

Organizational Ethnography and Religious Organizations: The Case of the Quaker

Business Method

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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.

Keywords

Organizational Ethnography; Quakers; Decision-making; Quaker Business Method; Spiritual/Religious Organizations

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,

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3 religious organizations/groups also make collective decisions, exercise leadership and
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5 accountability, and manage themselves as corporate bodies. They do so in ways that are
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7 variously affected by their religious and spiritual traditions, but that are also obviously
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9 otherwise comparable to the practices of secular organizations. Conversely, secular
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11 organizations may take up and use management practices that are associated with religious
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13 and spiritual traditions, such as ‘mindfulness’ or, the focus of this paper, decision-making
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15 practices adapted from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).
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20 How then can the study of religious/spiritual organizations do justice to the distinctive
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22 religious motivations and traditions around their practices – while still interpreting them as
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24 organizations, open to the same forms of critical scrutiny and analysis as secular
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26 institutions/bodies? In particular, how should management and organizational researchers
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28 handle religious organizations’ internal accounts of how their management practices work,
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30 and the various truth-claims that emerge within these accounts? What methods are
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32 appropriate to the study of decision-making processes, leadership and management, and
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34 related characteristics of religious organizations, particularly where these organizational
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36 features are embedded within specific religious traditions and their associated explanatory
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38 frameworks?
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44 In addressing these questions, we highlight the distinctive contribution of organizational
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46 ethnography to the study of religious/spiritual organizational practices. Our argument is
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48 structured as follows: first, we situate our method of enquiry within the recent and broader
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50 methodological debates within the Management, Spirituality and Religion (MSR) literature.
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52 Second, we show how the unique features and practices of organizational ethnography enable
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54 it to do justice to the complexity of the religious-and-secular space of an organization and its
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3 management practices, without requiring the researcher to position herself decisively in
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5 relation to specific religious truth-claims. We highlight two empirical examples – Pentecostal
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7 Christianity and social activism – to illustrate our arguments. We then move on to an account
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9 of the Quaker Business Method (QBM) based on the literature - showing both why it is of
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11 particular interest to MSR researchers and why it poses, in a distinctive and especially
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13 pressing way, the methodological issues to which we draw attention. We conclude by
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15 showing that the commitments of organizational ethnography to being there, relationality,
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17 reflexive practice and context-sensitivity offer important ways forward in understanding the
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19 Quaker business method.
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24 **Studying Management, Spirituality and Religion**

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26 Recent discussions within the MSR group of the Academy of Management have raised
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28 significant questions about methodological inquiry (Tackney et al. 2017). Furthermore,
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30 Management Research Review recently devoted a timely special issue to MSR research
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32 methods from across a range of different ontological and epistemological traditions and
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34 methods of inquiry (Burton et al. 2017). The special issue highlighted methodological
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36 innovations and advancements in MSR research such as theological reflection (Miller 2017),
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38 single case studies (Retolaza and San-Jose 2017), action research (Lychnell and Martensson
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40 2017), quantitative approaches to data analysis such as structured equation modelling
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42 (Petrosko and Alagaraja 2017) and applying critical realism to MSR research (McGhee and
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44 Grant 2017).
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50 The historical backdrop to these different traditions in MSR research is an assumed tension
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52 between religion and spirituality on the one hand and science on the other (e.g. MacDonald
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54 2011) – a tension that corresponds to other key binaries used to organize knowledge and its
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3 objects in modernity (e.g. the religious and the secular, the tradition-specific and the
4 universal, the non-rational and the rational, etc). Traditionally, the study of religion and
5 spirituality is viewed as incompatible with science due to "...differences in paradigmatic, and
6 inherently metaphysical, challenges to assumptions about the nature, source, and meaning of
7 knowledge" (MacDonald 2011, 197).
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15 A number of MSR scholars in the 'scientific' tradition have attempted to overcome this
16 divide by extending the methods of management and organization science to the study of
17 spirituality and religion; for example Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003, 2010); MacDonald
18 (2011); and Petrosko and Alagaraja (2017). Such scholarship often examines the relationship
19 between variables that measure religion and/or spirituality and some other management
20 variable(s), such as, say, organizational performance or employee commitment. However,
21 Benefiel (2003a, 2003b, 2005) argues that there exists a paradox between the objective,
22 material and quantifiable concerns of science (and by extension management and
23 organization science) and the non-materialistic concerns of religiosity and spirituality.
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37 In response to the "absurdity of trying to factor analyze God" (Fornaciari and Lund Dean
38 2001, 35), Tackney et al. (2017, 249) have suggested a paradigmatic shift in MSR research to
39 "a fundamentally different paradigm [that] can make a significant contribution to our
40 knowledge and understanding of human organizing". In a similar vein, Lin, Oxford, and
41 Culham (2016, ix, x) recently argued that spiritual research requires a specific ontology "that
42 considers all reality to be multidimensional, interconnected, and interdependent" and an
43 epistemology "that integrates knowing from outer sources as well as inner contemplation,
44 acknowledging our integration of soul and spirit with body and mind". An additional
45 criterion they suggest for such a spiritual research paradigm is teleology, "an explanation of
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3 the goal or end (telos) with which new knowledge is applied, such as gaining wisdom and
4 truth, touching the divine, increasing inner peace, exploring hidden dimensions or improving
5 society” (ibid). In the same edited volume, Ergas (2016, 17) argues that a spiritual research
6 paradigm “...reverses our idea of enquiry. Knowing...is not considered as an act of
7 observing natural or social phenomena for their own sake. It is an experience of being
8 that can bring forth a transformative effect on the be-er [researcher] and in fact this
9 transformation is the end of such research”. One problem with these calls for a new
10 spiritual paradigm is that they assume an account of spirituality, or the spiritual, that is not
11 necessarily shared by all who would understand themselves as spiritual or religious – let
12 alone by all MSR researchers with their own values, preconceptions, assumptions and
13 dogmas that often go unacknowledged (McGhee and Grant 2017). A research paradigm that
14 focuses on a belief (for example) in ‘soul and spirit’ is liable to flatten out the diversity and
15 complexity of spirituality as expressed in organizations – and to force the researcher to
16 position herself as either a believer or a non-believer and to construct the research field along
17 similar oppositional lines.
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37 Our position is that religiosity and spirituality as expressed in organizational contexts is
38 highly subjective, and far from being easily summarized (in general or in any specific
39 tradition) into a single belief structure that grounds a research paradigm, it is in fact
40 heterogenic; it is lived out in multiple, subjective individuals and their collective realities. In
41 addition, there is a noticeable gap, both in MSR research, and in the study of religion and
42 spirituality more broadly, around the study of the management practices of religious
43 organizations – decision-making processes, leadership and management structures,
44 governance, patterns of accountability, and so forth – and how these features relate to the
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3 specific traditions of belief and practice within which they are embedded (see also Tracey
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5 2012).

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9 For example, if we look specifically at Christianity, studies of the management of Christian
10 organizations tend to describe them in standard ‘scientific’ terms (e.g. Simpson 2012).
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12 Christian theological engagement with management and organizational literature is often
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14 extremely critical, and tend to set Christian and secular accounts of management and
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16 organizational practices against each other without engaging in detail with how Christian
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18 organizations operate (Pattison 1997; Shakespeare 2016). Meanwhile, the growing subfield
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20 of ecclesiology and ethnography, while establishing a productive dialogue between
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22 theological and social-scientific research approaches, has rarely engaged with those practices
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24 of church and faith organizations that are likely to be of interest to management or
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26 organizational science (Muers and Grant 2017).
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33 Although the sacred/secular, religion/science binary is widely rejected in the literature, it
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35 appears still to affect the selection of research foci in relation to religious organizations and
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37 their management practices. Compared with practices of worship, community service and
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39 political activism, family life, or artistic and cultural production – to give but a few examples
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41 – practices of management and organization are tacitly assumed to be uninteresting, at least
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43 from the point of view of understanding religious traditions and their adherents. The picture
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45 is complicated further – in ways not effectively captured by current research – when we
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47 consider the adaptation and use by secular organizations of management practices with roots
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49 in religious and spiritual traditions. The most well-known contemporary example is the
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51 widespread use of a range of techniques associated with ‘mindfulness’ in organizational as
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53 well as individual practice (Ray, Baker and Plowman 201; Weick and Sutcliffe 2006).
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5 The Quaker business method (which we shall refer to as QBM) is also, however, similar
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7 enough – both in its aims and uses, and in some of its features – to non-religious group
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9 consensus decision-making processes, to have attracted recent interest from scholars and
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11 practitioners in management and related fields (Allen 2017; Brigham and Kavanagh 2015;
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13 Burton 2017; Velayutham 2013), and there is some evidence that it has been adapted and
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15 used successfully in non-Quaker, and non-religious, organizations (e.g. Michaelis 2010).
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17 Thus, QBM is, on the face of it, an obvious area of interest for researchers in management,
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19 spirituality and religion. However, researching QBM in a way that does justice to it both as
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21 religious practice and as organizational practice poses non-trivial challenges, which, we shall
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23 argue, can be addressed by using an organizational ethnographic approach.
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28 **Organizational Ethnography for Studying Spiritual and Religious Organizations**

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31 This paper, as we have shown above, aims to advance the use of organizational ethnography
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33 to the study of the management practices of religious/spiritual organizations. We contend that
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35 organizational ethnography is uniquely endowed to investigate and understand the
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37 management practices of religious organizations such as the Quakers and their decision-
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39 making practices because they are explored in the context of the specific traditions of belief
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41 and practice within which they are embedded. Organizational ethnography is, thus, capable of
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43 addressing the complexity by which “religious organizations experience similar pressures to
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45 organizations located in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors, such as arise from
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47 scale, resource flows, a volunteer base” while at the same time they “differ because of the
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49 primacy of belief systems which present an alternative set of pressures, especially in working
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51 out the relationship between beliefs, organization, and activities” (Hinings and Raynard 2014,
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53 161).
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5 Ethnography is, of course, widely used in the study of religion, but rarely with a focus on
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7 religious-cum-organizational practices and dynamics. A search of the keyword ‘ethnography’
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9 in the MSR literature produces surprisingly few results (with the notable exceptions of Cullen
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11 (2011) and Day (2009) and other mixed methods studies) – this despite the fact that,
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13 according to Lund Dean, Fornaciari, and McGee (2003, 383), “[MSR] research appears a
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15 strong candidate for many of the qualitative research techniques that have been used for
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17 decades in disciplines such as education and psychology. Ethnography and case study
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19 are just two examples of technique”.

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24 Several of the key questions that are likely to affect the use of organizational ethnography in
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26 the study of religious/spiritual organizations have arisen in existing studies of the religious
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28 group on which we focus in this paper – the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Due to
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30 the fact that many of the scholars doing research on Quakers are Quakers themselves, one of
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32 the core issues discussed is the insider/outsider dichotomy within Quaker research (see Allen
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34 2017; Collins 2002; Meads 2007; Molina-Markham 2014; Nesbitt 2002). Some would argue
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36 that “that there is something in religion that clearly and definitely distinguishes the insider
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38 from the outsider” (Stringer 2002, 3), whereas others are of the opinion that problematizing
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40 the distinction in fact essentializes both the insider and outsider (Collins 2002). For the
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42 researcher as ‘outsider’, the challenge is considered to lie in how to take the believers’ point
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44 of view earnestly – how to do justice to the experience of religion as “their reality” (Knibbe
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46 and Versteeg 2008, 48) and to the claims they make about the search for, and access to, truth
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48 in religion. Nesbitt (2002, 137) argues that reflexivity offers ways to theorize the distinction
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50 as “reflexive awareness requires the student of belief and practice in any faith community an
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52 ongoing interrogation of his/her cultural conditioning and religious/ideological stance and
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3 alertness to inter-influence between these and the field”. These concerns are not unique to
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5 doing research on religion and spirituality or on Quakers by Quakers or others. All
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7 ethnographers, as argued by Livezey (2002), are continuously negotiating and re-negotiating
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9 their status and are often both insider and outsider (particularly if we do not take these
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11 concepts to have only a literal meaning).
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16 In short, the methodological challenges in the study of religious/spiritual organizations are
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18 about *how* to explore religious organizations and organizational practices as both
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20 organizational and religious. So far, the only agreement seems to be that ethnography is quite
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22 suitable because of its fieldwork character (which is discussed further below) – but the
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24 question of the ethnographer’s status in relation to the religious organization, as ‘insider’ or
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26 ‘outsider’ or neither, remains open to debate. As we will demonstrate in a subsequent section,
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28 attention to the specific example of QBM reveals the instability of the insider/outsider binary
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30 and suggests fruitful new ways of understanding the relationship between the researcher and
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32 the organization.
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37 So what would *organizational* ethnography, specifically, add to the study of
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39 spiritual/religious organizations and specifically of QBM? Before addressing this question,
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41 we very briefly address what organizational ethnography is considered to ‘be’ and ‘do’.
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46 Organizational ethnography is geared towards a fine-grained, up and close understanding of
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48 organizational life (Ybema et al. 2009) and through such ethnographic detail (of the
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50 everyday) a better understanding of organizations and organizing (of any kind of organization
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52 and/or organizing). Organizational ethnography, thus researches “the human networks of
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54 action we call organisations” (Kostera 2007, 15), or cultures; indeed, as Van Maanen (1988,
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3 1) states: “ethnography is written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a
4 culture)” with a hint of legacy to Geertz’s *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Following these
5 positions, organizations for organizational ethnographers are very much perceived as
6 “systems of meaning and interpretation” (Schubert and Rohl 2017, 5) or in fact ‘belief
7 systems’ that can be explored through participant observation (sometimes also referred to as
8 fieldwork, leaving the balance between participating and observing open). In its core,
9 organizational ethnographers are thus “concerned with understanding how organization
10 members go about their daily working lives and how they make sense of their workplaces”
11 (Ciuk, Koning and Kostera 2018, 278); the “sense-making, that of situated actors – in our
12 case, “living” in organizations of various sorts – along with that of the researcher her- or
13 himself” (Yanow 2012, 33).
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29 We are not suggesting that organizational ethnography is unified about the how, where, and
30 why. As Van Maanen (1988, 2010) already highlighted in the 1980s when he wrote *Tales of*
31 *the Field* (1988) and some twenty years later with his *More Tales of the Field* (2010) there
32 are various ‘tales’ ethnographers can tell. The tales being the outcomes (the ethnographic
33 writing), they are of course closely related to how ethnography as method has been put to
34 use. Are we inclined to tell a realist tale (a narrative describing what has been observed as the
35 reality of the setting and its actors) or a moral tale that uses the narrative to address a
36 particular ‘wrong’ in the world? There is however, a growing sense that any sense-making
37 “has been co-generated with organisational members” (Yanow 2012, 34) and more recently
38 such a constructivist-interpretivist stance seems to have become more common. From the
39 above it is clear that the organizational ethnography we envision lies within the interpretivist
40 tradition.
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3 So why is organizational ethnography so well-suited for studying the organizational features
4 and management practices of and in religious organizations such as Quakers? We will
5 explore this in more detail by highlighting key qualities of organizational ethnography as
6 shared in several of the core texts (e.g. Ciuk et al. 2018; Cunliffe 2010; Neyland 2008;
7 Yanow, Ybema and Van Hulst 2012; Ybema et al. 2009), namely 1) fieldwork dynamics:
8 ‘being there’, relationality, power, and agenda-setting; and 2) knowledge creation: lived-
9 experience, reflexivity and contextualized knowledge. Each of these will be followed by
10 examples from organizational research on Pentecostal mega-churches and social movements.
11 Although these examples are somewhat outside the organizational mainstream, we consider
12 them a highly relevant starting point for studying religious/spiritual organizations and
13 management practices such as QBM due to their ‘beliefs’ and subsequent impact on the
14 fieldwork, researcher and knowledge creation.
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Fieldwork Dynamics: Being There, Relationality, Power, Agenda-setting

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32 Organizational ethnography is very much grounded in fieldwork and participant observation.
33 As Van Maanen (2011, 219) argued, it entails “subjecting oneself to at least a part of the life
34 situation of others”. This immersion and close observation of the life of others in particular
35 settings requires careful consideration to the everyday interactions, situations, objects, and
36 events; the outcomes are then often judged on the ability to convey an embodied sense of
37 participants’ experiences (Richardson 2000). Thus, being there is considered an important
38 way of understanding ‘what is going on’ but ethnographers can take different positions
39 towards the ‘how’ of gaining such an understanding. Below we offer three examples: the
40 engaged participant (Sutherland), the engaged activist (Plows) and the engaged ‘stranger’
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3 Sutherland (2016, 9), researching leadership in an anarchist social movement organization,
4 argues: “Through participating in meetings, events and actions, I was able to develop
5 understandings of how practices actually worked – being ‘on the ground’; experiencing them
6 first-hand; immersing myself; knowing the various implicit and unspoken rules and
7 guidelines; encountering problems and issues; and enjoying successes”. He not only observed
8 but participated by co-organizing events, doing administrative tasks and by actively joining
9 discussions. Plows’ (2008, 10) ‘engaged’ ethnography of an activist movement, is more
10 explicit: “My engaged approach went beyond explicit identification – I took part in protests
11 and in some cases helped to catalyze them”. Finally, the second author, Koning (2017, 42)
12 researching two Pentecostal-charismatic organizations, observed and participated – as non-
13 co-believer - in the Sunday worship meetings, stating that these “sensitized” her “at a
14 personal level” through vivid experiences of the experiential dimensions of Pentecostal-
15 charismatic Christianity.

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33 As Yanow et al. (2012, 345) point out, and the examples above hint at, thinking in terms of
34 insider or outsider or going native gloss over a more important aspect of organizational
35 ethnography and that is the “relational nature of ethnographic fieldwork” as well as, we
36 argue, the engaged position and mindset of the researcher. It is clear that “ethnographers no
37 longer enter into projects with clearly defined “subjects” or “informants” but with “epistemic
38 partners”” who might themselves be pursuing their own research questions (Lassiter and
39 Campell 2010, 4) and agendas. Thus, research partners and researchers might be pursuing the
40 same agenda, such as the activist ethnographic turn aimed at making social movements
41 research more “activist-centric” (Sutherland 2012, 627) by being “more explicitly supportive
42 of the views and aims of the actors” (Plows 2008, 3). But sometimes agendas do not fully
43 align between research partners and researchers, leading to awkward and unsettling
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3 experiences for all those involved. Both positions however, offer important ways to query
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5 “social reciprocity in field encounters, different agendas of researchers and research
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7 participants, and fieldwork ethics” (Koning and Ooi 2013, 29). Fieldwork, and being there,
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9 we argue, is thus very much about balancing between wanting to belong and trying to keep
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11 distance (see Hume and Mulcock 2004) and about reflexivity (see next section).
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14 15 ***Knowledge Creation: Lived Experiences, Reflexivity and Contextualized Knowledge***

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17 In order to make sense, organizational ethnography has to be contextually sensitive. In other
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19 words, while interested in how specific groups go about their lives by exploring events and
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21 staying attuned to language, rituals and artefacts (Cunliffe 2010), organizational
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23 ethnographers take the position that these actors do so in a specific social, historical, and
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25 cultural context defined by time and place. The research needs to be sufficiently
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27 contextualized so that the “interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the
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29 settings of the actors studied” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 47). The combination of
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31 fine-grained detail with contextual awareness offers an alternative to the “ahistorical,
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33 acontextual and aprocessual” qualities of most organizational studies (Bate 1997, 1155). The
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35 way to show this lies in the credibility of the text, which ought to contain detailed
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37 descriptions that grasp “the intricacies of life in that setting” (Cunliffe 2010, 231).
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39 Knowledge gained through organizational ethnography, therefore, concerns ideas and
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41 practices directly relevant at the level of the field (and other, similar ones) and is of a holistic
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43 nature. That is, it helps to grasp the social world in all its dynamics and complexity, to
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45 consider phenomena in their broader context (Ciuk et al. 2018).
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52 To grasp this meaning-making in context, Sutherland (2012, 633) reflecting on activist
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54 ethnographies, argues that they are “able to understand and analyze individual organizations,
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3 including their development, local understandings, constructions and performances”.

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5 Similarly, by joining church meetings and by participating with every aspect of the two-hour
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7 worship session (singing, clapping of hands, greeting each other, swaying to the music),
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9 Koning (2017) shows that an important dimension of the observation and participation is the
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11 ‘experience’; whether it is understanding the role of lively music in preparation of receiving
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13 the Holy Spirit, as is the case in the Pentecostal-charismatic sessions, or that of silence as is
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15 the case in the Quaker community (to which we turn in the next section). It makes it possible
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17 to unpack layers of understanding doing justice to the lifeworld under investigation without
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19 disconnecting from scientific interpretation.
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24 Since ethnographers do not simply observe and describe, but, in fact, “interpret and inscribe”
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26 (Robben 2007, 446) this “calls for a heightened self-awareness”, a reflexivity about how our
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28 own experiences shape the knowledge claims we arrive at (Ybema et al. 2009, 9). This
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30 reflexive turn has over the years raised some critical questions such as whether the concept
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32 lost its meaning by overuse. These developments have led to a re-evaluation of the power
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34 involved (in the relationship, the account, and representation) with the aim to rebalance the
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36 power between/among ethnographer(s) and participant(s). It is not just about acknowledging
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38 that there are power dimensions involved and that these are often quite unequal but moving to
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40 a stance where we agree that relationality and reflexivity should transform into the realization
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42 that “we are always in relation to others” (Cunliffe 2008, 128) and informs the theorizing and
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44 meaning-making. Demonstrating reflexivity on the part of the researcher, including
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46 considerations of researcher positionality, is now a commonly used criterion for assessing the
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48 quality of organizational ethnographic work (Schwartz-Shea 2006; Watson 2011). In the
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50 example above, by exploring reflexively the ‘awkward moments’ of the researched trying to
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52 convert the researcher, important insight into Pentecostal practice -reconverting the self- was
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3 gained (Koning and Ooi 2013). It is a good example of how our interpretation of how ‘others’
4 make meaning, particular of others with whom we do not share the same ‘culture’ (or
5 religion), needs to be supported by reflexive practice. Reflexivity, including the less-pleasant
6 and emotional experiences in fact offer many analytical clues and are “epistemologically
7 informative” (Davies 2010, 13).
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16 Based on the above, we propose, first, that organizational ethnography as a methodology -
17 through its unique features of fieldwork and reflexive knowledge creation - is eminently
18 appropriate for integrating religious and organizational perspectives in the study of QBM.
19 Second, we suggest that considering organizational ethnography’s approach alongside
20 Quaker understandings of T/truth – understandings that are implied and enacted in QBM -
21 reveals surprising and valuable congruencies. With this in mind, we now move to a more
22 detailed literature-based overview of QBM, the specific challenges it poses for the researcher,
23 and the ways in which organizational ethnography might serve to address them.
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35 **Characterizing Quaker Business Method**

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37 Quakers have a history of about 350 years in Britain. As documented by King (2014),
38 Turnbull (2014) and Walvin (1998), in the world of business and management, Quakers had
39 tremendous success in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With renewed interest in
40 responsible business (e.g. Hope and Moehler 2015; Parris et al., 2016), management scholars
41 have recently been drawn back to Quaker history and tradition to examine lessons for
42 contemporary responsible business practice (Burton and Hope, 2018). One of the foci of
43 attention that has emerged recently is the distinctive Quaker practice of decision-making that
44 lies at the heart of Quaker corporate governance (Burton 2017; Muers 2015; Velayutham
45 2013).
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5 Quakers are unusual among religious groups in having a distinctive, consistently applied, and
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7 theologically-framed process used routinely for collective decision-making in meetings – on
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9 ‘worldly’ matters such as money, property and administration, as well as on what might be
10
11 conventionally thought of as ‘religious’ issues. The decision-making approach – QBM - is
12
13 widely used in Britain, US and beyond for business meetings that vary enormously in size,
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15 coverage and agenda (for more detailed accounts see Mace 2012; Sheeran 1996). A business
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17 meeting has numerous structural similarities with a Quaker meeting for worship, that is, an
18
19 unstructured meeting based on silence. Burton (2017) argues that Quaker business method
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21 can be considered to encompass two broad dimensions: (i) a spiritual dimension, and (ii) a
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23 decision-making process/practice. In terms of the religious/spiritual dimension, QBM
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25 requires Friends to turn their attention to God or the Spirit as the source and ultimate
26
27 authority in decision-making. Standard Quaker accounts of the process/practice encompass
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29 distinctive qualities such as contributions framed by silence and spoken contributions are
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31 presented as ‘ministry’ to the group, rather than as the advocacy of an individual’s or a sub-
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33 group’s opinion. Most notably to many outside observers, no votes are taken; action-
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35 orientated minutes are proposed and agreed to reflect the shared discernment of the group, the
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37 ‘sense of the meeting’. Various additional behavioural norms – such as not speaking twice or
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39 repeating a point already made – are similar to those found in a Quaker meeting for worship
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41 (Anderson 2006; Burton 2017; Muers and Grant 2017). Of particular interest for our
42
43 methodological discussion to follow, we focus on the following distinctive qualities (1) the
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45 practice of discernment, and (2) silence. We now turn to consider each of these qualities in
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3 QBM is a collective testing of individual ‘leadings’ from the Spirit (Anderson 2006; Grace
4 2006). Group unity is achieved in a process of corporate discernment that “...involves a
5 commitment to being led based on faith in a relational power beyond each person” (Morley
6 1993, 15). There is a shared responsibility to discern a shared understanding of the right way
7 forward. Allen (2017, 134-5) connects this emphasis on shared responsibility for discernment
8 with a practice of individual “unknowing” – radically decentring the individual knower in
9 order to foster ““a wider group-wisdom””; In the collective process of seeking unity, ideas put
10 forward by individuals are “tested, revised and woven together” to produce a result that is not
11 recognizably the work of any of the individuals involved.
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24 The significance of open-endedness and ‘unknowing’ in Quaker decision-making also
25 becomes apparent when we consider the central role of silence in the process – with decision-
26 making meetings being framed and punctuated by periods of silence. According to Law and
27 Mol (2003, 24), the key point is that the practice is about understanding “that there is more
28 than can possibly be put into words”. Molina-Markham (2014, 157) develops a more
29 extended account of the positive role of silence in QBM, in the context of its wider
30 constitutive and community-forming function for Quaker communities – as both a key
31 cultural symbol and a practice that enables community formation (see also Bauman 1983;
32 Lippard 1988). For the participant-researcher, periods of silence invite or require reflection
33 and reflexivity on the unfinished character of the sense-making process and its multi-levelled
34 effects – for the research subjects as well as for the researcher. An organizational
35 ethnographic approach, actively invites the researcher to ‘experience’ organizational
36 (cultural) practices, as such sensitizing the researcher at an experiential level and seriously
37 increasing the potential to understand ‘what is going on’ (whether it is social activism in
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3 social movements and lively worship in Pentecostalism addressed in the examples earlier, or
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5 in silence as is the case in QBM).
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10 If we consider the end-points or results of QBM, however, we are brought back to some of
11 the as yet unresolved questions around the relationship between religious and secular
12 practices, or between insider and outsider accounts of the practice. In Quaker descriptions of
13 Quaker decision-making, a clear differentiation is often made between unity on the one hand
14 and ‘secular’ notions of consensus on the other. Thus, Burton (2017), summarizing a range of
15 Quaker theological sources, argues that Friends often insist that unity and consensus are not
16 the same thing; consensus is based on a notion of human reason and authority, and commonly
17 understood as requiring mutual compromise between human beings, whereas unity and a
18 ‘sense of the meeting’ is based on a spiritual and corporate discernment of God’s will. One
19 final distinctive feature of QBM, discussed in detail by Muers (2015, 194-8) is the emphasis
20 on action in the minutes of business meetings, that is, in the definitive statements of the unity
21 that has been reached. Unity is characteristically around a course of action - even if the
22 “action” is accepting a report and thanking the people who wrote it (Muers 2015, for more on
23 the grammar of Quaker minutes, see Mace 2012). As we shall see, this emphasis on unity
24 being expressed in action is also extremely important for understanding the wider religious
25 context within which QBM operates – and for developing appropriate ways to study it.
26 Again, organizational ethnography, with its attention to the organizational contextual setting,
27 describing meticulously (based on observations, experiences and detailed field-notes) what
28 unfolds in this setting and through the relationality with the research participants, allows for
29 an evaluation that shows both these dimensions without trying to pin this down to one
30 outcome only.
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3 As we pointed out above, language used by Quaker researchers on Quakerism sometimes
4 appears to reinforce the division between insiders and outsiders. For example, framing her
5 study of Quaker group meditative practices (the ‘Experiment with Light’), Meads (2007)
6 suggests that good research on this and other Quaker practices would not be possible
7 “without understanding and living the Truth that Quakers believe springs from divine
8 encounter”. On first reading – taking ‘Truth’ as some kind of propositional statement about
9 the existence and nature of God, and ‘Quakers believe’ as implying that Quakers possess
10 unique or full understanding of such ‘Truth’ – this sounds less than promising. Read in that
11 way, it divides the religious from the (merely) secular, the insider from the outsider, and
12 makes Quaker practice – qua religious practice - incomprehensible to the non-Quaker. We
13 suggest, however, that such a reading fails to do justice either to the empirical reality of
14 Quakerism or to the historic Quaker understanding of T/truth towards which Meads gestures
15 – an understanding that is performed in QBM, and which, moreover, is surprisingly
16 commensurate with the critical perspective of the constructivist-interpretivist ethnographer,
17 as described in our preceding section.
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37 **Truth in Quakerism, Quaker Business Method and Organizational Ethnography**

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39 As shown in the previous section, several of the formal features of QBM – discernment and
40 silence - as a practice do lend themselves to organizational ethnographic research. In this
41 section, we move to examine another aspect of the congruence of organizational ethnography
42 as a method with QBM as a management practice. We argue that organizational ethnography
43 as a method is particularly well suited to the study of QBM *on Quakers’ own terms*. The key
44 aspect of Quakerism that enables us to make this claim is the distinctive Quaker account of
45 truth as it emerges in recent scholarship. If we examine recent scholarship on what it means
46 for Quakers to find or seek truth in QBM and Quakerism more widely, we find a wealth of
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3 points of connection with organizational ethnography as a research approach. We are not
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5 claiming here that all organizational ethnographers can or should ‘think like Quakers’ or
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7 practice something like Quaker decision-making. We are, rather, trying to disrupt the
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9 assumption that religious ‘truth-claims’ will inevitably be marginal to, or problematic for,
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11 management and organizational research – and to demonstrate that a reflective conversation
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13 about truth and methods for seeking it, between the organizational researcher and the
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15 religious organization that is the object of research, is both possible and potentially fruitful.
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20 In order to see this, we must first set aside the common assumption that ‘truth’ in a religious
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22 group will consist of a set of shared beliefs. Quakers are a particularly clear counter-example.
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24 Recent research demonstrates that contemporary British Quakers are extremely diverse in
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26 belief while being extremely consistent in terms of their religious practices (including QBM).
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28 Dandelion (1996) argues that the faith or belief of Quakers celebrates diversity, whereas the
29
30 behaviour and practice is governed and tightly regulated. This is the ‘double-culture’ of
31
32 Quakerism (Dandelion, 2004). A bewildering diversity of theological outlook, illustrated by
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34 the existence of Quagans (Vincett 2009), Muslim, Buddhist, and even Moonie Quakers
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36 (Dandelion 2004) is combined with a coherence and unity in practice – for example, in QBM.
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41 Collins (2009, 206) presents the diversity of Quaker belief as a puzzle, asking, “How can a
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43 voluntary organization like the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) sustain a coherent
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45 identity without charter or creed-without an overt, unifying ideology?” While the
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47 characterization of Quakerism as a “voluntary organization” is not particularly helpful –
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49 obscuring as it does the identity-defining and community-forming aspects of religious
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51 belonging – the question is an important one. Organizational ethnography is likely to be able
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53 to help to answer it, by enabling attention to what is going on in shared practices of meaning-
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3 making while resisting the temptation to impose assumptions about shared belief or unifying
4 ideology. This approach to seeking the answer will in turn fit well with Quaker
5 understandings of how truth is found and lived out in religious community.
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11 The most obvious place to look for an answer to Collins' question about what holds Quakers
12 together is, as we have already suggested, the other side of Dandelion's (2004) double
13 culture, that is unity or uniformity of practice. Dandelion argues that "Quaker identity is
14 [expressed] in terms of [a] conformist 'behavioural creed'" (Dandelion 2002, 219), noting for
15 example that "...the 'unprogrammed' form of worship based in silence has not changed in
16 350 years, while the belief-content of ministry has not only changed, but is now pluralistic"
17 (Dandelion 2004, 221), and drawing attention to the myriad of mostly unwritten rules that
18 govern Quaker behaviour both in worship and in the decision-making process. Muers (2015)
19 finds a further unity of practice not in rules of behaviour within Quaker spaces, but in
20 testimony – storied and shared traditions of practice, individual and collective, that relate
21 particularly to interactions with the non-Quaker world (an obvious example being the
22 longstanding Quaker commitment to nonviolence and peace work).
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39 Where does this focus on shared practice leave our understanding of T/truth in this
40 community? Both Dandelion's (2002) idea of the behavioural creed and Muers' (2015)
41 account of testimony raise sharp questions for the study of Quaker decision-making –
42 specifically, whether it is possible to understand it solely as a set of shared behavioural norms
43 with no underlying belief commitments? Dandelion cautions that "...the diversity of specific
44 beliefs about the nature of God might undermine the behavioural creed" (2004, 222); and
45 Muers' work makes a much closer link between theology and practice by connecting the
46 unity-in-practice of Quaker testimony to certain core commitments in Quaker tradition, albeit
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3 commitments that are rarely expressed as theological claims. QBM looks like a unifying and
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5 core practice that persists despite diversity of belief – but that nonetheless relies on *some*
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7 underlying commitment by the practitioners. Organizational ethnography’s commitment to
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9 exploring and understanding the underlying commitments of organizational behaviours – by
10
11 ‘being there’, exploring the behaviours and practices in context and through reflexivity –
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13 commends it again as a key research tool for moving beyond the simple binary of diversity of
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15 belief on the one hand and simple behavioural conformity on the other. Organizational
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17 ethnography opens up the possibility of making sense of a shared practice, not by treating it
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19 as an enactment of a set of propositional claims that are in principle independent of it, but by
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21 exploring commitments, values and norms that are integral to it.
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27 This feature of organizational ethnography, and this way of moving beyond the apparent
28
29 binary of belief and practice, is deeply congruent with Quakers’ own approaches to the
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31 relationship between belief and practice – and to truth. As argued at length elsewhere by
32
33 Muers, and somewhat differently by Rediehs (2015), T/truth from a Quaker perspective is,
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35 always lived and enacted. ‘Truth-claims’ – paradigmatically, testimony, or speaking truth to
36
37 power – are truthful not in the abstract but as acts of truth-telling, that both reveal and
38
39 advance the establishment of a just and peaceful divine order (Muers 2015). Everyday acts
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41 of telling the truth, including potentially the kind of truth-telling to which the researcher is
42
43 committed – doing justice to the world as it is, avoiding interpretive violence - both core to
44
45 an interpretivist organizational ethnographic stance – are part of ‘Truth’ on this interpretation.
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47 So, too, are everyday decisions – like the decisions taken in a Quaker business meeting. The
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49 British Quaker book of discipline, in its section on truth, notes that in Quaker tradition the
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51 term encompasses both core religious convictions and beliefs and a way of life that includes,
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3 but is not limited to, everyday truth-telling (Britain Yearly Meeting 1994, 19.34-19.38,
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5 preambles).
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9 Understanding truth in this way has deep implications for ethics and politics – including the
10 ethics of a research relationship. As Rediehs (2015) explains with the help of contemporary
11 nonviolence theory, Quaker ‘Truth’ emerges in and through nonviolent and just relationships
12 and the transformation of unequal power relations. The core “divine encounter” in the search
13 for Quaker truth is the encounter that occurs through (to quote a well-known Quaker text)
14 “answering that of God” in others by responding to them in justice and love (Fox 1952, 263 /
15 Britain Yearly Meeting 1994, 19.32). Truth is practical, embodied, engaged and situated,
16 emerging in each particular context in which people live truthfully; it is neither internal to the
17 knowing and acting subject, nor indifferent to the subject. The organizational ethnographer’s
18 work, as we have seen, is likewise practical, embodied, engaged and situated, encompassing
19 reflexivity and open-ended encounter with the other; its adequacy as research, or we might
20 say its truthfulness, relies on these methodological ethical commitments.
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37 A further implication of the Quaker understanding set out here is that t/Truth – since it is not
38 primarily a matter of correct deductions from known propositions – can and does emerge in
39 the actions, lives and speech of people who do not share Quaker beliefs. Indeed, another key
40 component of traditional Quaker religious identity is a consistent challenge to the
41 sacred/secular binary – the insistence that religious commitment should be reflected in all
42 areas of life, and should (in a contemporary slogan reflective of the emphasis of twentieth-
43 and twenty-first-century British Quakerism) help to build a better world. This is a general
44 feature of Quaker religious identity and practice, but it comes through particularly clearly in
45 QBM because the latter is consistently applied to everyday situations that carry, in
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3 themselves, no particular theological weight. This means that it draws on, interacts with and
4 affects secular expertise, processes and organizations – and this is not incidental, but part of
5 what it means to do QBM well. QBM, seen in the broader picture of Quaker commitment and
6 practice, invites comparison with ‘secular’ processes, and analysis in terms of its ‘worldly’
7 effectiveness; just getting it right in theory, or holding the right beliefs about what one is
8 doing, will not be enough for Quakers. QBM exists in constant and close relation to non-
9 Quaker institutions and processes, and subject to implicit or explicit critical scrutiny from
10 them.
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22 Both on empirical grounds and on Quakers’ own theological terms, then, it is neither possible
23 nor desirable to keep QBM in a protected ‘Quaker space’. Researchers of QBM will not do it
24 justice if they study it as the logical outworking of some clear shared beliefs. Nor can they
25 treat it purely in terms of the preservation of group identity via the transmission of a set of
26 (ultimately arbitrary) practices and rules of practice that operate in a defined ‘religious
27 space’; nor as a practice without religious significance that is used just because it is
28 particularly efficient or effective.
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39 In summary, then, this Quaker approach to truth foregrounds, not belief in a particular set of
40 ‘truth-claims’ (religious or otherwise), but a commitment to doing justice with and to others –
41 a commitment that is not restricted to a given religious community. The organizational
42 ethnographer, from this perspective, is engaged in ‘understanding and living truth’ in a way
43 that is connected to QBM. The connection is not a shared theological framework, but rather
44 an overlapping (not identical) set of ‘nonviolent’ and justice-oriented relationships and
45 practices. The researcher is attempting to discern and do justice to the integrated ‘sense-
46 making’ work of QBM, not from a detached or indifferent position but within a non-coercive
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3 relationship open to the emergence of new insights. Participants in QBM, likewise, are
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5 attempting to discern the right way forward through a process that requires close attention to
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7 other people and to the realities and constraints of the situation, not imposing one's own point
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9 of view, critical acknowledgement of one's own positionality, and openness to new or
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11 surprising possibilities.
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15 On this account, the organizational ethnographer's position would be provided, not by a
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17 difference of beliefs, nor straightforwardly by an 'outsider' status in relation to Quakerism or
18
19 an 'observer' status in the business meeting, but by meaning-making in context and not by
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21 being personally committed to whatever decision is made or action agreed. Given the strong
22
23 emphasis on unity in QBM, this is a significant qualification on the ethnographer's
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25 'participation' in the process – one that allows us to recognize points of contact between the
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27 ethnographer's work and the work of those engaged in QBM, without bracketing out Quaker
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29 understandings of 'Truth'.
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35 **Conclusions and Implications**

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37 We argued at the beginning of this paper that studies of management and organizational
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39 practices in religious organizations need to be able to take both religious and organizational
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41 matters seriously – and that this requires research methods that work across the implicit and
42
43 explicit boundaries between insider and outsider and between sacred and secular. We propose
44
45 that organizational ethnography fulfills these requirements. The need to work across binary
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47 boundaries becomes particularly obvious and pressing where the organizational practices of
48
49 spiritual/religious organizations themselves break down those boundaries – for example, by
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51 attaching religious significance to the most "mundane" of decisions or of organizational
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53 practices. We have highlighted the contribution of the prior ethnographic work on Quakers,
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3 in many cases done by Quakers (for example, Collins, 2002, 2009; Meads, 2007), and
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5 existing work on Quaker organizations (for example, Burton, 2017; Mace, 2012; Molina-
6
7 Markham 2014; Muers and Grant, 2017). This existing body of work, read in the context of
8
9 the wider literature on Quakerism and the study of management and spirituality, shows that
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11 Quakerism in general and QBM in particular requires this kind of boundary-crossing if it is to
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13 be adequately understood.
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18 Organizational ethnography is particularly well suited for the study of a religious
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20 organizational practice like QBM for the following reasons. Organizational ethnography is
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22 particularly good at working across the sacred/secular, insider/outsider, and indeed
23
24 belief/practice, binaries – or in fact deconstructing such boundaries – as organizations are
25
26 very much perceived as systems of meaning and interpretation. Organizational ethnography,
27
28 moreover, can deal with the “unknowing” of QBM - and the open-ended collective practices
29
30 of sense-making that are at the heart of this method – as it has inbuilt resistance to the
31
32 imposition of single external frameworks of meaning. Rather, research in organizational
33
34 ethnography is about uncovering how the individual and the organization “make sense” by
35
36 subjecting oneself to at least a part of the life situation of others, as Van Maanen (2011)
37
38 reminded us. This immersion and close observation of the life of others requires careful
39
40 consideration of the everyday interactions as well as the ability to convey an embodied sense
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42 of participants’ experiences. Finally, developing this suggestion further, we have found that
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44 organizational ethnography, through ‘being there’ and its relational epistemology (see also
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46 Cunliffe 2008), is congruent with Quakers’ own understandings of how the search for truth
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48 works and is expressed.
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3 So, what are the wider implications of this discussion for the study of management,
4 spirituality and religion? We advance three tentative proposals. First, we suggest that the
5 interaction between organizational ethnography and QBM enriches ongoing methodological
6 conversations on ‘ethical’ practice, particularly as related to issues such as ‘knowing’,
7 ‘religious truth’ and ‘just relationships’.
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16 Second, we suggest that the approach taken in this paper – allowing the religious organization
17 being researched to enter into the conversation about basic methodological questions around
18 the nature and status of truth-claims, the meaning of ‘participation’, or the relationship
19 between religious and the secular – could be applied elsewhere, such as in the study of
20 mindfulness and other spiritual practices. This might lead both to subtly different methods
21 emerging for the study of different organizations and/or management practices– and, as
22 indicated in our first point above, to new issues or ideas entering the wider methodological
23 debate.
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35 Third, and perhaps least controversially, our account of QBM as a ‘religious’ practice
36 undermines certain widespread assumptions about how ‘religion’ works in relation to
37 organizations and management practices. We have seen that QBM is theologically
38 underdetermined and sustained as a unified practice in the face of significantly different
39 theological explanations; and is consciously and as a matter of religious principle applied to
40 ‘secular’ issues, and brought into relation with secular frameworks of understanding. MSR
41 researchers should, then, be encouraged by the study of QBM not to assume a tension or
42 conflict between the two terms (management and spirituality), but to consider whether and
43 how a given spiritual framework consciously accommodates diversity, alternative non-
44 spiritual perspectives and the possibility of change.
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5 Given our analysis of QBM and subsequent proposals, we invite researchers in the MSR
6 tradition to consider pathways to research questions that occupy the space between the
7 binaries of religious/secular and believer/non-believer. In the context of our discussion of
8 QBM, we see the adaptation and use of QBM by non-Quaker and non-religious organizations
9 as an intriguing opportunity to explore these binaries further. Further research questions using
10 organizational ethnography might include the following: how might the tradition of
11 discernment be operationalized by secular organizations? We are drawn to the idea of
12 ‘mission discernment’ as an example of such a management practice. What are
13 boundaries/limits to diversity of belief in QBM? How does the practice of QBM relate to, and
14 sustain, a sense of unity in organizational life more generally? How can the known ‘issues’ of
15 practicing QBM – such as the time commitment, and the role of inclusion of
16 specialist/technical knowledge - be improved?
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33 We propose, then, to not only use organizational ethnography to study QBM, but to use the
34 distinctive characteristics of QBM, as it reflects wider Quaker thought and practice, as an
35 opening for reflection on the nature of the research process itself. Core commitments of
36 organizational ethnography to “being there”, relationality, reflexive practice and context-
37 sensitivity enable us to see the ethnographic researcher in a Quaker business meeting as
38 engaged in a search for truth analogous to that of the participants.
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