Research Note

Quakers and Host Cultures: Towards a Theory of Accommodation[1]

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Abstract

This research note focuses on how present-day British Quakers fit into theories of social accommodation that are seen as predictable for religious groups over time. Typically this has been cast in terms of move from a sectarian sensibility to a denominational one. Here I suggest, however, that in a highly secular society, the desire to accommodate can lead to a process of internal secularisation as an internal linguistic coherence becomes developed into linguistic assimilation with wider society. Examples of this possible re-expression of Quakerism are given along with ideas for how this theory might be more fully tested.

Keywords

Internal secularisation, secularism, sectarianism, Communication Accommodation Theory, liberal religion

Introduction

Sociologists of religion are generally united in their acceptance that radical religious expression, typically in the form of sectarian religion, is modified over time within faith groups towards a more denominational sensibility. Groups over

1 This research note is drawn largely from published work in Dandelion 2019, developed as keynote address to the CRQS/QSRA conference in April 2022. I am grateful for the feedback to that presentation which has helped develop the work further. I dedicated that address to Christopher Loten, very fine Quaker studies scholar taken prematurely from us in early 2022, and I do the same with this. Chris gave the Quaker studies community so much and we miss him.

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time become more accepting of other religious options and more acceptable to the state. In turn, as happened with the history of the Quakers, legal rights, for example to worship or marry, are granted to the group as they emerge as an acceptable part of the religious landscape of the nation. Given the popular appeal of the universal claims of sectarian certainty (Bruce 2003: 58) but the desire for rights, groups need to navigate this transformation carefully. The declaration to the monarch that Quakers were a 'harmless and innocent people' in 1661 was to avoid imprisonment, while also attempting to maintain the integrity of Quaker Christianity and its opposition to war.

Quakers have often been used in examples of the modification of religious radicalism over time. What varies are the explanations of how and when this process takes place and how complete a transformation it entails. Quakers have been regarded as primarily a sect (Weber 2011 [1904–05]: 142) becoming a denomination in the second generation (Niebuhr 1975 [1929]), partly after one century (Mullet 1984), partly after two centuries (Isichei 1967) and incompletely after three (Dandelion 1996, 2019). David Martin has claimed that Quakers began life as denomination (1962), while Bryan Wilson has charted the history of Quakerism in terms of different kinds of sectarian expression (1970). Ernest Troeltsch has characterised a third religious form, that of mystical religion (1931 [1911]: 780). However, all have acknowledged that Quakers have generally and increasingly accommodated to the mores and rules of the state over time, even when the relationship is ruptured by war and perhaps in particular conscription. Accommodation is not irreversible.

What is of interest here is the way in which present-day British Quakerism presents itself both within the demands of the state's rules on religious expression (secularism) and within a society that is increasingly secular or secularised. The focus here is on the way individual Quakers talk about their faith and the way choices made over religious language feeds back into the organisational expressions of Quaker faith. The research note proceeds by outlining the secular context of present-day Britain, introducing the idea of internal secularisation within a religious group, and using ideas from Communication Accommodation Theory to suggest a theory about changes in present-day Quaker expression as a consequence of the desire to accommodate within a secular society. The research note ends with the suggestion of ways this theory could be tested.

The Secular Context

For Charles Taylor (2007), and for Grace Davie (2015), religion in northern Europe and the USA is operating in terms of the secular marketplace, a differentiated element of modernist consumption. The Quaker commentator Sean O'Flynn (2018) talks of,

> a market of ideas from which we pick and choose: philosophies, religions, and ethical theories are along there with cars, electronic goods and holidays, to be

> chosen from and consumed at will, a smorgasbord in which there are no absolute preferences. Without a transcendent dimension, relativism spreads everywhere: it is a quagmire within which we are sucked into the anti-spiritual terrain of the absurd.

Taylor (2007: 12) states that certainty is diminished and that everyone is living:

> between two standpoints: an 'engaged' one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens to us; and a 'disengaged' one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to co-exist.

Thus even the faithful see their faith from a worldly perspective, with faith prescribed as an option rather than a soteriological necessity. As Jose Casnaova writes: 'Secularity becomes the default option, no longer in need of justification' (2010: 266).

Internal Secularisation

For Mark Chaves, internal secularisation is 'the declining scope of religious authority's control over the organizational resources within the agency structure' (1993: 165). In other words, agency structures, such as publishing or fundraising, can become detached from the religious authority of the parent body and start to resemble secular equivalents.

Bruce charts the process of secularisation along the following axes:

(1) a decline, generationally, in commitment to what were once orthodox Christian beliefs (e.g. that the Bible is literally true, in heaven and in hell) (2011:160);

(2) an increased psychologisation and subjectivisation of faith, epitomised by preachers such as Harry Fosdick Emerson and Norman Vincent Peale, for whom good was represented by the power of positive thinking and evil by a lack of self-confidence (2011:161);

(3) an increase in a liberal attitude to morality and ethics even among evangelicals (e.g. in terms of dress, dancing, television, and divorce) (2011:163);

(4) an increase in relativism among churchgoers with fewer people prepared to make universal claims for their faith, for example on whether Christianity is the one true religion to which everyone should convert, and more people prepared to admit that many religions could lead to eternal life. Sectarian certainty has diminished (2011:165).

We can mirror this process *within* religious organisations: belief becomes marginal, diffuse and plural, faith and ethics are subjectivised, in which universal claims are replaced by personalised provisonality.

Oliver Tschannen claimed that 'When religion becomes generalized, it pervades secular institutions under disguise' (1991: 401). I suggest that the converse is also true: when secularity becomes generalised, it pervades religious institutions in disguise.

When secularity-pervaded religion is then re-expressed in the public sphere, we need to pay attention to the language of religious expression. I suggest that for the religious mask to remain intact, linguistic culture, or the way in which religious group identity is expressed in the public sphere, is key. It may be that actions such as public prayer or dress denote faith but typically it is ideas, expressed in language, which delineate religion from non-religion, which constitutes meaning and perception of meaning.

I suggest that there are two elements to the internal secularisation of religion as expressed linguistically: (1) individualism and subjectivisation; and (2) rationalism or detheologisation.

Individualism and Subjectivisation

Diffuse interpretations of core aspects of Quaker religiosity such as peace coupled with decentralised congregational practices, such as membership procedures, has enhanced a shift towards the autonomisation of the congregational and individual away from the corporate. The option of untethering moral values from faith has led to a wider range of points of entry into the group and a high rate of conversion without a strong faith transmission has encouraged individual interpretation of liturgy and practice. Quakers are eclectic in their beliefs and in their moral decision-making (Scully 2008). Religious identity becomes personalised, even bespoke, part of a commodified religious landscape or religious marketplace. One Quaker taking part in his meeting's enquirer's programme related how he had been told that he was not to say what Quakers believed, only what he as an individual believed, should he be asked a theological question (Field Notes). Individualism was thus presented as normative. The sign at one meeting house invites the outsider to 'come and join us and explore your inner values' (Field Notes). In this example, the subjectivisation and individualisation of faith connects with its detheologisation: there is nothing explicitly religious about 'inner values'.

Detheologisation

I suggest the process of rationalisation or detheologisation is about changing the linguistic assumptions and linguistic expression of faith, as is privatisation, hence my focus on it. It is about the decline in explicitly religious language within faith descriptions and explanations. It is about the portrayal of morality and ethics in rational rather than religious terms and of history in terms of human decision-making rather than providence. It is about locating cosmology in terms of historical time.

We can see this process in the decline of explicitly religious motivations and frames of understanding, for example the declining use of terms such as 'sin',

'salvation', 'God' and so on, and the concomitant decline in the traditional religious imperatives of soteriology and mission. It is visible in low and nominal membership criteria (ch. 11, *Quaker Faith and Practice*) and particularly in the interpretation of religious symbols, beliefs and language in non-religious ways, for example within Quakerism the shifts from the phrase 'that of God' to the phrase 'that of good' (see, for example, 'On God', https://soundcloud.com/qwitness), and from the shift in the description of Quaker decision-making from the idea of 'will of God' to the idea of 'sense of the Meeting'. It may be that these replacement terms still incorporate or encapsulate religious meaning for many, but their ambiguity potentially opens the way for the secular as equally valid. It appears that values direct the everyday life, rather than faith experience and religious forms are given common-sense interpretations. For example, the vote-less Quaker way of conducting business is presented by adherents in response to enquirers' questions in terms of the psychological benefits of there being no winners or losers (rather than the seeking of God's will) and silent worship is presented as psychologically helpful or meditative rather than a way of directly encountering the divine (Field Notes). The Quaker involved in the enquirer's programme who had been told to answer questions not with 'Quakers believe' but 'I believe' was also told he was not to use the term 'God'. Within this rubric, the term 'will of 'God', the traditional Quaker rendering of divine guidance, becomes a contested site, complexified through individualised theological or (a)theological interpretation.

Towards a Theory of Internal Secularisation

My argument then is that a cultivation of conformity is rooted in popular and local religious expression, in particular through the secularisation of popular religious linguistic culture. In other words, people are describing their religious participation in secular terms, either because their 'faith' is indeed secular, or in order to minimise dissimilarity with wider culture. This latter mechanism is known as 'Accommodation Theory' and has been attributed to the desire to maximise social integration and thus to maximise positive reception, evaluation and response (Giles et al. 1991: 18).

Drawing on work on 'accent mobility' and 'accent convergence' (Giles 1973), Howard Giles and Peter Powesland argued that those involved in a conversation adopt each other's phraseology and mode of speaking to minimise dissimilarity (1975) and thus maximise ideational harmony.

Giles and colleagues also found in time that this pattern of accommodation was not limited to speech but included gestures and posture, the para-linguistic, and thus related to communication more widely. Traits they explored included: utterance length, speech length, information density, vocal intensity, pausing frequency and lengths, response latency, self-disclosure, jokes expressing solidarity, orientations and opinions, gesture, head nodding and facial effect and posture (Giles et al. 1991: 7). National differences have been identified with Japan and

Korea, collectivist cultures, showing even higher levels of receiver-centred communication (Yum 1988). Speech Accommodation Theory became known as Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al. 1991). The dominant strategy identified is one of achieving convergence.

Accommodation happens most when social integration is most desired. Studies show that convergence happens more between people at one level of society and those above them socially or technically (Giles et al. 1991: 20). One study of a travel agent revealed the art of skilful selling as the travel agent adroitly accommodated their mode and content of communication to each separate client (Coupland 1984).

This theory over the decades has been multiply tested and developed. Studies of particular linguistic or cultural groups showed strong evidence of consistent linguistic patterns that created coherence and conformity within sub-cultural groups, and in opposition to perceived outsiders. One study of Welsh speakers found they broadened their accents when faced with hostile questions about their language from an English speaker (Giles et al. 1991: 9). 'Speech maintenance', that is using particular patterns of speech, is a frequent way of maintaining group identity (Bourhis 1979), creating divergence with other speech-groups. Giles and colleagues claim that 'divergence can be a tactic of intergroup distinctiveness of individuals in search of a positive social identity' (1991: 28), even at the cost of wider social integration.

In the Quaker case, we can see that for two hundred years, Quakers maintained a distinctive linguistic culture in and outwith meeting for worship through the use of plain speech, the use of 'thee' and 'thou' instead of 'you' and the numbering of days of the week and months of the year. There were also distinctive patterns of nasal or sing-song ministry, often in disconnected fragments (Wood 1978: 57). Through distinctive vocabulary and patterns of speech, alongside their other 'peculiarities', Quakers created a cultural identity that affirmed insider-status and excluded outsiders (Dandelion 2019: ch. 3): there was a way of speaking and being Quaker. They operated a communication model that delineated and identified its participants as Quaker, in the same way that members of other religious groups conducted themselves along the cultural markers of their own sub-cultures. There are still ways in which Quakers identify each other as Quakers, for example with the use of particular cultural references or insider jargon or technical terms. Within their own versions of internal coherence, there is a way for Methodists to speak and be Methodist and for Anglicans to speak and be Anglican.

Today, Quakers do not practise expressing their faith in 'Quaker time', the time they are together as Quakers, but do get practised at mutual accommodation. Explicit theological terms like 'God', 'worship' and 'prayer' can get converted to 'good', 'silence' and 'holding people in the Light'. In one location, 'Meeting for Worship' has been rebranded as 'Breathe' (Field Notes) and another Meeting recently announced that they had dropped the term 'worship' from their

noticeboard so as not to put anyone off who would be uncomfortable with the implication of the 'worship of a deity' (Pickering 2022). As Rhiannon Grant shows (2018), list-making of religious terms, to create the sense of a range of equally valid options, supports and accommodates internal religious pluralism and avoids the conflict within a non-doctrinal group inherent in doctrinal surety. Participation or attendance is increasingly voluntary and for many, sporadic (Dandelion, B. P. 2014: 31). At the same time, even when Quakers are together, they are not currently practised at sharing their interpretations of their Quaker experience.

This may mean that the majority of any adherent's expression of their Quaker identity may take place outside the group setting. Thus, speaking to non-Quakers becomes the practical expression of practising talking about Quaker faith. Only outside the group might Quakers need to face questions about their spiritual identity.

What I want to suggest is that in the twenty-first century, freed of any other outward form of particularity or peculiarity, and now wishing to enjoy full citizenship, Quaker participants express their faith and practice to those outside the group in accommodatory terms, in order to minimise dissimilarity with those they are speaking to. They aspire to social harmony, and to minimise dissimilarity in a secular culture entails articulating Quaker faith and practice in secular terms. Already dressing like anyone else, present-day Quakers thus lose their own distinctive in-group linguistic culture when speaking outside of 'Quaker time' in order to be part of a larger and wider in-group, the general public. In other words, Quakers have moved from a situation in which they perceived that everyone else, including the way they spoke, was theologically wrong to one where they seek to be integrated with that society: they cultivate conformity.

Studies of Quaker experience outside of Quaker settings are rare, but recent work by Mark Read on Quakers in the workplace reveals some interesting patterns. As might be expected, most of Read's participants were converts into the group, and yet the conversion process was affirming of previously held positions rather than revolutionary. These Quakers tended to downplay their Quaker affiliation in the workplace to minimise discord or disharmony (Read 2017: ch. 7). Where public Quaker affiliation created discord, affiliation was masked (Read 2017: 203).

Patterns of accommodation operate within the group as different types of believer translate their beliefs in order to accommodate the perception of the others and thus to minimise dissonance.[2] Indeed, at least as long ago as three decades, 'that of God in everyone' was being replaced by 'that of good in everyone' in some internal Quaker discourse as an accommodatory measure (Dandelion 1996: 309). Indeed, this practice and practise of internal accommodation may have modelled the out-turning of accommodatory narratives towards wider society.

2 In a highly religious context, if this process is accurately describing what is happening, we could expect Quakers to be more explicitly religious in their expression in order to minimise dissimilarity.

This pattern of 'faith accommodation' is encouraged by the non-doctrinal form of Liberal Quakerism that enforces self-constructed articulations of what it is to be a Quaker. Because there is no organisational doctrine, or shared narrative, the explanation of Quakerism falls to the individual to make up.

The pattern of accommodation is also encouraged by the high number of converts to the group. As nearly 90% of those in the group have entered as adult converts, with only one third coming from an immediately prior religious affiliation, then faith transmission becomes crucial if a particular religious and linguistic culture is to be maintained. In the non-doctrinal and volunteer-run context of Liberal Quakerism, this transmission has been problematic. Falling numbers can encourage congregations to welcome even those with differing views and there is no systematic or required induction process for newer participants. Britain Yearly Meeting cut its adult education staffing in 1995 and Woodbrooke, the independent Quaker learning centre that runs continuing education courses for Quakers, reported pre-pandemic that only about 14% of the Yearly Meeting took one of its courses (Dandelion, B. P. 2014: 59). Faith transmission is often localised and ad hoc, even given the huge growth of online learning as a consequence of the Covid pandemic. With 33% of participants in the British Quaker Survey 2013 attending for less than ten years (Hampton 2014: 66), belief statements are continually recast within Quaker time: what is important is not when someone entered the Quaker fold but how recently they re-expressed their belief in innovative ways, or indeed whether they publicly expressed anything at all.

Conclusion

Thus, two mechanisms are at play. The first is the lack of transmission of a distinctive Quaker linguistic culture across the Quaker population. The second is related to the consequences of adult converts wishing to retain their pre-Quaker identity or positive evaluation with non-Quakers through minimising difference with societal peers. This is the perceived need that induces high levels of communication accommodation. In other words, when new identities threaten consolidated ones, the desire is to minimise dissonance. In previous times, conversion to Quakerism would have involved new patterns of speech and dress, a particularity that reflected the desire for spiritual renewal or the reality of spiritual transformation. It was deliberately and explicitly a counter-cultural course. Old ties would have been subservient to the new life. Given that present-day British Quakerism is not offering a 'new life' but rather presents itself as an optional enhancement, the new adherent needs to find convergence between affiliation and the rest of life. Thus, the presentation of Quakerism in terms of values rather than supernatural beliefs, of silence instead of 'worship' and 'that of good' instead of 'that of God', are all hallmarks of the secularisation of Quaker expression, and of religious expression in a secularist society.

Other than for the Quaker 'core' who maintain 'peculiar' ways of speaking about Quaker faith and practice and who can manage an organisational conservatism, these

articulations become the modus operandi, linguistically, within popular Quakerism as adherents seek consistency and coherence within their own narratives of Quaker participation. These narratives have become further diversified through the range of media with which Quakers may engage with a worshipping community. Thus, I suggest that popular Quakerism, while upholding the central value of diversity but also released from any need to adhere to universal claims, becomes prone to a process of internal secularisation through the blurring of Quaker/non-Quaker styles and content of 'religious' speech acts, as well as the blurring of 'Quaker time' into public time, the spaces in which people converse with others. The equal sacramentality of all places and times can become the equal secularity of all places and times. According to Francesca Montemaggi, more and more individual Quaker witness takes place in non-Quaker groups (2018: pt 2) and we know that the increased permissiveness of Quakerism has made it easier to dip in and out of Quaker time, so that Quakerism is no longer necessarily adherents' primary identification (Dandelion, B. P. 2014: 31). Online worship further accommodates the ability to participate on one's own terms. Indeed, for many it is Quaker faith that needs to be integrated with the 'rest', or most, of life rather than the other way around. Seamlessness demands accommodation.

It is language that is crucial to potential internal secularisation as it is these moments of speech that make explicit narratives of faith transmission and normativity. Quakers mask theological diversity and change through their emphasis on silence and their marginalisation of speech so that moments of explicit language become crucial indicators and teachers of the latest parameters of acceptability/normativity. While the revision of the book of discipline becomes key in terms of explicit organisational theological disposition, the less formal and more regular speech acts govern the extent and shape of Quaker faith in the meantime.

The desire for accommodation in the British context, combined with a high turnover of under-inducted adherents free to interpret and express the Quaker faith as they wish, leads to the potential for internal secularisation. These local and popular expressions are mirrored in local and national organisational statements, some of which are innocently facilitated by non-Quaker staff. Anecdotal evidence suggests this theory of internal secularisation could be correct. Some have reported that classes for young people often follow the same pattern of removing the explicitly religious and placing it with a values-driven agenda. Ongoing doctoral work by Irena Marusincova at the University of Birmingham may illuminate this particular aspect. Isaac May's forthcoming work on God-optionality offers a longer perspective on century-old process in the USA (2022). Corpus work using letters to *The Friend* or leaflets produced by Britain Yearly Meeting may be the most quantitative way of charting significant change over say the last 40 years. It is more difficult to collect data on individual and informal expressions but there is clearly work to be done to identify the agents of change to better understand a process that appears to be taking place at a popular and an organisational levels.

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