

2022

**Review of Dandelion, P. *The Cultivation of Conformity: Towards a General Theory of Internal Secularisation*, (Routledge, 2019).**

Jon R. Kershner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#)

**Recommended Citation**

Kershner, Jon R. (2022) "Review of Dandelion, P. *The Cultivation of Conformity: Towards a General Theory of Internal Secularisation*, (Routledge, 2019).," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 135 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol135/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

REVIEW OF DANDELION, P.  
*THE CULTIVATION OF CONFORMITY:  
TOWARDS A GENERAL THEORY OF  
INTERNAL SECULARISATION,*  
(ROUTLEDGE, 2019).

JON R. KERSHNER

“Ben” Pink Dandelion’s book, *The Cultivation of Conformity: Towards a General Theory of Internal Secularisation*, is a serious examination of religious expression using British Quakerism as a test case. Even for one like me—who is not trained in the methods of the social–scientific study of religion, which the book employs—*The Cultivation of Conformity* is immensely useful to understand the changing dynamics of Quakerism, and Quakerism’s relationship to culture. Dandelion is a British Quaker *and* the foremost sociologist of Quakerism. His book builds on decades of research, presents a clear-eyed analysis of Quakerism and advances the study of religion in a way that will appeal beyond the boundaries of Quakerism. Dandelion’s book offers a new theory of religious dynamics for the secular age we live in. There are many, many takeaways in *The Cultivation of Conformity*, but let me just state one at the beginning: one should not discount the effects of secularity and secularization simply because one is a person of faith. Building on the work of Charles Taylor and others, Dandelion describes how for persons who live in North America and Europe, secularity defines the era we live in, including the faith we do, or do not, hold (see 38-39).

*The Cultivation of Conformity* clocks in at 181 pages including the bibliography and it is thick with arguments, ideas, evidence, and theory. It is a weighty book and here I can only offer a suggestive overview. While the book is focused on British liberal Quakerism as the test case, Dandelion does suggest ways that his theory relates to American Evangelical Quakers, too. Throughout the book, Dandelion engages with the work of leading scholars of religion. Many of these names will be obscure to the general reader, but the scholars and theories referred to have been important for understanding the development of religion in the modern world. I won’t get into all of these theories,

but the reader will learn a great deal about the study of religion from Dandelion's work.

I want to highlight in this review Dandelion's analysis of sects, denominationalism, flow, and turbulence. These concepts are essential building blocks for Dandelion's theory of internal secularization, which is presented in the book's last chapter.

Quakerism provides an interesting case study for Dandelion's theory because its history features "centuries of sectarian sensibility" (2). In other words, from the middle of the seventeenth century and into the nineteenth century, Quakers defined themselves against and separate from "the world" (53). The Quaker notion of the "hedge" was believed by Quakers to be a protection from contamination and worldliness. Quakers' distinctive manners of dress, speech, and religious restrictions, such as those forbidding marrying non-Friends, represented the boundary behaviors that formed the "hedge" (56-61). The "hedge" worked both to protect Quakers from the worldliness that lurked beyond the hedge and as an organizational mechanism for policing purity within Quakerism (67). It is important to note how there are both inward- and outward-focused functions to the "hedge." With the "hedge" in place, the first two centuries of Quakerism can be classified as a sect. After about the 1850s, British Quakers began to debate whether the "hedge" was important. Problematizing attempts to name a single moment when Quakers moved from a counter-cultural sect to a respected denomination, Dandelion argues that the Quaker "experience illustrates that sectarian sensibilities can emerge at any point in the lifespan of a religious group. Further, it is argued that notions of 'Quaker' and 'world' are oversimplified. Rather, a more complex set of relationships exist which need to be taken into account..." (74). In other words, simple dichotomies do not hold up. The evolution of Quakerism was not linear and it continues to be multidirectional. As "the State tolerated Quakers, so the Quakers tolerated the State" (95). Dandelion shows that there is a continuous state of negotiation with the State and a selective accommodation with "the world" and so there are many interdependent factors on religious expression. By problematizing the traditional schema of Quaker development from a sect to a denomination Dandelion shows how competing desires within a religious group go back and forth and appear sporadically and recurrently. All of this is helpfully examined through the concepts of "flow" and "turbulence."

Using the work of Thomas Tweed and Jane Calvert, Dandelion proposes a new model of understanding negotiations within a religious group that

frames the navigation between citizenship and public appeal as a combination of dynamic processes within the Quaker group as they relate to those *equally* dynamic processes within the State and the public square, resulting in differing levels of engagement on different aspects of church-State and church-world relationship at different times. Thus, I am proposing a model that can accommodate how Quakers may argue with Quakers over what ‘purity’ may consist of, and on the importance and content of strategies for State acceptance and public appeal (107).

Not only are the dynamics of religion and secularization complex, but the way sects interact with the state are turbulent and unpredictable. Sometimes influence may “backwash” suddenly as a strand of prophetic religious expression suddenly flows into secular places that produces an unwanted contamination and transgresses boundaries (109). “Typically though, we may most appropriately see the influence between the religious and non-religious in terms of multiple eddies or patterns of multiple turbulent flow...” (110). This modeling of the complex way religions interact within and without themselves makes way for more complex historical analyses of Quakers as well as a better understanding of how British Quakerism has changed over the course of the last century.

I want to note that in trying to give a sense of the argument Dandelion is making I am skipping over quite a lot and simplifying even more. However, these models show how Quakers can both be sectarian in, say, liturgical forms like silent worship (i.e. a “behavioural creed” [122]), while also largely “world-accepting” in terms of integrating pluralism and doctrinal diversity into Quaker self-understanding. All of this leads us to the main argument of the book, which is that British Quakers (and others) can be modeled through a theory of internal secularization.

Dandelion argues that contemporary British Quakers now hold as self-definitional a value of “seeking;” and thus, “seeking” performs a prescriptive boundary function for what it means to be Quaker. It is not so important what a person believes, but *how* they believe. Doctrinal certainty is eschewed and religious belief is privatized (128). Because overt doctrinal discussions within Quakerism are treated as having dubious value, there is a high degree of uncertainty within the

group about what the group actually believes. This uncertainty about the content of Quaker faith plays out linguistically when Quakers talk with non-Quakers about the content of their faith. Dandelion shows that there is little opportunity for the same discussions among Quakers, so the transmission of “what Quakers are about” occurs through a “linguistic culture” at the popular level, which may be different from the organizational level. “Indeed,” Dandelion writes,

it is ‘on the street’ as it were, through linguistic expression in particular, that the desire to minimize linguistic dissimilarity with those they encounter, find non-religious language to express their spiritual insights and identities. These popular forms of expression then find their way back into the organisational environment, a process accelerated within a non-doctrinal setting such as the Quakers in Britain (2).

As Quaker adherents seek to minimize difference with non-Quakers they describe their faith in secular terms. This linguistic feature “has been attributed to the desire to maximize social integration and thus to maximize positive reception, evaluation and response” (150). The Quaker belief that spirituality is ineffable and private “thus accommodates and masks changes in popular religious belief. Thus unspoken tradition is reinterpreted and in due course collective organizational expressions of Quaker faith, the Quaker orthodoxy drawn from popular assent, can be recast in innovative terms” – the process of internal secularization (150).

Dandelion’s book makes an important contribution to Quaker studies and, more broadly, to the study of religion. It tracks the often ignored dynamics that have shaped Quakerism since its inception. It also illustrates previously undetected dynamics of conformity and accommodation that exist in post-Enlightenment religions. These two contributions are important enough, but the book does something else of note: it shows how the study of Quakerism presents opportunities for understanding religion more generally. For too long scholars of religion have ignored or glossed over Quakerism as an important entity in the religious milieu. And, for too long, Quakers have enabled this oversight by portraying themselves as completely unique, or even alien, to the factors that influence other religions. Rather, Dandelion shows that a thorough examination of Quakers makes contributions beyond Quakerism, and, likewise, that the trends impacting post-Enlightenment religions can be poignantly illustrated within Quakerism.