

Article

A Quiet Faith: Quakers in Post-Christian Britain †

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Abstract: Post-Christian Britain is characterised by a rejection of doctrinal and morally conservative religion. This does not reflect solely the experience of those with 'no religion' but can be found in the narratives of 'new Quakers,' those who have become members or attenders in the past three years. New Quakers contrast Quaker sense of acceptance, freedom from theological ideas and freedom to be a spiritual seeker with conservative Christian churches, which have often been experienced as judgmental and doctrinal. Quaker liberal morality also affords inclusivity to those who have felt marginalised, such as disabled and LGBT people. The way new Quakers articulate their identity shines a light on the contemporary transformation of religious forms and society. Their emphasis on individual spirituality and rejection of theological doctrine reflect the profound cultural shift towards a post-Christian Britain, which is religiously diverse, more open to individual spiritual seeking and more liberal morally and socially.

Keywords: Quakers; Christianity; non-religion; spirituality; liberal; UK

1. British Quakers and the 'Christian Question'

The religious profile of Britain has changed substantially in the past few decades. The 2011 Census and more recent surveys show a significant drop in those identifying as Christians, a modest rise in those identifying with other religions and a sharp increase in 'nones'—those who do not identify with any religion. Christianity is still the religion with the largest number of adherents but its institutions, beliefs and traditions are culturally less relevant. The burgeoning literature on non-religion points to a detachment and, at times, hostility towards religion understood in terms of doctrinal belief and conservative morality. This finds echo in the narratives of 'emerging' Christians, who seek to 'deconstruct' Christian worship and belief (Tomlinson 1995; Bergmann 2003; Guest and Taylor 2006; Bielo 2011; Marti and Ganiel 2014) but also in those of mainstream evangelicals, who stress experiential and relational belief and authenticity (Montemaggi 2017a, 2017b). The present research shows that an increased disaffection with doctrinal religion is also prevalent in the narratives of new Quakers, those who have become Quaker members or attenders in the past three years.

At first sight, Quakers fit neatly within the wider decline of British Christianity. They are more likely to be over-60, white, middle class and their number has been steadily dwindling since the 1990s (Chadkirk 2014). Some scholars (Chadkirk 2005; Stroud and Dandelion 2005) have even warned that Quakers could disappear by 2032. Yet, the narratives of new Quakers suggest that what is attractive of Quakerism is the sense of acceptance, theological openness and spiritual seeking, which they do not find in Christian churches. Many have left evangelical and Anglican churches because they could not agree with defined doctrines. New Quakers value the theological diversity of Quakerism, which they contrast with Christianity, seen as exclusive, out-dated and rigid.

British Quakerism could be said to be 'post-Christian' (Dandelion 2014a, 1996). It does not require members and attenders to adhere to any theological stance or even to identify with Christianity.

New Quakers identify with Quaker theological openness, liberal morality with a focus on acceptance of diversity and spiritual seeking. They feel at 'home' because they feel accepted for who they are as individuals. This is particularly important for people who have suffered and still may suffer marginalisation in other contexts, such as LGBT and disabled people and who feel they can be themselves at Quaker Meetings. Quaker inclusiveness, which often rests on spiritual seeking and theological pluralism, is valued more than traditional Quaker concerns for peace and consensual decision-making, reflecting changed religious sensibilities.

New Quakers' understanding and experience of religion reflect the cultural hegemony of Christianity in Britain, which has shaped how religion is constructed; yet their rejection of it is part of the wider shift away from—what are felt to be—bureaucratic, hierarchical and doctrinal religious forms, towards a more fluid religiosity that emphasises individual self-expression and human relationships. The 'post-Christian era' is marked by the reality of religious diversity, which includes informal spiritual expressions and by a critique of religion, understood as hierarchical, morally conservative and theologically doctrinal. It is this understanding of religion that is felt no longer relevant. The way new Quakers articulate their identity shines a light on the contemporary transformation of religious forms and society.

2. Quakers in Post-Christian Britain

Recent times have seen a significant and rapid change in the religious self-understanding of British people. The snapshot given by the national census in the last two decades gives a portrait of steady decline of British Christianity and a rise in those who do not identify with a religion. The National Census for England and Wales (White 2012; Stokes 2013) shows that people identifying as Christians have dropped from 37 million (71.7%) in 2001, to 33 million (59.3%) in 2011, notwithstanding an increase of 1.2 million foreign-born Christians. In Scotland, the number of Christians has decreased from 65.2% to 53.8% (National Records of Scotland 2013).

The rapid and sharp decrease in self-identifying Christians has been mostly a decrease among people under 60 years of age. Demographically, Christians are older and are more likely to be white than the rest of the population in England and Wales. Twenty-two per cent of Christians are 65 and over, compared with 16% of the wider population and 93% are white, compared with 86% of the wider population. The decline in self-identifying Christians is in sharp contrast with the increase of the number of people identifying with another religion and with 'no religion.' Islam is now the second largest religious group in Britain. In England and Wales, 2.7 million people (4.8%) identify as Muslims, up from 1.5 million (3%), and, in Scotland, 77,000 (1.4%) do so, up from 43,000 (0.8%).

The group registering the highest increase are 'nones,' those who do not identify with a religion. In England and Wales, nones have nearly doubled, rising from 7.7 m in 2001 to 14.1 m in 2011 (White 2012; Stokes 2013). The increase is particularly marked for those aged 20–24 and 40–44 and higher among women (89%) than men (78%). A similar increase in nones was registered in Scotland, where 'no religion' went up from 27.8% in 2001 to 36.7% in 2011. The more recent British Social Attitudes Survey for England and Wales (Harding 2017) found that, in 2016, nones represented 53% of the population. Among 18 to 24-year-olds, nones are 71%, compared with 40% of respondents aged 65 to 74 and with 27% of respondents of over 75 years of age.

The statistics paint a picture of Britain as less Christian and more pluralistic. Lee (2014, p. 476) warns not to interpret the rise of non-religion simply as an increase of secularisation. Non-religion includes a variety of positions and identities that still need to be understood, such as indifference to religion but also 'believing without belonging' (Davie 2015) and 'spiritual but not religious.' As Michael Hout and Fisher (2014) remark: "the distance from God is less than the distance from church." (Hout and Fisher 2014, p. 432). They report that "35 percent of "nones" were at least slightly religious and 70 percent were at least slightly spiritual" and that "37 percent prayed at least once a week and 22 percent prayed daily." (Hout and Fisher 2014, p. 432). Thus, nones are more likely to have personal belief than to participate in communal religious practice (Woodhead 2016, p. 250).

Non-religion is constructed in relation to religion (Lee 2012), which reflects a traditional Christian and particularly Protestant, idea of religion, centred on belief (Montemaggi 2017b). Nones are more likely to be former Christians and thus have an understanding of religion in terms of propositional belief, conservative sexual morality and hierarchical organisations. Catto and Eccles (2013) report that, for young British atheists, religion is about belief in the existence of God, which they reject and that they resent religion's claim of monopoly over morality. The rise in people who do not identify with a religion thus marks a detachment from—what are seen as—the traditional Christian forms of belief, worship and morality.

Quakerism has not escaped decline. The Society's membership has been falling since the 1990s (Chadkirk 2014). In 1991, there were 26,757 members and attenders (Chadkirk 2014, p. 253). This has fallen by 21.3% in 2016, when the Society listed 21,055 members and attenders, of which 13,130 were members and 7925 were attenders (Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 2017, p. 2). This decline might reflect a rise in indifference towards religion, the association, in the mind of the general public, of Quakerism with doctrinal Christianity and its consequent rejection, the lack of visibility of Quakers and communal dynamics that do not facilitate growth (Montemaggi 2018). Nevertheless, the fluid non-doctrinal spirituality of Quakerism (Plüss 2007; Dandelion 1996, 2014a), its openness to spiritual seeking and its progressive ethics and politics might just befit contemporary sensibilities.

From the very beginning, Quakerism has emphasised the personal experience of the numinous. Quakerism reflects some of the hallmarks of Protestant Christianity, such as the lack of mediation by religious authorities in the believer's relationship with the divine and the ministry of all believers, which has been articulated as a strong belief in equality and a very distinctive consensual decision-making. Contemporary Quakerism is the fruit of nineteenth-century shifts in theology. By 1920, there were three main strands of Quakerism: Evangelical, Conservative and Liberal (Dandelion 2008, p. 16). Quakers in Europe are nearly all Liberal Quakers, placing authority on individual spiritual seeking and allowing a pluralism of theological views (Dandelion 1996, 2004; Plüss 1998). Thus, the scholarship on Quakerism has sometimes constructed it in opposition to religious belief (Kline 2012; Dandelion 2008; Pilgrim 2008; Vincett 2008; Bourke 2003).

Dandelion (1996) argued that the fundamental character of Quakerism today is of prescriptive pluralism, where 'truth' can be known only "personally, partially, or provisionally." (Dandelion 2008, p. 35). The phrase 'to be open to New Light,' which originates in the 1931 Yearly Meeting (Punshon 1989, p. 15) signalled a fundamental break from the past. It grounded Quakerism in a never-ending search for 'truth.' Dandelion (2008) referred to Quaker seeking theology as the 'absolute perhaps:' what is 'absolute' (normative) is the impossibility of knowing truth. It is the seeking that is prescriptive. Therefore, the "possibility of seeking in multiple directions and subsequent pluralism and difference within the group has become a norm and a boundary." (Dandelion 2008, p. 83). The emphasis on individual experience allows diversity as long as it is framed within a continuous spiritual search rather than any form of certainty.

Quakers are theologically diverse; yet divergence in belief is balanced by a shared ethos and a conformity to form that bind the group together. Coherence and unity emerge from the adherence to form. Dandelion argues that "the group is held together by a conformist and conservative behavioural creed." (Dandelion 2008, p. 22). Quakers are not conformist in the sense of being influenced by social conditionings; rather they are prescriptive in the way they conduct themselves at Meetings and the way in which they believe. That is why there are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and non-theist Quakers (Dandelion 2008, p. 62), united by the inner search. Quakerism is characterised by a continuous search, a spiritual journey of self-discovery and of questioning. In the narratives of new Quakers, this is often constructed in opposition to their past experience of Christianity. These narratives shine a light on the wider trend of disaffection with traditional Christian organisations, worship and morality, as Britain becomes more post-Christian.

3. Research Methods

This article is based on research commissioned by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations and hosted by Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre. The research aimed to identify contemporary religious change in Britain and its implications for British Quakers. This article presents the construction of Quaker religious and spiritual identity of new Quakers, by focussing on their spiritual journey and how they relate to Christianity. The fieldwork, consisting of a qualitative online survey and interviews, was limited in time, lasting two months. The questionnaire asked questions regarding the religious background of Quakers as they grew up, before attending Meetings and what they valued of Quakerism. It was initially meant only for Quakers who have been attending for less than three years; however, the method of distribution of the survey through local committees led to long-standing Quakers also responding to the survey. The software used did not allow further selective sampling.

The total number of survey respondents was 225. The aggregate data from the survey give a portrait of Quaker members and attenders with no distinction on the basis of how long they have been attending Meetings. However, the responses quoted in this article are limited to those who have been members or attenders for less than three years. The dataset also included 19 interviews, which were conducted over the phone and Skype. The lack of any face-to-face meeting between the interviewer and informants did not allow the interviewer to build a relationship with informants. Consequently, interviews were less natural and lacked the possibility of communication through body language. In addition, some interviews faced technical difficulties that made the conversation more difficult. However, interviewees spoke with ease of their religious background and of their experiences of Quakerism. Some felt they could share very personal experiences to illustrate their spiritual journey.

Respondents have been anonymised and their names changed. With regard to the terminology used, local Quaker groups are called local Meetings with a capital 'm' to distinguish from the other meanings of the word. The official name of the Quaker movement is the Religious Society of Friends, therefore, 'Friend' is the term used by Quakers to refer to Quaker members and attenders. I use the terms 'Quaker' and 'Friend' to identify both members and attenders. Becoming a Quaker member involves a process whereby 'overseers' and the applicant discuss together the applicant's understanding of being a Quaker and decide on whether it is appropriate to go forth with the application (*Quaker Faith and Practice*). There are, however, no substantial differences between being a member and being an attender in terms of involvement in the local Meeting.

4. The Non-Doctrinal Religion of Quakers

Most Quakers in this study have a Christian background and live in a culture that still largely defines religion according to doctrinal belief. Quakerism is thus articulated in relation and, at times, in opposition to Christianity and a Christian understanding of belief. Many respondents were lapsed Christians before joining or beginning to attend Quaker Meetings, many stated that they were non-religious and some that had experience with spiritual movements. The survey shows that 147 respondents declared having a Christian background, 35 reported not being brought up with a religious background and only 5 said they were brought up in a religion other than Christianity. Many later left churches: 61 respondents declared no religion before becoming Quakers and around 30 respondents reported having experience of other religions or spiritual movements. It was not possible to arrive at precise numbers as many selected the open response, under 'Other,' which required interpretation.

The significant proportion of nones or unchurched coming to Quaker Meetings confirms the findings of Alastair Heron's (1994) survey which found that 40% of new members were unchurched, or lapsed members. This is often due to a rejection of doctrinal religion and worship that is not felt as authentic. Quakerism allows diversity of perspectives and spiritual seeking, which explains why some of the comments in the survey show how people with very different religious perspectives feel at home within Quakerism. For instance, Emma remarked that Quakerism is "a complementary side

of my faith journey alongside Anglicanism.” Frank found Quakerism a more authentic way to express Christianity: “for me it’s about having a faith that is a spiritual practice rather than a set of rules, which is what I feel Christianity should be.” Quakerism is also a home for atheists, as Fredrick’s comment suggests: “while a lifelong atheist I was looking for an outlet for my sense of the spiritual.”

Sociological studies of Quakers have considered their relationship with Christianity and have showed that, since the 1990s, there seems to have been a move away from beliefs that are specifically Christian, as in the case of the importance of the figure of Jesus (Dandelion 1996, 2014b). Mellor (2008) drafted a qualitative survey and found that 80% of respondents identified as Christians and 90% believed in God (Mellor 2008, p. 81). She distinguished between ‘explicit Christians’ (80%), ‘implicit Christians’ (15%) and ‘non-Christians’ (4.5%). Explicit Christians are those who answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Do you consider yourself to be Christian?’; implicit Christians are those who do not subscribe to a creedal statement but follow the teachings of Jesus; while non-Christians are those who either identify as other than Christian, for instance ‘spiritual atheist,’ or did not provide sufficiently explicit answers (Mellor 2008, p. 84).

More recently, Hampton (2014, p. 36) found that there has been a drop in people attending Meetings who consider themselves Christians, from 52% in 1990 to 37% in 2013. There was also a decrease in the number of people who consider themselves Universalists, from 23% in 1990 to 16% in 2013 (Hampton 2014, p. 36). In contrast, the proportion of those who report not believing in God has gone up from 3% in 1990 to 15% in 2013 (Hampton 2014, p. 37). The notion of Jesus as “God made human” or “containing that of God” was held by only 14% of respondents in 2013, against 19% in 1990. (Hampton 2014, p. 37). In contrast, there has been an increase in Quakers who see Jesus as an ethical teacher from 47% in 1990 to 42% in 2003 and to 54% in 2013 (Hampton 2014, p. 37).

New Quakers often recount how they moved away from a church, from which they found themselves theologically or culturally distant, or, if they have moved to a new location, how they tried Quaker Meetings in their search for a spiritual home. The most common reason adduced for leaving churches was the unease at doctrinal statements. These include not only official statements of faith but also the words of hymns and official church literature. New Quakers reported feeling they could not subscribe to them, even if they had not been asked for explicit adherence to a creed.

Quakers’ rejection of doctrinal belief is often accompanied by an uneasy relationship with Christianity. This tension over Christianity can be prominent in Quaker written culture, such in the Quaker magazine *The Friend* or Quakers’ pages on social media. When asked, most interviewees had no problems with the use of Christian language or other references to Christianity, even when they did not identify explicitly as Christians. Some, however, expressed their dislike for Christian language, such as God and reference to the Bible and others noted that some Friends are hesitant to use Christian terms or refer to the Christian Scriptures. One of the interviewees, Harriet, stated that she has been told at her Meeting that there were two Friends who, in their ministry, were “deliberately Christian” and that some felt that the Quaker Meeting should be Christian. However, she did not think it amounted to a tension.

I wouldn’t say there’s tension. [. . .] There’s an understanding that there is difference. [...] I feel at home with a broader understanding of spirituality than Christian [...] I’m far less certain so I’m open to any sort of language. [...] In our meeting it’s all very friendly.

In contrast, William heard derogatory comments about Christianity and suggested the Meeting had a series of discussions to learn more about Christianity. He was raised a Christian but later practised Buddhism for 14 years. As an academic, he values and enjoys learning. He finds it frustrating that some people lack intellectual curiosity over the varieties of Christianity and the different strands of Quakerism. At university, William was attracted to Buddhism, at least in part, because he wanted to avoid studying Western cultural tradition. Twenty years later, he felt he wanted to learn more about Western culture and religious cultural history, something that he found in Quakerism.

At university, I studied religion, comparative religion. I was mainly interested in Asian religions, Buddhism in particular. I did a Master's in Buddhist studies. I was practising Zen Buddhism for a number of years. On a couple of occasions, I went to a couple of Quaker meetings cos I stopped practising Buddhism at that point but I was still interested in contemplative, meditative practices. So, I went along Quaker meetings at times but never did anything about it really until more recently. [. . .] I went back to reading about Buddhism and doing meditation but felt like I needed to connect with something more culturally, more my own culture rather than Asian/Eastern cultural practices. I remembered about Quakerism so I went along Quaker meetings where I live. [. . .] Quakerism was a way of practising religion primarily through meditation or contemplation but also as a way to engage with Western Christian tradition with its art, with its poetry, with its philosophy and theology.

William values the emphasis on the inward spiritual experience in Quakerism, shared with Zen Buddhism and other forms of mysticism.

The emphasis on individual experience and I suppose it resonates as well with some of what I learned when I studied Asian religion and Buddhism, the emptying of the self, trying to overcome the ego, I suppose. I think I've come to learn about in the Christian tradition the 'negative theology,' which seems to me, [. . .] to equate to a more mystical tradition. [. . .] I found the reading around mysticism and gnostic Christians [. . .] a useful way to understand the meaning behind Christian words. I'm actually quite excited about it but I suppose I come at it on the premise that it's all to be interpreted, it's not literal and so I have no understanding or real interest in any kind of literalism, neither evangelicalism.

Some interviewees have come to Quakerism after difficult experiences of Christian churches; yet often it is due to a dissatisfaction with the lack of critical thinking. Walter, for instance, was always fascinated by questions regarding time and the universe. When he talked to the minister of his church about how to reconcile his ideas with Christianity, he was told not to worry about such things and that he just needed to have faith. He searched for a religious environment that could accommodate his intellectual awareness as well as his spirituality.

This really questioned my belief [...] I questioned the whole Christian teaching. That didn't help because I wasn't taken seriously. [...] I sat there one day and thought 'I really don't believe this. I don't accept this. It doesn't make sense.' The fear of being struck down and stuff, the wrath of God, that was a bit frightening really. [. . .] I still had this need, the spiritual component of my life. At 16 I decided to visit every religious denomination in the area. [...] from the Spiritualist Church through to the local Quaker Meeting. [...] For many years I had no religious beliefs whatsoever. I thought of myself as agnostic and that lasted for many years.

Walter chose Quakerism for its spiritual component, political activism and theological openness. He found the practice of meditation a discipline through which he could work through his thoughts. He is keen on Quakers' peace activism and other humanitarian concerns, but, ultimately, it was the freedom from doctrine that made him choose to attend Meetings.

There's meditation [. . .] That period of quiet, which I enjoyed when I went as a youngster, that may be the place to have the discipline to actually let your thoughts run freely. [. . .] [On choosing Quakerism] It's the acceptance, there's no requirement for me to conform to any particular type belief. I welcome that.

Susan, coming from an evangelical background, noticed the tension over Christianity straight away but finds that to be confined to written and official discussions.

Very quickly after becoming involved with Quakers I've become aware of that tension. [...] It's evident in *The Friend*, which is the weekly magazine that we get, that lots of Meetings get, it's evident on the Facebook posts sometimes. [...] In terms of my Meeting and the way in which people engage with each other, my experience has been people receive other people's spiritual experiences with a huge level of respect and consideration. I've never heard anyone be upset that someone has, for example, given ministry that was based on the Bible or someone has given ministry based on something completely different, or has used God language or has not used God language. I've never seen it in my Meeting but there is a tension that comes out all the time in the written conversations that we have. It's something I feel a little bit worried about because if Quakers weren't rooted in Christianity, if we didn't have that Christian tradition, I don't think I would have become part of Quakerism. I'm a Quaker because it is for me a form of being a Christian that I feel happy with. I still identify as a Christian and if I felt that there wasn't, if the Society became just a sort of spiritual organisation rather than a Christian organisation I would struggle a bit with that. [...] I see there being space for non-theists or other faiths within Quakerism but I would become anxious if that became [...] the defining thing about Quakerism. For me the Christian roots are important. [...] I think perhaps there's more tolerance within the way we actually live our faith than you might pick up from the way we write it down.

The non-doctrinal nature of contemporary Quakerism emphasises acceptance of different theological perspectives. This makes people feel accepted and, at times, contrasts starkly with their experience of doctrinal religion. Susan began attending Quaker meetings to avoid the militaristic and triumphant tone of Remembrance services every November in her Baptist church. Susan's and her husband's choice of Quakerism has not been easy. It has caused deep rifts with family members, as she recounts.

Both our families are quite conservative evangelical, both our parents, [...] have found it very difficult. They have been quite upset that we've been going to Quakers. They feel that we have strayed from the true path. So that's been quite a difficult thing and that's something a lot of Quakers don't understand what is like being an evangelical Christian unless they are also with an evangelical background. They just don't get why anyone would view them with suspicion. [...] We have three young children. The most important thing, especially for my husband's parents, the most important thing in terms of how they view our parenting is the extent to which we raise our children with an evangelical understanding of the world. Their view of whether we are good parents or not good parents is very much based on 'are we bringing up our children as Christians?' and by that they mean a specific kind of Christianity. So to leave was a big deal, in terms of family pressure and in the church itself. The minister emailed my husband [...] and said, 'you do know that Quakers are not Christians, they are heretics.' So to leave took a huge amount of certainty in our own hearts but that was right for us.

Susan told me that hers and her husband's parents gave their children Bibles and Bible story books, reflecting a deep concern that the children would not be brought up as true Christians. The wounds have now healed and Susan's family seems to have accepted her and her husband's choice; yet it has been a difficult journey. Had her husband not made the same theological journey, Susan might have found herself alone. This experience shows that Quakers' theological openness and acceptance can sometimes be painful and require resolute choice. For Susan, being a Quaker means that she is no longer "the outside voice arguing for change," but "the inside voice." Susan and her husband have found home.

Quaker theological openness is often experienced as acceptance of different points of view. What interviewees value is the lack of judgmental attitudes and the expectations of conformity. Jane commented that Quakerism had released her from "the pressure of being able to answer questions

in black and white,” such as belief in God and to explore—what she feels—are “more meaningful and helpful questions that have a larger impact on myself on others’ lives.” This is echoed by Marianne, who has found in Quaker Meetings “the chance to explore spirituality and God with Friends, without pressure to conform [. . .] True Friendship and willingness to address the issues of life within a faith framework, without judgment or prejudice.”

Mary’s comment below, from the survey, highlights how Quakerism is interpreted and practised and how this relates to religion and wider society. It is therefore worth citing it in full. She contrasts Quakerism’s progressive ethics and spiritual expression not just with dogmatic churches but also with the secular environment, dominated by a reductive scientific mentality.

Being part of a Quaker meeting has been a very liberating and positive experience for me. Prior to attending, I spent many years searching for a more authentic way of practising my faith. I grew up in an Anglican tradition but struggled with more evangelical/dogmatic parts of this church movement and elements of prejudice and discrimination that I observed in the church organisation (e.g., opposition to female bishops; teachings on sexuality etc.). Professionally I work within a scientific environment that is heavily dominated by atheist/Darwinist views and leaves little room for spiritual discussion. It has been crucial to me to find a way of practising my faith that allowed for openness to individual experience and was non-dogmatic in its approach. My first experience of attending my Quaker meeting felt like it ‘clicked.’ I had some previous experience of meditation so was not daunted by the idea of sitting in silence for an hour. I was struck by how rich and inclusive the silence was. Since then, I’ve gradually found a place in the Meeting. It has supported me tremendously through personally challenging times and gives me support and hope in politically turbulent times. I feel that Quakerism fills an important niche that is currently neglected in modern Christian religion where there are strong movements for conservatism, evangelism, traditionalism but much less for peaceful liberal and universalistic approaches. Being part of a Quaker Meeting gives me a spiritual identity that I am proud of with values that I whole-heartedly support. My experience with Quakerism has also enabled me to feel more confident in exploring the views of others and entering into discussion with people that I meet with more fundamentalist (Christian or atheist) views. It has given me more confidence and hope for the continued role of peaceful religion in society.

Mary’s quote captures Quakers’ distinctive ethical identity (Montemaggi 2018), centred around the acceptance of diversity. The lack of dogmatism of Quakerism instils a sense of acceptance and belonging. A strong narrative of ‘finding home’ emerges from the stories of new Quakers. This is in line with the narratives of finding home and one’s true self of spiritual movements, such as Pagans (Johnston 2013) and in stark contrast with the narratives of conversion and deconversion that are a central feature of evangelicals (Fazzino 2014; Bielo 2012). An example comes from former evangelical Susan, who does not feel that moving from evangelical to Quaker was a particularly big step:

I have always been on the liberal edge of my churches and groups, so my views have become a little more liberal but it’s not been a massive step for me. [. . .] Issues of personal ethics and morality, things like gay people, things like divorce, for a long time I probably differed on the hard line evangelical position that some people in my churches would have agreed to it and other issues, things like the role of women in church that was a big influence on my spiritual life, kind of struggling with that in the evangelical tradition I came from and also an acceptance of other denominations.

Susan feels she has not taken such a significant step because there has not been a change in her ethics. Theology thus does not constitute an identity boundary for Quakers, while ethical stances do. The narratives of continuity are not meant to deny the changes new Quakers experience as they begin to attend Quaker Meetings regularly; rather they emphasise the process of finding a home.

Most interviewees and many survey respondents reported that they discovered they had been Quakers all along without knowing it. When asked whether they felt in any way changed by being a Quaker, some interviewees confirmed a degree of change in terms of behaviour and of being more mindful in their relationships with others; yet, even when there is a change, interviewees consider it unintentional and an outcome of Quaker practice rather than intentional as stressed in the narratives of evangelicals and post-evangelicals (Montemaggi 2013, 2017a). The overarching narrative of finding home stresses continuity rather than change.

5. The Diversity of Silence

Quaker theological diversity in Britain is sustained by the prominence of silent worship, which contrasts, for instance, with the 'programmed worship' in the US, which includes hymns and set readings (Dandelion [2015] 2017, p. 57). The one-hour silent meditation, interspersed with individual spontaneous and concise contributions allows a diversity of perspectives. There is a structure to the meeting for worship: Friends are invited by an elder to begin the silent worship, which lasts for one hour and concludes with Friends shaking hands. This is followed by an elder or other volunteer reading out community notices. There are no set readings, no hymns, no sermons, or prepared contributions. There are no ordained ministers. Any Friend might 'minister' by contributing a short reading or a reflection, when moved by the 'Spirit.' Quaker worship is centred traditionally on direct personal experience of the divine (Dandelion 2014a; Johns 2013); yet today there is no explicitly Christian framework or expectation of belief in the divine.

When giving ministry, some Friends read out from the book *Quaker Faith & Practice*, copies of which are placed on chairs at every meeting for worship. The book is an anthology of reflections collected over time which serves to provide inspiration and aid one's reflection. Silence largely dominates the meeting for worship. This is highly valued by respondents. Some of them had tried different forms of meditation or silent worship before attending Quaker Meetings. This was often in Christian contexts. For instance, Lydia practised meditation with a group of nuns. Harriet told me that she was "exposed to a deeper spirituality" at the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation and learned listening skills through churches. Some have also explored Buddhism and other religions before joining the Quakers.

Many respondents like the simplicity of Quaker worship; yet the simplicity also requires discipline. For Edmund, who is 75 and has recently joined the Quakers, sitting in silence for one hour every week and practising meditation during the week is a challenging but rewarding exercise.

It sounds very simple as a method of worship, in fact, I discovered [...] that it is in fact extremely challenging [...] I think you're thrown very much on your own resources to develop the spiritual side of your nature and, when you start to do that, then you begin to understand how other people operate and you learn with them and from them. [...] I think most human beings have got a deep desire for their spiritual nature but are prevented by all sorts of reasons. I think I was. It's almost like a lack of confidence in yourself. It does mean having to let go to release a lot of emotions. If you are a cerebral kind of mind, you're intellectually biased, as I am, that's even more difficult. You've got to give up something. You've got to release yourself in order to begin to explore the spirit.

Silent worship is an exercise in quieting the mind and becoming aware of oneself and of others. For Edmund, the contemplation allows one to be in touch with one's spiritual nature. Therefore, worship is an exercise in developing one's awareness of human spirituality. Furthermore, as Edmund suggests, spirituality is experiential and requires releasing oneself from the mind as sole source of knowledge. He told me:

Quakerism is [...] a way, I think, of trying to explore some of the mysteries of life but without a particular map to guide you. You're giving yourself over to the Spirit and in the Light in

the hope that it will lead you forward. That sounds rather romantic but it's not meant to be. It's rather more prosaic than that.

Quaker spiritual experience is not solely individual inward experience but it has a collective element, what Dandelion calls "mutual discernment" (Dandelion 2014a, p. 19) and which is reminiscent to—what Magliocco (2012) calls—'participatory consciousness' of Witchcraft and Paganism. Catherine, who began attending Quaker Meetings after retirement, captures the shared spiritual experience of Quaker worship.

The sense of being in silence in company, the sense of exploration, the sense of totally different depths you can achieve or the filled room can achieve. ... It's quite different from a personal meditation. ... It has to do with what it is you're connecting with, what is in you and what is outside. From a collective, I find authenticity from what is within and from what is without. The sense of purpose.

Respondents did not remark upon the shared aspect of spiritual experience frequently. Quaker spirituality tends to be individualistic. This may explain why the most collective element of Quaker practice, the Business meeting, was never mentioned by any of the interviewees and, when asked about it, they did not think it significant. The Business meeting is a distinctive form of decision-making, where there is no proper contradictory; rather a consensus emerges. This is where 'participatory consciousness' happens; yet it seems that new Quakers do not attach great importance to it. It is silence that is the primary aspect of worship for new Quakers. The prominence of silence allows a multiplicity of meanings and identities to coexist, including Christian, non-Christian, non-religious and atheists.

New Quakers find a home in Quakerism due to its theological openness, contemplative worship and shared liberal ethical values. Respondents often stated that in other Quakers they found 'like-minded people.' Quaker liberal ethics allows inclusivity, especially so for people who have often been marginalised, like people with disabilities, LGBT Quakers and Quakers coming from LGBT families. British Quakers recognised same-sex marriages at the 2009 Yearly Meeting (Booth 2018). The acceptance of diversity is thus not limited to theological issues. Lydia, who is disabled, a lesbian and very "straight-forward and honest," told me that at Quakers she can just be herself. In other settings, she said she can get "into problems sometimes because people don't understand when you're saying something without embroidering it," while at Quaker Meetings she is accepted for who she is. Diana, whose parents are lesbians, also found a home at Quaker Meetings.

"My parents are lesbians and we were not accepted by people in the area. We were treated as outsiders. People from the local church were particularly unfriendly toward my family. I found it quite difficult as a child because I think I really did believe in God then. I've always believed in God. [. . .] So for a while I was very much non-denominational but had these kind of feelings about existence and about God. I guess I was a bit scared to admit them to my parents because my parents have always, I guess their experience of a church and, kind of, religion in general has always been one of ostracism. I didn't want to want to talk to them much about it cos I felt that maybe they thought I was doing a bad thing because I felt spiritual but I knew that like lots of religions wouldn't accept me or my parents and who they were."

In Quakerism, Diana not only found a community accepting of her family but also one where her religious identity did not clash with her social identity, something not possible in mainstream churches. New Quakers are thus not only fleeing from doctrinal religion but also from judgmental and conservative religion. They value inclusivity reflecting contemporary pluralistic ethics. Lack of judgment plays an important role in making communities inclusive (Montemaggi, forthcoming). However, one should be mindful of Quaker overall homogeneity in terms of demographics and politics. In addition, Quaker conflict aversion (Robson 2008) may often have the effect of suppressing

disagreements rather than ensuring the respect of a plurality of views. Further research is thus needed to examine how diversity is negotiated within Quaker Meetings.

6. Conclusions

The narratives of new Quakers point to a rejection of—what is seen as—dogmatic, conformist and conservative religion, which reflects the loss of cultural hegemony of Christianity in Britain. New Quakers have a fraught relationship with Christianity. This is partly to do with how they construct religion but also with their experience of Christian churches. There are Quakers who acknowledge and value the Christian roots of Quakerism, those who cherish a deep engagement with the varieties of Christianity, especially its mystical forms and of Quakerism but also those who are uncomfortable with Christian language at Meetings and find reference to Christianity inappropriate. New Quakers find in Quakerism the freedom of spiritual expression and the freedom from theological ideas that they could not find in Christian churches.

New Quakers emphasise Quakerism as a spiritual practice, rather than an adherence to set beliefs or liturgies. Many have recounted how they moved away from rigid theologies or church contexts that did not encourage free thinking in matters of faith. The prominence of silence in British Quaker worship allows theological diversity and spiritual seeking. It is an opportunity for silencing one's mind, be still and be present, as in other forms of meditation. It is also a collective silence, connecting the individual with the community. As a practice, silence is not in itself pluralistic, as it inhibits other forms of spiritual expression, such as through song and communal prayer. However, the absence of official words, be they hymns or prayers, makes possible theological pluralism. Quakers might give vocal ministry reading passages from *Quaker Faith & Practice* or sharing their thoughts; yet these are personal contributions rather than communal statements to which one should adhere. The prominence of silence, however, compounded by Quaker conflict avoidance, runs the risk of religious indifference or even antipathy, which may undermine the very diversity and acceptance that Quakers are trying to promote.

The centrality of spiritual seeking, the contemplative worship and the lack of religious conformity and judgmentalism make new Quakers feel at home at Quaker Meetings. Contrary to conversion narratives prevalent among evangelicals, new Quakers stress continuity when describing how they have become Quakers. Their experience of spiritual seeking matched by Quaker constant spiritual search is more salient than any changes or new practices that they have adopted since becoming Quakers. Quakerism represents the non-doctrinal and non-judgmental form of religion that they have always searched for. It is the finding of a home where one can be oneself. New Quakers thus often declare to have been Quaker all of their lives without knowing it.

At times, finding home represents the possibility of expressing a religious identity that is respectful of one's social and personal identity. This is particularly significant for those who have felt marginalised in society, such as disabled and LGBT people. Views on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, gender and sexuality have become more liberal in the UK; nevertheless, religious communities are generally less morally liberal, especially in terms of sexual orientation, women's rights and gender identity (Harding 2017). New Quakers' appreciation of Quaker inclusivity, especially in moral and social terms, marks a move away from conservative Christianity—as they see but also as some have experienced it. New Quakers are 'post-Christian' theologically but also culturally. The 'Christian question' thus reflects the profound cultural shift towards a post-Christian Britain, which is religiously diverse, more open to individual spiritual seeking but also more liberal morally and socially.

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