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Theology at Thresholds: Learning From A Practice ‘In Transition’

Abstract

Recent developments in contemporary theology and theological ethics have directed academic attention to the interrelationships of theological claims, on the one hand, and core community-forming practices, on the other. This article considers the value for theology of attending to practice at the boundaries, the margins, or as we prefer to express it the threshold, of a community’s institutional or liturgical life. We argue that marginal or threshold practices can offer insights into processes of theological change – and into the mediation between, and reciprocal influence of, ‘church’ and ‘world’. Our discussion focuses on an example from contemporary British Quakerism. ‘Threshing meetings’ are occasions at which an issue can be ‘threshed out’ as part of a collective process of decision-making. Drawing on a 2015 small-scale study (using a survey and focus group) of British Quaker attitudes to and experiences of threshing meetings, set in the wider context of Quaker tradition, we interpret these meetings as a space for working through – in context and over time – tensions within Quaker theology, practice and self-understandings, particularly those that emerge within, and in relation to, core practices of Quaker decision-making.

Keywords

Quakerism; Quaker decision-making; threshold; ordinary theology; Daniel W. Hardy

1. Introduction: Practices and Thresholds

In contemporary theological research, a church-community's practices are no longer regarded as a secondary consequence of belief, uninteresting to the theologian. Rather, the shared and storied practices, and the habits and patterns they engender in the body and the imagination, are integral to what it is to believe, and this claim itself can be defended in terms of Christian theology.¹ Despite the numerous overlaps of theme and approach that allow us to speak of a theological turn to practice, this attention to practice takes many forms, and carries many different implicit ecclesiologies.² Bound up with these differences in ecclesiological

¹ For examples of recent summary discussions that indicate some of the historical and contemporary contours of – and controversies around – this 'turn to practice', see Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp.167-170; Timothy K. Snyder, 'Theological Ethnography: Embodied', *The Other Journal* 23 (2014) at <http://theotherjournal.com/2014/05/27/theological-ethnography-embodied/>; Christopher Brittain, 'Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live By Doctrine Alone', *Ecclesial Practices* 1/1 (2014), pp.5-30, at p. 9 discussing John Webster's critique of the turn to practice.

² These range, for example, from Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's focus on tools for attention to a grassroots 'community of accountability' over against the churches' institutional complicity in oppression, to the strong division between church and world assumed in Stanley Hauerwas' robust rejection of the tools of social anthropology, to the thorough interweaving of religion and 'English everyday life' seen in Timothy Jenkins' work. See Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between* (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1988), pp. 101-132; Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English*

framework and in methodology is the persistent question, both in the theoretical literature and in empirical studies, as to which ‘practices’ are theologically relevant – and why.³

This article considers the value for theology of attending to practices at the boundaries, the margins, or as we prefer to express it the threshold, of a community’s institutional or liturgical life – practices that are, theoretically and institutionally, neither church nor non-church. Developing an example from British Quakerism, we argue that these marginal or threshold practices offer insights into processes of theological change – and into the mediation between, and reciprocal influence of, ‘church’ and ‘world’. They are not, in other words, merely derivations from, or applications of, the core practices that carry theological significance, nor are they ‘worldly’ intrusions into ecclesial space. They are sites of collective and contextual experimentation, where communities work with their core habits and claims to make sense of particular situations and contexts – in conjunction with other ways of making sense.

Our use of the term ‘threshold’ arises, as will be seen, from the specific practice on which this article focuses – the Quaker ‘threshing meeting’. Tracing the history and contemporary use of this terminology, which might at first appear to be merely an archaic survival, we have found it to be a powerful image for drawing attention to the space, time and energy devoted to the interface between ecclesial and secular spaces – or, to use terms from Daniel W. Hardy to which we will return later, between the intensities of liturgy and the extensities of everyday

Everyday Life (Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), and also *An Experiment in Providence: How Faith Engages With the World* (London: SPCK 2006), pp. 96-102.

³ See for example Kathryn Tanner, ‘Theological Reflection and Christian Practices’, in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 228-242.

life. In talking about threshold practices, we gesture towards the well-developed idea of ‘liminality’ as the space and time ‘between’ social states and roles. Extending this, however, we use the ‘threshold’ as a metonym for the threshing-floor – which, while a ‘space between’, is also a space where specific, structured, and temporally-extended work is done. The ‘threshold’ space is interesting not only because of its ‘between-ness’ and indeterminacy, but also because of how its practices shape and enable transitions and transformations.⁴

We return to the image of ‘threshing’ and its importance within Quakerism shortly. In order to understand how it works and why it matters, within a church tradition that is still very marginal in the study of Christianity, we need first to give a brief account of the core community-forming practices to which it is attached.⁵

⁴ For the account that shaped subsequent discussions of liminality in the study of religion, see Victor Turner, ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*’, *The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (1964). In a recent example of ethnographic appropriation of further philosophical development of the idea, Bhri Gupta Singh, *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), especially pp. 33-58, develops Deleuze’s account of ‘thresholds’ to denote ‘points of passage across stages and phases of life’ and also points of ‘intensity’ in encounter or engagement with spirits

⁵ Significant empirical studies of contemporary British Quakerism – none of which deal with the practice on which our research focuses – include Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1996), and the collection in Pink Dandelion and Peter Collins, eds., *The Quaker Condition: The Sociology of a Liberal Religion* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008)

2. Practice and Theology in Quaker Decision-making

Quaker decision-making has attracted considerable interest over the years from academics and practitioners, Quaker and non-Quaker. This is partly because of its many striking features when compared to other processes commonly in use – features such as the lack of voting, the openness in principle to contributions from all members of the community, and the particularly strong commitment to shared ownership of decisions – but partly also because of its capacity to disclose important aspects of Quaker belief and identity.⁶ The most obvious place to look, in order to understand Quaker decision-making and its theological implications,

⁶ For an extended study of Quaker voteless decision-making by a non-Quaker, see Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1996). For an illustrative recent account of Quaker decision-making focused on its possible value for non-Quaker organisations, see Leonard Joy, ‘Collective Intelligence and Quaker Practice’ (Collective Intelligence Institute, n.d.; available <http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-QuakerCI.html>). For a recent theological overview, see An excellent introduction for an ecumenical audience is Eden Grace, ‘An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice’, paper presented to Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, Damascus, 2000 – available on <http://www.edengrace.org/quakerbusiness.html> [accessed November 2016]. We acknowledge helpful discussions with Nicholas Burton on his current research on Quaker business method and its application to non-Quaker organisations. See Nicholas Burton, ‘Quaker Business Method: A Contemporary Decision-making Process?’, paper presented at Friends Association for Higher Education conference, Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, June 2016, available on <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/27780/> [accessed November 2016].

is the business meetings where Quakers' shared decisions are actually reached.⁷ Business meetings - while varying enormously in size, geographical coverage and focus - are governed by a strong set of shared and distinctive norms that mark them out as Quaker meetings – not just incidentally, as meetings that Quakers happen to attend, but essentially, as spaces where the Quaker community encounters the source of its life and the core of its identity.

Particularly important here is the close and explicit connection between business meetings and Quaker meetings for worship. Thus, for example, the consideration of each matter is framed by silence, and the expectation is that spoken contributions are offered as ministry – for the sake of the meeting and the process of discernment in which it is engaged, rather than to advocate an individual's point of view. Various behavioural norms are recognisably linked to the idea that the business meeting is a meeting for worship; periods of silence between spoken contributions, refraining from speaking twice or from making the same point twice, speaking to the group rather than to an individual, and so forth.⁸

⁷ We are using the term 'business meetings', widely found in ordinary Quaker usage, simply because it is more concise than 'meetings for church affairs', the term used in the Quaker book of discipline (Quaker Faith and Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1994)) .

⁸ See for a recent study of decision-making in contemporary British Quakerism, mainly but not entirely focused on business meetings, Jane Mace God and Decision-Making (London: Quaker Books 2012); and for a recent 'insider' account of Quaker decision-making, by a former clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting, Peter J. Eccles, The Presence in the Midst: Reflections on Quaker Discernment (London: Quaker Books, 2009).

Collective statements agreed by Quakers in Britain, including directions and advice for the conduct of business meetings, frequently make the connection between business meetings and worship, and expound this in theological terms:

‘We earnestly desire that Friends concerned in Meetings of Business do labour to know their own spirits subjected by the Spirit of Truth; that, thereby being baptised into one body, they may be truly one in the foundation of their love and unity, and that therein they may all labour to find a nearness to each other in spirit’.⁹

Given the theological ‘turn to practice’ discussed above, a good case could be made for taking Quaker business meetings as a key locus for understanding Quaker theology. More than this, the sacramental language used in the quotation above draws attention to the claim – also implicit in more recent descriptions - that the business meeting is a place in which the material realities of a community’s life undergo transformation; this is where the community is formed in and through divine encounter.¹⁰ Again, the business meeting is a place in which characteristic habits and virtues – peacefulness, equality, truthfulness, simplicity – are practised, reflected on, and placed in relation to each other and to their shared source.¹¹

⁹ Pastoral Epistle from Yearly Meeting in 1717, reproduced in part in *Christian Discipline of the Society of Friends: Church Government* (London: Friends’ Bookshop, 1917), p. 34.

¹⁰ Understandably, studies of Quaker ‘liturgy’ have tended to focus on the Meeting for Worship proper – that is, in the ‘liberal unprogrammed’ tradition of British Quakers, worship based on silence. See Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (London: Ashgate, 2005).

¹¹ On the importance of these ‘testimonies’ for contemporary British Quaker self-understanding, see Rachel Muers, *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics* (London: SCM 2015), pp. 22-28.

In terms borrowed from Daniel W. Hardy, the Quaker business meeting can be understood as a place of intensity – a place ‘where the interwoven involvements of God, community and world are most fully expressed’.¹² It carries the conscious expectation of divine encounter, understood and mediated through traditioned language and practice, with formative and transformative significance in the lives of individuals and the community. Moreover, as the place where collective authority is exercised, it is the place where the issues and concerns affecting the community’s life are focused on, considered and resolved. The concept of intensity is helpful here because it allows us to recognise the distinctive significance of the business meeting, without isolating it from the ‘extensity’ (to use Hardy’s term of contrast) of the everyday lives of individual Quakers and the ongoing work of maintaining Quaker communities. The ‘extended’ life of the community is gathered and re-formed in the ‘intensity’ of the meeting. This could certainly be said of meetings for worship, but it makes just as much sense to say it of the business meeting.

Given the particularly strong emphasis within Quakerism on the practice of faith in everyday life – seen, for example, in the prominence given to the injunction to ‘bring the whole of your life under the ordering of the spirit of Christ’¹³ – this reciprocal relationship between the intensity of business meetings (and meetings for worship) and the extensity of daily life seems particularly important. Neither the point of intensity – the business meeting – nor the

¹² Daniel W. Hardy, *Finding the Church* (London: SCM, 2001), p. 112. Hardy, an ordained Anglican, was educated in a Quaker college (Haverford); the influences of Quakerism on his thought are discussed at some length in Stephen Pickard and Martyn Percy, ‘Wording a Radiance: A Conversational Book Review’, *Journal of Anglican Studies* 10/2 (2012), pp. 251-266.

¹³ Quaker Faith and Practice 1.02.

extensity – the daily life of Quakers and their communities – can be understood without the other. The stuff of a Quaker business meeting just is, obviously and inescapably, the stuff of everyday life in a particular time and place.

However, the persistence of the specific and the everyday at the heart of the business meeting's 'intensity' raises theological and practical challenges. Quaker business meeting is – as the current Quaker Faith and Practice observes – likely to be concerned with 'humdrum down-to-earth business' and rarely a 'high peak of experience'.¹⁴ What does it actually mean, in practice and in everyday understanding, to place so much weight on (for example) the process for deciding whether to refurbish a meeting house kitchen? In what follows, we suggest that the threshold space around the Quaker business meeting – the space where transitions can be made between the extensities of everyday life and the intensity of worship – plays a particularly important role.

3. Threshing Meetings on the 'Threshold' of British Quakerism

Our research project, supported by the University of Leeds, the Hibbert Trust and Quakers in Britain, examined 'threshing meetings' as part of British Quaker decision-making.¹⁵ The focus of our small-scale study was, narrowly, how Quakers use and understand threshing meetings in relation to other Quaker practices and processes, particularly business meetings; and, more broadly, how this can illuminate the theology and practice of Quaker decision-

¹⁴ Quaker Faith and Practice 3.07.

¹⁵ An initial account of the project, on which the current article draws, was published as 'At the Threshold of Community: Exploring Quaker Decision-Making Processes', Faith and Freedom 69/1 (January 2016), pp. 3-13.

making. At their simplest, threshing meetings (today) are meetings at which an issue can be ‘threshed out’ – for example, at which a range of opinions and feelings can be aired, and a range of perspectives and information shared.

As suggested in our introductory discussion, much of the empirical work that has supported theology’s ‘turn to practice’ has been ethnographic with a strong element of participant observation. In our case, operating under significant resource constraints and also mindful of the complexities – theological as well as ethical – of ‘participant observation’ in the open-ended community process of threshing meetings, we chose to approach the practice of threshing meetings through the reflections of those who participated in them. Alongside reviewing historic and contemporary Quaker writing on the subject, we conducted a survey and focus group session – the former publicised generally among Quakers in Britain, the latter put together from an open invitation to those who had completed the survey and shown interest in the project.¹⁶

In the spirit of the ‘ordinary theology’ developed by Jeff Astley and others, then, our project treated the ‘ordinary’ member of a church-community as a theologian with specific expertise, based on her lived experience, critical reflection and creativity within the tradition she inhabits.¹⁷ However, in a Quaker context ‘ordinary theology’ takes on a rather different meaning, for two reasons. First, since Quaker polity makes ‘lay’ (that is, non-specialist and non-professional) theological reasoning the norm – giving authority for discernment to the

¹⁶ The project report, which includes more detail on various aspects of the research process, is available on <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/downloads/125150/research/> [as of June 2015].

¹⁷ See Jeff Astley, ‘The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology’, in Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis, eds., *Exploring Ordinary Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 1-9.

whole group and allowing little visible authority or role for specialists – arguably ‘ordinary theology’ is the norm rather than the exception. The distinctions between academically-trained and ‘ordinary’ theology – or even between formal and official theologies and (more diffuse and varied) espoused and operant theologies - are not entirely irrelevant to Quakerism; but they are less useful than a distinction between theologies that are already collectively agreed and those that are emerging, developing or the subject of ongoing experimentation.¹⁸ Second, since there is so little emphasis in Quakerism on shared or even individual formulations of belief, investigating ‘theology’ in isolation from practice would yield limited understanding of the change going on.

Besides being particularly appropriate for the study of Quaker theology, our inclusion of these methods in our wider study was closely related to the practice we were investigating. While it is possible to obtain a picture of the theology and practice of Quaker business meetings from a wide range and long tradition of Quaker literature, threshing meetings are not collectively owned in the same way by British Quakers. Both the practice and the discourse around it seem to be an example of an area of practical and theological experiment. The book of discipline, *Quaker Faith and Practice* offers the briefest of descriptions, without comment:

Threshing meetings. This term currently denotes a meeting at which a variety of different, and sometimes controversial, opinions can be openly, and sometimes forcefully, expressed...¹⁹

¹⁸ On formal, official, espoused and operant theologies, see Helen Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010).

¹⁹ *Quaker Faith and Practice* 12.26.

Even if we had wanted to find ‘official theology’ to contrast with ‘ordinary theology’, we would have had difficulty doing so.²⁰

With the aim of engaging our respondents as ‘experts’, both survey and focus group interview were designed to gather both narrations of experiences and reflections on the principles involved and the lessons learned. We asked our respondents for specific examples, for general reflections, and for the advice they would offer to others. In the questionnaire, we used a combination of closed questions with statements to which respondents were invited to agree or disagree, and open questions for comments and reflections arising from the prompts of the closed questions. The focus group drew on the initial results of the questionnaire to shape an extended semi-structured discussion, followed up in some cases with ongoing correspondence after notes from the group were shared with the participants.

We received 120 responses to our survey, almost all from Quakers from Britain.²¹ Although a number of Quakers have never heard of threshing meetings (we heard from some of them as we advertised this work, and have to assume that many chose not to complete the survey for this reason), there were also some who had considerable experience.²² From our survey responses a clear picture emerged of threshing meetings as preparatory to business meetings

²⁰ While a leaflet of practical guidelines for the conduct of threshing meetings has been produced, it does not, by its nature, include reflection on the background aims or principles, nor on how threshing meetings relate to the wider Quaker decision-making process.

²¹ This being an online survey, we attracted a small number of international respondents - 8 out of 123.

²² Although 38% of our respondents had never attended a threshing meeting, 6% of our respondents had attended more than six threshing meetings.

– and clearly differentiated from business meetings, by being spaces in which no decision is to be taken or expected. When asked to talk about how threshing meetings ‘related to’ business meetings, respondents mainly articulated the relationship in terms of time – ‘usually happens first’, ‘A threshing meeting would be about something that will eventually go to a business meeting’. Threshing meetings are seen to be needed when a complex issue is to come to a business meeting and would benefit from exploration in advance – or, sometimes, where a complex issue has come to a business meeting and it has not proved possible to reach a decision. The topics addressed by threshing meetings held in Britain were almost all local and practical; typical examples include decisions about property or employment.

Beyond this broadly consistent picture, a striking feature of the responses was the diversity of practice – not necessarily accompanied by awareness of that diversity. As it emerges from our study, the threshing meeting is repeatedly ‘reinvented’ for specific situations by particular groups. It is not really a single coherent method – it is multiple cross-currents of idea sharing, pooled experience, and experimentation. The ‘rules’, behavioural norms and expectations governing threshing meetings vary widely. Taking notes, appointing an outside facilitator, agreeing rules of confidentiality, establishing a norm that each person speaks only once or that contributors do not directly address or argue with each other – all have been tried, none are universal. This is not particularly surprising. Ideas about threshing meetings and how they can be held are sometimes shared formally – through the production and distribution of pamphlets with instructions, books which contain examples or guidance, and suggestions given on training courses for clerks and elders – and also through informal networks and channels of conversation.

The obvious question that arises, especially given what has already been said about Quaker business meetings, is – is the threshing meeting a Quaker process, and, if so, how? Our idea

is that the threshing meeting works as a ‘threshold’ space, a space of transition – including a transition between recognisably ‘Quaker’ spaces, processes and practices and those not marked as Quaker. As our respondents perceive it, threshing meetings are effective just because they are neither ‘Quaker meetings’ – with all the accompanying norms and expectations, as well as the associated theological weight, discussed above – nor ‘non-Quaker’ meetings, lacking any relationship to the core of the community’s life. In the diversity of practice identified in our questionnaire and discussed above, another overall picture emerged; every threshing meeting described was using some but not all the ‘rules’ and norms of a business meeting. Thus, presented with a list of commonly-recognised distinctive features of a Quaker business meeting, none of our contributors seemed to describe a threshing meeting with none or all of these features.²³

So the threshing meeting is ‘at the threshold’ of Quaker practice – and, as discussed earlier, the ‘threshold’ in this case is not simply a place where transition happens to occur or different practices and expectations happen to be juxtaposed. The threshing meeting as threshold is a place where transitions are made, with the expenditure of considerable time and effort. ‘Hard work’ was one of the most common themes that arose, unprompted, in our respondents’ descriptions of the threshing meetings they had experienced.

Thinking about the history of ‘threshing meetings’ – as reflected in the quotation from Quaker Faith and Practice given earlier – this might not surprise us. At the origins of Quakerism in seventeenth-century England, talking about ‘threshing’ would have called to

²³ Nearly but not quite all began and ended with silence; many but not all had silence between contributions; most but not all appointed a clerk; some expected each contributor only to speak once; some did not expect contributors to respond directly to each other; some produced minutes that were read out in the meeting.

mind not only a wide range of biblical texts, but also ordinary experience of the extended and labour-intensive transitional process between gathering the harvest and storing the grain. The original Quaker ‘threshing meetings’, in the period of rapid expansion of Quakerism in the mid-seventeenth century, were likewise transitional spaces between the initial ‘gathering in’ of anyone and everyone from the streets where Quakers were preaching, and the formation of Quaker communities. Thus, in London in the 1650s, Francis Howgill and Edward Burrough preached, argued and exhorted at ‘threshing meetings’ of up to a thousand people – enabling those who were already Quakers to ‘meet together in several places out of the rude multitude’.²⁴ Howgill, Burrough and others saw threshing as a particularly arduous part of how those spreading Quakerism brought in the ‘harvest’ of transformed lives - strongly associated, at least in this earliest period, with the imminence of the eschaton.²⁵

²⁴ Letter of Francis Howgill and Edward Burrough to Margaret Fell, in Abram Rawlinson Barclay ed., *Letters etc of early Friends* (London, 1841), p.26.

²⁵ Quaker use of biblical texts on ‘threshing’ – most notably Isaiah 41:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 9:10-11- reflects this double focus on the eschaton and on the work of ministers. The point of the meetings, it should be noted, was not primarily to separate one group of people from another, the saved ‘wheat’ from the condemned ‘chaff’ - which is how at least some of Quakers’ contemporaries would have read biblical texts about threshing. In Quaker writings of the period, the ‘seed of God’ is within each person – and the point of the threshing meeting is to effect a separation within each person, to free the ‘seed of God’ from anything that concealed or opposed it. Converts could be referred to as ‘corn’ gained from a threshing meeting, but the wider context of Quaker ‘seed’ language suggests that these are metonymic uses.

Historically, then, ‘threshing’ points to the work done among and by Quakers to maintain a strong community united in worship and shared understanding – while being actively open to the changing complexities of the world, and managing the tensions that arise within and around the search for unity. In the contemporary context, our suggestion is that tensions within Quaker theology, practice and self-understandings emerge in the context of Quaker collective decision-making – specifically, in the multiply intense community-shaping event of the decision-making meeting; and that threshing meetings are one space where these tensions are held and ‘worked through’, over time, by Quaker communities. Two tensions we see being held and creatively negotiated in threshing meetings are: between an emphasis on distinctive ‘Quaker’ practices, spaces and attitudes and the affirmation that there is no meaningful division between religious and secular concerns; between individual freedom and responsibility and the emphasis on unity.

4. Working Through Tensions at the Threshold

a. Church and World / Quaker and ‘Secular’

Sociological studies of British Quaker communities have often emphasised the distinction between ‘Quaker’ time, space and activities, on the one hand, and non-Quaker time, space and activities on the other. These studies suggest that this distinction both shapes Quaker practice and is recognised in Quaker language; there are distinctive patterns of behaviour, community organisation and language applying to Quaker-designated places, spaces and people, and these are recognised by the description (for example) of certain behaviours or

attitudes as ‘Quakerly’ or ‘not Quakerly’.²⁶ Moreover, even those studies – historical and sociological – that do not explicitly emphasise the distinction between Quaker and non-Quaker often develop conceptual frameworks for understanding Quaker community that emphasise separation from ‘the world’ - focusing, for example, on holiness, or on Foucauldian heterotopia.²⁷ Several features of Quaker history and tradition make this unsurprising – for example, Quakers’ theological and historical affinities to the churches of the radical Reformation and to ‘gathered church’ ecclesiologies; the emergence of ‘testimonies’ of dress, speech and everyday life that conspicuously set Quakers apart; and arguably, as Dandelion suggests, the central place of silence in worship.

We might see the Quaker business meeting, with its extensive use of silence, its theologically-loaded ‘jargon’, and its conspicuous exclusion of many practices commonly found in decision-making meetings elsewhere, as a paradigmatic example of a set-apart Quaker space, a performance of Quaker holiness. However, as we have already said, this ‘set-apart’ space is at the same time the space in which decisions are taken about very mundane matters – and this is in turn based on a core Quaker emphasis, on bringing ‘the whole of daily life under the ordering of the Spirit of Christ’.

²⁶ See for example Pink Dandelion’s discussion of the importance of silence in ‘Quaker time’, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers*, pp. 236-237, and Peter Collins’ account of the intensive learning of a distinctive Quaker ‘habitus’ in *Meetings for Worship*, ‘The Problem of Quaker Identity’ in Dandelion and Collins, eds., *The Quaker Condition*, pp. 38-52.

²⁷ On holiness, see Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007); on Quakerism and heterotopia, Gay Pilgrim, ‘British Quakerism as Heterotopic’, in Dandelion and Collins, eds., *The Quaker Condition*, pp. 53-67.

As the business meeting enacts this ideal of holiness – the whole of life (including its mundane everyday details) being made holy by being gathered and re-formed in worship – tensions emerge at the crossing-points between Quaker and non-Quaker space, time and processes. What, exactly, comes in and what is left out when a complex practical issue is brought into a Quaker business meeting for decision? How is the decision to be taken in a way that takes the practicalities seriously while maintaining the ‘Quaker’ character of the deliberation? For example, the role of expert knowledge, of any kind, tends to be played down in Quaker worship and in business meetings insofar as they are characterised as Quaker worship – for good theological reasons concerning the universal availability of divine presence and guidance. Attitudes and behavioural norms in Quaker spaces and processes tend to avoid the explicit acknowledgement of expertise – and not only theological expertise. It is not hard to see, however, that good decisions cannot be made on many complex practical matters unless there is some place both for the acknowledgement and for the critical interrogation of claims of expertise. The question is then how to bring that interrogation of expertise – and other apparently ‘non-Quakerly’ processes, such as arguments about important details – into Quaker decision-making.

In our survey of the use of threshing meetings, it was striking that complex practical issues, on which various kinds of professional expertise might usefully be brought to bear, were by far the most frequently-mentioned topics. Property issues – such as selling, replacing, or refurbishing a meeting house – were most common, and related issues such as wardenship, employment, finances, and lettings were all mentioned as well. Both the questionnaire and the focus group suggested that, in the minds of our respondents, these practical issues require a form of attention that cannot be given in a business meeting, just because the business meeting is so clearly framed as ‘Quaker’ space related to Quaker worship and oriented towards a collective search for the will of God. Respondents suggested, as reasons for the use

of threshing meetings, the need for ‘common-sense’ reflection, the fact that these issues need to be worked on in ‘the world’s’ terms, the importance of getting ‘the facts’ straight. The implication was not that common sense, checking the facts, or using ‘the world’s’ approaches to decision-making could only go on outside Quaker space, or would be mutually exclusive with Quaker business meetings. As we have seen, the threshing meetings thus described were clearly framed as ‘Quaker’, and as key parts of extended Quaker decision-making processes. We are suggesting here that they are being used to manage the tensions – theological tensions with practical applications – that arise within and around a space that is both understood to include ‘the whole of daily life’ and set up to be clearly distinct from most people’s ‘daily life’.

b. Individual and Community

One of the best-known features of Quaker decision-making is that it proceeds without votes. The underlying emphasis on unity and the search for a shared decision – rather than the aggregate of individual decisions or ideas – is emphasised in both the theory and practice of Quaker decision-making. At the same time, Quakers maintain a theologically-grounded emphasis on the individual as the recipient of divine guidance, on the inviolability and freedom of the conscience, and (as we have seen) on the rejection of ecclesial hierarchy. The business meeting is both a space of intense attention to divine guidance by the individual, and an intense space of community formation – that explicitly requires individuals to attain some distance from their own wishes, prior convictions and habitual responses.²⁸ Once again, the

²⁸ See for example Quaker Faith and Practice 3.05: ‘The right conduct of our meetings... depends on all coming to them in an active, seeking spirit, not with mind already made up on a particular course of action, determined to push this through...’

tension between individual and community here does not mark a contradiction within Quaker theology – the underlying claim, and the ideal that the business meeting enacts, is that all are guided by and to the same truth insofar as they each individually attend to it, and that the truth is itself capacious enough to include the diversity of individual perspectives.²⁹

Nonetheless, during the decision-making process there is space for tensions to emerge between ‘the truth I know’ and the shared truth the community seeks.

One recurring theme in our participants’ responses was that in the threshing meeting – as opposed to a business meeting – participants were encouraged to speak freely about their own feelings, evaluations of arguments, knowledge and experience, without the need to ask whether such self-expression was the right thing for the group or was contributing to the shared process of seeking the will of God. Moreover, as our participants expressed it, the threshing meeting is not simply about ‘getting these things out of the way’. Understood as preparatory to a business meeting, it is a way of ensuring that all aspects of the group’s life, individually and collectively, that might be relevant to the decision have been brought together, heard and considered. Our participants stressed the importance of preparing for threshing meetings, with two main aims – to make sure that all the relevant information, and as many as possible of the people with strong opinions or feelings, can be present, and to make sure that the meeting is a safe space for voicing and hearing everything that arises.

We have noted that the topics of threshing meetings held by Quakers in Britain were almost all practical issues – often related to property or employment. Another dimension of these

²⁹ The same passage quoted above later states: ‘...coming together with a variety of temperaments, of background, education and experience, we shall have differing contributions to make to any deliberation... it is in the sharing of knowledge, experience and concern that the way towards unity will be found’.

issues, which came through in our survey and in the focus group, was that they are frequently the focus of strong and disparate emotions, to the extent that they may provoke open conflict or cause significant distress to individuals. Individual emotional attachments and responses – for example, strong attachments to particular buildings or patterns of building use – and shared emotions – for example, fear of open conflict – were cited frequently, both in accounts of particular threshing processes and in reflective general descriptions of the circumstances in which these meetings might be used. Threshing meetings themselves were very frequently described as ‘intense’ and ‘emotional’ – even as ‘heated’ and ‘conflicted’, which are unusual terms to see attributed by Quakers to Quaker processes.

The silence of Quaker worship, also present in Quaker business meetings and surrounding the decisions that they make, can sometimes be experienced as a silence that excludes or represses individuality and the diversity of voices, and with that the expression of emotion. As it emerges in our study, however, the point of ‘noisy’ preparatory/threshold processes - like threshing meetings – is to ensure that Quaker worship becomes, instead, a silence that includes and draws together. When threshing meetings are regarded as failures, our study suggests, it is sometimes because the focus has been on the exclusion of certain forms of emotional expression from the Quaker space. We found examples in which threshing meetings that became overly focused on situations of conflict around one or more individuals – rather than on matters that were of genuine collective concern – had resulted in further internal divisions.³⁰

³⁰As we discussed in our report, other processes – sometimes formal, sometimes informal – will be more appropriate in these cases.

5. Implications and Future Work

Our study of threshing meetings in British Quakerism, undertaken as it was in partnership with the national Quaker organisation, has already given rise to various ongoing conversations and the development of new educational materials.³¹ It also contributes further to the growing literature on Quaker processes and organisation, not least in relation to decision-making. Does it, however, have wider implications for the study of theology – and particularly ecclesiology – in and through attention to practice?

In the first place, we suggest that the concept of ‘threshold practices’ has wider applicability in other ecclesial contexts, and can help to extend the range of theologically-significant investigation of practice. The ‘threshold practice’, as we have understood it, is a process that enables a community, and the individuals within it, to bring the ‘extensity’ of their everyday lives into the ‘intensity’ of church life.

Our own small-scale qualitative study provided sufficient data to offer plausible hypotheses about threshold practices and to identify this as a useful direction for future research. In order further to test the applicability of the concept, ethnographic studies with a strong element of participant observation would be particularly valuable. As noted above, our study of a particular threshold practice focused on participants’ reflective perceptions of how it works; but many of these reflections, as presented in our account, would benefit from further testing and refinement through the observation of the practices concerned. In particular, where – as in our example – the management of conflicts and tensions is part of the function of a threshold practice, there is limited opportunity to evaluate this, in cases where only one

³¹ We acknowledge the further support of the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, and valuable conversations with the participants on a short course related to our work.

participant's perspective is available. Our approach to 'ordinary theology' has the advantage of recognising and reflecting the theological work of 'lay' people as they interpret, evaluate and develop a community's practices – but it remains limited as a mode of attention to practice, as such.

The extension of ethnographic work to the study of threshold practices would, we would argue, complement and extend current developments. A considerable body of recent work in ecclesiology and ethnography considers practices and spaces that are in some sense marginal to established church communities. This is often with the explicit or implicit agenda of assessing how and to what extent they are part of the church – or whether they are primarily forms of outreach that are in some way preparatory for church life. Thus, for example, work on 'messy church' and 'emerging' Christian communities may be framed within a debate about (for example) whether a church-initiated knitting group is itself 'being church', whether and to what extent it exhibits the marks of the church and how it relates structurally to a wider understanding of church.³² Our study invites further reflection on how 'preparation' for church life – and the work of transition between 'everyday' spaces and intense spaces of worship – is an ongoing activity. How, for example, can the more mundane activities of church communities – as they build interpersonal relationships, resolve conflicts, make and carry out practical decisions, plan and develop liturgy – be read as church practices, properly distinct from the intensity of worship, but not irrelevant to how that practice of worship forms the community?

We further suggest, picking up on work by Alistair I. McFadyen, that the study of such threshold practices may prove particularly important for an ecclesiology that gives proper

³² Christine Dutton, 'Unpicking "Knit and Natter": Researching an Emerging Christian Community', *Ecclesial Practices* 1 (2014) 31-50.

prominence to the laity – whose primary ‘condition’ is ‘the dynamics of movement between world and church’.³³ It is hardly surprising if the study of a Quaker practice, from a community that (in Britain at least) has no clergy or paid ministry, helps to support an ecclesiology focused on the ‘lay condition’; what is surprising is that, given that laity are the majority of members of any church tradition, the kind of ‘movement between world and church’ that is practised throughout a person’s life has been given little attention in theology – including ethnographically-informed theology. Crossings-over of church and world, or of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’, are more often studied at the level of institutions – which tends to obscure the extent to which both individuals and local congregations are always working through, or threshing out, the relationships between the different spaces in which they operate.

This in turn leads to a final suggestion for extending the theological, and particularly the ecclesiological, conversations around the contemporary turn to practice. We have drawn here on Daniel Hardy’s concepts of ‘intensity’ and ‘extensity’ to describe the location and function of threshold spaces. However, Hardy’s ecclesiology, particularly as developed in his last work, offers further as-yet-underexploited resources for re-imagining the relationship between church and world, in ways that might affect how ecclesial practices are studied and described. For example, Hardy’s Coleridgean account of ‘abduction’ – being drawn simultaneously towards God and deeper into social existence – grounds an account of the

³³ Alistair I. McFadyen, ‘The Habitus of the Theologian’, in Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers and Simeon Zahl, eds., *The Vocation of Theology Today: A Festschrift for David Ford* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), pp. 259-272, at p. 268.

church that is in deep relation to ‘the world’ just because it is centred in God;³⁴ and his provocative proposals for a ‘walking ecclesiology’, in his posthumously published work, might push even beyond talk of threshold spaces, by drawing attention to the capacity of church-communities to be re-shaped in response to ‘whatever they find as they go along’.³⁵ The further study of ecclesial practices ‘in transition’ or ‘in between’ is likely to benefit from the ongoing conversations around Hardy’s work.³⁶

³⁴ See Daniel W. Hardy, ‘Receptive Ecumenism – learning by engagement’, in Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 428-441, here p. 433.

³⁵ Daniel W. Hardy et al., *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church* (London: SCM, 2010), p. 86. We acknowledge helpful conversations with Julie Gittoes about Hardy’s ecclesiology and its wider implications.

³⁶ The authors acknowledge with gratitude the valuable suggestions received from anonymous reviewers on an earlier version of this article.