Research Note

Believing and Belonging in Britain Yearly Meeting: The Use of Serial Quantitative Studies

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Featuring quotes from Giselle Vincett

Abstract

In relation to its numerical strength amongst Quakerism globally, British Quakerism has received a disproportionate degree of sociological investigation over the past 30 years. This research note looks at a series of surveys carried over this time, in particular previously unpublished work on the 2013 survey. The article anticipates the next 'British Quaker Survey' of October 2023 and suggests that this survey format could be usefully employed elsewhere to offer a greater level of comparative analysis between different types of Quaker than has been achieved to date.

Keywords

British Quaker survey, latent class analysis, orthopraxy, orthocredence, double culture

Context

Beginning with my doctoral research, British Quakerism has been the subject of a particular series of surveys into Quaker demographics and patterns of participation and belief which have now become decennial. They have typically been conducted by research students under the supervision of other sociologists and the results have been widely reported (Dandelion 1996; Cary and Dandelion 2007; Carey, Dandelion and Rutherford 2009; Best 2010; Hampton 2014).

In 1990, I ran the 'Quaker Questionnaire' amongst a random sample of 32 local Quaker Meetings in addition to members of Meeting for Sufferings and Young Friends General Meeting. The 32 meetings were of eight types along three axes

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(large/small, rural/urban, north or south of Britain). A survey form was sent to each of these meetings with enough copies and freepost envelopes to encourage everyone present on a particular Sunday to complete and return a form. Despite the length of the survey, the response rate was high, close to 60 per cent of the estimated attendance at those meetings that day (Cary et al. 2009: 239).

In 2003 a version of the survey was conducted by Rosie Rutherford. Fifty meetings were selected using a sampling frame to stratify by size, and to improve reliability, up to 17 participants per meetings were selected by assigning everyone present on the given Sunday a number and then utilising a random number generation tool or 'kish table' to select who was given a survey form and freepost envelope (Cary et al. 2009: 239). In a parallel project, Simon Best used a survey to begin his investigation into adolescent Quaker spirituality (2010).

In 2013, Rutherford's sampling method was replicated by a project overseen by Simon Best, Bill Chadkirk, Peter Collins, Giselle Vincett, Jennifer Hampton and and myself to survey both adult and adolescent Quakerism (Best et al. 2013). Jennifer Hampton conducted the quantitative data analysis and Giselle Vincett conducted 20 interviews. The 2013 survey had a response rate of 80 per cent (Hampton 2014: 21)

All of these surveys were conducted using paper forms and freepost envelopes, proving costly in both financial terms and the amount of labour required for coding the responses. All the surveys exhibited a response rate far above what is usually expected of survey research, highlighting the perceived salience of the research to its participants.

A form of the survey will be repeated in October 2023 under the direction of staff at the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies and given wider internet access, it will be distributed and completed online in the attempt to survey the whole population of those attending British Quaker meetings, with a retrospective check on the proportions of those surveyed amongst known demographics (e.g. from the Yearly Meeting tabular statement). It is hoped that those with internet access will assist those without.

There are three stages to the design. Colleagues in Britain Yearly Meeting are being asked what kind of data they might like to collect. An academic working group is being established to see with which other surveys it might be useful to contrast the Quaker data. And the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies at Woodbrooke, which is overseeing the work, is very open to hearing suggestions of useful questions from other researchers. A doctoral research student is being recruited to analyse the data. It is this timely to highlight some of the unpublished comparative findings of the 2013 survey and in particular what the use of qualitative work highlighted about the quantitative.[1]

1 The qualitative work was never published and this section draws heavily on work prepared by Giselle Vincett for a paper presented at the (British Sociological Association) Sociology of Religion conference in 2015 (Dandelion and Vincett, 2015).

The 2013 Survey

The sample population were well educated with 77 per cent holding a first degree and 33 per cent a postgraduate qualification. The group were 99 per cent white; 60 per cent were female. The average age was 64 and about 60 per cent were retired. About 87 per cent of the group had joined as adults with the average age of first attending 43. Of these, 33 per cent came directly from another religious affiliation.

Comparison between 2013 and the earlier research

Because the sample populations differed in each survey, the data is not longitudinal; nevertheless we can note differences between these snapshots of the different sample populations. The following items illustrate the significant differences between the surveys.

'Do you believe in God?'

	1990 %	2003 %	2013 %	Significant differences*
Yes	74.8	73.5	57.5	1990/2013, 2003/2013
No	3.4	7	14.5	All
Not Sure	21.8	19.5	28.1	1990/2013, 2003/2013

*Statistically significant

This question is a notoriously difficult one and has been criticised by respondents. For the Quaker population, the doctrinal specificity of using the term 'God' is problematic, compounded by the lack of detail regarding the type of God being referred to. Homan and Dandelion have earlier analysed the difficulties Quakers have in responding to doctrinal questions (Dandelion and Homan 1995; Homan and Dandelion 1997). The term 'belief' is also seen as problematic, whilst a statistical consultant to the 2003 survey claimed the 'not sure' category blurs the question. It may allow those not sure of the question to voice their dissent. A survey which omitted this option but allowed respondents to define God in their own terms reported a 90 per cent positive response rate to 'belief in God' (Mellor 2010). The changing response rate may reflect alternative theological understandings of the divine or an increased atheism (although only 3 per cent self-described as atheist).

'Which of the following best describes your view of Jesus?'

	1990 %	2003 %	2013 %	Significant differences★
Containing that of God within as we all do	63.3	49.1	50.2	1990/2003, 1990/2013
An ethical teacher	46.9	42.1	53.8	1990/2013, 2003/2013
God made human	19.2	17.1	13.9	1990/2003

★Statistically significant

My analysis of the 1990 survey concluded that British Quakers were 'post-Christian' in that so many participants used an alternative theological language with which to describe their spiritual experience (Dandelion 1996). 39 per cent in 1990 considered Jesus an important figure in their spiritual life (29 per cent in 2013) and terms which linked Jesus to Christ were the least popular responses. In the comparison above, theistic terms have also fallen in popularity.

'Which of the following best describes what prayer is for you?'

	1990 %	2003 %	2013 %	Significant differences★
Talking to / listening to God	42.5	36.3	35	1990/2013, 1990/2013
Asking God to change things	12.6	8	7.4	1990/2003, 1990/2013
Seeking communion with the divine	32.2	25.5	30.2	1990/2003
Seeking enlightenment / guidance	60.6	50.4	52.2	1990/2003, 1990/2013
Still and silent waiting	51.1	49.5	63.2	1990/2013, 2003/2013
Praise	23.8	19.4	13.4	1990/2013, 2003/2013
Confession	22.9	14.8	10.2	All
Seeking healing	31.7	23.8	22.3	1990/2003, 1990/2013
Thanksgiving	60.6	50.4	52.2	1990/2003, 1990/2013

★Statistically significant

Those behaviours described by terms with an explicit religious connotation dropped in popularity. The same is true of behaviours in Meeting for Worship.

'What kind of activity best describes what you usually do in Meeting for Worship?'

	1990 %	2003 %	2013 %	Significant differences★
Praying	35.4	34	28.7	1990/2013, 2003/2013
Praising	12.2	13.7	7.2	1990/2013, 2003/2013
Meditating	42.8	46.9	39.8	2003/2013
Listening	52.6	65.9	64.7	1990/2003, 1990/2013
Seeking God's will	32.6	25	20.2	1990/2003, 1990/2013
Sleeping	5.8	7.3	4.3	2003/2013
Worshipping God	17	17.3	8.6	1990/2013, 2003/2013
Thinking	64.1	57.2	57.3	1990/2003, 1990/2013
Opening up to the spirit	59.5	66.8	55	1990/2003, 2003/2013

★Statistically significant

'Do you think of yourself as a…'

	1990 %	2003 %	2013 %	Significant differences★
Christian	51.5	45.5	36.5	All
Universalist	22.5	18.8	15.6	1990/2013

★Statistically significant

Christian self-identification has dropped between the three surveys. Universalism, a popular alternative to christocentricism in the 1980s, is no longer so current as a label given that British Quakerism is self-perceived as universalist and it is unsurprising that fewer people self-designate as such.

Education level

	1990 %	2003 %	2013 %	Significant differences★
Higher degree (postgraduate level)	16.6	23.1	32.7	All

★Statistically significant

Finally, we can note that educational attainment has risen.

Comparison between 2013 and other national surveys

One of the original features of the 2013 survey was the inclusion of questions from national surveys to allow comparison between the Quaker sample and the British population generally, such as the British Social Attitudes Survey (Britsocat) as well as the European Values Survey (EVS).

'Some people say that being Christian is important for being truly British. Others say it is not important. How important do you think it is?'

	BQS 2013 %	Britsocat 2008 %
Very/fairly important	9.7*	23.7*
Not at all important	64.5*	37.7*

*Statistically significant at 95%

'Some people think that women are still not treated equally in British society, while others think that efforts to change the status of women have gone too far. Which of the statements below comes closest to your opinion?'

	BQS 2013 %	Britsocat 2008 %
More should be done	90.8*	76.2*
Changes have gone too far	3.4*	18.3*

*Statistically significant at 95%

Given the historic Quaker view of men and women as spiritually equal, high levels of responding positively to the idea that more should be done and low levels of agreement with the idea that enough had been done, is expected.

'Some people live with partners of the same sex. Using the statements below, please say whether you approve or disapprove of laws that treat these partnerships somewhat like marriage?'

	BQS 2013 %	Britsocat 2008 %
Approve	79.7*	40.7*
Disapprove	4.6*	25.9*

*Statistically significant at 95%

These figures are unsurprising given the 2009 Yearly Meeting commitment to campaign for 'equal marriage', although it would be interesting as well to have a more recent survey of the British population. Some respondents felt the question weak as it referred to '*somewhat* like marriage' where their preference was for 'just like marriage'. However, the question was not overly problematic in this potential ambiguity: approving was understood to be supporting increased rights for same-sex couples.

'Please mark for each of the following whether you think it can never be justified, always be justified, or something in between'

	BQS 2013 % Disapprove	EVS 2008 % Disapprove
Claiming state benefits to which you are not entitled	82.6★	86.3★
Cheating on tax if you have the chance	90.8★	79.7★
Joyriding	96.1	95.8
Taking the drug marijuana or hashish	43.7★	69.8★
Lying in your own interest	75.1★	64.7★
Married men/women having an affair	56.7	54.3
Someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties	94.4★	89.8★
Homosexuality	5.7★	28★
Abortion	7.9★	29.2★
Divorce	2.9★	13★
Euthanasia	12.2★	23.3★
Suicide	22.6★	49.5★
Paying cash for services to avoid taxes	61.7★	54.9★
Having casual sex	44.8★	50.2★
Avoiding a fare on public transport	79.6★	68.5★
Prostitution	53.6	54.9
Scientific experiments on human embryos	26.9★	45.4★
Genetic manipulation of food stuffs	30.2★	52.1★
Artificial insemination or in-vitro fertilisation	3.6★	19.4★
Death penalty	92.1★	30.2★

★Statistically significant at 95%

This question was challenging for many respondents who found it difficult to answer. They frequently wrote on the survey forms and asked whether the question referred to something being personally justified or justified per se. This distinction in itself is interesting. The results are unsurprising with those items that involve dishonesty meeting with low levels of approval from the members of the Quaker group, one of whose tenets is honesty and integrity. Sexual morality is more permissive, as is the attitude to suicide, euthanasia and casual drug use (see Chambers 2010). There is strong disapproval of the death penalty, again unsurprising given the Quaker attitude towards killing.

'Generally speaking, how concerned are you about environmental issues?'

	BQS 2013 %	Brisocat 2010 %
Concerned	88★	55.6★
Not at all concerned	1.9★	14.7★

★Statistically significant at 95%

Quakers are here again positioned on the progressive end of British society, with higher levels of concern about environmental issues than the British population as a whole. Again, the three-year gap between these two surveys may belie a lower degree of difference between the two populations in 2015.

Social Class[2]

	BQS 2013 %	Britsocat 2012 %
I & II	83.6★	40.4★
III Non-manual	11.4★	20.3★
III Manual	0.9[a]	19.4
IV & V	4.1★	19.8★

★Statistically significant at 95%

[a] Cannot calculate significance

Social class was calculated based on respondents' current occupation following the Registrar General's Social Class categories:

I Professional etc. occupations

2 It is worth noting that all the percentages used in these calculations are valid percentages. Because we did not have information on the retirees' prior occupations (59.6% of all respondents), they were not included in this calculation.

II Managerial and technical occupations 'Non-manual'

III (Non-manual) Skilled occupations

III (Manual) Skilled occupations

IV Partly skilled occupations 'Manual'

V Unskilled occupations

No survey has previously measured the social class of the British Quaker group. The findings here fit with the anecdotal evidence of a highly educated group who are largely middle or ruling class. As above, 32 per cent had a qualification beyond undergraduate degree. Ten per cent of the whole sample had a doctorate.

Ethnicity

	BQS 2013 %	Census 2011[a] %
White	98.9★	85.8★
Mixed/multiple ethnic group	0.4[b]	2.2
Asian/Asian British	0.8★	7.5★
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	0[a]	3.3
Other ethnic group	0[a]	1

★Statistically significant at 95%

[a]*NB* England & Wales

[b]Cannot calculate statistical significance

Using the 2011 British Census question on ethnicity allowed a comparison between British Quakers and the British population. Quakers are largely white with very small percentages of other ethnic groups, these groups far more under-represented in the Quaker sample than the British population.

Latent Class Analysis

Jennifer Hampton conducted a latent class analysis amongst the 84 per cent who self-identified as Quaker (2014: 24–27). This is a form of analysis that looks beneath the presenting responses and identifies patterns of response across the whole survey to identify sub-populations that are not otherwise visible. Hampton looked at the belief profiles of the respondents and found three kinds of response pattern (Hampton 2014: 27–28).

Hampton's analysis of the 2013 British Quaker Survey reveals a set of three groupings amongst those who self-identify as Quaker, what she has called 'Traditional', 'Liberal' and 'non-Theist'. These clusters are not due to generational differences but are distinct cross-age cohorts. The 'Traditional' Quakers, 32 per

cent of the whole sample, have a high percentage of belief in God and self-identification as Christian. Jesus is more likely to be described in Christ language than by the other groups, and the importance of Jesus is highest for this group. A high percentage believes that prayer can affect the way things are on earth, and read the Bible regularly (Hampton 2014: 28).

The 'Liberal Group', 50 per cent of the whole sample, occupy a middle ground. They believe in God less than the Traditionalist (55 per cent as opposed to 90 per cent) but far more than the 'Non-Theist' cluster. They pray less often and are less certain than the Traditionalists about the power of prayer. They are more likely to read *Quaker Faith and Practice* than the Bible, less likely than the Traditionalists to see themselves as 'Christian' and more likely to see themselves as 'spiritual' (Hampton 2014: 29–30).

Hampton's 'Non-Theists', 18 per cent of the whole, are far more likely to say they do not believe in God (9 per cent said they did and 49 per cent said they did not) and the least likely to self-describe as Christian. They never pray, self-describe as non-theist, agnostic, humanist, see Meeting for Worship in terms of thinking, and see Quaker Business Method in terms of consensus and not as 'seeking the will of God'. They are far less likely to have served as clerk and indeed are less likely to be a member (just 65 per cent are in formal membership). They are more likely to believe that violence can be morally justified (Hampton 2014: 28–29).

Qualitative Work

The qualitative work sought to get beneath these figures and to see how far statistical distinctions were realised in interview settings. Giselle Vincett interviewed 20 participants over four months by phone. In our 2015 presentation at the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group conference, Vincett related:

> One thing which became immediately clear to me as I conducted the interviews was that there was a lot more uncertainty around the belief questions than we had thought based upon survey results. It was evident, for example, that even those we had labelled 'Traditionalists' might, in other contexts, be labelled simply as 'Liberal Christians', and most of these deconstructed 'traditional' doctrinal theologies in various ways. For example, May (North East, 81, from a Presbyterian background but Quaker for almost 50 years and who sometimes attends Roman Catholic Mass) identifies as Christian and ticks that she believes in God, but says of Christ 'I don't know!… It doesn't bother me if he's the Christ or not'. Donald (Scotland, 41, former Anglican) identifies as Christian and says he believes in Jesus as 'the Christ', but speaks of God using language drawn from both science and alternative spiritualities and describes a divine which is not only immanent and earth-centred, but (importantly) changing.

It was not that the categories completely disappeared; some respondents were more likely to use language drawn from Christianity, others were more likely to have been influenced by Buddhism or alternative spiritualities. However, the *blurring* of neat categories or boundaries was typical of respondents. Let's

look at one example, the 'Non-Theists'. These respondents may belong to the Quaker Non-Theist network, they may have ticked that they do not believe in 'God'. However it was clear that what this often meant was that they believed differently to the way they interpreted the survey questions. Typically, they would write things like 'but not in the way you might think!' in the margins of survey responses. It seemed that what 'Non-Theists' prioritised was a *flexibility* of the divine and the experiential, but, on the other hand, this was also a concern of many of the 'Traditionalists'. So Jenny, who identified as non-theist says,

> I believe in God in different ways at different times… I believe that God is as real as anything else… You can look at it scientifically or you can look at it socially; … it's about the *meaning*. So I believe in God in a very social way. I don't think God exists in isolation, the concept of it is together.

It was not that Jenny didn't believe in God per se, it was that she believed in a particular *kind* of God, which was not what she thought others meant by God. More importantly, she did not want to draw boundaries between these things, but emphasised that God could be viewed in many ways: scientifically, socially or other. Jenny, I should point out, ticked 'not sure' about God on her survey, ticked that she believes in Jesus as 'the Christ', and that she believes in 'spirits of the natural world' ('I think there are spirits of everything and that they are everywhere'). This flexible and boundary crossing approach is perhaps unsurprising given the history of British Quakerism—the emphasis on experience over doctrine and the flexible silence in which Meetings are conducted—but also perhaps reflects the demographic and ideology of most Quakers: that is, that they are educated questioners who would be uncomfortable with language they would see as 'limiting' the divine and who are very liberal politically. As Jenny puts it, 'I do consider myself a person of faith. Sometimes I'm Christian, sometimes not… I don't actually like certainties'.

Vincett continued:

> At first we noted a strong diversity and uncertainty in belief—or, more accurately, a hesitancy to say definitively that the divine was always one way or the other or that truth was capitalised. The identity of Quaker seems to provide a 'meta-label' or umbrella which drew together these diverse beliefs and confirmed Dandelion's previous ideas about unity of Quaker practice being prioritised over unity of belief. Also confirmed was Ben's previous finding about the 'absolute perhaps' which captures the hesitancy about definitive belief. Quakers don't like creeds—they never have, and they have in the last century asserted that the divine reveals itself continuously so that are open to new expressions of the divine and new language for the divine.
>
> That said, as we coded the data, it became apparent that actually we were seeing a large amount of *agreement* about belief. First of all, surprisingly perhaps, almost universally respondents believed in what we might inclusively call the 'other-than-human', that even though the divine was often revealed and experienced socially

> and relationally, that it was not '*only*' social; there was some 'mystery' (Helena) beyond that or that moves in that as well as in the natural world. Because of the Quaker dislike of 'labels' which limit, there was hesitancy about language—some had issues with the word 'God' because of a perception of an exclusivist legacy surrounding that term (patriarchal, hierarchal, colonialist, etc). This is unsurprising given the strong feminist and inclusivist values evinced by Quakers both historically and in their responses to the ethics questions on the survey. Others felt uncomfortable with the word 'divine', feeling that it suggested a false separation from the everyday or mundane. Once again, the roots of this attitude may lie in the Quaker belief in being able to experience the divine anywhere (as equally likely on a hilltop, as the founder George Fox did, as in a Meeting House). But laying the difficulty of terminology aside for a moment (and remember that labels aren't very important to these respondents anyway), we can begin to identify certain shared beliefs.

The divine or other-than-human is thus:

1. Strongly this-worldly and emphasising the natural world
2. Experiential (with the caveat that although Quakers often have powerful spiritual experiences, they are—ironically—cautious about publicly declaring them)
3. Changing, or potentially so
4. Both/and
5. *Can* be personal, but largely described in terms which are both inclusive and abstract, such as 'spirit', 'light' (note Quaker history here)—exception is natural terms
6. Divine often described using language or ideas drawn from science, especially quantum physics
7. A verb—in the *doing* (see #3), supporting a strongly performance-based spirituality. belief only really makes sense or has meaning in the doing or living out, especially with others—not necessarily humans
8. 'Can meet you where you are'—there are inclusive echoes here, but also echoes of the therapeutic turn
9. Despite the strong sense that the divine can be encountered/revealed/experienced anywhere, an agreement that there are some places and times when this might be more likely (in the natural world was a strong theme, for example, or sensed in Meeting)

Vincett recorded:

> As I conducted interviews, I began to feel a sense of déjà vu. I felt I had heard similar things from respondents in previous research I had conducted. Most

> notably, research with feminist Christian women, but also certain echoes from interviews with those involved with alternative spiritualities. Based upon these characteristics and the ones we already know or confirmed from our survey, I suggest that British Quakers overlap with others who we might describe as 'very liberal' believers. We can see that British Quakers overlap with what Gordon Lynch, for example, calls 'Progressive Spirituality' (2007), Richard Flory and Donald Miller (2008) call Christian 'liberal innovators', or are part of what Leigh Eric Schmidt sees as a strong tradition in the US of liberal Christianity (2005).

Gordon Lynch sees four main concerns of 'progressive spirituality', which for him includes both Christians and those involved in many forms of alternative spiritualities: it desires 'an approach to religion or spirituality that is appropriate for modern, liberal societies, the rejection of patriarchal forms of religion…, the move to resacralize science (particularly quantum physics and contemporary forms of cosmology), and the search for a nature-based spirituality' (10). Lynch goes on to say that another defining feature of progressive spirituality is 'a sympathy with, and often active engagement in, green or left-of-centre political concerns' (19), along with a prioritising of spiritual searching over religious certainties (24). Importantly however, Quakerism gives Friends an established and communal ritual structure, a set of ethical imperatives and accepted performances, and a long history of acceptance of spiritual seeking, change in ideas about the divine and liberal politics.

Richard Flory and Donald Miller (best known for their studies with young Christians in the US) identify four emerging trends amongst what they call post-Boomers in the US. But it is the group they call 'Innovators' and particularly 'Liberal Innovators' who overlap with much of what we observe here with British Quakers. 'Innovators' according to Flory and Miller (2008), prioritise performance and experience over passive, cerebral faith. They are 'solidly middle class' and 'college educated', which leads them to a 'more involved, critically engaged faith'. They privilege 'seeking', constantly evolving or innovating and are open to innovations from outside Christianity, particularly because of a concern to be relevant to the wider culture. Further, they are relatively 'nonintitutionalized and non-hierarchical', based on an egalitarian structure (2008: 19–51) with strong environmental, social justice and gender concerns reflected in their theologies.

Finally, Eric Leigh Schmidt has traced the history of this type of liberal Christianity or progressive spirituality, arguing that it is not new, but has strong roots in liberal Western traditions, including Quakerism. Schmidt lists the elements of religious liberalism both historically and now:

- Individual aspiration after mystical experience or religious feeling;
- The valuing of silence, solitude, and serene meditation;
- The immanence of the transcendent—in each person and in nature;

- The cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety as well as unity in diversity;
- Ethical earnestness in pursuit of justice-producing reforms or "social salvation";
- An emphasis on creative self-expression and adventuresome seeking. (2005: 12)

Vincett continues:

> I see certain similarities and differences between Quakers and my previous work with feminist liberal Christians and pagans. For example: the apparent move away from universalism, which we have noted in our data matches a similar trend in paganism, noted by Graham Harvey and myself (Harvey and Vincett 2012). Similarly, the Quaker suspicion of *publicly* sharing strong spiritual experiences (visions, etc)—even, (perhaps especially) by those who have experienced them—matches a similar suspicion by Christian liberals (and which differentiates them from early mystical Quakers, like George Fox, or more recent liberal mystic Quakers such as Rufus Jones). These experiences largely remain private, even though British Quakerism provides the perfect ritual platform for sharing them. The hesitancy and fluidity of both belief in and language for God also matches that of liberal feminist Christians, as does the tendency to end up using abstract language (with, again, the exception of language drawn from the natural world) in order to be inclusive. Quakers differ from the data on liberal Christians that I have worked with, in the *degree* of uncertainty that they are willing to accept (and even celebrate), which makes them much more similar to those involved in alternative spiritualities, perhaps because, as I have said, British Quakers have a stable and accepting institutional structure, whereas liberal feminist Christians, for example, are on the margins of the Church. Lastly, Quakers are more apt than liberal feminist Christians to see God and the natural world as both/and. Whereas most of the liberal feminist Christians I spoke to would stop short of seeing a tree as divine in itself and would be more apt to say it was part of Creation and thus part of God in that way, Quakers are more likely to say 'that's too black and white' (Judith, 76) or to use words like 'energy' to describe a unique 'something' to the tree (Barbara, 65); Robert, 59, I think articulates the Quaker attitude well: he suggests (as Jenny did) that the important part of the divine is 'about a sense of relatedness'. One can get this from interacting with people, but one can also feel it in other things, such as a tree—'the spirit in the tree confirms the possibility of relationship with it'. Thus, most Quaker informants did not go so far as to say that a tree was divine in and of itself, but many ascribed a unique 'spirit' to trees, and most felt that they did not want to limit their ideas of either the world or God by drawing boundaries.

Vincett suggests:

> The qualitative aspect of this research project, whilst drawing on the significant level of quantitative data and the theorising that the latent class analysis had facilitated, drew alternative and original conclusions. This raises important

questions about researchers relying solely on one form of data collection. Firstly the three types of believer identified by the latent class analysis become masked by the way in which respondents talked about their beliefs and practice. Here, accounts of journey, change and a comfort with doubt and uncertainty become predominant themes. Whilst belief is important to individual Quakers, accounts support ideas of Quakerism as non-doctrinal (Plüss 1995) and the idea of the 'absolute perhaps' (Dandelion 2004). Even powerful spiritual experience is rarely rehearsed publicly but is instead treated with caution or suspicion. 'Quaker' is used as a meta-label by participants to construct unity between group members and to diminish dissimilarity in terms of aspects of religiosity considered as non-essential. However, the qualitative analysis does reveal a common core of beliefs, challenging earlier scholarly insights that belief is marginal and wholly diverse. Dandelion argued that only the idea of 'that of God in everyone' was shared (1996). This study shows a group of commonly held theological attitudes and beliefs as we have shown, and which would be recognisable to liberal or progressive Christians and those in alternative spiritualities. Thirdly, this research shows how Quakers are both like other liberal Christians in their values and beliefs but also unlike them in the strength of their peace witness and in their degree of comfort with uncertainty.

The 2023 Survey

The aspiration for the 2023 survey, beyond encouraging the potential for thousands of respondents, is to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research. Another possibility is to use parts of the British Quaker survey internationally. Following the 2013 survey, Peter Williams replicated the 2013 survey as an online invitation to all Australian Quakers and his findings have been published in this journal (Williams and Hampton 2016; Williams and Thomson 2018). An American version of the survey form was also trialled in Western Yearly Meeting. A global survey of Friends worldwide appears too ambitious at present, given the lack of internet access everywhere and the multiplicity of languages amongst Quakers worldwide, but a pilot survey of those 800 Friends attending the 2024 FWCC World Plenary (with just three official languages) is being planned.

Conclusion

The advantage of survey work is the collection of large amounts of data relatively easily that can be used to generalise about specific populations. The disadvantage is the way in which questions can be understood differently by different participants and that the nuance of responses can only really be investigated using qualitative methods. Together, however, they form a powerful tool and it can only be hoped that the predominance of surveys amongst British Friends becomes a less idiosyncratic phenomenon and that we can begin to learn as much about other Quaker constituencies.

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