

Research Note

Results from the First National Survey of Quaker Belief and Practice in Australia and Comparison with the 2013 British Survey

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Abstract

The first national survey of the beliefs and practices of Australian Friends was conducted in 2014, including 42 questions from the 2013 British Quaker Survey. This article compares results from those surveys to discover similarities and significant differences in two English-speaking Quaker populations with a common unprogrammed liberal tradition. Answers to half of the questions were remarkably similar in both surveys, including: reasons for applying for Membership; feelings of personal spirituality; belief in God, miracles and life after death; and views about Jesus, human nature and whether violence can ever be morally justified. There were some statistically significant differences. Australian respondents were more likely to describe prayer and their activities in Meetings for Worship as meditation; describe the Quaker business method as finding a consensus; believe Quakers can be helped by hearing about the religious experiences of other groups; and be involved with other social or religious organisations or issues.

Keywords

Australia, Great Britain, Quakers, religious belief, spirituality, worship.

Background

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) first took root in Australia in 1832, as a result of a visit by two English Friends on a six-year journey around South-east Australia to enquire into the condition of the penal settlements. At first a General Meeting for Australia was established as a Quarterly Meeting of London Yearly Meeting, but in 1964 Friends in Australia became an independent Yearly Meeting with their own Handbook of Practice and Procedure.

In Britain today there are over 23,000 Members and recognised Attenders and there have been a number of recent surveys on their beliefs and practices. Dandelion ran the first British Quaker Survey (BQS) in 1990. He contacted 32 British Meetings to determine the breadth of Quaker belief and reported results from 27 of those Meetings (Dandelion 1996). In 2003, Rutherford replicated this survey using a more formally stratified sample of 600 Members from 48 Meetings. A latent class analysis of the responses and a comparison of results from the two surveys have been published (Cary, Dandelion and Rutherford 2009; Cary and Dandelion 2007). A third survey was conducted in 2013 and the first analysis of the findings have now been published (Hampton 2014).

Other studies in Britain have also examined the private practices and beliefs of Quakers generally (Bourke 2003), adolescent Quakers (Best 2008) or those who self-identify as Buddhist (Huber 2001), non-theist (Rush 2004) or pagan (Vincett 2008) Quakers. A further set of British surveys in 2006 and 2008 aimed to obtain an overview of active membership participation in the Religious Society of Friends, including the profile of people attending Meetings and the processes of business meetings (Chadkirk and Dandelion 2008, 2010).

By contrast, in Australia the Quaker community is much smaller, with around 2,000 Members and Attenders (Australia Yearly Meeting 2015) and academic study of their history and beliefs has been lacking (Carey et al. 2001). In 2014, the first national Australian Quaker Survey (AQS) was conducted, using a questionnaire largely based on the 2013 BQS. It was the first ever attempt to examine the views and practices of Quakers in Australia and aimed to inquire into what leads people to consider membership of the Society, and what are the shared beliefs, practices and values held by Quakers in Australia.

This article presents a summary of the results from the AQS and compares the results from the common questions asked in the BQS to discover the similarities and significant differences in these two English-speaking Quaker populations, which have a common unprogrammed liberal tradition.

Methods

The sampling methods were different in the two surveys. The paper-based BQS was distributed to Friends by the Clerks of a size-stratified random sample of 48 of the 478 UK Local Meetings. Eight hundred and nineteen questionnaires were distributed with a 79 per cent response rate (Hampton 2014).

The 63-question AQS was designed to be distributed via an online questionnaire from September to November 2014. A print version of the questionnaire is available at: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/248402072/Australian-Quaker-Survey-2014>. The BQS contained 55 questions, but the experience of the British researchers had been that some questions were difficult for respondents to answer, and those were omitted in the Australian version. A few additional questions for the AQS were taken from David Rush's 2002 survey of non-theist Quakers (Rush 2004).

Further questions were included to explore issues of membership status, methods used to develop personal spiritual growth and knowledge of Quaker practice, environmental concerns and other social attitudes. Both surveys consisted of five parts:

1. Religious background, upbringing and introduction to Quakerism;
2. Involvement with Quakers and attitudes to Quaker practice;
3. Religious beliefs;
4. Ideas about broader social issues;
5. Demographic information about the respondents.

The AQS questionnaire was created in the online program *SurveyMonkey* (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>). Recent reviews have concluded that such surveys are not usually maladjusted and provide data of at least as good quality as traditional methods (Gosling et al. 2004). However, recognising that not all Friends would have Internet access, the survey was also made available on request in a paper-based format. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents could omit any questions they did not wish to answer. Personal email invitations to participate were sent to all 1,875 Members and Attenders of the Australia Yearly Meeting (AYM), excluding children under the age of 12, and the survey was promoted by articles in newsletters, meeting notices and on Facebook pages. Twenty-four Friends requested paper copies of the questionnaire and 15 of these were returned. Their contents were entered into the *SurveyMonkey* web-based version of the questionnaire by the survey coordinator (PW). A total of 378 questionnaires were completed, giving an overall response rate of 20 per cent.

Forty-two of the questions were identical in the BQS and AQS. The majority of questions were a closed tick-box response type, although several allowed more than one response. The analysis in this article compares the percentages of respondents choosing responses to the common questions in both surveys, with a statistical significance level set at 95 per cent ($p < 0.05$) measured using Pearson's chi-square test. Some questions used a 10-point Likert scale to measure strength of agreement with belief statements (from 1 = 'definitely no' to 10 = 'definitely yes'). The differences in mean scores from these questions were analysed using unpaired two-sided Student's *t*-tests. Many questions also allowed for additional open text comments but those have not been compared here.

Results

Respondent Details

The demographic profile of respondents in the two surveys was very similar. In both they were predominantly older, white, well-educated females, in formal Membership. Table 1 compares a number of demographic features of the

Table 1. Profile of Quaker respondents

	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (n = 649)</i>	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (n = 378)</i>	<i>Australia Yearly Meeting 2014 (n = 1,875)</i>	<i>Australian Census 2011 (n = 2,076)</i>
Age range (years)	17–100	12–94		1–100
Mean age (years)	64	63†		55†
Percentage female	61	66†	63	60†
Percentage university educated	72‡	82‡†		63†
Percentage in formal membership	70	71†	52†	
Income level* (percentage)				
<i>Low</i>	29‡	37‡†		31†
<i>Middle</i>	58	50		50
<i>High</i>	9	12†		19†
Regional Meeting membership (percentage)				
<i>New South Wales</i>		24	23	
<i>Victoria</i>		18	19	
<i>Canberra</i>		17†	10†	
<i>Tasmania</i>		13	15	
<i>South Australia/Northern Territory</i>		11	13	
<i>Western Australia</i>		10	9	
<i>Queensland</i>		7†	11†	
Cultural identity (percentage)				
<i>Australian</i>		87		90
<i>British</i>	92‡	39‡		

* Income level was self-identified in the AQS; census data on Quakers' income is divided into the tertiles of Australian household income distribution (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013).

† $p < 0.05$ (Australian Quaker Survey vs. Australia Yearly Meeting or Australian census data).

‡ $p < 0.05$ (Australian Quaker Survey vs. British Quaker Survey).

respondents. The AQS responses came primarily from adult Members of the Society (71 per cent), with a smaller proportion from adult Attenders (26 per cent) and Young Friends or Junior Young Friends (3 per cent). For comparison, data from AYM membership records, and the Quakers identified in the 2011 national Australian census are also included, to examine potential bias in the convenience sample used in the AQS. A significantly higher proportion of older, female, university-educated Friends participated in the AQS than the total Australian

Quaker population. The skew to older ages is similar to that for all churches in Australia, with around three-quarters of attenders aged over 40 years in 2012 (McCrinkle Research 2012). The proportion of Quakers with university degrees is significantly higher than the Australian average of 24 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012a).

In the BQS, 99 per cent identified as belonging to a white ethnic group. The questions on cultural background asked in the AQS were worded slightly differently, but more than 95 per cent of respondents were from Anglo/Australian backgrounds, with only 1 per cent identifying as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin and 2 per cent as Asian. Only a small percentage of respondents in both surveys classified their income as high, but fewer British respondents self-identified as having a low income (AQS 37 per cent; BQS 29 per cent; $p < 0.05$).

Initial Experiences

The mean age of Friends when they began attending Meetings was almost identical in the two surveys: 36.7 years in the AQS (range 0–82) and 36.3 years in the BQS (range 1–86), which was not significantly different (ns). The majority of survey respondents had long experience of attending Meetings. In both, 67 per cent of respondents had been attending regularly for more than ten years, and only 16 per cent for less than four years. Significantly more in the BQS had attended for more than 25 years (AQS 37 per cent; BQS 44 per cent; $p < 0.05$).

In both surveys, only a small proportion of Friends were raised as Quakers (AQS 11 per cent; BQS 13 per cent; ns) but more than 85 per cent had a Christian upbringing (24 per cent Church of England in both surveys). Only 1 per cent to 2 per cent were from non-Christian religious backgrounds and 11 per cent to 14 per cent had atheist/agnostic/non-religious backgrounds. Most Friends did not come to Quakers directly from another church or religious/meditational group (AQS 62 per cent; BQS 67 per cent; ns). A minority of Friends (AQS 19 per cent; BQS 16 per cent; ns) was actively involved with another religious/spiritual group concurrently with their Quaker Meeting. In both surveys the most commonly nominated of these other groups were other Christian churches, but more so in Britain (AQS 26 per cent; BQS 37 per cent; $p < 0.05$). The extent of concurrent participation in meditation groups (AQS 15 per cent; BQS 11 per cent; ns) and Buddhism/Yoga (AQS 8 per cent; BQS 12 per cent; ns) was similar in both surveys.

Table 2 shows the main categories of reasons that initially attracted Friends to Quakers, from a list of 13 options. Although there are some differences in the proportion of Friends nominating particular reasons in the two surveys, the rank order of importance was very similar in both, with more than 60 per cent of respondents nominating the lack of religious dogma and the form of worship as factors that attracted them to Quakers initially. The issues of the position of women, position of gays and lesbians, the lack of hierarchy and the peace and

Table 2. What initially attracted Friends to Quakers

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Lack of religious dogma	66	67
Form of worship	65	62
Peace and social testimonies/political viewpoint	62*	41*
Quaker structure/lack of hierarchy	51*	37*
Quaker way of life	44	40
A feeling of coming home	42*	34*
Position of women within the group	37*	18*
The idea of inward light	32	27
Company and fellowship	32	27
Position of gays and lesbians within the group	28*	12*
Own curiosity	23	23
Quaker writings	23*	11*
Born into a Quaker family/attended as a child	15	17

* $p < 0.05$.

social testimonies were nominated significantly more often in the Australian survey.

The mean age of applicants for Membership was very similar in both surveys (AQS 42.4 years; BQS 41.8 years; ns), and approximately 40 per cent had attended for at least ten years before applying for formal Membership. A larger proportion of British Friends were enrolled as Quakers at birth by their parents (AQS 8 per cent; BQS 13 per cent; $p < 0.05$). There were no significant differences in reasons for applying for Membership: a feeling of belonging/spiritual home and wanting to make a formal commitment were the two main reasons nominated by more than two-thirds of respondents in both surveys. By contrast, respondents who had not applied for formal Membership described a wide range of reasons for this, but only a small proportion cited disagreement about religious beliefs (8 per cent in AQS and 13 per cent BQS; ns).

Table 3 summarises what the AQS respondents identified as the main factors that keeps them coming to Meeting. They are similar to the BQS responses (59 per cent community receiving; 44 per cent spiritual; 44 per cent personal; 6 per cent community service).

Table 3. Main factors that keep Friends coming to Meetings

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>
Belonging to a community of like-minded people	33
Peace/stillness/silence	19
Seeking spiritual nourishment/renewal	12
Communal Meeting for worship	10
Waiting on/connection with God/numinous	6
Being with others in the Spirit	5
Commitment to being a Quaker	4
Shared values/social justice	4
Belonging to a faith community	2
Family/parents	2
Ministry at Meeting/discussion with Friends	2
Mental health/well-being	1

Quaker Practice

Table 4 compares how Friends described their activities in Meeting for Worship, from a list of 13 options. The order of responses was similar in the two surveys, however there was a large difference related to the term ‘meditating’, with significantly more Australian Friends nominating this term compared with the British.

Although Quaker Meetings for Worship in Australia and Britain are often silent, at times Friends may be led to offer spoken ministry. There were no significant differences between the responses in the two surveys, when Friends were asked when they had first spoken in Meeting. Approximately one-quarter had waited at least three years before offering ministry and a significant minority had never spoken (AQS 20 per cent; BQS 16 per cent; ns).

Table 5 summarises how Friends understand the Quaker business method. While the results are similar, one-third of Australian Friends identified ‘finding a consensus’ as a description, compared to less than one-fifth of British Friends. Friends were asked which parts of the Quaker world they were actively engaged with. Most nominated their local, regional or area Meeting, but there was a significantly higher proportion identifying the Yearly Meeting in the Australian survey (AQS 56 per cent; BQS 26 per cent; $p < 0.05$). When asked which parts of the Quaker community they financially supported, the results from the two surveys were not significantly different, with more than 80 per cent making a contribution at some level.

Table 4. Activities in Meeting for Worship

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Listening	79*	65*
Meditating	68*	40*
Being with others in the Spirit	65	69
Thinking	62	57
Waiting	60*	53*
Opening up to the Spirit	58	55
Praying	38*	29*
Seeking union with the Divine	31*	19*
Seeking God's will	30*	20*
Communing	30*	24*
Worshipping God	13*	9*
Praising	12*	7*
Sleeping	9*	4*

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 5. Quaker business method

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Seeking the sense of the Meeting on a particular issue	86*	80*
Seeking the will of God	52*	42*
A process of trust	43	40
Finding a consensus	33*	19*
A useful process	18	16
A good idea	14	12

* $p < 0.05$.

Religious Beliefs

In one section of the surveys Friends were asked about their attitudes towards God, spirituality, prayer, the Bible and Jesus. Since Quakers have always resisted the necessity to believe in a creed, it was noted that people may have different ideas about terms such as God or spirituality, but respondents were asked to answer according to their own interpretation of these words and concepts.

Table 6. Important aspects of spiritual awareness

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Love	73	73
The Inward Light	68*	55*
Truth	65*	56*
Connectedness/joining with all things	65*	57*
Spirit	64*	55*
God	42	41
Transcendence	24	19

* $p < 0.05$.

The extent to which Friends considered themselves to be spiritual people was virtually identical in both surveys: ‘very spiritual’ (20 per cent to 22 per cent); ‘moderately spiritual’ (52 per cent to 54 per cent); ‘slightly spiritual’ (22 per cent); ‘not spiritual at all’ (4 per cent to 5 per cent). Table 6 shows the terms that Friends chose to express important aspects of their spiritual awareness, from a list of seven options. Although there are some small differences in the survey answers, overall the responses were similar: 73 per cent identified ‘Love’ in both surveys, and 41 per cent to 42 per cent nominated ‘God’.

There were no significant differences between the two surveys when respondents were asked ‘Do you believe in God?’ The replies were: yes (AQS 62 per cent; BQS 58 per cent); no (AQS 13 per cent; BQS 15 per cent); not sure/unable to answer (AQS 25 per cent; BQS 28 per cent). None of these differences was statistically significant. The main reasons given in the AQS for not being able to answer this question were: ‘I do not use the word “God”’ (32 per cent), ‘My own views are still uncertain’ (29 per cent), ‘I cannot answer without a definition’ or other (24 per cent). Those who answered that they did believe in God were asked to indicate which terms described God for them, from a list of 17 options (Table 7). The survey question allowed multiple responses, so percentages do not total 100.

The BQS respondents more frequently chose the terms ‘The Inward Light’, ‘Love’, ‘A life force’, ‘Creative spirit’, ‘A spirit’, or ‘Unknowable’. However, while there are some minor differences in absolute percentages, it is striking how closely the order of responses is the same in both the surveys. Only 15 per cent to 17 per cent described God as ‘a being’ in either survey.

When asked whether they seek God’s guidance in making important decisions in their lives there were similar responses in both surveys, with less than half of Friends replying ‘always’ (AQS 16 per cent; BQS 17 per cent; ns) or ‘often’ (AQS 32 per cent; BQS 22 per cent, $p < 0.05$) and around one-fifth replying ‘never’ (AQS 21 per cent; BQS 17 per cent, ns).

Table 7. Which terms describe God

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
The Inward Light	65*	77*
Love	62*	75*
A life force	55*	71*
A spirit	45*	51*
Creative spirit	40*	60*
All loving	35	36
Unknowable	31*	41*
Capable of a personal relationship	27	26
Best not described	23	26
All knowing	22	23
A human construct	18	20
A being	17	15
All powerful	14	15
A process	12	17
Mother figure	10	6
Father figure	8	8
Person figure	7	6

* $p < 0.05$.

When asked ‘Does being a Quaker affect your everyday life? (e.g. the way you vote, shop, what you buy etc.)?’, in both surveys more than 80 per cent of Friends answered positively, with scores of 7 or higher out of 10. However, mean scores were significantly higher in the AQS (8.34) than the BQS (7.86; $p < 0.005$). Table 8 shows the terms that Friends chose to describe their view of Jesus, from a list of ten options. Respondents to the AQS almost always gave higher percentages of agreement to each option, but the rank order was the same in the two surveys.

When asked if Jesus was an important figure in their life, the responses were not significantly different: ‘yes’ (AQS 28 per cent; BQS 29 per cent); ‘it varies’ (AQS 37 per cent; BQS 38 per cent); ‘no’ (AQS 37 per cent; BQS 33 per cent). Similarly, when Friends were asked if the teachings of Jesus were important in their life, the responses in both surveys were not significantly different: ‘yes’ (AQS 56 per cent; BQS 58 per cent); ‘it varies’ (AQS 33 per cent; BQS 34 per cent); ‘no’ (AQS 11 per cent; BQS 8 per cent).

The surveys asked respondents if they believed in any of 15 options of spiritual concepts or beings, including life after death, miracles, heaven, reincarnation, hell

Table 8. Views of Jesus

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
A spiritual teacher	74*	67*
An ethical teacher	63*	54*
Containing that of God within as we all do	59*	50*
Exemplary human	40*	32*
Christ	20	16
God made human	14	14
The Inward Light	14	13
The Son of God	13	14
Saviour	11*	7*
Just a person/not special	10*	4*

* $p < 0.05$.

and the Devil. There were no significant differences between the two surveys, except for one option: 'spirits of the natural world' (AQS 18 per cent; BQS 13 per cent; $p < 0.05$). Approximately half of the Friends believed in none of the concepts. Table 9 compares the terms that describe what prayer is for Friends, from a list of 13 options.

The most common response in both surveys was 'still and silent waiting', but significantly more Australian Friends agreed with the terms 'Meditating', 'Seeking enlightenment/guidance', 'Thanksgiving', 'Talking to/listening to God', 'Seeking healing', or 'Confession'. When Friends were asked if they believed that prayer can affect the way things are on Earth, there were no significant differences between the responses from the two surveys: 'yes' (both AQS and BQS 48 per cent); 'not sure' (AQS 36 per cent; BQS 38 per cent); and 'no' (AQS 16 per cent; BQS 14 per cent). There were no significant differences in how often Friends pray, with the exception of those who reported never praying (AQS 14 per cent; BQS 7 per cent; $p < 0.05$). In contrast, 20 per cent to 24 per cent said they prayed every day.

Table 10 shows the most common terms that describe Friends' views of the Bible, from a list of 12 options. The results were similar: more than half of respondents in both surveys saw the Bible as a book of stories and less than 10 per cent in both surveys regarded the Bible as the authoritative word of God.

When asked, 'What do you read to nurture your spiritual life?', in both surveys Quaker texts were much more widely nominated than the Bible (33 per cent to 38 per cent), with slight but significant differences in the preferences for 'Advice and Queries' (AQS 77 per cent; BQS 72 per cent; $p < 0.05$) and 'Quaker Faith and Practice' (AQS 67 per cent; BQS 75 per cent; $p < 0.05$).

Table 9. Friends' views of what is prayer

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Still and silent waiting	74*	63*
Seeking enlightenment/guidance	63*	52*
Opening to the Spirit	61	55
Meditating	51*	37*
Thanksgiving	49*	37*
Tuning into the consciousness around you	47*	37*
Seeking communion with the Divine	46*	30*
Talking to/listening to God	42*	35*
Seeking healing	30*	22*
Daily life	28*	18*
Confession	18*	10*
Recollection	12	10
Asking God to change things	9	7

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 10. Friends' view of the Bible

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
A book of stories	55	52
The word of God experienced by its writers	44*	54*
A useful teaching text	37	35
A book of history	37*	46*
A book of myths	29*	37*
The word of God ever-open to new interpretation	23*	31*
A book of authority for belief in God	7	7
The word of God in that all words are God given	3	3
The literal word of God	1	1
The final word of God	1	1

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 11. Terms used by Friends to describe themselves

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Quaker	90*	84*
Spiritual person	32	32
Christian	32	37
Universalist	19	16
Non-theist	15*	9*
Humanist	13	10
Agnostic	7	8
Buddhist	4	4
Atheist	4	3
Pagan	2	2

* $p < 0.05$.

When asked, ‘To what extent do you agree with the idea that Quakers can be helped in their religious journey by hearing about the religious experiences of other religious groups?’, in both surveys more than 70 per cent of Friends answered positively, with scores of 7 or higher out of 10. However, mean scores were significantly higher in the AQS (8.19) than the BQS (7.86; $p < 0.03$). Table 11 shows the most common terms that Friends used to describe themselves, from a list of 16 options.

In both surveys the most popular term used by Friends to describe themselves was ‘Quaker’. There were only small differences in most of the responses, but it was interesting to note that in both surveys a substantial proportion of Attenders did not use the term Quaker (AQS 32 per cent; BQS 43 per cent; ns). By contrast, less than one-tenth of Members who responded did not call themselves Quaker (AQS 3 per cent; BQS 6 per cent ns).

Ideas about the World

When asked to consider the proposition, ‘In certain circumstances, breaking the law can be morally justified’, more than two-thirds agreed in both surveys, but the mean score out of 10 was significantly higher in the AQS compared with the BQS (8.36 vs. 7.25; $p < 0.0001$). When asked to consider the proposition, ‘In certain circumstances, violence can be morally justified’, the mean score was not significantly different between the two surveys (AQS 3.26; BQS 3.10), and nor was the percentage who agreed with the statement (with scores of 7–10): AQS 16 per cent; BQS 12 per cent).

Table 12. View of human nature

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Essentially bad	1	1
Imperfect	27	23
Neither essentially bad nor essentially good	19*	14*
Essentially good	33	31
Both essentially good and essentially bad	17	19
Don't have a view	3	1
Other	0*	11*

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 13. Involvement with organisations or issues

	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>British Quaker Survey 2013 (percentage)</i>
Religious or church organisations (including Quakers)	75*	58*
Conservation, the environment, climate change	60*	29*
Education, arts, music or cultural organisations	53*	46*
Third world development or human rights	46*	22*
Social welfare services	40*	29*
Professional associations	40*	19*
Peace movement	33*	15*
Local community action on issues like poverty, unemployment, housing, racial equality	31*	15*
Political parties or groups	30*	14*
Trade unions	23*	8*
Voluntary organisations concerned with health	20*	15*
Women's groups	18*	7*
Sports or recreation	15	12
Youth work (e.g. scouts, guides, youth groups)	10*	6*

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 14. Environmental action in the previous 12 months

<i>Action</i>	<i>Australian Quaker Survey 2014 (percentage)</i>	<i>Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey (percentage)</i>
Signed a petition relating to any environmental issues	84*	13*
Donated money to help protect the environment	64*	13*
Volunteered or became involved in any environmentally related programmes	33*	8*
Expressed concern about the environment through a letter or by talking to responsible authorities	61*	8*
Participated in a demonstration or rally on the environment	43*	2*

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 12 shows how Friends describe their view of human nature, from a list of five options. The results in both surveys were similar with around one-third opting for 'essentially good' and one-quarter describing humans as essentially bad or imperfect. The AQS did not include the option of 'other' reasons.

Table 13 shows the organisations and issues that Friends are involved with, from a list of 14 options. Friends in the AQS reported significantly greater levels of involvement with almost all groups listed. Most Friends considered these involvements to be part of their Quaker identity (AQS 67 per cent; BQS 62 per cent, ns).

The AQS had two additional questions on the topic of concern for the environment. When asked, 'Generally speaking how concerned are you about environmental issues (including climate change)' (using a 10-point rating scale, from 1 = 'not at all concerned', to 10 = 'very concerned'), the mean score was 9.07 (out of 10). Fifty-seven per cent of Friends scored their concern as 10; 94 per cent scored their concern as 7, 8, 9 or 10. By comparison, in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Environmental Views and Behaviour, 2011–12 Survey, when asked the same question, only 62 per cent of Australians said they were concerned about environmental problems (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012b).

Table 14 shows the actions on environmental issues that Australian Friends had taken in the previous 12 months. For comparison, results are provided from the same ABS survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012b). Friends had clearly been much more active on this issue than most Australians.

Discussion

The findings from the AQS confirm that there is a wide diversity of views and experience amongst Australian Friends that is not easily captured in simple summaries. In particular, the survey recorded over 51,000 words of free text commentary provided by Friends, which has been included in a report to AYM. These are worthy of further detailed analysis.

A significant limitation of this comparison is that different methods of sampling and questionnaire distribution were used in the two surveys. The size-stratified random sampling in the BQS is a stronger survey design, while the self-selecting nature of the AQS resulted in a less representative convenience sample, with some bias towards older and university-educated participants. It is possible that some Friends who were not regular computer users would have been less likely to respond to an invitation to participate in an online survey. Despite this, the AQS respondents seem to be a reasonably reliable sample of the total population of Friends in Australia, with the representation according to gender, income and geographic location well matched to the AYM membership as a whole. The much lower response rate in the AQS compared with the BQS is not unexpected with an unsolicited online survey, but it did gather responses from a much higher proportion of the total Quaker population in the country than the British survey (AQS 20 per cent; BQS 3 per cent).

A second limitation is that in both surveys 70 per cent of responses came from Friends who were Members, with a much smaller representation of Attenders. In Australia, only 52 per cent of adult Friends are Members of the Society (Australia Yearly Meeting 2015) while in Britain the proportion is around 62 per cent (Britain Yearly Meeting 2015). Thus, although the proportion of Members respondents in the two surveys was the same, caution is needed in describing the results as the views of all Quakers, since the views of Attenders are under-represented. Furthermore, in both surveys at least one-third of responding Attenders did not describe themselves as Quakers.

With these limitations in mind, a few tentative conclusions may be drawn from the AQS results. Most Australian Friends are over 50 years of age, highly educated and from an Anglo-Australian cultural background. Quakers have been generally loath to proselytise their faith and it is notable that, unlike many other Christian churches, new members seem to have found their own way to Quakers later in life, after having grown up in and left another Christian tradition. The lack of religious dogma, the form of worship, and the Quaker testimonies—Peace, Simplicity, Integrity, Equality, Community and Earthcare (Australia Yearly Meeting 2015)—are the key issues that attract new members to Quakers. Belonging to a community of like-minded people and the practice of silent worship are the main factors that keep Australian Friends coming to Meeting.

Similarities

The respondent demographics were very similar in both surveys and for most of the questions the two results were remarkably alike. Even when there were some statistically significant differences in choice frequencies, the rank ordering of responses was often the same (e.g. Tables 3–9). There were no statistically significant differences in the responses to 20 of the 42 common questions in the two surveys, including reasons for applying for Membership, feelings of personal spirituality, belief in God, belief in miracles and life after death, views about Jesus and human nature, and whether violence can ever be morally justified. More than half of the respondents in both surveys said they believed in God—similar to the national Australian average of around 70 per cent in 2009 (Powell 2013; NCLS Research 2013)—but more than one-third either did not or were uncertain or unable to answer. The existence of non-theist views amongst Quakers (Bolton 2009; Cressin 2014) parallels similar explorations in other Protestant churches as well (Geering 2002; Vosper 2014; Maguire 2014). Although there was only a small number of AQS respondents under the age of 30 years, fewer of those younger Quakers (31 per cent) expressed a definite belief in God, but this was still a much higher proportion than the 15 per cent of young Australians in general surveyed in 2009 (Hughes 2014).

In both the AQS and BQS the mean age of starting to attend Quakers was 36 years, and very few came from non-Christian or non-white ethnic backgrounds. This homogeneity is in stark contrast to the increasing ethnic diversity of the general population of both countries. The smaller numbers of young people joining and the lack of cultural diversity may be issues for the ongoing growth and vitality of the Society.

Most Friends responding to the surveys called themselves Quakers but only one-third called themselves Christians. In Britain, Davie has charted the shift in Quaker belief from ‘conservative’ to ‘radical’, noting active questioning of whether Quakers need to be Christians or not (Davie 1997; Scott 1980). In Australia, there has not been extensive debate on this topic but the results of this survey suggest the same development of a liberal belief culture is occurring there too. Perhaps the group is most accurately described as ‘post-Christian’ (Dandelion 2014). Furthermore, in both the AQS and BQS, less than half of respondents identified God as an important part of their spiritual awareness, and a significant minority (about 15 per cent) identified as non-theists—which has a long tradition in Quaker history (Boulton and Cresson 2009). However, in both surveys, 95 per cent of respondents called themselves spiritual to some extent, compared with only 40 per cent of Australians generally in the 2009 International Social Science Survey (Hughes 2010). It may be that spirituality fits more readily into today’s anti-institutional and individualistic age, and that for many an emphasis on ritual and doctrinal beliefs does not have the immediacy or sense of authenticity that is found in personal experiences (Hughes 2012).

The finding in both surveys that around one-quarter of respondents viewed human nature as essentially bad (1 per cent) or imperfect (23 per cent to 27 per cent) is somewhat surprising, given that orthodox Quaker opinion today is that there is no imputed original sin and that the Inward Christ is present in all humanity (Tousley 2013). The seventeenth-century Quaker theologian Robert Barclay may have accepted that all humans are corrupted by the fall of Adam (Pyper 2007), but modern liberal Quakers mostly affirm the essential goodness inherent in every human being and take the innate primary goodness of people as a non-negotiable truth (Abbott 2007; Scully 2007). Perhaps the less certain responses in the two surveys reflect what one recent writer has suggested as the legacy of the concept of original sin, lying deep and unrecognised in the psyche of all Western people (Boyce 2014).

Only one-third of Australian and British Friends believe in life after death, compared with more than 50 per cent of other Christians surveyed in the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (NCLS Research 2013). The AQS respondents were also much less likely to believe in religious miracles (14 per cent) than other Australian Christians in 2009 (> 40 per cent).

The similarity in practice and belief overall is not surprising, given that the separation of the Australian Yearly Meeting from Britain took place only 50 years ago. It is likely that the religious culture developed by Australian Quakers in their first 130 years, as part of the London Yearly Meeting, has continued relatively unchanged. Unlike the USA, there has been no history of divisions in Australia into evangelical or liberal branches of Quakerism. The British handbook of *Quaker Faith and Practice* is still commonly used as a reference in Australia, even though an Australian edition was created in 1994 (Quakers Australia 2011).

Differences

Despite the many similarities, there were interesting and significant differences in some of the responses. British Quaker respondents were more likely than Australian respondents to:

- have become Members through enrolment as Quakers at birth by their parents;
- have attended Meetings for more than 25 years;
- be concurrently involved with other Christian churches;
- describe God as ‘the Inward Light’, ‘Love’, ‘a life force’, ‘a Creative spirit’, ‘a spirit’, or ‘unknowable’;
- read *Quaker Faith and Practice* to nurture their spiritual life.

By contrast, Australian Quaker respondents were more likely than British respondents to:

- have been initially attracted to Quakers by their positions on gays and women, the lack of hierarchy, and the peace and social justice testimonies;
- describe meditation, and seeking union with the Divine, as their activities in Meetings for Worship;
- describe the Quaker business method as finding a consensus;
- be actively engaged with Yearly Meeting;
- describe prayer as ‘meditating’, ‘seeking enlightenment or guidance’, ‘thanksgiving’, ‘talking or listening to God’, ‘seeking healing’, or ‘confession’;
- read *Advices and Queries* to nurture their spiritual life;
- believe Quakers can be helped by hearing about the religious experiences of other groups;
- call themselves Quakers;
- agree that in certain circumstances breaking the law can be morally justified;
- be involved with other social or religious organisations or issues.

The reasons for these differences are not always clear, and cannot be properly understood without either more detailed analysis of the free text comments provided by respondents to supplement their answers or clarified with follow-up interviews. Nonetheless it is possible to speculate about the reasons in some cases.

Australians were much more likely to identify the position of women and gays within the group as factors that initially attracted them to Quakers. It may be that the lack of legal recognition of same-sex marriage in Australia makes the Quaker acceptance and willingness to conduct marriages important for a segment of the community in that country (Australia Yearly Meeting 2006), but it is unclear why the factor of the position of women should be particularly different. Perhaps it is a result of the generally more conservative nature of the mainstream churches in Australia compared with Great Britain—particularly the Catholic and Anglican denominations (Parker 1982; Porter 2006; Collins 2008; Sherlock 2008; Shanahan 2011; Jenkins 2012). This might have led more dissatisfied members of other churches in Australia to seek a welcoming home amongst the Quakers, than in Britain.

Australians were also much more likely to nominate ‘meditating’ as a description of both their activities in Meeting for Worship and their view of what prayer is. This is contrary to the orthodox Quaker view, as noted in entry 2.37 of the British *Quaker Faith and Practice* (Britain Yearly Meeting 1995), that the silence of a Meeting for Worship is not to be confused with individual meditation, a view that is expressed in more recent writing as well (Durham

2010). Nonetheless, in a 1999 survey of Buddhist Quakers, two-thirds said they regarded Meeting for Worship as a form of meditation (Huber 2001), and it is likely that many Quakers do use the language of meditation to describe their experience of Meeting for Worship (Boulding 1964; Rush 2004; Plugh 2012; Quakers Buffalo New York 2015). Perhaps the influence of Eastern meditation traditions is stronger in Australia owing to its proximity to Southeast Asia and the high proportion of migrants from that region. For example, in 2010/11 census data, Buddhists made up only 0.28 per cent of the British population, but 2.5 per cent in Australia. This influence might partly explain the language chosen by Australian Quakers to explain their personal experiences (Grant 2015).

When describing their understanding of the Quaker business method, significantly more Australian Friends nominated 'finding a consensus' than respondents in the British survey. Perhaps interpretation of the word 'consensus' is different in the two countries, but use of this term—which is specifically rejected by many Quaker writers—might reflect less familiarity with the traditional Quaker position that opposes secular processes such as voting and consensus-seeking (Sheeran 1983; Morley 1993). However, many more Australian Friends also nominated 'seeking the sense of the Meeting' and 'seeking the will of God', so these more traditional religious interpretations are also held. This probably deserves further investigation.

When considering the terms used to describe God, British Friends were much more likely to use the terms 'the Inward Light', 'a life force', 'a spirit' or 'a creative spirit' and 'unknowable'. In fact, most of the terms in Table 7 had a higher percentage of responses in agreement in the BQS compared with the AQS, whereas for most other survey questions the reverse was the case. Perhaps the longer tradition of theological reflection and Quaker writing in Britain has given rise to this difference.

The Australian respondents were less likely to read *Quaker Faith and Practice* to nurture their spiritual lives. The Australian edition is now available only as an online publication, which may discourage many Friends from accessing that resource. Instead, in the AQS two-thirds reported reading *This We Can Say*, a compilation of Australian writings on Quaker life, practice and thought (Australia Yearly Meeting 2003). There is also an Australian version of *Advices and Queries*, first published in 2009, which was widely used. It is basically a compilation of all but one of the advices and queries in the British publication, supplemented with six additional entries.

Respondents to the AQS were much more actively involved with Yearly Meeting than those in the BQS. This is most likely a result of the small total membership in Australia, and the wide distances between small regional Meetings. Yearly Meeting is the one important time when all Australian Friends can congregate to participate in workshops, meet old acquaintances, share experiences and make corporate decisions, whereas in Britain these functions can occur at Regional and

Area gatherings. However, it may also be an artefact of the sampling, with those Friends who are most actively involved in Australian Yearly Meeting being more likely to respond to the survey.

Australian Friends were much more concerned about environmental issues than the Australian population in general and much more likely than most Australians to have taken action on environmental issues. They were twice as likely to nominate involvement with conservation or environmental organisations than British respondents. This concern has been reflected in a recent vision document published by Australian Quakers on the topic (Howell et al. 2013) and the decision of AYM in 2015 to add Earthcare as one of the formal testimonies of the Society. It has been noted elsewhere that many postmodern Quakers focus less on religious experience and faith than on the common ground of global responsibility for the well-being of the whole earth, with a shift from the mystical to the practical or pragmatic. For them salvation is human and ecological well-being and wholeness (Farrow and Wildwood 2013; Spencer 2013).

The bare frequency responses presented in this article are rather blunt tools used for the initial analysis of these survey results. In Britain, a latent class analysis of an earlier survey has revealed three groupings amongst Quakers as ‘Traditional’, ‘Liberal’ and ‘Non-Theist’ (Dandelion 2014) and it would be useful to undertake similar analysis of the Australian data. However, the results presented here do give the first detailed picture of the beliefs and practice of Quakers in Australia. Most participants expressed a strong sense of identification with the Quaker community and acceptance of individual differences within the membership. It seems that in the contemporary life of Australian Quakers acceptance of a diversity of belief may be one unifying factor in this faith community, which has been noted amongst British Quakers as well (Dandelion 1992). As for liberal Quakers elsewhere, silent Meeting for Worship and living the testimonies remain common core values despite a diversity of beliefs (Frost 2013).

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