

QUAKER BELIEFS: DIVERSE YET DISTINCTIVE

Rosamund Bourke

University of Wales, Bangor

ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to obtain the views of Quakers about their beliefs. 166 members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) responded to a questionnaire about Quaker faith and practice. The respondents largely agreed with traditional Quaker beliefs. As might be expected from previous studies, a diversity of views was found and it was not possible to calculate an 'index of Quakerism'. Eighty per cent were over the age of 50. Their attitudes to religion were probably formed before the changes in cultural values of the latter half of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Quakers, religious belief, prayer, worship, silence, post-Christian

Introduction

This research was part of an extensive study of the beliefs of religious groups which aimed to gather information on the beliefs and attitudes of worshippers. The questionnaire designed for a survey of church congregations included such items as 'I am drawn nearer to God through the worship of this church' 'I find the traditional forms of worship helpful', 'Jesus really helped lepers' 'Churches should be actively involved in educational issues'.

For a study carried out on the same Sunday in four churches in a North of England town the questionnaire was completed by over 400 churchgoers. 177 of these were Roman Catholic, 108 were Anglican, 75 were Methodists and 47 were from the United Reformed Church (Francis 2000). Forty per cent of participants were over 60 years of age. The different faith traditions among these churches were found to generate different belief profiles. For example, Roman Catholics were more inclined to feel drawn nearer to God through the ritual of their church, while the members of the Free Churches felt nearer to God through the preaching of their church.

Quaker Faith and Practice

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) differs from institutional Christian Churches in several ways. It therefore seemed that a questionnaire purposefully adapted to the distinctive faith and practice of Quakers might provide a valuable perspective on questions of religious beliefs and forms of worship.

The following are some of the basic Quaker beliefs as outlined by Hans Weening (1997) on a Quaker website. At the centre of Quaker faith lies the concept of the Inner Light—‘that of God’ which is implanted in every human being. First-hand knowledge of God is possible only through what is experienced by the individual human being. True religion cannot be learned from books or set prayers, from words or rituals. The Bible is not considered the final test of right conduct and true doctrine. Friends can accommodate a wide range of religious views among their members. Prayer and love of God are of primary importance. Friends reject outward ceremonies and sacraments, without rejecting the spiritual reality they symbolize.

What visitors from denominational churches might notice first during a ‘meeting for worship’, is that those present wait together in silence. ‘Silence is one of the best preparations for communion [with God] and for the reception of inspiration and guidance’ (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 2.16). By corporately seeking God’s will the worshippers become open to one another. Usually there will be some brief spoken contributions, ‘vocal ministry’—anyone may feel the call to speak. Contrary to popular belief, neither singing nor laughter is forbidden (*Quakers in Wales Today* 1997: 18). In the congregational churches, ‘hymns play a central part in group worship, as those present share in proclaiming their beliefs and generating shared emotions’ (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). *Common Worship Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (2000: 26) notes that periods of silence may be kept at appropriate points in the service, such as during the prayers. However, ‘it is when the framework of worship is clear and familiar and the texts are known by heart that the poetry of praise and the passion of prayer can transcend the printed word’ (preface: x). In a discussion of the part music may play in worship, Sloboda (2000), noting that many traditions of worship encourage the development of an attentiveness and a readiness to be ‘spoken to’, proposes that music may smooth our path towards such attentiveness, so that we are made ready to ‘hear God’s voice’. Miller and Strongman (2002) describe a particularly striking use of music among Pentecostal-Charismatic worshippers. From questionnaire responses by 95 members and interviews with 8 members of a Pentecostal church, they concluded that the music used in Pentecostal church worship elicited strong experiences of positive emotions and acted as a major

facilitator of religious experience. Interaction between the congregants and the leaders (usually the preacher) was encouraged throughout the service.

From the Quaker belief in the ability of all to have direct relationship with God comes the concept of a priesthood of all believers. Thus there are no appointed priests. However, elders undertake some of the responsibilities of an ordained minister or a churchwarden in denominational churches (*Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1995: ch. 12).

Because all of life, when lived in the Spirit, is sacramental, no time should be marked out as more holy; hence what God has done for humankind should be always remembered and not on only occasions such as Christmas and Easter (*Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1995: 27–42).

The above summary of Quaker beliefs, based on *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995), the book of discipline of the Yearly Meeting of Religious Society of Friends (1994), on a booklet by Hans Weening (1997) and on *Quakers in Wales Today* (1997), has been questioned by Dandelion (1996). He concluded from an extensive survey of 692 Quakers that rejection of creeds has tended, in itself, to have become a ‘behavioural creed’. The silence during worship means that individual beliefs are not made public. The unity of the group is maintained only by a conservative culture operating around the way the group is organized. Although the Society is rooted in the Christian faith, some 50 per cent cannot now be considered Christian. He also compared the answers of his sample of Quakers with groups from other Christian churches and from a student group who were neither Quaker nor religious.

Table 1. *Quaker Beliefs Compared with Non-Quaker Beliefs¹*

Question and Response	Student	Ecum	C of E	RC	Char	QQ
<i>Do you believe in God?</i>						
Yes	54.5	88.2	100.0	100.0	96.6	74.0
No	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4	3.1
Not sure	27.3	11.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.9
<i>Is Jesus an important figure in your spiritual life?</i>						
Yes	23.8	64.7	78.1	97.4	100.0	39.7
No	42.9	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0	20.5
It varies	19.0	35.3	15.6	0.0	0.0	32.1
Not sure	14.3	0.0	6.3	0.0	0.0	7.5

1. This table is taken with permission from Dandelion (1996: 167, 174).

As can be seen from Table 1 (Dandelion 1996: 167, 174) belief in God and the acknowledgment of the importance of Jesus were found to be very much less among Quakers than among the non-Quaker Christians. The data for the denominational churches have been largely confirmed by Francis (2000). Ninety-five per cent of the churchgoers who participated in Francis's survey stated that they believed in God and in Jesus Christ.

Method

Participants

Fourteen out of the sixteen Quaker Meetings in England and Wales that were approached agreed to distribute a questionnaire on Quaker faith and practice. All the Meetings consisted of 50 or more members. The Clerk of the Meeting was asked to invite all who were present at a given meeting for worship to participate. In fact 81 per cent of the respondents were formal Members of their Meeting. Thus the responses were largely provided by experienced Members. 370 questionnaires were sent out. Completed questionnaires were received from 61 men and 105 women, a return of around 45 per cent. Only 20 per cent were under the age of 50, 39 per cent were between 50 and 69 and 41 per cent were 70 or over.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to gather two main kinds of data.

First, to gather data on the background of the participants, a series of fixed format items was compiled to assess frequency of attending meetings, private prayer, reading the Bible and other religious material.

Second, to gather data on the beliefs of the participants, a scale of 24 items was compiled, based on *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995), visits to Quaker meetings and discussions with Quaker friends. Each item was arranged for choice on a five-point Likert scale: Agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly. While questions from the broader congregational survey were borne in mind, the scale was purposely designed to cover questions that seemed to touch upon points uniquely characteristic of the Society of Friends, for example the rejection of creeds as tending to 'fetter the search for truth' (*Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1995: 27.23). Since some Friends are not comfortable with the language used by Christian tradition, care was taken to avoid such language. As music seems now to be recognized by some meetings as having a part to play in worship (*Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1995: 21.30-31) one general question on music and religious contemplation and one on the desirability of having music during meetings for worship were included.

Mundane thoughts may enter the heads of any congregation during services and sermons are not always inspiring. It seemed likely that Friends might have similar feelings in the context of meetings for worship. Two questions explored the proposition 'there is that of God in every man'. One questioned whether this would be felt to be true of a mass murderer, the other in the case of a personal wrong. Besides 'theological' questions, some of the 'ethical' questions discussed in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1995: 22) were included.

Results

Quaker Background

94 per cent of the participants stated that they had been attending Friends' meetings for three years or more. The percentages of the respondents who attended meetings, prayed on their own and read religious literature are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents' Religious Activities

Attendance at Meetings

	Worship %	Other %
Every week	65	2
At least once a month	31	13
At least six times a year	4	17
At least once a year	0	46
Never	0	22

Frequency of Prayer

	%
Every day	52
At least once a week	20
At least once a month	10
At least once a year	14
Never	4

Religious Literature

	Bible %	Other %
Every day	6	10
At least once a week	10	24
At least once a month	18	40
Less often than once a month	57	26
Never	9	0

Attendance at other Friends' Meetings was much less than for meetings for worship. This may have been because so many of the participants were rather elderly. Among the participants in the study reported by Francis (2000) 87 per cent claimed to attend services at least once a week, with a further 8 per cent attending every other week. If the percentages for Quaker attendance at Meetings weekly and at least once a month are added together, the 96 per cent is very close to the 95 per cent for the churchgoers. The percentages for reading the Bible and other religious literature might be compared with Dandelion's (1996) findings. The Quakers in his survey gave a low agreement to views of the Bible as an ultimate authority on religious questions and 26 per cent stated that they read the Bible at home less often than once a month. Daily Bible reading among the churchgoers varied from 32 per cent of the Methodists to 6 per cent of the Catholics.

A general finding in the psychology of religion is that women are in many ways more religious than men (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Francis and Wilcox 1994). Inspection of the results revealed that there was little difference between the male and female responses. In the case of prayer, reading the Bible and other religious books, male respondents scored on average slightly higher than the female respondents. But the numbers were too small to be more than suggestive.

In reply to the question 'Have you ever regularly attended (i.e. at least six times a year) any other religious groups?' 22 per cent answered 'None'. Thirty-nine per cent had attended an Anglican church. A variety of other faiths were mentioned—3 had been Roman Catholic, 9 had come from the United Reformed Church and 13 had been Methodists—but only a few had been regular attenders at more than one or two other religious groups.

Quaker Beliefs

The results of the questions on the participants' beliefs are summarized in Table 3.

As inspection of Table 3 shows, the statement which receives the most definite rejection is the one suggesting that an ordained minister might guide worship—nearly 60 per cent are strongly against and 33 per cent against. Sixty-three per cent agreed that communion with God was best obtained by silent worship in a gathered company. Five other statements specifically referred to practices of the denominational churches. Observance of sacraments was rejected by 90 per cent, credal statements of belief and formal confession of sin were rejected by 80 per cent, baptism by over 70 per cent and communion using bread and wine by over 60 per cent. Nearly one half agreed that they sometimes have a sense of being *prayed through* when speaking at a meeting,

Table 3. *Frequencies of Response to Questions on Quaker Beliefs*

	AS	A	NC	D	DS
Communion with God is best attained by silent worship in a gathered company	27.7	45.3	17.6	8.8	0.6
Music helps to quieten my inner voices and let God speak	4.3	26.1	31.1	33.5	5.0
I often find much of the vocal ministry at meetings is not worth listening to	0.6	9.8	8.5	61.6	19.5
Sometimes when I speak at a meeting I have a sense of being <i>prayed through</i>	13.0	36.4	29.9	14.9	5.8
We have a duty to help other worshippers to share their experiences	12.1	52.1	24.8	10.1	0.6
I often find mundane thoughts intrude during silent worship	19.4	63.6	1.8	14.5	0.6
Communion with the Divine is not helped by physical symbols of bread or wine	33.5	28.0	21.7	13.0	3.7
I would like music to find a place at meetings for worship	1.8	18.4	20.9	42.9	16.0
I sometimes wish for an ordained minister to guide our meetings for worship	1.2	2.4	3.0	33.5	59.8
Observance of sacraments is not essential to full religious experience	60.0	30.3	4.2	1.8	3.6
Credal statements of belief may act to close off new religious experiences	35.0	45.4	11.7	7.4	0.6
Bringing my failings into God's light is more effective than joining in a formal confession of sin	31.5	52.5	13.0	2.5	0.6
Baptism should be not with water but 'with the Holy Spirit'	23.7	49.4	23.7	2.6	0.6
It is good to mark Christmas Day with celebrations and music	7.3	62.8	20.1	9.1	0.6
The meaning of Easter should be remembered on every day of the year	17.3	53.1	17.9	9.9	1.9
Anger directed towards righting wrongs is justified	7.9	48.5	21.2	15.2	7.3
I find it hard to see that of God in a mass murderer	6.3	51.6	13.8	23.3	5.0
I find it particularly difficult to see that of God in someone who has done me a wrong	0	25.9	17.9	49.4	6.8
The paramount aim of education should be the development of spiritual life	9.4	28.7	34.4	26.3	1.3
It is wrong to judge a relationship by its outward appearance	34.4	60.1	4.9	0.6	0
A celebration of commitment should be available for homosexual couples	14.2	51.9	23.5	8.6	1.9
Sincerely committed divorced persons should be allowed to remarry in a Friends' meeting	36.8	58.3	4.3	0.6	0
Occasionally abortion may be the least sinful choice	15.2	56.1	21.3	5.5	1.8
Quakers should take a strong lead in developing non-violent strategies for dealing with disputes	54.3	39.6	4.3	1.8	0

AS = Agree Strongly A = Agree NC = Not Certain D = Disagree DS = Disagree Strongly

which might indicate a sense of the Holy Spirit. The question on mundane thoughts intruding during worship might well elicit similar responses among worshippers in congregational churches. The respondents agreed that the meaning of Easter should be remembered on every day of the year. While this is a view with which all Christians should agree, the congregational churches still regard Easter and Christmas as of salient importance, indeed these are perhaps the events most likely to attract worshippers to the Christian churches. Those who agreed that music helped to deepen contemplation also tended to agree that they would like music to find a place in meetings for worship. The replies to the 'ethical' questions on human relationships and wrongdoing showed the liberal attitude of the respondents, which accords well with the views expressed in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995). A high proportion agreed that it is wrong to judge relationships by outward appearances and that divorced persons might be allowed to remarry in a Friends' meeting. On the other hand, there was uncertainty and both some agreement and disagreement with the statement that the paramount aim of education should be the development of spiritual life.

Table 4. Significant correlations between each of seven variables

	CG	CD	OM	OS	CS	BF	BW
Communion with God (CG)							
Communion with the Divine (CD)	0.23**						
Ordained minister (OM)	-0.16*	-0.20**					
Observance of sacraments (OS)		0.45***					
Credal statements (CS)			-0.30***	0.16*			
Bringing my failings (BF)	0.21**		-0.17*	0.26***	0.54***		
Baptism should be not with water (BW)	0.25**	-0.19*		0.21**	0.23**	0.41***	

*P < 0.05

**P < 0.01

***P < 0.001

There appeared to be considerable agreement in the answers to the seven questions that particularly seemed to distinguish Quakerism from other faiths. This suggested that it might be possible to extract an 'index of Quakerism'. A few statistically significant correlations were indeed found. Correlations that did not reach significance have been omitted from Table 4. Table 4 shows that the strongest correlations were found between 'observance of sacraments' and 'communion with the Divine', between 'bringing my failings into God's light' and 'credal statements' and 'baptism should be not with water'. However, many of the significant correlations were quite low and others were not statistically significant.

Discussion

The participants in this research are characterized by their high frequency of attendance at meetings for worship and of private prayer. Judging by their replies, they appear to be content with their Quaker identity. Only about 9 per cent fail to agree that communion with God is best attained by silent worship in a gathered company, only 5 per cent disagree that observance of sacraments is not essential to full religious experience. Only 8 per cent disagree that credal statements may close off new religious experiences and only 3 per cent that bringing failings into God's light is more effective than formal confessions of sin and that baptism should be with the Holy Spirit. Nearly 59 per cent would not welcome music during meetings. Over 90 per cent would not relish the possibility of having an ordained minister to guide meetings for worship. Views on ethical questions were also in line with what might be expected from Quakers.

While there is considerable agreement with the statements that characterize Quaker faith and practice, there was sufficient diversity of views to prevent the calculation of an 'index of Quakerism'. In the foreword to his book *Dandelion* (1996) suggested that the theology of Quakers has come to be individualist, and thus pluralistic. His research found not just individual differences in religious beliefs within Meetings, but also large variations of trend between Meetings. Individuals are free to select their Meetings and where they have a choice, theological character is one of the dimensions along which choice is made. Again, Pluss (1998) noted that when Quakers are asked how they define their faith, their answers are characterized by a high degree of diversity and the only definition of their faith which Friends share is that Quakerism stems from experience. This may well be true of the present sample.

The verbal content of denominational church services may well work towards uniformity within one faith community. However, considerable heterogeneity may also be found in the denominational churches (Davidson 1972). Davidson studied 577 members of two Methodist and two Baptist churches using a scale to assess two types of belief, one 'otherworldly' in orientation, the other socially inclined. Some participants scored high on both indices, some high on one and only moderately on the other, others scored only moderately on one or low on both. For a church to be rated as 'homogenous', only one category of belief had to prevail among at least two-thirds of the congregation. Only one of the Baptist churches qualified as homogenous, all the other congregations were classed as heterogeneous.

It may be that the diversity of beliefs among Quakers is too complex for

categorizing on such as a simple system. As Dandelion (1996) argues, the popular categorization as 'Christocentric' vs 'Universalist' does not represent the complexity of Quaker views. Davidson points out that variation in belief can be constructive in fostering breadth in religious outlook. Bradney and Cowie (2000) from their anthropological study of a Quaker group consider that one of the most interesting aspects of contemporary Quakerism is that individuals holding apparently irreconcilable theological views, often deeply opposed to each other, can coexist peacefully within one religious movement.

Psychologists have often found that the elderly tend to be more devout than young or middle-aged persons (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Hood *et al.* 1996). Eighty per cent of the participants in the present research were over the age of 50; 41 per cent 70 or over. What is more important than age per se is that their attitude to religion was probably formed before what Dandelion (1996) termed the paradigm change in Quaker belief. Participants in his research who were aged under 30 spent less time on average during meetings for worship seeking God's will, seeking union with the Divine and opening up to the Spirit. In their investigation of church-leavers, Richter and Francis (1998) also noted a comparable change. Children born after the Second World War tended to question traditional church beliefs and to wish to 'pick and mix' their spiritual allegiances. In the United States similar changes have also been reported among the generation known as 'Baby Boomers' (Hood *et al.*, 1996).

The numbers involved in the present research were too small to enable firm conclusions to be drawn. A larger and more representative sample would be required to provide more definitive results.

Which type of worship an individual finds most helpful may be determined by social and family factors and also by personality characteristics (Francis, Bourke and Robbins, forthcoming). The Roman Catholics among the participants in Francis's (2000) study were much more likely than members of other denominations to derive help from ritual and from periods of silence during services, while Methodists were more likely to find help from hearing the Bible read in church and reading it at home. But, the aspect of church services found helpful by the largest number of the churchgoers was silence. Four out of five stated that they found periods of silence in services helpful.

Quaker worship has the virtue of cultivating silence in a gathered company into which communion with God can enter. Silence in a gathered company is different from individual meditation (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 2.46). From an inquiry into the awareness of silence as a transpersonal paradigm, Ballou (1997) concluded that silence has the ability and capacity to increase awareness of one's relationship to noise, thinking, experience, to being 'there',

to reality, to other people, and to one's self. From a secular point of view, Claxton (1998) noted that thinking in words can impede non-verbal or more intuitive kinds of cognition and stressed the value of stillness as being conducive to the creative workings of the subconscious mind.

Note

The author thanks Dr Ben Dandelion, other Quaker friends for their advice and all the participants who kindly completed the questionnaires.

The present sample was too small to test crucial theories about the relationship between age and the changing face of Quaker faith and practice. The author would be interested to hear from Meetings who would like to distribute the questionnaire in order to obtain enough data to test such questions.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Rosamund Bourke is a Research Associate of the Welsh National Centre for Religious Education, University of Wales, Bangor. Her earlier research centred on musical ability and led to the publication of the books *The Psychology of Music* and *Psychologie musikalischen Verhaltens* and other articles in that area under the name of Rosamund Shuter-Dyson. For several years she was editor of *Psychology of Music*. Her present research includes the personality characteristics of religious persons, Quakerism and the attitude to religion of musicians, especially of church musicians.

Mailing address: Dr Rosamund Bourke, 8 St Swithuns Close, East Grinstead, West Sussex, RH19 3BB.

Email: rosamund@bourke8.freeserve.co.uk

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