Organizational Ethnography and Religious Organizations: The Case of the Quaker

Business Method

Abstract
How should we study the management practices of religious organizations to do justice to their distinctive religious motivations and traditions? In this paper, we articulate how a specific research approach – organizational ethnography – may enable a deeper understanding of religious and/or spiritual organizational practice. We approach our methodological research questions by engaging with the literature on the distinctive decision-making practices of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), commonly known as the Quaker business method. Having shown that the Quaker business method destabilizes a simple binary between 'insider' and 'outsider' and between believers and non-believers, we bring the theory and practice of organizational ethnography into conversation with Quaker accounts of decision-making. We conclude with pathways for future research in the space this destabilization creates.

Introduction

In this paper, we address a cluster of methodological issues in the study of management, spirituality and religion by showing how a specific research method – organizational ethnography – can help to resolve issues in the study of a specific, complex management practice – the Quaker approach to decision-making (known by Quakers as the Quaker business method (QBM).

In an initial review of the literature, we highlight how religious truth-claims, or religious organizations' internal accounts of how their management practices work, raise challenges for management and organizational research – challenges that are linked to perceptions of a binary division between insiders and outsiders and between 'religious' and 'secular' analysis. In practice, as we demonstrate in the paper, religious and spiritual traditions intersect in many ways with management and organizational practices. For example, like secular organizations,

religious organizations/groups also make collective decisions, exercise leadership and accountability, and manage themselves as corporate bodies. They do so in ways that are variously affected by their religious and spiritual traditions, but that are also obviously otherwise comparable to the practices of secular organizations. Conversely, secular organizations may take up and use management practices that are associated with religious and spiritual traditions, such as 'mindfulness' or, the focus of this paper, decision-making practices adapted from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

How then can the study of religious/spiritual organizations do justice to the distinctive religious motivations and traditions around their practices – while still interpreting them as organizations, open to the same forms of critical scrutiny and analysis as secular institutions/bodies? In particular, how should management and organizational researchers handle religious organizations' internal accounts of how their management practices work, and the various truth-claims that emerge within these accounts? What methods are appropriate to the study of decision-making processes, leadership and management, and related characteristics of religious organizations, particularly where these organizational features are embedded within specific religious traditions and their associated explanatory frameworks?

In addressing these questions, we highlight the distinctive contribution of organizational ethnography to the study of religious/spiritual organizational practices. Our argument is structured as follows: first, we situate our method of enquiry within the recent and broader methodological debates within the Management, Spirituality and Religion (MSR) literature. Second, we show how the unique features and practices of organizational ethnography enable it to do justice to the complexity of the religious-and-secular space of an organization and its

management practices, without requiring the researcher to position herself decisively in relation to specific religious truth-claims. We highlight two empirical examples – Pentecostal Christianity and social activism – to illustrate our arguments. We then move on to an account of the Quaker Business Method (QBM) based on the literature - showing both why it is of particular interest to MSR researchers and why it poses, in a distinctive and especially pressing way, the methodological issues to which we draw attention. We conclude by showing that the commitments of organizational ethnography to being there, relationality, reflexive practice and context-sensitivity offer important ways forward in understanding the Quaker business method.

Studying Management, Spirituality and Religion

Recent discussions within the MSR group of the Academy of Management have raised significant questions about methodological inquiry (Tackney et al. 2017). Furthermore, Management Research Review recently devoted a timely special issue to MSR research methods from across a range of different ontological and epistemological traditions and methods of inquiry (Burton et al. 2017). The special issue highlighted methodological innovations and advancements in MSR research such as theological reflection (Miller 2017), single case studies (Retolaza and San-Jose 2017), action research (Lychnell and Martensson 2017), quantitative approaches to data analysis such as structured equation modelling (Petrosko and Alagaraja 2017) and applying critical realism to MSR research (McGhee and Grant 2017).

The historical backdrop to these different traditions in MSR research is an assumed tension between religion and spirituality on the one hand and science on the other (e.g. MacDonald 2011) – a tension that corresponds to other key binaries used to organize knowledge and its

objects in modernity (e.g. the religious and the secular, the tradition-specific and the universal, the non-rational and the rational, etc). Traditionally, the study of religion and spirituality is viewed as incompatible with science due to "…differences in paradigmatic, and inherently metaphysical, challenges to assumptions about the nature, source, and meaning of knowledge" (MacDonald 2011, 197).

A number of MSR scholars in the 'scientific' tradition have attempted to overcome this divide by extending the methods of management and organization science to the study of spirituality and religion; for example Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003, 2010); MacDonald (2011); and Petrosko and Alagaraja (2017). Such scholarship often examines the relationship between variables that measure religion and/or spirituality and some other management variable(s), such as, say, organizational performance or employee commitment. However, Benefiel (2003a, 2003b, 2005) argues that there exists a paradox between the objective, material and quantifiable concerns of science (and by extension management and organization science) and the non-materialistic concerns of religiosity and spirituality.

In response to the "absurdity of trying to factor analyze God" (Fornaciari and Lund Dean 2001, 35), Tackney et al. (2017, 249) have suggested a paradigmatic shift in MSR research to "a fundamentally different paradigm [that] can make a significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of human organizing". In a similar vein, Lin, Oxford, and Culham (2016, ix, x) recently argued that spiritual research requires a specific ontology "that considers all reality to be multidimensional, interconnected, and interdependent" and an epistemology "that integrates knowing from outer sources as well as inner contemplation, acknowledging our integration of soul and spirit with body and mind". An additional criterion they suggest for such a spiritual research paradigm is teleology, "an explanation of

the goal or end (telos) with which new knowledge is applied, such as gaining wisdom and truth, touching the divine, increasing inner peace, exploring hidden dimensions or improving society" (ibid). In the same edited volume, Ergas (2016, 17) argues that a spiritual research paradigm "…reverses our idea of enquiry. Knowing…is not considered as an act of observing natural or social phenomena for their own sake. It is an experience of being that can bring forth a transformative effect on the be-er [researcher] and in fact this transformation is the end of such research". One problem with these calls for a new spiritual paradigm is that they assume an account of spirituality, or the spiritual, that is not necessarily shared by all who would understand themselves as spiritual or religious – let alone by all MSR researchers with their own values, preconceptions, assumptions and dogmas that often go unacknowledged (McGhee and Grant 2017). A research paradigm that focuses on a belief (for example) in 'soul and spirit' is liable to flatten out the diversity and complexity of spirituality as expressed in organizations – and to force the researcher to position herself as either a believer or a non-believer and to construct the research field along similar oppositional lines.

Our position is that religiosity and spirituality as expressed in organizational contexts is highly subjective, and far from being easily summarized (in general or in any specific tradition) into a single belief structure that grounds a research paradigm, it is in fact heterogenic; it is lived out in multiple, subjective individuals and their collective realities. In addition, there is a noticeable gap, both in MSR research, and in the study of religion and spirituality more broadly, around the study of the management practices of religious organizations – decision-making processes, leadership and management structures, governance, patterns of accountability, and so forth – and how these features relate to the

specific traditions of belief and practice within which they are embedded (see also Tracey 2012).

For example, if we look specifically at Christianity, studies of the management of Christian organizations tend to describe them in standard 'scientific' terms (e.g. Simpson 2012). Christian theological engagement with management and organizational literature is often extremely critical, and tend to set Christian and secular accounts of management and organizational practices against each other without engaging in detail with how Christian organizations operate (Pattison 1997; Shakespeare 2016). Meanwhile, the growing subfield of ecclesiology and ethnography, while establishing a productive dialogue between theological and social-scientific research approaches, has rarely engaged with those practices of church and faith organizations that are likely to be of interest to management or organizational science (Muers and Grant 2017).

Although the sacred/secular, religion/science binary is widely rejected in the literature, it appears still to affect the selection of research foci in relation to religious organizations and their management practices. Compared with practices of worship, community service and political activism, family life, or artistic and cultural production – to give but a few examples – practices of management and organization are tacitly assumed to be uninteresting, at least from the point of view of understanding religious traditions and their adherents. The picture is complicated further – in ways not effectively captured by current research – when we consider the adaptation and use by secular organizations of management practices with roots in religious and spiritual traditions. The most well-known contemporary example is the widespread use of a range of techniques associated with 'mindfulness' in organizational as well as individual practice (Ray, Baker and Plowman 201; Weick and Sutcliffe 2006).

The Quaker business method (which we shall refer to as QBM) is also, however, similar enough – both in its aims and uses, and in some of its features – to non-religious group consensus decision-making processes, to have attracted recent interest from scholars and practitioners in management and related fields (Allen 2017; Brigham and Kavanagh 2015; Burton 2017; Velayutham 2013), and there is some evidence that it has been adapted and used successfully in non-Quaker, and non-religious, organizations (e.g. Michaelis 2010). Thus, QBM is, on the face of it, an obvious area of interest for researchers in management, spirituality and religion. However, researching QBM in a way that does justice to it both as religious practice and as organizational practice poses non-trivial challenges, which, we shall argue, can be addressed by using an organizational ethnographic approach.

Organizational Ethnography for Studying Spiritual and Religious Organizations

This paper, as we have shown above, aims to advance the use of organizational ethnography to the study of the management practices of religious/spiritual organizations. We contend that organizational ethnography is uniquely endowed to investigate and understand the management practices of religious organizations such as the Quakers and their decision-making practices because they are explored in the context of the specific traditions of belief and practice within which they are embedded. Organizational ethnography is, thus, capable of addressing the complexity by which "religious organizations experience similar pressures to organizations located in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors, such as arise from scale, resource flows, a volunteer base" while at the same time they "differ because of the primacy of belief systems which present an alternative set of pressures, especially in working out the relationship between beliefs, organization, and activities" (Hinings and Raynard 2014, 161).

Ethnography is, of course, widely used in the study of religion, but rarely with a focus on religious-cum-organizational practices and dynamics. A search of the keyword 'ethnography' in the MSR literature produces surprisingly few results (with the notable exceptions of Cullen (2011) and Day (2009) and other mixed methods studies) – this despite the fact that, according to Lund Dean, Fornaciari, and McGee (2003, 383), "[MSR] research appears a strong candidate for many of the qualitative research techniques that have been used for decades in disciplines such as education and psychology. Ethnography and case study are just two examples of technique".

Several of the key questions that are likely to affect the use of organizational ethnography in the study of religious/spiritual organizations have arisen in existing studies of the religious group on which we focus in this paper – the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Due to the fact that many of the scholars doing research on Quakers are Quakers themselves, one of the core issues discussed is the insider/outsider dichotomy within Quaker research (see Allen 2017; Collins 2002; Meads 2007; Molina-Markham 2014; Nesbitt 2002). Some would argue that "that there is something in religion that clearly and definitely distinguishes the insider from the outsider" (Stringer 2002, 3), whereas others are of the opinion that problematizing the distinction in fact essentializes both the insider and outsider (Collins 2002). For the researcher as 'outsider', the challenge is considered to lie in how to take the believers' point of view earnestly – how to do justice to the experience of religion as "their reality" (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008, 48) and to the claims they make about the search for, and access to, truth in religion. Nesbitt (2002, 137) argues that reflexivity offers ways to theorize the distinction as "reflexive awareness requires the student of belief and practice in any faith community an ongoing interrogation of his/her cultural conditioning and religious/ideological stance and

alertness to inter-influence between these and the field". These concerns are not unique to doing research on religion and spirituality or on Quakers by Quakers or others. All ethnographers, as argued by Livezey (2002), are continuously negotiating and re-negotiating their status and are often both insider and outsider (particularly if we do not take these concepts to have only a literal meaning).

In short, the methodological challenges in the study of religious/spiritual organizations are about how to explore religious organizations and organizational practices as both organizational and religious. So far, the only agreement seems to be that ethnography is quite suitable because of its fieldwork character (which is discussed further below) – but the question of the ethnographer's status in relation to the religious organization, as 'insider' or 'outsider' or neither, remains open to debate. As we will demonstrate in a subsequent section, attention to the specific example of QBM reveals the instability of the insider/outsider binary and suggests fruitful new ways of understanding the relationship between the researcher and the organization.

So what would organizational ethnography, specifically, add to the study of spiritual/religious organizations and specifically of QBM? Before addressing this question, we very briefly address what organizational ethnography is considered to 'be' and 'do'.

Organizational ethnography is geared towards a fine-grained, up and close understanding of organizational life (Ybema et al. 2009) and through such ethnographic detail (of the everyday) a better understanding of organizations and organizing (of any kind of organization and/or organizing). Organizational ethnography, thus researches "the human networks of action we call organisations" (Kostera 2007, 15), or cultures; indeed, as Van Maanen (1988,

1) states: "ethnography is written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)" with a hint of legacy to Geertz's Interpretation of Cultures (1973). Following these positions, organizations for organizational ethnographers are very much perceived as "systems of meaning and interpretation" (Schubert and Rohl 2017, 5) or in fact 'belief systems' that can be explored through participant observation (sometimes also referred to as fieldwork, leaving the balance between participating and observing open). In its core, organizational ethnographers are thus "concerned with understanding how organization members go about their daily working lives and how they make sense of their workplaces" (Ciuk, Koning and Kostera 2018, 278); the "sense-making, that of situated actors – in our case, "living" in organizations of various sorts – along with that of the researcher her- or himself" (Yanow 2012, 33).

We are not suggesting that organizational ethnography is unified about the how, where, and why. As Van Maanen (1988, 2010) already highlighted in the 1980s when he wrote Tales of the Field (1988) and some twenty years later with his More Tales of the Field (2010) there are various 'tales' ethnographers can tell. The tales being the outcomes (the ethnographic writing), they are of course closely related to how ethnography as method has been put to use. Are we inclined to tell a realist tale (a narrative describing what has been observed as the reality of the setting and its actors) or a moral tale that uses the narrative to address a particular 'wrong' in the world? There is however, a growing sense that any sense-making "has been co-generated with organisational members" (Yanow 2012, 34) and more recently such a constructivist-interpretivist stance seems to have become more common. From the above it is clear that the organizational ethnography we envision lies within the interpretivist tradition.

So why is organizational ethnography so well-suited for studying the organizational features and management practices of and in religious organizations such as Quakers? We will explore this in more detail by highlighting key qualities of organizational ethnography as shared in several of the core texts (e.g. Ciuk et al. 2018; Cunliffe 2010; Neyland 2008; Yanow, Ybema and Van Hulst 2012; Ybema et al. 2009), namely 1) fieldwork dynamics: 'being there', relationality, power, and agenda-setting; and 2) knowledge creation: lived-experience, reflexivity and contextualized knowledge. Each of these will be followed by examples from organizational research on Pentecostal mega-churches and social movements. Although these examples are somewhat outside the organizational mainstream, we consider them a highly relevant starting point for studying religious/spiritual organizations and management practices such as QBM due to their 'beliefs' and subsequent impact on the fieldwork, researcher and knowledge creation.

Fieldwork Dynamics: Being There, Relationality, Power, Agenda-setting

Organizational ethnography is very much grounded in fieldwork and participant observation. As Van Maanen (2011, 219) argued, it entails "subjecting oneself to at least a part of the life situation of others". This immersion and close observation of the life of others in particular settings requires careful consideration to the everyday interactions, situations, objects, and events; the outcomes are then often judged on the ability to convey an embodied sense of participants' experiences (Richardson 2000). Thus, being there is considered an important way of understanding 'what is going on' but ethnographers can take different positions towards the 'how' of gaining such an understanding. Below we offer three examples: the engaged participant (Sutherland), the engaged activist (Plows) and the engaged 'stranger' (Koning).

Sutherland (2016, 9), researching leadership in an anarchist social movement organization, argues: "Through participating in meetings, events and actions, I was able to develop understandings of how practices actually worked – being 'on the ground'; experiencing them first-hand; immersing myself; knowing the various implicit and unspoken rules and guidelines; encountering problems and issues; and enjoying successes". He not only observed but participated by co-organizing events, doing administrative tasks and by actively joining discussions. Plows' (2008, 10) 'engaged' ethnography of an activist movement, is more explicit: "My engaged approach went beyond explicit identification – I took part in protests and in some cases helped to catalyze them". Finally, the second author, Koning (2017, 42) researching two Pentecostal-charismatic organizations, observed and participated – as non-co-believer - in the Sunday worship meetings, stating that these "sensitized" her "at a personal level" through vivid experiences of the experiential dimensions of Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity.

As Yanow et al. (2012, 345) point out, and the examples above hint at, thinking in terms of insider or outsider or going native gloss over a more important aspect of organizational ethnography and that is the "relational nature of ethnographic fieldwork" as well as, we argue, the engaged position and mindset of the researcher. It is clear that "ethnographers no longer enter into projects with clearly defined "subjects" or "informants" but with "epistemic partners"' who might themselves be pursuing their own research questions (Lassiter and Campell 2010, 4) and agendas. Thus, research partners and researchers might be pursuing the same agenda, such as the activist ethnographic turn aimed at making social movements research more "activist-centric" (Sutherland 2012, 627) by being "more explicitly supportive of the views and aims of the actors" (Plows 2008, 3). But sometimes agendas do not fully align between research partners and researchers, leading to awkward and unsettling

experiences for all those involved. Both positions however, offer important ways to query "social reciprocity in field encounters, different agendas of researchers and research participants, and fieldwork ethics" (Koning and Ooi 2013, 29). Fieldwork, and being there, we argue, is thus very much about balancing between wanting to belong and trying to keep distance (see Hume and Mulcock 2004) and about reflexivity (see next section).

Knowledge Creation: Lived Experiences, Reflexivity and Contextualized Knowledge

In order to make sense, organizational ethnography has to be contextually sensitive. In other words, while interested in how specific groups go about their lives by exploring events and staying attuned to language, rituals and artefacts (Cunliffe 2010), organizational ethnographers take the position that these actors do so in a specific social, historical, and cultural context defined by time and place. The research needs to be sufficiently contextualized so that the "interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 47). The combination of fine-grained detail with contextual awareness offers an alternative to the "ahistorical, acontextual and aprocessual" qualities of most organizational studies (Bate 1997, 1155). The way to show this lies in the credibility of the text, which ought to contain detailed descriptions that grasp "the intricacies of life in that setting" (Cunliffe 2010, 231). Knowledge gained through organizational ethnography, therefore, concerns ideas and practices directly relevant at the level of the field (and other, similar ones) and is of a holistic nature. That is, it helps to grasp the social world in all its dynamics and complexity, to consider phenomena in their broader context (Ciuk et al. 2018).

To grasp this meaning-making in context, Sutherland (2012, 633) reflecting on activist ethnographies, argues that they are "able to understand and analyze individual organizations,

including their development, local understandings, constructions and performances". Similarly, by joining church meetings and by participating with every aspect of the two-hour worship session (singing, clapping of hands, greeting each other, swaying to the music), Koning (2017) shows that an important dimension of the observation and participation is the 'experience'; whether it is understanding the role of lively music in preparation of receiving the Holy Spirit, as is the case in the Pentecostal-charismatic sessions, or that of silence as is the case in the Quaker community (to which we turn in the next section). It makes it possible to unpack layers of understanding doing justice to the lifeworld under investigation without disconnecting from scientific interpretation.

Since ethnographers do not simply observe and describe, but, in fact, "interpret and inscribe" (Robben 2007, 446) this "calls for a heightened self-awareness", a reflexivity about how our own experiences shape the knowledge claims we arrive at (Ybema et al. 2009, 9). This reflexive turn has over the years raised some critical questions such as whether the concept lost its meaning by overuse. These developments have led to a re-evaluation of the power involved (in the relationship, the account, and representation) with the aim to rebalance the power between/among ethnographer(s) and participant(s). It is not just about acknowledging that there are power dimensions involved and that these are often quite unequal but moving to a stance where we agree that relationality and reflexivity should transform into the realization that "we are always in relation to others" (Cunliffe 2008, 128) and informs the theorizing and meaning-making. Demonstrating reflexivity on the part of the researcher, including considerations of researcher positionality, is now a commonly used criterion for assessing the quality of organizational ethnographic work (Schwartz-Shea 2006; Watson 2011). In the example above, by exploring reflexively the 'awkward moments' of the researched trying to convert the researcher, important insight into Pentecostal practice -reconverting the self- was

gained (Koning and Ooi 2013). It is a good example of how our interpretation of how 'others' make meaning, particular of others with whom we do not share the same 'culture' (or religion), needs to be supported by reflexive practice. Reflexivity, including the less-pleasant and emotional experiences in fact offer many analytical clues and are "epistemologically informative" (Davies 2010, 13).

Based on the above, we propose, first, that organizational ethnography as a methodology - through its unique features of fieldwork and reflexive knowledge creation - is eminently appropriate for integrating religious and organizational perspectives in the study of QBM. Second, we suggest that considering organizational ethnography's approach alongside Quaker understandings of T/truth – understandings that are implied and enacted in QBM - reveals surprising and valuable congruencies. With this in mind, we now move to a more detailed literature-based overview of QBM, the specific challenges it poses for the researcher, and the ways in which organizational ethnography might serve to address them.

Characterizing Quaker Business Method

Quakers have a history of about 350 years in Britain. As documented by King (2014), Turnbull (2014) and Walvin (1998), in the world of business and management, Quakers had tremendous success in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With renewed interest in responsible business (e.g. Hope and Moehler 2015; Parris et al., 2016), management scholars have recently been drawn back to Quaker history and tradition to examine lessons for contemporary responsible business practice (Burton and Hope, 2018). One of the foci of attention that has emerged recently is the distinctive Quaker practice of decision-making that lies at the heart of Quaker corporate governance (Burton 2017; Muers 2015; Velayutham 2013).

Quakers are unusual among religious groups in having a distinctive, consistently applied, and theologically-framed process used routinely for collective decision-making in meetings – on 'worldly' matters such as money, property and administration, as well as on what might be conventionally thought of as 'religious' issues. The decision-making approach – QBM - is widely used in Britain, US and beyond for business meetings that vary enormously in size, coverage and agenda (for more detailed accounts see Mace 2012; Sheeran 1996). A business meeting has numerous structural similarities with a Quaker meeting for worship, that is, an unstructured meeting based on silence. Burton (2017) argues that Quaker business method can be considered to encompass two broad dimensions: (i) a spiritual dimension, and (ii) a decision-making process/practice. In terms of the religious/spiritual dimension, QBM requires Friends to turn their attention to God or the Spirit as the source and ultimate authority in decision-making. Standard Quaker accounts of the process/practice encompass distinctive qualities such as contributions framed by silence and spoken contributions are presented as 'ministry' to the group, rather than as the advocacy of an individual's or a sub-group's opinion. Most notably to many outside observers, no votes are taken; action-orientated minutes are proposed and agreed to reflect the shared discernment of the group, the 'sense of the meeting'. Various additional behavioural norms – such as not speaking twice or repeating a point already made – are similar to those found in a Quaker meeting for worship (Anderson 2006; Burton 2017; Muers and Grant 2017). Of particular interest for our methodological discussion to follow, we focus on the following distinctive qualities (1) the practice of discernment, and (2) silence. We now turn to consider each of these qualities in turn.

QBM is a collective testing of individual 'leadings' from the Spirit (Anderson 2006; Grace 2006). Group unity is achieved in a process of corporate discernment that "…involves a commitment to being led based on faith in a relational power beyond each person" (Morley 1993, 15). There is a shared responsibility to discern a shared understanding of the right way forward. Allen (2017, 134-5) connects this emphasis on shared responsibility for discernment with a practice of individual "unknowing" – radically decentring the individual knower in order to foster "'a wider group-wisdom'"; In the collective process of seeking unity, ideas put forward by individuals are "tested, revised and woven together" to produce a result that is not recognizably the work of any of the individuals involved.

The significance of open-endedness and 'unknowing' in Quaker decision-making also becomes apparent when we consider the central role of silence in the process – with decision-making meetings being framed and punctuated by periods of silence. According to Law and Mol (2003, 24), the key point is that the practice is about understanding "that there is more than can possibly be put into words". Molina-Markham (2014, 157) develops a more extended account of the positive role of silence in QBM, in the context of its wider constitutive and community-forming function for Quaker communities – as both a key cultural symbol and a practice that enables community formation (see also Bauman 1983; Lippard 1988). For the participant-researcher, periods of silence invite or require reflection and reflexivity on the unfinished character of the sense-making process and its multi-levelled effects – for the research subjects as well as for the researcher. An organizational ethnographic approach, actively invites the researcher to 'experience' organizational (cultural) practices, as such sensitizing the researcher at an experiential level and seriously increasing the potential to understand 'what is going on' (whether it is social activism in

social movements and lively worship in Pentecostalism addressed in the examples earlier, or in silence as is the case in QBM).

If we consider the end-points or results of QBM, however, we are brought back to some of the as yet unresolved questions around the relationship between religious and secular practices, or between insider and outsider accounts of the practice. In Quaker descriptions of Quaker decision-making, a clear differentiation is often made between unity on the one hand and 'secular' notions of consensus on the other. Thus, Burton (2017), summarizing a range of Quaker theological sources, argues that Friends often insist that unity and consensus are not the same thing; consensus is based on a notion of human reason and authority, and commonly understood as requiring mutual compromise between human beings, whereas unity and a 'sense of the meeting' is based on a spiritual and corporate discernment of God's will. One final distinctive feature of QBM, discussed in detail by Muers (2015, 194-8) is the emphasis on action in the minutes of business meetings, that is, in the definitive statements of the unity that has been reached. Unity is characteristically around a course of action - even if the "action" is accepting a report and thanking the people who wrote it (Muers 2015, for more on the grammar of Quaker minutes, see Mace 2012). As we shall see, this emphasis on unity being expressed in action is also extremely important for understanding the wider religious context within which QBM operates – and for developing appropriate ways to study it. Again, organizational ethnography, with its attention to the organizational contextual setting, describing meticulously (based on observations, experiences and detailed field-notes) what unfolds in this setting and through the relationality with the research participants, allows for an evaluation that shows both these dimensions without trying to pin this down to one outcome only.

As we pointed out above, language used by Quaker researchers on Quakerism sometimes appears to reinforce the division between insiders and outsiders. For example, framing her study of Quaker group meditative practices (the 'Experiment with Light'), Meads (2007) suggests that good research on this and other Quaker practices would not be possible "without understanding and living the Truth that Quakers believe springs from divine encounter". On first reading – taking 'Truth' as some kind of propositional statement about the existence and nature of God, and 'Quakers believe' as implying that Quakers possess unique or full understanding of such 'Truth' – this sounds less than promising. Read in that way, it divides the religious from the (merely) secular, the insider from the outsider, and makes Quaker practice – qua religious practice - incomprehensible to the non-Quaker. We suggest, however, that such a reading fails to do justice either to the empirical reality of Quakerism or to the historic Quaker understanding of T/truth towards which Meads gestures – an understanding that is performed in QBM, and which, moreover, is surprisingly commensurate with the critical perspective of the constructivist-interpretivist ethnographer, as described in our preceding section.

Truth in Quakerism, Quaker Business Method and Organizational Ethnography

As shown in the previous section, several of the formal features of QBM – discernment and silence - as a practice do lend themselves to organizational ethnographic research. In this section, we move to examine another aspect of the congruence of organizational ethnography as a method with QBM as a management practice. We argue that organizational ethnography as a method is particularly well suited to the study of QBM *on Quakers' own terms*. The key aspect of Quakerism that enables us to make this claim is the distinctive Quaker account of truth as it emerges in recent scholarship. If we examine recent scholarship on what it means for Quakers to find or seek truth in QBM and Quakerism more widely, we find a wealth of

points of connection with organizational ethnography as a research approach. We are not claiming here that all organizational ethnographers can or should 'think like Quakers' or practice something like Quaker decision-making. We are, rather, trying to disrupt the assumption that religious 'truth-claims' will inevitably be marginal to, or problematic for, management and organizational research – and to demonstrate that a reflective conversation about truth and methods for seeking it, between the organizational researcher and the religious organization that is the object of research, is both possible and potentially fruitful.

In order to see this, we must first set aside the common assumption that 'truth' in a religious group will consist of a set of shared beliefs. Quakers are a particularly clear counter-example. Recent research demonstrates that contemporary British Quakers are extremely diverse in belief while being extremely consistent in terms of their religious practices (including QBM). Dandelion (1996) argues that the faith or belief of Quakers celebrates diversity, whereas the behaviour and practice is governed and tightly regulated. This is the 'double-culture' of Quakerism (Dandelion, 2004). A bewildering diversity of theological outlook, illustrated by the existence of Quagans (Vincett 2009), Muslim, Buddhist, and even Moonie Quakers (Dandelion 2004) is combined with a coherence and unity in practice – for example, in QBM.

Collins (2009, 206) presents the diversity of Quaker belief as a puzzle, asking, "How can a voluntary organization like the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) sustain a coherent identity without charter or creed-without an overt, unifying ideology?" While the characterization of Quakerism as a "voluntary organization" is not particularly helpful – obscuring as it does the identity-defining and community-forming aspects of religious belonging – the question is an important one. Organizational ethnography is likely to be able to help to answer it, by enabling attention to what is going on in shared practices of meaning-

making while resisting the temptation to impose assumptions about shared belief or unifying ideology. This approach to seeking the answer will in turn fit well with Quaker understandings of how truth is found and lived out in religious community.

The most obvious place to look for an answer to Collins' question about what holds Quakers together is, as we have already suggested, the other side of Dandelion's (2004) double culture, that is unity or uniformity of practice. Dandelion argues that "Quaker identity is [expressed] in terms of [a] conformist 'behavioural creed'" (Dandelion 2002, 219), noting for example that "…the 'unprogrammed' form of worship based in silence has not changed in 350 years, while the belief-content of ministry has not only changed, but is now pluralistic" (Dandelion 2004, 221), and drawing attention to the myriad of mostly unwritten rules that govern Quaker behaviour both in worship and in the decision-making process. Muers (2015) finds a further unity of practice not in rules of behaviour within Quaker spaces, but in testimony – storied and shared traditions of practice, individual and collective, that relate particularly to interactions with the non-Quaker world (an obvious example being the longstanding Quaker commitment to nonviolence and peace work).

Where does this focus on shared practice leave our understanding of T/truth in this community? Both Dandelion's (2002) idea of the behavioural creed and Muers' (2015) account of testimony raise sharp questions for the study of Quaker decision-making – specifically, whether it is possible to understand it solely as a set of shared behavioural norms with no underlying belief commitments? Dandelion cautions that "…the diversity of specific beliefs about the nature of God might undermine the behavioural creed" (2004, 222); and Muers' work makes a much closer link between theology and practice by connecting the unity-in-practice of Quaker testimony to certain core commitments in Quaker tradition, albeit

commitments that are rarely expressed as theological claims. QBM looks like a unifying and core practice that persists despite diversity of belief – but that nonetheless relies on some underlying commitment by the practitioners. Organizational ethnography's commitment to exploring and understanding the underlying commitments of organizational behaviours – by 'being there', exploring the behaviours and practices in context and through reflexivity – commends it again as a key research tool for moving beyond the simple binary of diversity of belief on the one hand and simple behavioural conformity on the other. Organizational ethnography opens up the possibility of making sense of a shared practice, not by treating it as an enactment of a set of propositional claims that are in principle independent of it, but by exploring commitments, values and norms that are integral to it.

This feature of organizational ethnography, and this way of moving beyond the apparent binary of belief and practice, is deeply congruent with Quakers' own approaches to the relationship between belief and practice – and to truth. As argued at length elsewhere by Muers, and somewhat differently by Rediehs (2015), T/truth from a Quaker perspective is, always lived and enacted. 'Truth-claims' – paradigmatically, testimony, or speaking truth to power – are truthful not in the abstract but as acts of truth-telling, that both reveal and advance the establishment of a just and peaceful divine order (Muers 2015). Everyday acts of telling the truth, including potentially the kind of truth-telling to which the researcher is committed – doing justice to the world as it is, avoiding interpretive violence - both core to an interpretivist organizational ethnographic stance – are part of 'Truth' on this interpretation. So, too, are everyday decisions – like the decisions taken in a Quaker business meeting. The British Quaker book of discipline, in its section on truth, notes that in Quaker tradition the term encompasses both core religious convictions and beliefs and a way of life that includes,

but is not limited to, everyday truth-telling (Britain Yearly Meeting 1994, 19.34-19.38, preambles).

Understanding truth in this way has deep implications for ethics and politics – including the ethics of a research relationship. As Rediehs (2015) explains with the help of contemporary nonviolence theory, Quaker 'Truth' emerges in and through nonviolent and just relationships and the transformation of unequal power relations. The core "divine encounter" in the search for Quaker truth is the encounter that occurs through (to quote a well-known Quaker text) "answering that of God" in others by responding to them in justice and love (Fox 1952, 263 / Britain Yearly Meeting 1994, 19.32). Truth is practical, embodied, engaged and situated, emerging in each particular context in which people live truthfully; it is neither internal to the knowing and acting subject, nor indifferent to the subject. The organizational ethnographer's work, as we have seen, is likewise practical, embodied, engaged and situated, encompassing reflexivity and open-ended encounter with the other; its adequacy as research, or we might say its truthfulness, relies on these methodological ethical commitments.

 A further implication of the Quaker understanding set out here is that t/Truth – since it is not primarily a matter of correct deductions from known propositions – can and does emerge in the actions, lives and speech of people who do not share Quaker beliefs. Indeed, another key component of traditional Quaker religious identity is a consistent challenge to the sacred/secular binary – the insistence that religious commitment should be reflected in all areas of life, and should (in a contemporary slogan reflective of the emphasis of twentieth- and twenty-first-century British Quakerism) help to build a better world. This is a general feature of Quaker religious identity and practice, but it comes through particularly clearly in QBM because the latter is consistently applied to everyday situations that carry, in

themselves, no particular theological weight. This means that it draws on, interacts with and affects secular expertise, processes and organizations – and this is not incidental, but part of what it means to do QBM well. QBM, seen in the broader picture of Quaker commitment and practice, invites comparison with 'secular' processes, and analysis in terms of its 'worldly' effectiveness; just getting it right in theory, or holding the right beliefs about what one is doing, will not be enough for Quakers. QBM exists in constant and close relation to non-Quaker institutions and processes, and subject to implicit or explicit critical scrutiny from them.

Both on empirical grounds and on Quakers' own theological terms, then, it is neither possible nor desirable to keep QBM in a protected 'Quaker space'. Researchers of QBM will not do it justice if they study it as the logical outworking of some clear shared beliefs. Nor can they treat it purely in terms of the preservation of group identity via the transmission of a set of (ultimately arbitrary) practices and rules of practice that operate in a defined 'religious space'; nor as a practice without religious significance that is used just because it is particularly efficient or effective.

In summary, then, this Quaker approach to truth foregrounds, not belief in a particular set of 'truth-claims' (religious or otherwise), but a commitment to doing justice with and to others – a commitment that is not restricted to a given religious community. The organizational ethnographer, from this perspective, is engaged in 'understanding and living truth' in a way that is connected to QBM. The connection is not a shared theological framework, but rather an overlapping (not identical) set of 'nonviolent' and justice-oriented relationships and practices. The researcher is attempting to discern and do justice to the integrated 'sense-making' work of QBM, not from a detached or indifferent position but within a non-coercive

relationship open to the emergence of new insights. Participants in QBM, likewise, are attempting to discern the right way forward through a process that requires close attention to other people and to the realities and constraints of the situation, not imposing one's own point of view, critical acknowledgement of one's own positionality, and openness to new or surprising possibilities.

On this account, the organizational ethnographer's position would be provided, not by a difference of beliefs, nor straightforwardly by an 'outsider' status in relation to Quakerism or an 'observer' status in the business meeting, but by meaning-making in context and not by being personally committed to whatever decision is made or action agreed. Given the strong emphasis on unity in QBM, this is a significant qualification on the ethnographer's 'participation' in the process – one that allows us to recognize points of contact between the ethnographer's work and the work of those engaged in QBM, without bracketing out Quaker understandings of 'Truth'.

Conclusions and Implications

We argued at the beginning of this paper that studies of management and organizational practices in religious organizations need to be able to take both religious and organizational matters seriously – and that this requires research methods that work across the implicit and explicit boundaries between insider and outsider and between sacred and secular. We propose that organizational ethnography fulfills these requirements. The need to work across binary boundaries becomes particularly obvious and pressing where the organizational practices of spiritual/religious organizations themselves break down those boundaries – for example, by attaching religious significance to the most "mundane" of decisions or of organizational practices. We have highlighted the contribution of the prior ethnographic work on Quakers,

in many cases done by Quakers (for example, Collins, 2002, 2009; Meads, 2007), and existing work on Quaker organizations (for example, Burton, 2017; Mace, 2012; Molina-Markham 2014; Muers and Grant, 2017). This existing body of work, read in the context of the wider literature on Quakerism and the study of management and spirituality, shows that Quakerism in general and QBM in particular requires this kind of boundary-crossing if it is to be adequately understood.

Organizational ethnography is particularly well suited for the study of a religious organizational practice like QBM for the following reasons. Organizational ethnography is particularly good at working across the sacred/secular, insider/outsider, and indeed belief/practice, binaries – or in fact deconstructing such boundaries – as organizations are very much perceived as systems of meaning and interpretation. Organizational ethnography, moreover, can deal with the "unknowing" of QBM - and the open-ended collective practices of sense-making that are at the heart of this method – as it has inbuilt resistance to the imposition of single external frameworks of meaning. Rather, research in organizational ethnography is about uncovering how the individual and the organization "make sense" by subjecting oneself to at least a part of the life situation of others, as Van Maanen (2011) reminded us. This immersion and close observation of the life of others requires careful consideration of the everyday interactions as well as the ability to convey an embodied sense of participants' experiences. Finally, developing this suggestion further, we have found that organizational ethnography, through 'being there' and its relational epistemology (see also Cunliffe 2008), is congruent with Quakers' own understandings of how the search for truth works and is expressed.

So, what are the wider implications of this discussion for the study of management, spirituality and religion? We advance three tentative proposals. First, we suggest that the interaction between organizational ethnography and QBM enriches ongoing methodological conversations on 'ethical' practice, particularly as related to issues such as 'knowing', 'religious truth' and 'just relationships'.

Second, we suggest that the approach taken in this paper – allowing the religious organization being researched to enter into the conversation about basic methodological questions around the nature and status of truth-claims, the meaning of 'participation', or the relationship between religious and the secular – could be applied elsewhere, such as in the study of mindfulness and other spiritual practices. This might lead both to subtly different methods emerging for the study of different organizations and/or management practices– and, as indicated in our first point above, to new issues or ideas entering the wider methodological debate.

Third, and perhaps least controversially, our account of QBM as a 'religious' practice undermines certain widespread assumptions about how 'religion' works in relation to organizations and management practices. We have seen that QBM is theologically underdetermined and sustained as a unified practice in the face of significantly different theological explanations; and is consciously and as a matter of religious principle applied to 'secular' issues, and brought into relation with secular frameworks of understanding. MSR researchers should, then, be encouraged by the study of QBM not to assume a tension or conflict between the two terms (management and spirituality), but to consider whether and how a given spiritual framework consciously accommodates diversity, alternative non-spiritual perspectives and the possibility of change.

Given our analysis of QBM and subsequent proposals, we invite researchers in the MSR tradition to consider pathways to research questions that occupy the space between the binaries of religious/secular and believer/non-believer. In the context of our discussion of QBM, we see the adaptation and use of QBM by non-Quaker and non-religious organizations as an intriguing opportunity to explore these binaries further. Further research questions using organizational ethnography might include the following: how might the tradition of discernment be operationalized by secular organizations? We are drawn to the idea of 'mission discernment' as an example of such a management practice. What are boundaries/limits to diversity of belief in QBM? How does the practice of QBM relate to, and sustain, a sense of unity in organizational life more generally? How can the known 'issues' of practicing QBM – such as the time commitment, and the role of inclusion of specialist/technical knowledge - be improved?

We propose, then, to not only use organizational ethnography to study QBM, but to use the distinctive characteristics of QBM, as it reflects wider Quaker thought and practice, as an opening for reflection on the nature of the research process itself. Core commitments of organizational ethnography to "being there", relationality, reflexive practice and context-sensitivity enable us to see the ethnographic researcher in a Quaker business meeting as engaged in a search for truth analogous to that of the participants.

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