CHRISTOPHER ANDREW MORRISSEY

THE QUAKER PEACE TESTIMONY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO PRIVATE RELIGIOSITY

This dissertation presents an investigation into the contested interpretations of the Quaker 'peace testimony', based on a survey of a group of Quakers in California. The author begins with an examination of Quaker heritage. The historical story helps illuminate how the Quaker narrative of itself as an organisation working for peace and justice has come to act as a definition of the community, to the extent that the peace testimony has become almost synonymous with Quaker identity. Because unity is valorised as essential to the survival of the Society of Friends, the official understanding of the peace testimony is rigorously maintained. The survey reveals that, in settled times, automatic acceptance of the official story – avoiding acknowledgement of the existence of contradictory interpretations of the peace testimony – is reinforced by a pattern of 'learned behaviour', policed by a 'robust unofficial culture'. However, the contradictions inherent in this position come to the fore in more troubled times. Complex situations of violence and conflict call for new interpretations of the peace testimony and creative ways of implementing it. The author, therefore, investigates the way boundaries are erected between the official declarations on peace and individual understandings of the concept, the part unofficial Quaker culture plays in this process, and the implications this holds for Quaker action for peace in the world.

Key words: peace, conflict, the peace testimony, unity, identity, unofficial culture, traditionalism, modernism, individual interpretation, 'institutional dilemma', avoidance, activism

Key themes:

The centrality of the peace testimony to Quaker identity and its sense of itself as a unified community

The subtle shift of power from official Quaker channels to individual interpretative authority, and the paradox of an unofficial, popular culture of avoidance of individual interpretations of peace

The difference between settled times, which encourage unconscious acceptance of the official peace narrative, and unsettled times, which provoke creative individual interpretations

Of potential interest to: researchers with an interest in the Quaker attitude to peace, the relationship between individual ideas and institutional authority, the social psychology of collective identity creation

Chapter One: A Quaker Primer

Overview

In this chapter, the author introduces 'the basics of Quakerism', which form the framework of understanding for his analysis. He focuses on what he calls the Quaker 'institutional dilemma', and how the 'Quaker process' is designed to resolve it.

Quaker identity

Direct experience of the divine is central to Quaker religious experience – George Fox, the founder of the Society, argued that a spiritually authentic Christianity was only to be found in the 'still, small voice' within each individual. This emphasis on individual experience, without mediation, dogma or ritual, continues to be manifest in the silence of the Meetings for Worship, which is only broken if an individual 'discerns' the need to communicate their experience (or 'minister') to the meeting. Unspoken rules direct the form this ministry takes – it is expected to be short, simple and unemotional, and received without debate. A further characteristic of Quakerism is the lack of creed. Due to its non-credal nature and the emphasis on individual experience, combined with predominance of liberal personal politics among Friends in the 20th century, the Society exhibits a marked theological openness. The result is that there are only the most minimal of theological statements (such as, 'there is that of God in everyone') to guide members. The peace testimony has thus gained considerable influence as a primary marker of Quaker identity.

The 'institutional dilemma' and the 'Quaker process'

Paradoxically, the reliance on individual experience challenged the fledgling Quakers with the same institutional dilemma that Fox presented to the established religious and social order of his day – an individual acting from their experience could potentially disrupt the existence of the collective. Fox, therefore, set up a process whereby all 'leadings' (the individual promptings of spiritual experience) would be subject to the test of the whole community. The 'Quaker process' allows the Society to reproduce itself institutionally through its structure of overlapping meetings and committees. It handles the diversity of spiritual experience, and array of individual opinions it provokes through a process of corporate 'discernment' (the act of waiting in silence for the will of God to become evident) that takes place at every level of the Society in these meetings and committees.

The paradigm of unity

Unity is regarded as the ultimate measure of the correct discernment of God's will. The author comments on the way this paradigm's implicit authority impacts all aspects of Quaker life. The problem is that the Society allows many interpretations of the 'inner light' (a metaphor for the divine will). Subordinating the self to 'the collective searching for the will of God' through 'listening' in silence and participating in the Quaker process 'sometimes works [but] sometimes it does not'. Unity, however, remains the primary goal of Quakerism – disunity is regarded as 'the failure to accomplish the very essence of what it is to be a Quaker', and implies distance from the divine will. As disunity is a common feature of meetings, Quakers have established various forms of social control. When committees or meetings fail to reach unity, the matter aside is laid aside; the most intractable issues, however, are brought before 'listening meetings' – that is, they are relegated to a more private arena. Unofficially, conflict is dealt with by a subtle enforcement of social rules; a new Quaker rapidly learns to follow the unspoken rules with little overt direction. Thus, although responsibility for the enforcement of the social rules is handed over to individual Quakers, the effect is to perpetuate the official Quaker approach.

Insider research

The author is himself a Quaker, and therefore an 'insider'. He emphasises his awareness that insider research carries both benefits (ease of access, familiarity with the group under consideration, and trust) and drawbacks (a potential lack of detachment, the problem of 'knowing too much', and the possible dilemmas for interviewees in relating to a researcher who is also a Quaker).

Chapter Two: Changes in Spiritual Authority

Overview

The Quaker 'institutional dilemma' is reflected in the tension between the individual and the collective as the locus of authority. The way this has played out over time has had a critical impact on the continuing renegotiation of the peace testimony.

A continuum of moral authority

The author uses Kniss's (1997) continuum of moral authority, with its poles of modernism and traditionalism, to place this tension in a historical context. Quaker traditionalism emphasises the collective determination of moral values that are regarded as timeless, universal and transcendent;

it implies that individual actions are directed towards the collective good. Modernism, on the other hand, holds that the final authority for determining ultimate values lies with the individual. The author believes Quakerism straddles the dividing line between both traditions, but stresses that there have been subtle movements between the two strands throughout its history.

The peace testimony in settled and unsettled times

The author agrees with Swidler (1995) that cultures, as socially organised symbols and practices, gain their power from their social context. He argues that the external context has always influenced the peace testimony, from its conception in the turmoil of the Civil War onwards, and this accounts for the frequent ambiguity of the Quaker stance on peace. (For example, Fox, in the 1650s, omitted to mention the peace testimony to soldiers in Cromwell's army, and was interested in pursuing a military policy against the papacy, although he continued to believe that spiritual battles were ultimately the more important.) In settled times, it appears that the culture of peace tends to be implicitly embedded in Friends' individual consciousness and unreflectively accepted as 'common sense'. In unsettled times, however, it becomes more explicit and self-conscious – that is, more ideological – as the social context highlights the inadequacy of former strategies and the need for new ways of addressing more complex external challenges.

Chapter Three: Historical Interpretations of the Peace Testimony

Overview

The author argues that the peace testimony comprises a number of different understandings 'loosely woven together'. He explores the way these various strands of thought interacted with the historical context to produce different responses to the challenges thrown up by conflict and war.

Different interpretations of the peace testimony

The author contends that the peace testimony functions as a culture: it is a symbolically coded meaning system that informs Quaker knowledge and attitudes, forming both a model *of* reality (the symbol systems are manipulated to match reality) and *for* reality (reality is socially reproduced to better match the symbolic patterns) (Geertz 1973). The peace testimony was the principal tenet around which Fox created an organisational structure whereby an individual required the consent of the collective before taking a political stand. Its acceptance ensured loyalty to the symbolic order

this structure created, and hence to the Society and its values. However, there has never been a single understanding of the peace testimony, but 'a number of strands loosely woven together'.

The Light of Christ strand

The 'Light of Christ' strand was based on belief in the possibility of human perfection through union with the 'Light', envisioning the creation of the Kingdom of God on earth rather than in a world to come. This enabled Quakers to work towards a world without wars, as the love of all men made violence inconceivable. In the settled days after the Civil War, however, Quakers withdrew from public life. In the absence of external challenge, it was easier to maintain the peace testimony internally. It became accepted as common sense, without need for explanation or rationalisation.

The humanist strand

As the movement coalesced into a viable institution, a number of influential figures (such as Robert Barclay and William Penn) put forward the humanist argument for peace – that is, war represented an affront to human dignity and reason. Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, established the ideals of Quakerism as the basis for the government of his colony. However, this raised tensions between the position of pacifism and allegiance to the state. Penn argued that there was a critical difference between a general refusal to participate in war and legitimate participation to defend sovereign power, rectify wrongs or obtain justice. He maintained a distinction between his religious private identity and official public one. This public/personal dichotomy goes to the heart of the modern dilemma – traditionalism does not allows for a gap between collective and individual understandings, while modernism assumes its existence. For example, the 19th century saw a growing number of Quakers in America involved in the movement for the abolition of slavery, leading some to support the suppression of the rebellion in the South during the Civil War. In a time of divided loyalties, Friends struggled to maintain an absolute commitment to the peace testimony; 'the once-uniform ethical testimony was now subject to individual interpretation'. The Civil War marked a move from the traditionalist to modernist stance, posing a threat to internal discipline. Thus, in an apparently contradictory move, as individual moral authority increased, it took on greater responsibility for the unity of the Society through enforcing the official peace testimony.

Modernism and the 'that of God' strand

At the turn of the 20th century, Quaker reformers in London reacted against the evangelical leaders of the day and their biblical literalism, returning to the foundational texts for their inspiration. Their propagation of 'inward light theology' (the interpretation of the tenet 'there is that of God in

everyone' to mean that the inward light could be discerned by all) meant it became both the principal means of God's revelation and a moral guide. Amid growing concerns about the rise of militarism leading up to the First World War, the Quaker Peace Committee produced a document called 'Our Testimony for Peace', which stated that because every human life should be considered sacred, participation in war was inconceivable. The outbreak of war, however, saw a great number of Quakers enlisting and high levels of support among non-combatant Quakers. To prevent a disastrous split in the Society, dissenters were perforce tolerated. The sheer scale of the slaughter also induced a large-scale institutional response, creating a 'synthesis of religion and politics' in the move to proactively alleviate the root causes of war – injustice, poverty and misunderstanding between peoples. The author believes this is evidence that unsettled times generate greater cultural work and new strategies for action, in the context of a subtle shift of power towards individual interpretative authority.

Chapter Four: Contemporary Interpretations of the Peace Testimony

Overview

This chapter describes the empirical findings of the research the author carried out among a selected group of Friends. Quakers live in an age of immense freedom for individuals to interpret traditions as they wish. This was illustrated by the different positions on peace that surfaced in the interviews, suggesting that the peace testimony has become 'a heterogeneous cultural symbol'. Conversely, however, the author finds the gap between his interviewees' expressions of official and unofficial Quakerism paradoxical, given the value ascribed to diversity of belief and to integrity. The fact that his respondents only revealed their individual responses in private conversations suggests that subtle social forces are at play enforcing the official, pacifist position on the peace testimony.

The interview process

The author conducted 20 semi-structured interviews, followed by a questionnaire, with Friends from two Monthly Meetings in the Bay Area, California. Because the sampling was not random, he concedes he cannot generalise from his observations. However, the survey provides a snapshot of the broad commitments of his subjects – who were overwhelmingly older, white, well-educated and well-off. He describes his interviewees as 'post-Christian', in Dandelion's (1996) sense, as they all qualified their self-labelling as Christian; the most common self-description was Universalist ('there are many paths to God'). The sample demonstrated the continuing importance of the belief that

'there is that of God in everyone', and the influence this has on the peace testimony and the Quaker stance against war. Non-violence was seen as integral to humanity's true nature.

Novel contemporary understandings

The interviewees revealed new understandings of the peace testimony. Environmentalism and ecology, seen as spiritual and ethical concerns, were placed within its parameters. A further influence was modern therapeutic culture – violence was regarded as the result of dysfunctional psychology. This understanding of the self, in which outer collective peace begins with a quest for personal inner peace, brings individual interpretation of the peace testimony into conflict with the traditional impulse towards communitarianism. A further novel understanding was revealed in a strand of pragmatism: the devastation caused by mass mechanised warfare encouraged many interviewees to declare that non-violence was the only way for the world to survive. This entailed adopting an unofficial interpretation of the doctrine 'deeds not creeds': they focused on practical activities to reduce violence in the world, and were suspicious of intellectual understandings, trusting in individual experience and valorising activism. The author believes these examples of alternative interpretations of the meaning of the peace testimony illustrate that a culture 'can never possess a hegemonic monopoly on understanding'.

Unsettled Friends and the peace testimony

In settled times, a generic commitment to peace and aversion to war is generally accepted without question among Quakers. Opposition to war is assumed and is not an ideologically consistent position (that is, it is not an articulated, self-conscious belief system). The peace testimony, in such a context, operates as a solidarity-maintaining function by reaffirming the social order; its discourse conveys a subtext – this is the way the prototypical Quaker behaves – encouraging a culture of self-censorship. In unsettled times, commitment to peace requires greater elaboration; the crucial question of *pacifism* is ideological and requires a clear, consistent rationale. The author found that his interviewees struggled to articulate their understanding of the testimony when challenged to respond to a set of hypothetical dilemmas around the use of violence. A minority identified themselves as absolute pacifists. For others, the tools of non-violence appeared insufficient, and they were forced to consider alternative strategies of collective action and their implications.

The official/unofficial gap

Traditionally, Quakers have subjected individual experience to a corporate test, but the boundary has blurred between individual and corporate understandings. One hypothetical question the author

put to his interviewees was how they would have responded to the fight against fascism in the Second World War. Some respondents confessed their particular understanding of the peace testimony naturally leads to an acceptance of the 'legitimate' use of force. They argued that complex moral situations sometimes require violent action to end injustice or protect the innocent. The author concluded that contemporary Quakers are not necessarily pacifist. This gap between the official and unofficial is perplexing, given the Quaker commitment to unity and integrity. However, it is rarely visible – it only surfaced in private conversations with the author.

Chapter Five: The Social Psychology of the Peace Testimony

Overview

In this chapter, the author investigates the peace testimony paradox: Quakers presume they are unified by the testimony, but in practice they are not. He analyses the role of the peace testimony in contemporary Quaker social psychology, focusing on its assumed rather than explicit nature, and the way its centrality to Quaker identity discourages challenges to the orthodox perception.

The peace testimony's primary or secondary nature

Members often experience difficulty in communicating to others what Quakerism consists of. In the absence of a clear creed to refer to, articulating their identity 'provides stability in their choice of religious affiliation': a strong collective identity encourages solidarity and loyalty. However, although for some of the survey's respondents, the peace testimony was central to their Quaker identity, for others Quaker identity was dependent on a more central element: simplicity (or the removal of obstacles to listening to God's will). Belief in the peace testimony's secondary nature correlated with unorthodox views on its meaning – 'listening' entails the possibility of God's will condoning the use of force in some circumstances. In contrast, for those who regarded it as central, 'betrayal' of the testimony would destroy their sense of possessing a coherent, unified corporate identity.

The peace testimony and social identity

Generally, the peace testimony is regarded as the *sine qua non* of Quaker identity. The author's interviewees found it impossible to conceive of a violent Quaker as this concept would destroy the cognitive category. Therefore, it is difficult to discuss the testimony in the abstract as the two categories (the testimony and Friends) are conflated. The author investigates the reasons for this special reverence, using Berger's (1990) theory of the social construction of reality. Berger holds that

human social worlds are social constructions that create an arbitrary order to guard against the overwhelming complexity and meaningless nature of unfiltered sensory experience. There are powerful incentives to stay within the parameters of this social order: to venture close to the boundaries creates a marginal situation that is threatening because it acts as a reminder of society's constructed nature. The author believes this is the origin of the Quaker denial of the full range of understandings of the peace testimony, and he seeks to uncover the internal processes that lead to the 'cognitive simplification' that stresses the degree of unanimity. His findings show that, in reality, many Quakers hold deviant opinions. His respondents appeared to hold two types of social identification: social or personal. Social identifications tend to be rigid and stereotypical, personal identifications are idiosyncratic and flexible. Identity is context-dependent: when the social identity is more salient, individual behaviour is consistent with the group's self-description. When respondents objected to describing the peace testimony as an absolute injunction to pacifism, this was an expression of their personal self-identification, and was only expressed in private.

Worship and the enactment of social identity

The Meeting for Worship 'creates the [Quaker] community'. Members put aside their own understandings to 'listen to God', to 'discern any messages intended for the entire group'. This means it becomes a powerful arena for group identification and social control, reproducing the official Quaker identity. Any vocal ministry that occurs is consistent with the group identity, and is generally non-controversial. Transgressions of the (unspoken) rules are jarring for Quaker identity and are quickly contained and redirected into the official channels for conflict resolution. However, Quaker identity is such a powerful social force it requires little overt social control. The author found that his respondents frequently used the adverb 'Quakerly' to describe behaviour consistent with the group norm. Respondents tended to hide behind the silence of the meetings, and used the private context to express any doubts that they apprehended to be 'unQuakerly'.

The membership process as filter

The principal formal means of maintaining the boundaries of official Quaker identity is the membership process. However, the fact that the membership committee does not usually address the question of the peace testimony directly raises the question of whether it could be better described as an informal creed. Most of the respondents appeared to regard its acceptance as the 'basic threshold' for membership, and spoke of it as a 'self-evident truth'. However, despite this commitment, the majority affirmed they would condone the use of force in certain circumstances. The author concludes the membership process only operates as a filter under certain circumstances,

and the same qualification can be applied to the idea of the peace testimony as a de facto creed. The conditional nature of the peace testimony means that individuals can quietly hold unorthodox positions while avowing an official position.

Chapter Six: Cultural Practices of Avoidance

Overview

This chapter analyses how the deep spiritual community individuals experience in the Meeting for Worship promotes avoidance of conflict. As the burden of 'policing' the unity of the Society has shifted from an official to a popular level, the author investigates the unofficial cultural resources involved in the avoidance of unsettling situations that risk disrupting this sense of community.

The construction of unity

The Quaker community does not follow the general route for enforcing unity that most societies take: differentiating between acceptable and unacceptable views and behaviours through social structure and ranking is prevented by the Quaker belief in equality. The way the Society constructs unity is more subtle and self-regulating. Individuals attempt to bring the sense of a unified bond experienced in communal worship into their social gatherings, but the greater the emphasis on individual interpretative authority, the harder this is to achieve. Disunity is troubling as it implies a lack of spiritual clarity, and popular Quakerism tries to contain situations that might provoke disunity through patterns of avoidance. However, as avoidance does not provide sufficient cultural tools for the individual to resolve all conflicts, interpretative authority is paradoxically handed back to the community. This habit is seen most clearly in the 'discernment of leadings' process. Leadings are the source of all Quaker ideas and practices, and are regarded as the embodiment of the revelation of God in the world. Leadings, however, are individual in the first instance, and it can be difficult to decide which are legitimate. Individual interpretative authority is therefore kept in check by the process of corporate discernment. Unorthodox understandings generally fail to be discerned as valid leadings; they are seen as a threat to core identity. This illustrates the paradox of individuals agreeing to an institutional practice that removes their interpretative authority.

Orthodoxy and Quaker knowledge

The experience in Quaker meetings increases an individual's skill in navigating the culture ('learned behaviour') – as one interviewee put it, 'a lot of things are innate'. The author uses Foucault's (1980)

link between knowledge and power to analyse the phenomenon. Since power is articulated by means of knowledge, individuals cannot utilise knowledge without enacting and reinforcing power relations. Popular knowledge is non-coercive and subtle, but knowledge of the 'Quaker style' is a way of enforcing the dominant narrative. Thus, the author's respondents were reluctant to challenge the official understanding of the peace testimony.

Deeds not creeds

It is hard to articulate 'Quakerly knowledge', in part because of the emphasis on direct spiritual experience, which is 'beyond words'. An understanding that transcends words – words could lead to differing interpretations – serves as a way of avoiding conflict. Hence, the 'deeds not creeds' strand of the peace testimony advises against articulating rationales for the peace testimony. Many interviewees believed actions for peace are more effective than discussions. This approach changes the conditions for unity: social solidarity is connected with language – meetings strive for unity over issues that are necessarily verbally expressed. In contrast to the near-unanimous threshold for unity on the minute produced by a meeting, activity demands a much lower threshold. 'Acting in concert hides dissension behind a veil of social solidarity, but it is not the same as unity.'

The role of emotion

Emotional intelligence plays an important role in the avoidance of the peace testimony, due to the distrust of language and emphasis on spiritual experience. Working towards unity is an empathic not analytical task, and this ensures that individuals employ 'a simple emotional logic': if something is uncomfortable, it must be wrong. A collective sense of emotional wellbeing becomes a gauge for the whole meeting and an indicator of divine will. The respondents supported this process, but at the same time felt 'intense internal pressure', expressing the concern that they might be 'bad Quakers'.

Hidden worldviews

Friends hold radically different views on human nature: whether they believe human nature to be naturally good or evil has repercussions on the way they interpret the peace testimony. The major differences centre on the issue of 'faith in God' as opposed to 'faith in human works'. Interviewees who maintained the peace testimony believed the Spirit of Christ to be unchanging, even in complex, troubled circumstances; deviation from the peace testimony shows a lack of faith. Those who believed human agents responsible for moral action in the world saw themselves as 'agents of God's will'. The author argues that this remains a fundamental source of contention, and has been

central to most of the historic divisions within the Society over the peace testimony. However, due to the Quaker cultural patterns of avoidance, its existence is seldom acknowledged.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Implications

The final chapter addresses the implications of the survey findings. The author suggests that Quakers should consider how the peace discourse is socially reproduced and recognise its 'protean nature': the nature of this discourse and the community's relationship to peace has undergone radical transformations over the Society's history. The official version of the peace testimony narrative, however, suggests that different understandings of the nature of peace are problematic and lead to disunity and discord. Nevertheless, acknowledgement of the existence of different strands of interpretation would allow Friends to access more varied and sophisticated tools, and more effective strategies, when confronted with complex situations of conflict. There is an aversion towards evangelising among liberal Quakers, yet in their concern for justice and peace, the author argues that the Quakers are in practice evangelical – they stress the value of action. However, limiting the symbolic repertoire of peace has implications for their ability to effect social change: if individuals are unable to describe 'culturally resonant, meaningful strategies', they lack the means of persuading others. Furthermore, the avoidance of knowledge about the diverse traditions of peace strategies leaves Quakers 'devoid of a wealth of creative ways of bringing greater peace to the world'. Debates concerning such strategies would entail discussing the peace testimony. The author suggests bringing the idea of what a peaceful world would look like to the fore in any such discussion – he contends that effective action towards the goal of creating such a world would naturally follow.

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