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# **Friend in the Field: a reflexive approach to being a Quaker ethnographer**

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## *Abstract*

Acknowledgement of the significance of reflexivity in social research has generated numerous autobiographical references in introductions to reports of field studies of faith communities. In particular the relevance of the researcher's gender - or at least female gender - has been a subject for scholarly reflection. Moreover, the insider/outsider dichotomy has been invoked and contested, and the changing relationship between the ethnographer and the field during field work has been charted. In this article it is some ethnographers' religious context and orientation that is the focus. With particular reference to some contemporary British Quakers whose field work has had a religious focus, including the Society of Friends itself, this article suggests that insights and concerns that are characteristic of a researcher's faith community may find expression in the ethnographic research process. Both the mutual reinforcement and tension between the assumptions and practices underpinning being a Quaker and being an ethnographer are considered. Quakers' 'marginality', their concern for interfaith dialogue and understanding of listening are factors which receive attention. Aspects of this research process may in turn, it is suggested, contribute to the researcher's spiritual journey.

## *Keywords*

Ethnography, Insider research, Quakers, Researcher's faith identity

*Introduction*

The focus of this article is on the experience of British Quaker ethnographers, a sub-group of a religio-ethnic community - a sub-group to which I belong. I propose to set our experiences in the context of the literature on reflexivity which I take to mean the recognition that both researcher and researched inhabit a shared cultural space and that neither can be quite the same after the field work encounter. Reflexivity features in standard texts on qualitative research (eg Hammersley and Atkinson rep. 1993:14-23 and LeCompte and Preissle 2nd ed 1993:145-7), it has been the subject of detailed theorising (eg Denzin 1997:217ff) and is accorded at least a passing nod in the introduction to many ethnographies (eg Nesbitt 1995:45-7). This article will tease out reflexively, with reference to my own experience of producing this article, one aspect of this inter-influence by focusing upon the relationship between being a Quaker and being a fieldworker who is engaged in the study of faith communities or of individuals' religiosity. This is intended to demonstrate the significance for their work of the ethnographer's personal religious context or associated worldview in the particular case of Quaker ethnographers, and so to suggest the importance of attention to this dimension of reflexivity in field studies more generally. The stance, presuppositions and conditioning of those ethnographers who do not identify themselves as religious adherents are not considered in this article, but are assumed to be of commensurate significance in the interaction of the field worker and the field.

After nearly thirty years of attending Meeting for Worship in the Society of Friends (the past nineteen as a member of Warwickshire Monthly Meeting) and twenty years of conducting and reporting field studies of faith communities in the British Midlands, it seemed timely to reflect on the likely inter-influence of these two involvements.<sup>1</sup> During this period my growing awareness of other Friends in the field prompted me to include in this reflection six other Quaker Ethnographers, of whom four are women.

*The paragraph above is from an earlier draft, but why, really, am I writing this article? The immediate stimulus: an invitation to develop for this journal my thoughts on being both Quaker and ethnographer. A contributory factor in accepting this invitation was my annual teaching slot, entitled 'researcher stance', on a research methods course for graduate students. For this my thoughts on religious positioning had started to flow, but turbidly. Or I can stay with the answer that now, in my later forties, I seek to integrate, or at least be reassured of a healthy synergy between my professional practice and my religious allegiance.*

For the purposes of this article ethnography is taken to cover a distinct approach and method - that of social anthropology, and in particular observation (with more or less participation) and interviews (ranging from structured to unstructured). Such research employs the qualitative (for example the interpretative 'reading' of in-depth case studies) rather than the quantitative (for example statistical analysis of responses to closed questions [eg those requiring a yes/no answer] in a large-scale questionnaire survey). But the ethnographer may also draw upon more quantitative techniques (for example using statistical information in order to contextualise a case study). Similarly, since quantitative sociological or psychological study may have an ethnographic dimension, the tendency to dichotomise quantitative and qualitative approaches is both unhelpful and unrealistic (Brannen 1992). Ethnography can denote not only the process of carrying out the research but also the theoretical underpinning of it and the written report of the field study. An ethnographic approach is sometimes characterised by an awareness of multiple interactions between the field worker and 'the field'. This is in contra-distinction to any logical positivist attempt to reduce inter-influence of this kind to a minimum, or to any assumption - or even assertion - that the methodology eliminates the possibility of the researcher affecting the field.

Quaker ethnographer (hereafter QE) is not a term that was chosen or agreed by all the eight practitioners whose experience is the basis of this article. Pam Lunn, for example, identified what she was engaged in as

'an interdisciplinary narrative study of lives'. However, the designation is tenable as I, and those whom I interviewed or to whose studies I refer, are members of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends and we have also, to varying degrees, adopted an ethnographic approach to their field studies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, all seven QEs have focused their enquiry either wholly or in part on (a) communities defined primarily by their faith tradition, on (b) religious belief and practice or (c) (Lunn) on individuals' religiosity. It may be objected that British Quakers need to be understood in sociological terms as members of a particular social class, and that it is the sociological factors implicit in being a Quaker that demand attention. The approach of this article is to operate with the category of Quaker, allowing QEs to deconstruct it as they will.

I shall draw both on interviews (including one conducted by email, one by telephone and one self-administered and taped) with five of us and on the published writings of four. From these I shall consider the QEs' explicit statements of inter-influence rather than attempting a wider, more speculative analysis of their texts. As I am reflecting on the process of producing this article, I shall endeavour to involve and distance my own experience. This I do in part by identifying points from my reflections that have appeared in two British Quaker publications, *The Friend* and *Quaker Monthly*, on the relationship between being a Quaker and encountering people of faith (Nesbitt 1980, 1987) and then carrying out ethnographic studies of them (Nesbitt 1993a, 1994, 1997). This method faintly echoes Kim Knott's use of quotations from her 'methodological autobiography' which she had taped and transcribed (1995).

*How ethnographers situate themselves: religio-ethnic group*

Although the researcher's gender is the single factor to have received most discussion, religio-ethnic background (including white post-Christian non-alignment with any single tradition) contributes to the experience which the ethnographer brings to the field encounter.<sup>3</sup> Individual ethnographers do routinely preface their reports of religio-

ethnic groups by statements about the researcher's ethnicity and religion. So Kalsi, a Ramgarhia Sikh in Yorkshire, records his privileged access to data on the local Sikh community as a longstanding member of it (1992:5). Bhachu has reflected on the implications both of being a woman and of researching her own (London East African Sikh) community (1987) and Heilman suggested the advantages and disadvantages of being not only an Orthodox Jew, but also a member of the particular congregation that he was studying (1973).

For field workers to define themselves as insiders or outsiders does not however reflect the more complex reality of identity and belonging. Raj criticises over easy distinctions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and, as a Canadian Hindu Punjabi researching London (UK) Hindu Punjabis, identifies her own position as that of an 'uncomfortable insider' (1997:54-8). Chaudhry, a Pakistani Muslim who came from Pakistan to research Pakistani Muslims in California, provides a moving insight into the 'tensions and contradictions informing the research process' through three vignettes. These she reconstructed from field-notes and her reflective journal, and they point up the uncomfortableness of her insider/outsider status, as a member of the same religio-ethnic group but one whose worldview had been differently formed (1997:441). Smith (a Maori researching Maoris) reminds us that insider research involves painful complexities (eg of disillusionment) for the insider researcher (1999:139).

Victor Turner, in his foreword to Myerhoff's study of the Jewish elderly in Southern California, gives the title 'thrice-born' to anthropologists who return to their 'nation of birth', declaring that:

our discipline's long-term program has always included the movement of return, the purified look at ourselves (Myerhoff 1978:xiii).

But, as Raj and Chaudhry have suggested, other members of the ethnographer's religio-ethnic group (even if she can be sure whom this

includes) are not unproblematically her 'nation of birth'. Distances, geographical, social and generational between individuals and clusters of individuals complicate talk of insider and outsider.

Moreover, the ethnographer's relationship with the belief, practice or religiosity of those encountered in the field may shift over time. This serves to challenge further the insider/outsider dichotomy. Some ethnographers have described such shifts, including the internalisation of others' beliefs, or ways of expressing these, and so 'going native' (Barker 1987). The ethnographer's participation may involve performing/undergoing ritual or other activity and reflecting upon the extent to which this involvement differs from the full insider's. For example Brown ponders her experience of Vodou (1991:11) and Kenna records the effect of a pilgrimage to a miracle-working icon on her subsequent academic interests (1992:158).

#### *Situating Quaker ethnographers*

Citing Heilman as an example of overt research by an insider to the group, Dandelion provides a useful four-fold typology of insider research. This makes a distinction between insider research as covert or overt and between being an insider to the particular group or to its wider context. He identifies the advantages and constraints of insider research and finally considers the ethical implications (1996:37-50). Tentatively applying Dandelion's typology to the work of the QEs throws up challenges to such a schema however.

Of the seven QEs two were overt insiders to the wider context (the Society of Friends) and to particular groups (local meetings) that they studied (Collins 1994, Dandelion 1996); two have made case studies of individuals from a range of Christian/post-Christian backgrounds - one looking at 'nurture' of young people including Quakers (Jackson and Nesbitt 1992), the other at life story (Lunn 1994). Three have studied Hindus (chiefly in Britain). Of these three, one (myself) became an important respect part of a Hindu community - Punjabi Hindus, and more specifically Brahmins, in Coventry - by marriage during the field

work period. The foci of these Hindu studies have included children's 'nurture' as Hindus (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993), issues in religious identity (Nesbitt 1991, 1998), the Hindu temple community in Leeds (Knott 1986a), processes of adaptation (Knott 1991), the Hare Krishna movement (Knott 1986b) and death, dying and bereavement (Firth 1991, 1993a and b, 1996, 1999a and b, 1997). One QE (who had earlier become a Muslim while retaining her Quaker involvement) has studied Pakistani Muslims in Pakistan, the Netherlands and Britain with particular attention to issues of health (Imtiaz and Johnson 1993) and multilingual strategies of adaptation in the diaspora (Imtiaz 1998). Evidently Dandelion's typology provides a useful framework but, even on the scant information provided above, individual ethnographers' experience does not always 'fit' comfortably since their roles and degree of involvement change.

In relation to specific studies some QEs were insiders to the group or to the group's wider context and all can be described as insiders to the context of faith: as Quakers all are ready to affirm (as well as to debate what is meant by) a spiritual dimension to life. In her interview Knott singled out 'insider/outsider' and 'scholar/devotee' issues as being of particular interest to her. She used the word 'believer' (indicating heavy quotation marks by her intonation) for an 'insider to the context', not to the denominational or faith community to which particular local groups belonged but to the much wider context of faith, the context of people who perceive their experience as in some sense religious:

Being a 'believer' as well as a scholar means I'm personally situated in that debate... I'm not neutral. I use myself as a means of reflecting on them (interview).

#### *Acknowledging the implications of one's religious location*

In her introduction to Hinduism, Knott situates herself in relation to the tradition about which she is writing by mentioning that not only is she related to the colonisers of India but:

Additionally I am a Quaker by religion, not a Hindu: what I have written is not intentionally influenced by my own religious identity (1998:5).

Here she seems to be acknowledging the importance for readers of knowing that she is not Hindu rather than to be claiming any particular relevance for being Quaker, as compared with being, say, Methodist or Buddhist. But she is also admitting to the possibility of her own religious allegiance unintentionally influencing her account of Hinduism. Paul Heelas, on the other hand, regards his Quaker upbringing as making him almost an insider to the New Age Movement which he seeks to report. Consequently he commences 'My background', the opening section of his introduction to the New Age Movement, with the statement:

Brought up a Quaker - one of the most 'New Agey' forms of Christianity - I was a part-time participant of the counter-culture of the later 1960s and earlier 1970s.(1996:10)

For Heelas it is appropriate to declare his Quaker upbringing as part of his credentials for undertaking the exploration of the New Age. In this way the reader is allowed to know that the writer has the benefit not only of academic distancing from the field but of experiential closeness.

Reflexive awareness requires of the student of belief and practice in any faith community an ongoing interrogation of her/his cultural conditioning and religious/ ideological stance and alertness to inter-influence between these and the field.

Reflection upon my own experience and attention to what other QEs have said suggested the following questions: do being a Quaker and being an ethnographer involve (or develop) similar attitudes and skills? (Or, as Lunn suggested in her interview, is it simply that Quakerism appeals to the sort of person who is also drawn towards field studies, especially of religious communities?) What is the significance for the

conduct of such field studies of being perceived as a Quaker? What are the implications of being a Quaker for researching Quakers?

*Do being a Quaker and being an ethnographer involve/develop similar attitudes?*

I'm doing the sort of research I'm doing because I'm already the sort of person I am...and I'm a member of the Society of Friends because I am who I am and can be this among Friends. The relationship between me and the research and the relationship between me and being a member are similar and not necessarily reinforcing (Lunn interview).

Whether or not the relationship is reinforcing, it is to some degree compatible and I shall therefore examine some documented Quaker tendencies for their relevance to ethnographic approaches. Quakers regard positively an openness to the insights of others, including those of 'other' faiths and the Quaker response to individuals and communities has characteristically included a stated readiness to listen and to learn from them. Indeed, it is likely that some Friends have joined the Society in part because of this very openness (Nesbitt 1997:11). This makes Quakerism attractive to the ethnographer whose project is to interpret and represent religio-ethnically diverse individuals and communities. To quote Firth's interview:

I found Christians from other denominations have problems with other faiths - especially Anglicans and any evangelicals who took the Bible literally.

As Dandelion has elaborated (1996) acceptance that in everyone there is 'that of God' is a widespread, almost defining Quaker understanding. What this phrase means is debatable in theological terms (see eg Allum 1998:10): it is open to being understood as pantheism, panentheism, 'that of good' and so on. However, what is clear is that the acceptance that there is 'that of God' in every other person confirms the QE in paying

receptive attention to those of any faith or none, regardless of age, culture, politics or socio-economic group.

Collins avoids God language altogether in pointing to a shared approach to understanding and interpreting human behaviour:

In a way being an anthropologist and being a Quaker mesh quite well in relation to ways of life and thought - in each case one is given to respect the individuality of every person whilst expecting supra-individual 'forces' to impinge on those individuals' thoughts and feelings, sense of well-being etc (personal communication 1998).

Furthermore, in practical terms, as Firth explained, 'probably the fact [that Quakerism is] non-doctrinal means reinforcement at a personal level, with no worries about conflicts of doctrine'. For me Quaker tradition provided resources for resolving perceived conflicts between the demands of being a Quaker and being an ethnographer. So, for example, when field work required me to work on Sundays, as participant observer in Christian congregations, the specific Quaker attitude to the sabbath that no one day is more hallowed than the rest of the week helped offset my sadness at being unable to attend Meeting for Worship.

The QEs observed also that their social and ethical concerns - for example the promotion of greater understanding between groups in a mixed society - accord with conducting ethnographic studies of different communities in which faith/religiosity are a focus. Furthermore, the QE's overarching and specific aims might mould the research questions and the envisioned outcome of the research. So, to quote Knott:

Peace and social justice resonate with me in other areas that I'm involved in... It's more to do with engaged work - meaning engaged with people, about things that other people are interested in, that have importance NOW. I couldn't have worked on mediaeval theology (interview).

Not only in the conduct of the field work but also in the reporting of it Knott sensed a depth and context implicit in her Quaker vision. Thus her communication of her findings is more than an academic exercise:

I think of all my writing, whether it's specifically about ethnography or about religion in general - I think of it as in a way as a kind of meditation - well this sounds too precious, a way of working out both my ideas and my outreach - a funny way of putting it - to my readers, wherever they're situated personally, so it's a conversation I'm trying to have.

Certainly, some QEs express the conviction that their research writing had a purpose beyond academia. Through her published and oral presentations of her field study of Hindus in 'Westmouth' Firth sought to lessen the anguish of dying and bereavement for families and individuals by sensitising and informing members of the medical and caring professions (1993a and b, 1996, 1999a and b). Similarly, in 1993, reflecting 'on being a Quaker and a researcher in religious studies' I expressed the view that 'a major objective' of my field work was:

to use my observations to make teachers and others sensitively aware of the rich and varied experience of the children with whom they come into contact. Another aim is to introduce pupils to the ideas and experiences of children from a wide range of backgrounds, and to help them to empathise imaginatively with them I hope that these intentions are in keeping with Friends' expectations of education and with their concern for better community relations in our society<sup>4</sup> (Nesbitt 1993:160).

Clearly QEs' attitudes as Quakers may cohere as a social vision which further motivates and contextualises their work.

*Do being a Quaker and being an ethnographer involve/develop similar skills?*

Referring to an earlier interpretation of Quaker practice (Bauman 1983), Collins suggests that reflexivity (in the sense of continuous reflection on their Quakerism) is intrinsic to being a Quaker:

If one is to be true to Quakerism a properly reflexive approach is necessary. Bauman (1983, *passim*) clearly indicates how Quakers have themselves been reflective of their faith and practice from the very beginning... In order to do justice to the reflexive self-determination which characterises Friends' praxis I have attempted to maintain a reflexive methodology in the text (Collins 1992:38).

Another Quaker characteristic, identified in a recent study by Homan and Dandelion, is acute awareness of the slipperiness of words (1997). The Quaker tendency to 'occupy themselves with the scrupulous negotiation and definition of aspects to belief' (1997:205) predisposes Quakers to be ethnographers rather than the subjects of ethnographic investigation.

The defining debates of interpretative anthropology also speak to a Quaker (or post-modern Quaker) condition: living as many Quakers do with ambiguity about whether to be Quaker is to be Christian or not, while questioning definitions and boundaries and aware of the uneasy relationship between culture, heritage, creed and personal insights. As inheritors of a dissenting tradition it is possible that the QEs' Quakerism inclines them to distrust and question dominant discourses, to avoid reification or the over-hasty equation of experience near and experience distant concepts.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the reflexive character of Quaker tradition, and its fostering of alertness to challenge terms and definitions, QEs experience listening as central to both their Quaker and ethnographic practice. Listening 'pattern[s] Quaker spirituality' (Loring 1997:2) and is, of course, a prerequisite of ethnographic research (as I emphasise in an exploration of principles for researching the religious lives of children) (Nesbitt 1999). Indeed 'participant observation' (which stresses the aspect of watching) necessarily involves participant listening.

Listening is a layered and diverse means of response and Loring eloquently articulates the scope of Quaker listening:

By listening I mean the widest kind of prayerful, discerning attentiveness to the Source intimated within us, evidenced through others... This kind of listening is not simply auditory. It may be visual, kinesthetic, intuitive or visceral as well... Quaker practice ..is also a holograph, with the element of listening patterning all its parts. (1997:2-3).

When 'listening' in Meeting for Worship Quakers' experience silence as a medium, no less than the words, rather than as an absence. This differs from the ethnographer's listening in much the same way as vocal ministry (spoken contributions to Meeting for Worship) does from 'normal' conversation or indeed the ethnographic interview. QEs suggest that Quaker listening benefits ethnographic listening. When interviewed Karima Imtiaz spoke of both Meeting and the ethnographic interview as requiring the suspense of one's own feelings or wish to intervene and noted how 'concentrated' the listening is in Meeting for Worship and meeting for business. In my experience, I had recorded:

This listening is complex: we register the verbal content of the spoken ministry and respectfully reflect on its layers of meaning, and we are also alert to the speaker's tone (Nesbitt 1997:13).

An essential aspect of Quaker listening in Meeting is the acceptance of silence between oral contributions and indeed a valuing of silence, even above words, for mediating meaning and uniting the gathering. While discourse analysis generally has concentrated more on the verbal elements of discourse than the spaces between the words, Davies's study of ministry in a Quaker meeting recognises silence as a key rule of the discourse: 'Members recognise one another by keeping to the (linguistic) rules of ...silence, by doing being silent together' (1988:132).

For Knott the Quaker way of silence, together with doing a part-time counselling course, opened up the possibilities of the 'space' in interviews that is empty of words:

Being a Friend gives me another way of thinking about being a religious studies researcher. When I was a researcher and not a Friend, although listening without interrupting was very important...when I'd thought about silence in other ways that gave me another way of thinking about the space between the researcher and the 'respondent' (interview).

QEs were not suggesting that interviews adopt the silence that characterises Meetings, but the interviewers' ease with silence and valuing of it had the potential to influence their conduct of interviews.

*Resistance/tensions from being a Quaker*

So far it appears that QEs have experienced their Quakerism and their ethnography as mutually affirming and the Quakerism as a resource for their professional activities. However some also voiced tensions. Imtiaz mentioned her increasing awareness of the opportunities and drawbacks of research. Whilst she hoped that her research into a transnational Muslim *tariqat* (Sufi order) would further her spiritual development the fact of being paid to do the research also troubled her. She expressed the tension which she felt between the demands of being an ethnographer in certain worship situations and the imperative to be there herself as a worshipper. Firth 'had difficulty with the tension between being a support/friend during a bereavement, while still being a researcher' (personal communication).

My own experience of field work has at times made me acutely aware of the incompatibility of some Quaker assumptions, priorities and commitments and those of communities in which field work was immersing me. The flatly plain and the competitively lavish, the egalitarian and the hierarchical (including the worship of spiritual luminaries), gendered and gender-free roles - these are some of the polarities which I experienced existentially, as an ethnographer who was also a part of a Hindu community, as well as intellectually. Adopting the role of non-judgemental reporter (rather than activist for change) sometimes smacked of irresponsibility. At the same time, my

assumptions about Quaker principles and practice, such as those implied earlier in this paragraph, received jolts.

*Quaker ethnography of Quakers*

For QEs researching in Quaker settings the tensions may result from being an insider to the group. Dandelion looks at practical consequences of being a Quaker for his research and the ethical implications of insider research (1996:136ff) and in my own brief study of 'religious nurture' in my preparative meeting (of which I was then an elder) I experienced role confusion in the sense of facing conflicting priorities. For the QE whose Meeting for Worship is 'data' there is the question: can participant observation in worship be worship? The QE feels unable to worship because of the imperative to listen and watch, to record, and not to 'centre down'.<sup>6</sup> A different listening (observing, recalling and analysing) pushes at the attentive receptivity with which one has become comfortable as a 'worshipper' in Meeting.

In addition to the tension for the QE researching Quaker worship, Peter Collins reported some of the strain to relationships in the Meeting:

I have talked about 'tensions' but 'resonances' might be a better word in that 'tensions' too easily conjures up negative qualities. In studying Quakers, balancing the roles of academic and adept was challenging - and sometimes exhausting (my PhD turned out to be more contentious - for one or two Friends - than I could possibly have anticipated) (personal communication).

In conducting ethnographic study of Quakers the QE's perception of the group to which he or she belongs designedly sharpens and so changes. So Collins detected among Friends a 'possible unifying resource' not in the peace testimony or in affirming the inner light, but in 'plaining', a process, he argues, whereby Quakers continually define themselves vis a vis others in terms of their plainness (1994 and 1996a). Dandelion's research contributed to his identifying 'the Quaker double-culture (the liberal belief system and conservative organisational structure) (1996:283). Reflecting on Bowman's distinction of official and folk or

popular religion (1992) I became more intent on 'listen[ing] out for actual presuppositions and values' (Nesbitt 1997:12).

Collins's research involved a distancing of himself (as ethnographer) from himself (as Quaker, and indeed the warden of the Meeting House). In reporting his field work he uses the third person, pseudonymously calling himself Simon (1994). The reality as he later presents it is a composite of reflection, refraction and juxtaposition.

I have re-presented aspects of my auto/biography through the interpretive lenses of two traditions. In the context of my auto/biography, Quakerism and anthropology co-exist as corresponding frameworks for understanding the world. As a Quaker, I perpetually reflect that tradition back in on itself; as an anthropologist, I refract and then juxtapose facets of Quakerism against other traditions. Each process realizes a multiplication of meanings which bear on subsequent attempts at interpretation - both Quakerly and anthropological (1996b:37).

*The significance of being perceived to be a Quaker*

When researching Quakers the QE's relationships are affected by the fact that other Quakers perceive him/her as a Quaker, even forgetting that she/he is also conducting research. For the QE who is relating to research participants who are not Quaker there may be an initial decision to be made - whether or not to identify oneself as Quaker. Being perceived as Quaker may be more advantageous in some situations than others. Pam Lunn reported benefits:

Being a Quaker has been an interesting and mostly useful position to come from because of vague and undefined public perceptions of Quakers as generally nice/good/liberal/accepting/moral/vaguely religious...ie respectable and acceptable (interview).

Of course reaction depends on what the 'subject' thinks a Quaker is, especially in relation to Christian belief. Lunn continued:

Everyone talked freely - eg black women talking about what literature says they won't talk to white women about. One Catholic did say it'd have been more difficult if I'd not been 'Christian' (She assumed I was Christian because I was Quaker...) (interview).

However, Lunn noticed that

Two or three Catholic women ... were constrained by my being non-Catholic, because of their perception of what I'd understand and so what it was interesting or safe to talk about. They differ strongly from all my other interviews (interview).

Similarly, when conducting a study of the nurture of Christian children across thirteen denominations I sensed that by identifying myself as a Quaker I put myself into the category of a potential convert for members of some congregations and experienced the disapproval of a Greek Orthodox parent who understood Quakerism as a heresy at three removes from the true (Orthodox) faith. When researching among Hindus and Sikhs my being a Quaker was irrelevant. Subjects located others as 'gora' (white) or non-gora, as Asian (a term widely used in Britain for all people of South Asian ie Indian subcontinental ancestry) or *apna* (from one's particular South Asian community eg a Hindu Punjabi). Knowledge that I was married to a Punjabi Hindu was more relevant than that I belonged to a particular church. So one politicised Sikh father was suspicious of my motivation.<sup>7</sup>

Freilich used the phrase 'marginal natives' for anthropologists, participants who are also observers, always on the edges of their field work community (1970). Quakers are (and by some members of Christian churches are perceived to be) marginal to the theological 'mainstream'.<sup>8</sup> This sense of Quakers' marginality may also be pertinent in understanding how others relate to the QE in the field although the widespread ignorance of what the term Quaker means at all must not be overlooked.

*Quakers, ethnography and interfaith understanding*

Academic studies of faith communities other than one's own are one element in a growing concern for organised inter-faith encounter. For the QE, as a member of a Society which is committed to inter-faith understanding, such field work is part of a socially and theologically driven enterprise. Of course, the commitment to deepening understanding between members of different faith communities is not peculiarly Quaker. Barton (1986) and Bowen (1988) exemplify field studies by an Anglican priest and a United Reformed Church minister respectively, both of whose academic and pastoral careers have been largely dedicated to inter-faith understanding. However, it is arguable that the specific character of a faith community contributes in specific ways to encounter and dialogue. In the Quaker case I have suggested the value of being marginal to mainstream Christian churches:

This borderline position can render the role of intermediary between those of different persuasions and faiths easier than for more doctrinally defined traditions (Nesbitt 1987:225).

Moreover, Quakers experience their traditional emphasis on openness to the light from whatever quarter it comes and respect for other faith traditions,

coupled with their relish for freedom from doctrinal shackles, as enabling in inter-faith encounter (Nesbitt 1987). To quote Firth:

Being part of [another church's committee for inter-faith relations] made me realise the handicap of orthodoxy, the evangelical sub-text of X began to irritate me - the subtext of so many people. I think I've always felt this since I was a child - offended on behalf of Jews and Muslims. (interview)

Naturally, field work involves the ethnographer in drawing comparisons between communities. To an understanding and interpretation of others' religiosity and faith tradition the QE brings a specifically Quaker

reference point. So my reflection on my own immersion in Sikh studies included awareness of resemblance between our traditions (eg 'founders' reformist critique of contemporary religious institutions) and difference (eg the tenth Guru's affirmation that when all other means have failed it is right to draw the sword and Quakers' peace testimony)<sup>9</sup> (Nesbitt 1980). Had my own community of faith and its emphases been other my experience of Sikh communities would have been filtered differently.

At the same time it was my exposure to ethnographic literature and thinking (as well as the experience of living in a Hindu family), which encouraged me to urge other Quakers to note and question the filter of western concepts/terms. I was urging them to see what was familiar (eg the Society of Friends, Christianity) in a new light by looking at it through, say, the Indic conceptual filter of eg *dharma* and *sanskar* (formative cultural influences) (Nesbitt 1994:205-209)

*Fieldwork and the ethnographer's spiritual journey*

So far I have used such terms as religious context and religious positioning, terms as inherently static as 'standpoint' (Denzin 1997:221), 'stance', 'lifeworld' and 'worldview'. Do such terms do justice to what is dynamic and interactive? In her rich reflection on 'women researching, women researched' Knott records:

It was at this time that I began to gratefully acknowledge the personal growth that came as a result of fieldwork, where I had previously tended to see the impact on my personal feelings as a sign of my weakness (1995:205).

She found that she was not alone:

One [woman researcher] saw her research with older women as 'not just an intellectual journey, but a personal journey as well'. Another said, 'I get a lot out of doing interviews. They can challenge you and make you think about your own philosophy (*ibid*).

Clearly 'growth' and 'journey' convey a sense of movement (progression?), change and the richness of experience which eludes more static terms. Spiritual journey is a metaphor which allows for both theistic and non-theistic conjectures and convictions. Spiritual in this usage encompasses religious, without carrying the latter's connotation of discrete faith communities or institutional weight, but with an emphasis on individual experience at depth.<sup>10</sup>

Knott articulated the role of her field work immersion in Hinduism in a journey which brought her to membership of the Society of Friends.

I started out as a non-religious person ...when I was starting ethnography I was not a religious individual. I never attended anything. I was honed by Hindu temple worship. That's where I got all my experience of religious practice. So my context for coming to Quakerism is entirely through Hindu religious practice and Hindu and Buddhist religious ideas (interview).

One particular dimension of the Hindu tradition, North Indian *bhakti* (devotion), provided deeper than academic insight:<sup>11</sup>

My scholarly perspective on Hinduism is really focused in the area of North Indian Vaishnavism...if I was to read the *bhakti* poets, that's a part of my religious persona...I'd never use phrases like 'Quaker Buddhist or whatever, but it would be impossible for me to deny that *bhakti*, particularly North Indian *bhakti*, it's been an important spiritual resource for me (interview).<sup>12</sup>

Thus experience of worship which Knott brought to her Quaker worship was field work experience: 'I religiously grew up in Hindu ritual... I need the occasional dose of it. I love going...I have a huge empathy for *darshan*'<sup>12</sup> (interview).

Moreover it was her research on a particularly evangelical strand of the Hindu tradition, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness,

which helped precipitate her commitment to a particular (Quaker) tradition.

That invitation that the Hare Krishna movement gave to me to pay more attention to my spiritual journey was certainly part of what brought me to Quakerism. Why Quakerism? That was to do with my temperament and character. It could have been anything, couldn't it? But the invitation to think afresh about my spiritual journey moved me forward ... towards being more decisive I suppose and working out what I did want ...to become more aware of what attracts me and doesn't attract me about particular religious paths (interview).

Such tension may be inherently creative, as Knott articulates:

Certainly with the Hare Krishna movement where I was working with a movement with a strong evangelical flavour...any group with a strong desire to open people up to a spiritual message...I don't find this a matter of conflict - not a question of our religious beliefs are clashing - it's more...we might value different religious aspects differently...differences in our religious style (interview).

The challenge of her involvement in a community that was active in proselytising had a transformative impact on her own spiritual journey. Consistently, as it happens, with a widely held South Asian view that one cannot (or should not) escape one's family roots and conditioning, Knott explained: 'I needed something which in terms of culture and tradition was part of my people' (interview).

Thus the challenge of the Hare Krishna research made Knott examine her own spiritual journey, and through her research she realised she needed what was a part of my own culture and people and came to Quakers.

Firth's experience also suggests the appropriateness of the journey metaphor. She moved from the United Reformed Church to the Society of Friends during the period of her long academic involvement with a

local Hindu community. Far from being non-religious her experience from childhood was steeped in religion: her parents were missionaries in India: 'I was fortunate in that I grew up in a household in which theology was discussed all the time' (interview).

In school, in Pune, her friends were Parsi, Jewish and Hindu, and two other important influences were

a love of Indian philosophy (Hindu and Buddhist), instilled in me by my father, which I subsequently studied academically, and learning Buddhist meditation at a retreat that was run by that remarkable eclectic Parsi, Firoza Mehta (personal communication).

For Firth, too, ethnographic research - combined with other inter-faith activity - was a factor and possibly a catalyst in her journey towards Quakerism:

Researching contributed to my becoming a Quaker. I started research in 1982 and became a Friend 1991-2... There were a variety of factors - the fact of being involved in interfaith dialogue contributed to this. I might have become a Quaker anyway, I had been an occasional attender from the 1960s (interview).

Individual QEs' field work, and reflection upon it, continues to feed into their worship and thinking as Quakers. So Knott described her own 'gift to Meeting':

Everyone in the Meeting brings something different to the Meeting by virtue of their religious journey. I mean some people in my Meeting have a fantastic knowledge of the Bible, which I don't have, I bring something about a whole range of other religions... sometimes if I feel called to minister then that background may emerge in what I say (interview).

In my own case a mantra or some devotional music from field work in Hindu congregations have on occasion helped focus my thoughts during meeting for worship. Also occasionally field work has provided

inspiration for spoken ministry. The experience of being a participant observer in worship situations - including Quaker Meetings for Worship - has also sharpened my critical awareness of what is occurring during Meeting and the characteristic features of spoken ministry (participants' oral contributions). At the same time, concepts from other faith communities have helped provide perspective and so reduce tensions I experienced between my Hindu family and Quaker inclinations/priorities. Shifts in my thinking (arising from reflection upon 'experience -near' concepts such as *sanskar* exemplify what Jackson has termed edification: 'pondering on the issues and questions raised by...the activity of grasping another's way of life' (1997:130).

### Conclusion

Although this article has problematised any tendency to polarise insiders and outsiders, this remains a useful distinction, not least when considering the ethical responsibilities of conducting and reporting research. The experience of some Quakers engaged in field studies of religiously defined communities or of individuals' religiosity suggests that the ethnographer's (largely overlooked) religious context or commitment demands attention in discussions of reflexivity. It is this, I have suggested, that contributes to some ethnographers' decisions to engage in particular ethnographic studies, and it may well affect one's approach to the field work encounter - for example, in the Quaker case, by valorising listening. Knott's reflections in particular call into question the more static notion of 'religious context' and suggest 'spiritual journey' as it is in part through the experience of the research that the researcher 'moves on'. Certainly the QEs' experience suggests that Evans Pritchard's dismissive dictum that 'the study of anthropology probably affects faith little' is questionable (1962:171).<sup>14</sup> Where studies of religious belief and practice are concerned ethnographers who identify with one or more communities of faith (or who acknowledge a spiritual dimension to their experience) are insiders to the context. As we have seen, any polarisation of insider and outsider is problematic, and the QEs illustrate how various the ethnographer's relationship to the focus community can be. Furthermore the

ethnographer is journeying, with shifting insights and patterns of allegiance over time, and Dandelion's useful typology needs to accommodate this.

Certain elements of Quakerism appear to be pertinent to ethnographic studies: I have suggested these elements include an affirmation of silence and listening, the marginality to mainstream Christian tradition together with a fundamental and pervasive openness to other faiths coupled with a distrust of terminology, especially of theological formulae. The fact that for Quakers practices are, in Dandelion's analysis, more conservative than beliefs potentially differentiates the QE's interaction with faith communities in the field from that of an ethnographer whose faith community holds more defined or conservative beliefs. Discussion of reflexivity will need to recognise the inter-influence between the ethnographic enterprise and the field worker's specific religious context/worldview, including the secular or non-theistic. In some cases, the experience of these few QEs suggests, it is appropriate to recognise the research as a dynamic or a catalyst, a factor in the ethnographer's personal growth and spiritual journey.

The fact that the influence of field work on 'personal growth' and 'personal journey' received attention in Knott's reflections, and that the majority of the QEs are women, raises the question, for a future exploration, of how discussions of reflexivity are to relate spiritual journey with gender and feminist perspectives.

*Having struggled, intermittently - as other commitments allowed - to complete this article I find myself dissatisfied both as Quaker and ethnographer. In both capacities the questions which still loom are ones of truth and utility. Is this partial (a word chosen advisedly) interpretation of edited fragments faithful to those individuals' experiences? Is it useful to future considerations of the religious dimension of reflexivity?*

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#### *Notes*

1. These studies have focused on the transmission and adaptation of religious tradition in several Christian, Hindu and Sikh communities. See for example Jackson and Nesbitt (1992), Nesbitt (1993b), Jackson and Nesbitt (1993), Nesbitt (1991), Nesbitt (1995), Nesbitt (1998).
2. For example, Dandelion used both qualitative and quantitative for exploring different areas of organisational life and he acknowledged:  
Qualitative research helped with the design of survey questionnaires and response items... Some research questions were too problematic to ask of the Quaker group in a quantitative form, and a qualitative approach was a crucial element in the collection of data, and subsequent construction of theory (1996:31).
3. Examples of field workers discussing the gender factor are Knott 1995, Papanek (in relation to gaining access to both male and female domains in segregated societies) (1964), Saifullah-Khan on Muslims' reactions to a non-Muslim woman researcher (1974). In these cases Papanek and Saifullah-Khan reflect upon being women who are outside the religio-ethnic community that they are studying, but do not relate their own ideological position or spiritual journey to the field work experience. Shaw's examination of the 'gendering of religious studies' is also pertinent (1999). For discussions of the religious factor see McCutcheon (1999).
4. In 1996 the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit for which I work won the Templeton Award 'for promoting tolerance and understanding through ethnographic research on children and associated curriculum work'.
5. For these terms see Geertz (1983:57).
6. Centring down refers to the Quaker practice in Meeting for Worship of allowing one's thoughts to become stiller and more consciously receptive to spiritual guidance.
7. From the mid 1980s Khalistani separatists suspected a conspiracy of Hindus, the Indian government and academics to undermine the claims of Sikhs to be a distinct community entitled to a separate state.

8. Here 'mainstream' refers to those churches which share a core of trinitarian doctrine.
9. Guru Gobind Singh's statement is in *Zafarnama*, a letter to Emperor Aurangzeb. 'Peace testimony' refers to a stance expressed in successive exhortations to eschew war, currently distilled in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995:1.02.31).
10. With 'spiritual development' enshrined as an aim of education in England and Wales (UK Government 1988) the literature discussing the meaning of 'spiritual' is proliferating.
11. See O'Flaherty (1999) for discussion of 'the approach from the head to the heart' in the experience of scholars of religion (p344).
12. *Bhakti* means devotion and refers especially to Hindu devotion to a personal God and to the tradition of saint-poets.
13. *Darshan* means being in the presence of the divine and being blessed by a deity's gaze.
14. This quotation comes from his Aquinas Lecture 1959 on 'Religion and the Anthropologists' in which he also observed that 'the attitude of...social anthropologists in particular, towards religious faith and practice...has been for the most part bleakly hostile' (1962:155) and that of the Christian minority of anthropologists 'a considerable proportion are Catholics'.

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