganism. For whilst many Christians and pagans alike may practice silent worship individually (alternatively expressed as meditation, prayer, contemplative prayer, etc.), collective worship tends to be verbally expressed. The communal nature of the silent Meeting for Worship is emphasised by Dandelion: 'The silence is the very medium through which the group approaches God... This emphasis on collectivity is critical to both orthodox Quaker theology and to the limitation of individualism within the worship process' (2005: 3). Silent worship is not simply an absence of words, but the silence is experienced as spatial and as a location of the divine. As Molly put it, 'God is "I am", the void'. In the silent space of worship is the presence of the divine; silence for Friends facilitates experience of the divine presence (Dandelion 2005: 31). As Molly elaborated: 'Quakerism for me is about letting spirit speak to me, about being receptive, and about letting go of my expectations and getting in touch with the void'. The Quaker 'void' is communal: a space and a divine which are not static (participants several times referred to the Goddess chant 'She Changes'³³), and though it is silent and empty, it does not signal the absence of the divine, and it may be approached communally.

Dandelion writes, 'the theology behind [Friends] holding worship at any time and in any place is not about a constancy of sacramentality as much as a constant potential for it' (2005: 114). Such a viewpoint shifts the way an adherent sees and interacts with the world. The constant potential for unmediated experience of the divine potentially widens a participant's conception of what is, or might be a sacred place/being ('that of God in everyone'), and/or leads to a state of 'receptivity' (Molly) for experience of the divine. Perhaps this is why Quagans are

drawn to and have various forms of direct experience of the divine (trance, dreams, visions, spirit communication).

Molly spoke of a Quagan ritual she had attended at an ancient stone circle. Ritualising in such a place is certainly not a traditionally Quaker thing to do, but her experience of the ritual was bound up with being a Quaker, and is revealing of Quaker sacred space, Quagan theology, and the Quaker sense of silent communal religious experience:

I am particularly drawn to stones, like at Avebury. There's an energy that comes through them. Once with some friends of mine from the Quaker women's group, and one man...we went to a stone circle and we stood inside the circle and held hands...and time shifted inside there. There's a real sense of energy and divine connection that they have. And there was a sense of something happening in the silence; it was to do with us as Quakers, but it was also about the stones. There was a sense of power, and energy. There were six of us, but it was really strange, when I shut my eyes, there was [*sic*] seven. I felt very 'in touch' and beyond space and time, or rather, it was all time and space in that circle. I think it is important that they are stone *circles*, because in a circle it is hard to find an end and a beginning... And Quakers sit in *circles*.

This notion that there are places where the divine is particularly easy to experience is a strong pagan belief. But as Alison put it, for Quakers 'the thought of [one place] being more sacred than anywhere else um is—is actually anathema to me... I don't have any time for—for that'. However, her pagan experience of sacred places modifies her Quaker belief in the sacred being accessible anywhere and everywhere: 'I mean clearly there are sacred places...and you can feel a concentration of spiritual energy there, but there are many, many, many of them'. Like Alison, Molly stressed that stone circles are not more sacred than other places, but have a strong 'connection' with the divine. She equated Quaker Meeting for Worship with the liminality of the stone circles, suggesting that the same liminality is produced in both, and that it is partly the *communal* delineation of sacred space/time that is responsible for the possibility of experience of the divine within that space.

Many Quakers describe what they do in Meeting for Worship as 'listening'.³⁴ But as most Meetings only have a few short spoken contributions (Alison), what a Friend mainly listens to/for in ritual is the silence and silent presence of the divine. Such a regular practice helps to explain both why Gwen (who has always heard the voices of spirits in the natural world) was originally attracted to the Friends, and why in the Quagan ritual described above, Molly is sensitive to the 'energy' of the stones. It is the practice of and possibility of communication with/from the divine that is primary: silent worship 'is the means to the experience, central to the Liberal Quaker project' (2008: 29).

Molly emphasised that it is important that this site is a stone circle, and she referred to Quakers sitting in circles during Meeting for Worship. This has not always been the case, but most Meetings for Worship now use chairs placed in a circle (Collins 1996: 320). This arrangement symbolically affirms various dominant Quaker beliefs: non-hierarchy, priesthood of all believers, etc. (1996: 320). Molly

also pointed to circles having no beginning or end, which she related to the sense she got of being in a time out of time in the stone circle. She suggested that the ritual and symbolic space of a circle contains *and contributes to* the 'energy' of the ritual. This is consistent with contemporary pagan belief (see Salomonsen 2002: 177; Rowntree 2004: 149); the majority of practitioners also ritualise in a circle.

It is largely the potential for experience of the divine (and the lack of dogma) in the Friends and paganism that makes ritual central to both. For unprogrammed Friends, ritual may seem 'invisible' (Dandelion 2005: 2), but one thing that makes unprogrammed Quakers unique is their adherence to a ritual of silent (potential) communal experience of the divine.³⁵ The Quaker emphasis on experience means that Friends 'argue that the validity of worship lies not in its form but in its power' (Dandelion 2005: 71), a description which certainly fits the ritualisation of Goddess Feminists also. One reason the ritual which Molly related above was so affective, was 'the sense of power and energy' she had of it. In both cases, 'power' refers to what the participant experiences during ritual, in the ritual space, and what she carries with her from the ritual: deep experience of the divine, a divine which is active, relational and immanent, and communal connection.³⁶

LISTENING TO THE DIVINE AND OTHERS

I am struck by the number of voices that are in the transcripts of my interviews with Quagan participants, and by the amount of listening implied for the hearers. These are the voices of the spirits which Gwen hears, but also the voice of the divine which spoke to Molly ('I am') which was a confirmation for her of the universal immanence of God, the 'voices' of the river and trees which Molly also hears, the 'voices' of the goddesses which Alison hears through their stories, and even the voices of the characters in her own stories. The emphasis here is on the hearer, or more accurately, on the *hearing*: on listening as spiritual act and experience. Elise, for example, spoke of how 'listening to' (by which she means sensing) other peoples' needs was an act 'supported by Goddess', and how she 'couldn't hear the guidance [of the divine] in the Christian framework'. Elise also found it important to highlight that 'my prayer is usually a chat—I talk, but I also *listen*'. Goddess then, opens Elise up to hearing the divine, but I argue that it is the Quaker *framework* which has nourished both the prominence of Quagans listening for the divine and the notion that this is a spiritual act in itself.

The listening that Quagans do underlines the theme of relationality which runs throughout the spectrum of my participants. As Molly put it, 'the sacred is relational'. For Quagans, the relational implies the possibility of change. That is, in listening to the other, or in listening to the divine, one opens oneself up to the possibility that one's own beliefs/position may change through relation. Perhaps inevitably as Quagans fuse two spiritual traditions, this group of my participants spoke of their spirituality as a 'process', a 'journey' (Alison), or an 'exploration' (Gwen). Quaker Pagan personal spirituality cannot be divorced from relationality and indeed it is *because* Quagans listen to the Other (divine, human, other-than-human) that they must define their spirituality as a journey or process.

CONCLUSION

Since academic study of Quaker Pagans is in its infancy,³⁷ my aim in this article has been to begin the process of situating and explicating what appears to be a rapidly growing segment of both Quakerism and paganism. Clearly, further work needs to be done and my hope is that larger-scale studies of Quaker Pagans will deepen our understanding of this grouping in the near future. In this study, I have shown that Pilgrim's category of Syncretist Quakers (2003, 2004, 2008) is insufficient, and partly inaccurate, to describe Quaker Pagans. I have shown that certain 'canonical narratives' (Collins 2008: 41) in Quakerism, and particularly my notion of an extended behavioural creed, provide an underlying framework for Quaker Pagans as they develop the theo/thealogy and practice of their dual identity. I have emphasised that the syncretism of Quaker Pagans is based upon a behavioural creed that is a way of being in the world and a *performative* religiosity. As Molly put it, Quaker Paganism is about 'blurred boundaries'. Quagans thus inhabit an unusual space: a space that holds together difference, and the crossing-over point(s) between differences. My informants are not Quakers *and* pagans, as if the two identities could be held separate and the individual could oscillate between the two. Instead, they are Quaker Pagans, the identities cannot be separated out from each other but create something *sui generis*, a third thing entirely—Quagans.

NOTES

1. Although this website is American, where the community of Quaker Pagans appears to be larger and longer established (personal communication with American Quagans), it is relevant for the growing community in Britain, especially as the bloggers are from the upprogrammed branch of US Quakerism.

2. I first heard this term in 2001 when it was used by a participant in my MA research, an American Quaker-Pagan.

3. It is notoriously difficult to define contemporary paganism, as the term itself is a catch-all phrase that includes many and varied traditions. Despite the diversity between pagans, several researchers have shown (for example, Harvey 1997 and 2007, Berger *et al.* 2003) that paganism does have cohering themes and concerns, some of which I will discuss below.

4. Goddess Feminists are a subset of pagans who work primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) with the Goddess or goddesses. As with other contemporary pagans, there is no one form of Goddess Feminism nor is there a unifying institutional structure. That is not to say that one cannot speak meaningfully of Goddess Feminism as a coherent term.

5. Except where participants are public figures already (for example, writers who have published work on their spirituality), all names have been changed and identifying details obscured.

6. It is difficult to quantify this group as it depends on how one defines what constitutes 'fusing'. According to the way I have defined 'fusing' (see Vincett 2008), there are 12 interview participants who show evidence of fusing.

7. Other web-based resources include: observations from other researchers on a Pagan scholars email list, Quagan generated on-line articles, and flyers and invitations circulated on the web. Taken together, the two Quagan email lists consist of over one hundred members.

8. As with other mainline liberal British churches, British Friends are predominantly white. Brierley (2007: 5:19) includes the Religious Society of Friends in his 'smaller denominations' category, in which 6% are non-white. Goddess Feminists also tend to be mainly white. The ethnic profile of Goddess Feminism has been both criticised and rationalised by insiders and outsiders. Cynthia Eller (1993) presents some good reasons why Goddess Feminism tends to be white. For example, (a) in the United States at least, the needs of women of colour may be being met elsewhere (for example, in the rise of voodoo and African traditional religions), and (b) the different emphases between feminists, Mujeristas, and Womanists may mean that women of colour are not attracted to a religion which styles itself as feminist. Similarly, whilst my call for participants asked for feminist women, this may have precluded women of colour who define themselves differently, from responding.

9. Dandelion argues that British Friends have a 'prescription of seeking' (2008: 33), and the questions raised by Dandelion (1996) about the extent to which Quakers of the liberal British tradition can be called Christian and Mellor (2008) about the way British Quakers define 'Christian' indicate that there may be many Quakers who value a 'personal spiritual quest' and are disconnected from 'traditional sources of meaning' regardless of whether or not they are Quaker Pagans.

10. When Quagans argue that Goddess Feminism is not all 'sweetness and light', there is a subtext which they are keen to point out. As Peter Collins writes, 'the dominant symbol of Quakerism is "the Inner Light"' (1996: 285). This is a symbol which Quagans question because 'light has dark in it, surely; dark has light—they need each other... For me, the dark is fruitful and juicy and alive. We need the cycle of both... We need to untie the notion that dark is evil and wrong' (Gwen). However, the theology behind the concept of the inner light is part and parcel of Quagan beliefs. Similarly, Goddess Feminists are careful to differentiate themselves (and pagans in general) from the New Age emphasis on light (Heelas 1996; Harvey 1997) for the same reasons.

11. It would be interesting to know what the gender split is in Pilgrim's work, but her analysis is not 'gendered'.

12. The 'second shift' refers to women's unpaid work in the home which is on top of their paid occupation. Such work includes both material and emotional work, the majority of which still falls to women in most households (Hochschild 1989; Brannen and Moss 1991).

13. Though the term 'spiritual supermarket' was coined by Lyon, Luckmann used a similar phrase as far back as 1967 when he called it a 'market of ultimate significance'. Aupers and Houtman have recently done a good job tracing and challenging this discourse (2006).

14. This is a closed email group to which one must apply to join, but a website is planned and more information may be obtained by emailing postfriend@quakergoddessnetwork.org.uk.

15. The Venus of Laussel is a carving of a woman of generous proportions from the entrance to a cave in France. She holds a curved horn inscribed with thirteen lines. Paleolithic 'Venus figurines' such as this one have been used by Goddess Feminists to point to (a) evidence for ancient Goddess worship, (b) as images of 'the Goddess' or goddesses, (c) as positive images of the female body and its cycles.

16. See Dandelion (2008: 25, 26) for a comprehensive list and analysis of the reasons Quakers object to 'belief creeds'.

17. Note that the author of this entry does not capitalise 'truth', and uses 'one' not 'we', implying that truth is neither static, nor universal. Again, to me this is consistent with Liberal Quaker belief.

18. Other-than-human-beings would include animals, but also trees, rivers, rocks, etc.

19. Pilgrim (2004) argues that 'the utopian vision quest of Quakerism with regard to peace, justice and social equality has become mainstream within the wider society' (2004: 212). I find this difficult to believe. To take but one example, regardless of thirty years of equality legislation in the UK (the Equal Pay Act came into force in 1975), the gender wage gap

remains significant, the average difference being 17.1% (or median 12.6%) according to the government Women and Equality Unit report (2007: 12).

20. Not all Quakers are as active as this may imply, but these testimonies were certainly stressed by my Quagan participants.

21. Thealogy is discourse on the female divine, as used by Goddess Feminists.

22. Shieffelin builds here on Bourdieu's 'practices' (1977) which also influence Collins's thought (2008), and the differing approaches to 'performance' of theorists such as Schechner (1982) and Goffman (1959).

23. Dandelion shows how the interpretation of this phrase, especially what is meant by 'God', is diverse within contemporary British Quakerism and is a move away from the traditional Christian notion of God of previous generations of Friends (1996: 162, 268).

24. One of the main influences of Goddess Feminism is Wicca, especially feminist forms of Wicca.

25. For two interesting takes on how this can work in paganism, see Salomonsen 2002: 138-42 on re-membering Tiamat in feminist Wicca, and Griffin 2000: 73-88 on embodied narrative in Goddess spirituality.

26. This may be one reason why Catholic defectors do not seem drawn to Quakerism, unlike former members of protestant denominations (Rutherford 2003, unpublished research).

27. The other women I interviewed (Elise and Gwen) have a much more personal relationship with goddesses and spirits.

28. This is an ancient Celtic myth about the goddess Cerridwen who brews the potion of knowledge and inspiration in her cauldron. She is a shape-shifter, a transformer.

29. Elise works with health professionals, so healing and transformation are very much lived experiences in her professional life.

30. I remember a great deal of (feminist) negativity to the word expressed on one Goddess Feminist e-list to which I belong. I suspect the word 'channel' (used by two Quaker Pagan participants) is language inherited from Quakerism. Certainly, it is a concept that early Quakers used, for whom 'their bodies and lives were merely sites and channels to communicate the word of God, the living Christ, to others' (Dandelion 2005: 4).

31. I use the singular here, but pagan polytheists are common (see, e.g., the Association of Polytheist Traditions website at www.manygods.org.uk, accessed 12 October 2007 or <http://www.paganfed.org/paganism.php>, accessed 12 October 2007).

32. This phrase is one amongst many that were first used by early Friends and preserved in successive editions of *Quaker Faith and Practice*, so that they are 'stock' Quaker phrases. This particular phrase occurs in the current edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice* in seven entries, three of which date from the seventeenth century (1995: 2.41, 21.03, 28.02).

33. This chant, originally written by Starhawk, is possibly the most widely known and sung pagan chant, and is endlessly improvised upon.

34. Of Dandelion's sample, 53.8 per cent claimed that 'listening' was the best way to describe what they do in Meeting for Worship (1996: 111).

35. I am aware that both Dandelion's and Pilgrim's research indicates that not all Quakers use Meeting for Worship in this way, but what is key here is that my participants *do*.

36. And in the Goddess Feminist/Quagan context, 'power' must also be read as 'empowerment'.

37. Though there has recently been much web-based 'chatter' about Quaker Pagans by scholars studying contemporary paganism, I am not aware of any other academic publications resulting from the study of this form of spirituality.

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