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## The British Quaker Survey 2013

Pink Dandelion

*Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre and University of Birmingham, England*

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# THE BRITISH QUAKER SURVEY 2013: BELIEVING AND BELONGING IN SECULARISING SOCIETY

BEN PINK DANDELION

British society is increasingly secular. In concert with most other Northern European countries, the last 150 years have seen a dramatic drop in church-going with an accelerated trend since the 1960s. Sociologists like Steve Bruce declare this is a trend which is unlikely to be reversed (2011) whilst others claim that whilst organised religion is in decline, continued high levels of belief in God (about 70% amongst the general population) and even higher levels of claims of spiritual experience point to the replacement of organised religion with other forms of spirituality. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead famously undertook a survey of the small northern market town of Kendal to measure levels of religious and spiritual affiliation (2005). They defined religion in terms of transcendent reference point, such as God, and spirituality in terms of a subjective one. They counted everyone attending church in Kendal one Sunday and compared their findings with longitudinal statistics on church attendance, in order to measure levels of religion. They then searched out all those practices which might be counted as spiritual and counted the number of adherents. Their hypothesis was that a ‘spiritual revolution’ would take place when the levels of spiritual practice outstripped religious affiliation. They ended up estimating that such a revolution might take place in thirty years’ time.

Within British Quakerism, we may find, of course, that subjective spirituality replaces a reliance on the transcendent without any change in participation. Britain Yearly Meeting is the most permissive of the Yearly Meetings that met in Richmond in 1887, having undergone a transformation in the early part of the twentieth century (Kennedy 2001). Evangelicalism was replaced by a Liberal modernism that gave primary authority to experience, and emphasised continuing revelation. Belief became individualised, an interpretation of experience. By 1990, there were Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and even Moonie Quakers in Britain Yearly Meeting. I conducted a survey amongst 32 Quaker Meetings to determine the breadth of belief. I

had a gratifying 60% response rate and concluded that Quakers were post-Christian in that so many adherents described their spiritual experience in language other than Christian. 51% of my survey sample self-identified as Christian. 72% claimed they believed in God, and 39% said that Jesus was an important figure in their spiritual lives (Dandelion 1996).

A version of this survey was repeated in 2003 by Rosie Rutherford, using a more sophisticated sampling method developed with the help of Paul Buckley. Fifty Meetings were selected, stratified by size, with 22 respondents selected randomly from each. The response rate was 60%, the responses very similar to the 1990 survey. In the same year, Simon Best conducted a survey of adolescent Quakers aged between 11 and 18 which contributed to his doctoral work on how distinctive youth Quakerism is from the adult version (2010).

Ten years on from these two surveys, we established team of six scholars covering qualitative and quantitative expertise from three universities to repeat both surveys. Simon Best, Bill Chadkirk, Giselle Vincett and myself from the University of Birmingham, Peter Collins from the University of Durham, and Jennifer Hampton from the University of Lancaster (now at Cardiff). We redesigned the surveys, deleting questions which had not worked very well and adding for the first time questions from Britain-wide and European surveys so as to be able to compare the Quaker population with the national one. Questions on class and ethnicity were included for the first time. I will now concentrate on the adult survey.

We agreed that whilst it was more expensive and labour intensive, we would need to use a paper survey. Not all Quakers are on the internet, and paper also allowed us to collect the many marginal comments that we have found Quaker respondents like to add to their forms. We also felt that having the form handed out in public in Meeting to the 22 selected respondents increased the likelihood of return. Each survey form came with a post-paid return envelope. This time, the response rate was 80%, defying all accepted social science wisdom, especially for a survey comprising twenty pages and over 50 questions.

The respondents were aged between 17 and 100, with a mean age of 64. In terms of gender, 61% were female, in line with national figures. In terms of ethnicity, 99% belonged to the white ethnic group, and 71% had undergraduate degrees with 32% of these a Masters or doctorate in addition. The Quakers are not typical of the British population as a whole but represent a very particular demographic.

Jennifer Hampton coded and analysed the adult surveys forms for her MSc thesis in statistics at the University of Lancaster and this work has now passed with a distinction (2013). We noted some major changes from the 1990/2003 results. Levels of Christian self-identification had dropped from 51.5% in 1990, to 45.5% in 2003 to 36.5% in 2013. Those seeking God's will in Meetings for Worship had dropped from 32% in 1990 to 25% in 2003 to 20% in 2013. The other major overall change was in belief in God. The question asked, 'Do you believe in God?' and offered three responses, 'Yes', 'No', and 'Not Sure.' This is a potentially problematic question, and respondents may be cautious about how to respond on two counts. Firstly, they may ask what those conducting the survey imagine by 'God.' Will their response be understood? Secondly, even if they think that is the case, how will those reading the results understand what is meant by a 'Yes' or a 'No'. We know from interviews that people with similar conceptions of God ticked this question in different ways in 1990. In all three surveys nearly one quarter of respondents ticked 'Not sure' perhaps reflecting this uncertainty. However, the question has remained the same and so bears comparison across the three surveys. In 1990, 74% said 'Yes', in 2003 72% and in 2013 57%. What is interesting is that the drop from 72% to 57% is strongly reflected by an increase in those answering 'No.' This rose from 3.4% in 1990 to 7% in 2003 to 14.5% in 2013.

Frequencies are blunt tools of analysis and Jennifer Hampton also conducted a latent class analysis amongst the 84% who self-identified as Quaker. This is a form of analysis that looks beneath the presenting responses and identifies patterns of response across the whole survey to identify sub-populations that are not otherwise visible. Hampton found three kinds of response pattern and only 6 out of 654 respondents did not fit into one of these three types with a probability of more than 80%.

Hampton's analysis of the 2013 British Quaker Survey reveals a set of three groupings amongst those who self-identify as Quaker, what she has called 'Traditional', 'Liberal', and 'non-Theist'. These clusters are not due to generational differences but are distinct cross-age cohorts. The 'Traditional' Quakers, 32% of the whole sample, have a high percentage of belief in God and self-identification as Christian. Jesus is more likely to be described in Christ language than by the other groups, and the importance of Jesus is highest for this group. A

high percentage believes that prayer can affect the way things are on earth, and read the Bible regularly.

The ‘Liberal Group’, 50% of the whole sample, occupies a middle ground. They believe in God less than the Traditionalist (55% as opposed to 90%) but far more than the ‘Non-Theist’ cluster. They pray less often and are less certain than the Traditionalists about the power of prayer. They are more likely to read *Quaker Faith and Practice* than the Bible, less likely than the Traditionalists to see themselves as ‘Christian’, and more likely to see themselves as ‘spiritual.’

Hampton’s ‘Non-Theists’, 18% of the whole, are far more likely to say they do not believe in God (9% said they did and 49% said they did not) and the least likely to self-describe as Christian. They never pray, self-describe as non-theist, agnostic, humanist, see Meeting for Worship in terms of thinking, and see Quaker Business Method in terms of consensus and not as seeking the will of God. They are far less likely to have served as Clerk and indeed are less likely to be a member (just 65% are in membership). They are more likely to believe that violence can be morally justified. (Hampton 2013).

There are no major age, gender, urban/rural or geographical differences between these three groups. We are not looking at a generational division but of three types of Quaker being spread across the 14% birthright and 86% convinced Quaker population of Britain Yearly Meeting. The average age of joining, by the way, is 43.

If we can begin to see a permissive Liberalism emerging in the 1960s, what Martin Davie has called ‘radical’ in comparisons with ‘conservative’ (1995), there now appears to be a second derivative direction of a tripartite distinction emerging from the founding Liberal vision. We are in the process of analysing the adolescent survey. We are now following the adult survey up with in-depth interviews to try to better understand the ways in which people answered the survey and in particular to ask about differences in how Quaker business method is understood, particularly amongst those who do not believe in God, let alone the ‘will of God.’ We are also hoping to run the survey in the USA amongst Evangelical, Liberal, and Conservative Friends and Stephen Angell at the Earlham School of Religion is co-ordinating this. Jennifer Hampton’s findings will be published, we hope, in a future issue of *Quaker Studies*.

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