

THE MEANING OF NONVIOLENCE:  
EXPLORING NONVIOLENCE AS A CULTURAL RESOURCE  
FOR LIBERAL QUAKER SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on eight in-depth interviews conducted with Liberal Quaker subjects in the Boston area. Subjects spoke about two things: their relationship to the peace and nonviolence elements of Quakerism and their personal, spiritual journeys. Subjects tell stories, perform their social positions, and participate (or talk about participation) in communal ritual. I identify nonviolence as a cultural resource used in these processes (storytelling, social position performance, and ritual) to constitute existential meaning. Existential meaning has three different iterations that correspond to the three respective processes. In storytelling, subjects constitute life purpose. In social position performance, subjects constitute subjectivity (who they really are). In communal ritual, subjects constitute solidarity (where they belong). Nonviolence is not the only cultural resource used to constitute these three forms of existential meaning, and is combined in a myriad number of ways to suit the unique exigencies of each subject's lived experience. Further, nonviolence retains a limiting influence on subjects' life choices, and yet it by no means dominates the justification or legitimation of choice in every case.

KEYWORDS

Sociology, religion, Liberal Quakerism, nonviolence, culture, storytelling, performance, ritual, Boston.

INTRODUCTION

I explore the lived experience of subjects who lay claim to a contested idea. In different ways and in different situations, my subjects lay claim to nonviolence. The differences point to its multifarious flexibility. Nonviolence can be Quaker, but also Christian, but also Buddhist, but also Gandhian. Ultimately nonviolence is but one of many ideas to which people stake real meaning. In this sense nonviolence is a cultural resource—a linguistically constituted notion used in turn to constitute existential meaning. Nonviolence is but one of a selection of such

linguistically constituted notions that my subjects employ. Why or how subjects use nonviolence as a cultural resource to make out existential meaning corresponds to the situational exigencies of lived experience. Life takes on a unique chronological *mélange*, which grounds the selection of cultural resources.

I base my conclusions primarily on a set of eight preliminary interviews that I conducted with Liberal Quakers in the greater Boston area of the United States. The interviews explore relationships between the personal, spiritual journeys of my subjects, their identities, and the peace and nonviolence elements in their religion. Through the lens of sociological theory, I argue that nonviolence is a cultural resource used in actual situations (lived experience) to produce existential meaning. Such *use* of cultural resources occurs in specific processes each of which produces certain *types* of existential meaning.

I understand existential meaning to be the intangible part of life, which is discussed by theorists in different ways. Robert Bellah calls it high-order meaning,<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Alexander refers to it with his term 're-fusion',<sup>2</sup> and Randall Collins possibly conjures it with his term 'entrainment'.<sup>3</sup> Existential meaning has several variations; it sometimes emerges as the tension between struggle and outcome in storytelling. It also emerges as subjectivity in the performance of social position, or as solidarity in ritual.

Although my subjects may make choices with other goals in mind, it is clear that they orient their actions partially towards existential meaning. This orientation, in conjunction with the lived experience of particular situations and the available cultural resources, has a systematic correspondence. This systematic correspondence has explanatory power. Nonviolence (as a cultural resource) is explained via its place in this systematic correspondence. Its function among Liberal Quakers and its potential influence on choice is explained via this systematic correspondence. In the conclusion a probabilistic hypothesis is proposed along with a call for further study.

#### SHORT THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

In this introduction of the theory, I will sketch useful analytical categories that emerge from within a system. These categories will become my 'analytical friends' as I discuss my subjects. Generally, I understand *existential meaning* to be the category to which the other categories are oriented in the system. Thus, we can say that the system articulates a pragmatic movement towards existential meaning. Many theorists discuss meaning extensively.<sup>4</sup> I take from these theorists only what will aid me in the discussion of my subjects.<sup>5</sup>

First, subjects use cultural resources, understood as 'loose' toolkits or 'loose' frames.<sup>6</sup> Cultural resources are linguistic because they are largely nested within language, and they are social in so far as language is a social phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, cultural resources are the raw material for constructing existential meaning.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, cultural resources are *merely* the raw material for this construction. Left to their own devices, cultural resources make what Robert Bellah would call

low- and middle-order meaning.<sup>9</sup> The elements of language that distinguish between and connect things constitute low- and middle-order meaning. High-order meaning, however, is another word for existential meaning. Subjects use cultural resources to make high-order, or existential, meaning in actual processes of interaction. I contend that these processes are three-fold, and they often overlap. Subjects tell stories, perform social positions, and participate in communal rituals. Each process respectively generates three different forms of existential meaning: life purpose, subjectivity, and solidarity.

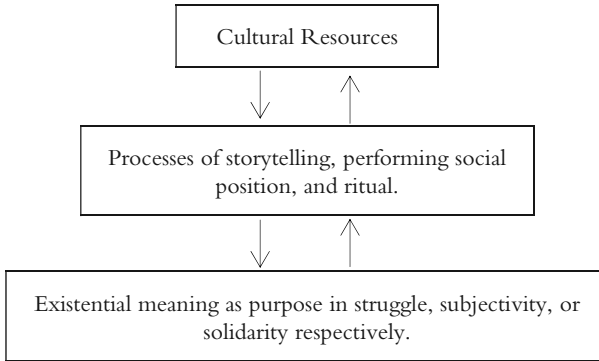
Before explaining the different processes in depth, it will benefit the reader to elucidate further what I mean by 'pragmatic'. The term first clarifies that cultural resources are *used* to constitute existential meaning. It secondly clarifies that cultural resources are engaged in actual situations. When I am hungry, I engage with cultural resources that involve food. At the level of low- or middle-order meaning, I use words like 'sandwich' or 'dinner'. At the level of existential meaning, I might use words like 'kosher' to indicate that my religious tradition restricts what I allow myself to eat. Likewise, someone from the United States only has at her disposal cultural resources that emerge within the Hebrew language and Judaism, for example, because this is likely for someone who lives in the United States. Only certain cultural resources are ever applicable to a particular situation, and only certain cultural resources are ever available. Thirdly, how one counts oneself in relationship to cultural resources influences how one can use them. Cultural resources therefore influence by limiting (in at least three ways) what one can say and do. As a Quaker I may not invest much religious significance in the word 'kosher'. But, since I am exposed to it, I might still use the word in a cultural way—perhaps as a colloquialism indicating social disapproval; I might say 'that is just not kosher'. And this employment occurs in processes—three of which I identify as storytelling, performance of social position, and ritual.<sup>10</sup> In the context of these processes, subjects constitute existential meaning in three corresponding forms—life purpose, subjectivity, and solidarity.<sup>11</sup>

Telling stories, or recounting narratives,<sup>12</sup> generates existential meaning within the tension derived from positing one's self as a *protagonist* in a struggle. This existential meaning takes the form of life purpose. Gloria, one of my interviewees, talks about struggling to be more spiritual, and she tells a story about how she came closer to this goal. She understands her life through efforts to live more spiritually. James, another interviewee, tells stories about going to jail for the sake of his commitment to non-participation in the Vietnam War. Subjects place themselves in the middle of the tension between a story's struggle and its posited outcome (being more spiritual, resisting participation in the Vietnam War). In this way, subjects make sense of the purpose of their lives. Necessarily, different stories, different struggles, and different situations generate different articulations of life purpose. In one moment, Gloria is becoming more spiritual, and yet later in the interview she is struggling to raise nonviolent children. For Gloria, life-purpose emerges within both contexts.

Secondly, the performance of social position generates existential meaning by constituting subjectivity. Subjects perform social positions such that cultural resources, ‘seem actually to become what they signify’.<sup>13</sup> Pacifists perform a certain kind of pacifism, and through this performance, they *become* pacifists. Christie, another interviewee, strings together stories and assertions to convince me, and her, that she is a pacifist. At one point she earnestly discusses why, if she were being mugged, she might intentionally kick the person mugging her and run away. According to Christie, this would minimize the amount of physical harm caused in the effort to protect herself. At another point she discusses the feeling of being spiritually called to become a war-tax resister.<sup>14</sup> The performance of social position is a matter of stringing together the cultural resources that underlie one’s social position into a coherent presentation of it. The performance of social position is oriented toward truly *being* one’s social position, and in truly being one’s social position one constitutes one’s subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> As with life-purpose, subjectivity is articulated differently within different contexts. Christie is also a Quaker, and a ‘life-partner’. These social positions, too, are performed through the engagement of select cultural resources such that Christie’s subjectivity becomes most accurately a mosaic of her collected social positions and their associated cultural resources—each of which she performs simultaneously and/or in turn depending on the situation.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, ritual generates existential meaning by radically identifying or unifying oneself with another.<sup>17</sup> I call this radical identification, solidarity.<sup>18</sup> Rather than performing one’s *own* social position, in ritual, we engage in the collective performance of community. For example, Quakers engage in a particularly ‘Quaker’ form of worship. Participating in Quaker worship marks one as a member of Quaker community in so far as one ephemerally engages in the same activity of ‘worship’ as everyone else. In a sense, everyone is performing the social role ‘Quaker’ by together sitting quietly and occasionally rising to speak.<sup>19</sup> Whereas identifying with one’s performance of social position operated in the above discussion to constitute subjectivity, in ritual, identifying with *the community* through collective performance of a type of community constitutes solidarity. Solidarity also involves social positions and their available cultural resources.<sup>20</sup> The difference is that, in the performance of social position,<sup>21</sup> one understands oneself as *distinct* from others; in ritual, one understands oneself as *indistinct* from others.

Lastly, there is no seamless use of any one set of cultural resources. For instance, cultural resources from within Quakerism and those from within the broader Western discourse on pacifism combine uniquely in each of my interviews. This is why cultural resources are called loose toolkits or frames—because subjects *use* them with increasing combinatory results in the context of telling their stories, performing social position, or engaging in rituals. To review, subjects use cultural resources in different processes (storytelling, performance of social position, and ritual) pragmatically<sup>22</sup> to construct existential meaning (as purpose in struggle, subjectivity, or solidarity). The accompanying diagram explains these processes:



Overlapping processes oriented toward existential meaning are actually messy, and although these analytical categories help us to understand, we need carefully to avoid their reification. I will simply use them as ‘analytical friends’ or guides as I discuss the interviews.

#### DISCUSSION OF INTERVIEWS

This section has two parts. The first part outlines more deeply the different forms that cultural resources take in the interviews. This section mainly demonstrates how cultural resources can be endlessly combined and elucidates for the reader exactly what I mean by cultural resources. The second part takes four of the eight interviews seriously, and explores specific ways in which processes of storytelling, performing social position, and ritual use cultural resources to constitute existential meaning (in the form of purpose, subjectivity, and solidarity respectively). We can understand the first part in terms of the top ‘box’ in the above diagram. We can understand the second part in terms of the lower two boxes in the above diagram.

##### PART ONE: CULTURAL RESOURCES

My first question is always, ‘what do you think the Quaker perspective on peace and nonviolence is?’ Despite the pointedness of this question, some interviewees do not immediately refer to Quakerism. The first words out of James’ mouth are exactly: ‘Gandhi’s three points: Loving means, self-sacrifice (‘til it hurts) and orientation to victims’. Gandhi and Buddhism are the frames for all of James’ stories. At several points, James also refers to a particular notion of grace and to an exhortation to focus one’s activity towards the well-being of the next seven generations (a saying he asserts can be sourced to the Iroquois Nation). From Buddhism, James takes the idea that the only criterion measuring whether one has lived a good life, ‘is whether you served others and were well-loved’. Only later, after some goading, does James steer a course towards Quakerism. He talks about the Quaker premise that there is a piece of God in everyone and that truth is

revealed continually (continuing revelation). Every single interviewee in some way mentions that there is *that of God in everyone*, and it is the only consistently repeated element of the cultural resources on which interviewees draw.

Another interviewee, Tim, talks about the non-use of violence as, 'just something I was brought up with', while Gloria takes the Quaker concepts of 'leadings' and of 'way opening' and uses them to understand two of the three main stories in her interview. For her, leadings are spiritual 'nudgings' that move us onto the right paths. Way opening is a related concept; it means trusting that we'll be able to find our way, as it were, no matter the many journeys on which our leadings take us. In the same way, Taoist philosophy informed Christie's understanding of Quaker worship in addition to the 'loudness' of Quaker historical figures, which informs her activism and her insistence that modern day Quakers need to have a 'louder' activist presence.

Jake frames our interview in terms of his scholarship—studying especially Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He also talks about being inspired by Quaker historical figures, Margaret Fell, James Naylor, John Woolman, and Thomas Kelly. He uses the Quaker language of 'conviction and convincement' to describe the fundamental transformation in his life after the death of a good friend. The 'blessed community', sourced partly in Quakerism and partly in Martin Luther King Jr., frames his 'small part' in the larger struggle towards the Peaceable Kingdom. My interviewees often take a 'small bit' approach in the face of larger injustices, which they acknowledge they cannot address on a large scale.

Melanie orients her stories in terms of her 'small bit', which is domestic violence awareness and prevention. She uses the Quaker language of 'being called', which means expecting persecution, if one's calling goes against the grain of society. From this she relies on Gandhi, Jesus, and her own particular interpretation of Quaker nonviolence to explain her insistence that nonviolence is a lifestyle (and not simply a technique).

Meredith turns outward the idea of an inwardly dwelling God. She asserts that, 'everything is God, so I need to treat [everything] like I would treat God'. She refers to herself as a 'small-picture' person, and she emphasizes that internal transformation is the key to bringing about a nonviolent world, which happens to be aligned with her profession as a therapist.

Lastly, Jason talks first about the Quaker peace testimony, which many of the other interviewees mentioned, but not all. He talks about his conscientious objector status during the Vietnam War, which influenced his thinking about whether to spank his daughter. He explicitly talks about Quakerism as an identity he uses to establish credibility with people he photographs and films for his socially engaged art work. Again, the significance for Jason is not the nonviolence itself. It is not Quakerism itself. Jason belongs also to Buddhist and Catholic communities. The significance of nonviolence, Quakerism, Buddhism, Catholicism, etc. is in their use as material for getting Jason life-purpose in the context of his social engaged art work, his family, his many communities, etc.

Therefore, Quaker nonviolence is not a monolithic cultural resource. Interviewees draw on different ideas about nonviolence. They also draw on a wide range of other ideas that have very little apparent relationship to nonviolence or to Quakerism. Interviewees are informed by their vocations and professions, by their particular interpretations of the Quaker faith, by their varied commitments to family life, community and/or activism. No assertions go without implicating the interviewees in a self-made network of justifications and legitimations. The correspondence between cultural resources, the particularity of lived experience, and the processes through which my subjects engage existential meaning, produces varied results. Each interviewee has a different set of stories, social positions, and communities, such that Quakerism (and nonviolence) becomes only one part of how each interviewee makes life meaningful. In Part Two, I now explore these varied, overlapping sets of cultural resources in relation to iterations of existential meaning with in-depth discussions of four of my interviewees: James, Tim, Gloria, and Christie.

#### PART TWO: EXISTENTIAL MEANING

One of the first social positions to which we have oriented our activity is that of interviewee and interviewer. I take out my voice recorder, ask if I can set it close to my interviewees, and we introduce ourselves in this process. As we talk, I give my interviewees a pen so that they can sign my consent form, which demonstrates the confidentiality of our session. The consent form and the voice recorder also symbolically formalize our interviewee–interviewer relationship. This is the first point of our contact and it informs the meaning of the rest of our interaction. The interview process begins already tinged with existential implications, but these implications largely relate to my own sense of purpose. Sporadically, interviewees ask if what they are saying will be worthwhile for me. I assure them that it will.

#### *James*

James dropped out of college so he could legitimately refuse to enlist in the Vietnam War. Officials would not allow him *not* to defer his enlistment unless he dropped out. Ostensibly, this resulted in a three-year jail sentence. The three years spent in jail were the three most spiritual years of his life, especially he says, were the two months in the hole. ‘The hole?’ I ask. It is the two-month long solitary confinement during which he passed his time writing about nonviolence, which would later become his senior thesis and a book. The book is an expression of James’ jail stories and their correspondence with principles of nonviolence. In the interview as in the book, the story of jail time grounds James’ use of cultural resources related to nonviolence. The story elucidates part of James’ life-purpose.

The relating of the story is also part of a performance of James’ social position ‘pacifist’. James’ storytelling is an integration of the different elements of his life into a coherent self-presentation that carries existential significance. Such existential meaning is apparent via his discussion of grace in the below account.

While in jail, James was ‘protected’ by a kind of grace when a ‘young white kid’ was getting set-up to be raped by a nasty looking inmate named Wine. James

says, 'I could not, *not*' protect the kid, like he could 'not, *not*' drop out of College to protest the war. James confronted Wine: 'You can't do it, Wine; don't do it'. Wine stared at James for a moment whilst the rest of the inmates in the cell went quiet. Then Wine lost interest and turned back toward the kid. John repeated himself, this time adding, 'I'm not going to call the guards, I'm not going to snitch, but I can't let you do it'. Wine aggressively protested, 'Have I ever disrespected you?' James said, 'No, but just wait a minute and let me tell you two things. If there were some bigger, meaner, nastier guy than you, who tried this, you know I'd do the same thing for you. And you know that what you wanna do is wrong, and I bet all the guys in here agree', and speaking to the whole cell now, James said, 'Right guys!?' Wine turned around and uttered words in protest, questioning the legitimacy of James' intervention. None of the other inmates responded. So Wine left the kid alone, having got no support from his peers. James reflects that the feeling of *having to do this* is like armor.

The story of this *successful* nonviolent confrontation is imperative to the performance of James' pacifism. James connects the feeling of *having to do this* in this story and in the story he tells about dropping out of college. Posing the stories in this way allows him to show that his pacifism is not completely of his own control—as if his pacifism were essential to his being. The *having to do this* theme extends James' stories beyond performance and into *realness*, into *becoming* his performance and constituting his subjectivity. Although sourced in Gandhi, the assertions later in the interview take on their own 'Jamesian' particularity.

James spent four months in jail again over civil disobedience. There he met four guys with knives. In this moment, he pauses to explain how he thinks he was again blessed with the same sort of grace: 'I was bi-located and was able to watch pretty serenely while they tried to stab me to death'. In one and the same stroke, the struggle apparent in James' stories offers him a way of organizing his experience into a plot with which he makes sense of his life purpose. His sense of life purpose is deeply connected to his subjectivity in the language about happiness, grace, and freedom. Here we see how cultural resources surrounding nonviolence (like happiness, grace, and freedom) only become existentially meaningful in actual processes of interaction like storytelling and the performance of social position.

Whether James is a Quaker would seem to hold secondary importance to his pacifist social position. After James asserts that the peace testimony is the core tenet of Quakerism, I asked him about other aspects of Quakerism that influence the peace testimony. He responds that continuing revelation is important: 'You keep your nose to the wind, and your ears to the ground and see', and most importantly, in Quakerism, 'you answer that which is god-like', in everyone. James adds that, 'there is an overarching sense that I get from Quakerism—of what Quakers did for the Jews in the 1600s and for Germans during World War I and II...Quakers won the Nobel Peace Prize'. I ask him whether he would have been the same person and involved himself in the same things had he not found Quakerism. He responds affirmatively, and adds that 'Quakerism is a manifestation of something a lot bigger'. James' pacifist social position is partly meaningful in terms of Quakerism, but it is not at all dependent upon Quakerism.



Yet his pacifism is indeed connected to a particular community of Quakers. James has belonged to the same Quaker meeting in the Boston area for a while, referring to it by telling me that good people worship there. He explains that his meeting approved gay marriage in the 1970s and that they are currently planning to worship *en masse* on the front lawn of a company that manufactures bombs for the United States Military. The prospect of engaging in collective ritual activity grounded in his Quaker community *and* in his pacifist commitments seems to produce visible excitement. From this, we can posit that James' pacifism remains in some way reinforced by his solidarity with a Quaker community that shares his commitment to nonviolence and to other liberal political views.

Now, James anchors a sharing circle at the Quaker meeting for ex-offenders, 'so they can come and just have a space to be compassionately listened to'. He understands this work in terms of a larger opposition to the prison system. If he could help just one ex-offender make a better life for himself, then James' commitment to nonviolent struggle against injustice would be worth it. After telling me that he abhors abstract nouns, he stops to recount another story. This time, he recites a parable: *A guy happens to find thousands of starfish that have recently washed up onto the seashore. Our guy begins to throw the starfish back into the sea one at a time. Another person walks along and says to the guy: 'What are you doing? You can't possibly make a difference; there are so many starfish'. The guy replies, 'It makes a difference to this starfish', as he tosses another back into the sea.*

The parable is among James' final words, and it perfectly encapsulates his 'small-scale' attitude. By the end of the interview, James has repeatedly hinted to me that he could have let his book propel him to a renowned status. In one and the same stroke, however, James explains that allowing this to happen would have been for greed rather than the pacifist movement. His activism has remained relatively small-scale (although we will encounter other subjects with even smaller-scale foci). James nonetheless understands his work to have existential significance in terms of a broader life-purpose, a broader pacifist subjectivity grounded in solidarity with Quaker community. Even though these are the only ex-cons he may affect, even though the worship outside of the bomb factory may not have widespread effects, and even though his Quaker community usually goes unnoticed (and is towered over by an adjacent Mormon church) James' cannot *not* do what he does or be who he is.

### *Tim*

Tim is not an activist. He has not spent any significant time in jail, and he has now worked thirty years in the same career. When I ask him about Quaker peace and nonviolence, Tim reflects that, 'the fundamental part of the Religious Society of Friends is that...we don't believe in the use of violence...it's just something I was brought up with'. He adds that there is, 'that of God in everyone...that just seems like a fundamental thing'. His assertion, however, is soon fraught with Tim's internal contentions. Tim has fewer radical tendencies than James, and the first task Tim takes up is to explain how he could be a Quaker, and thus purportedly non-violent, whilst avoiding some of its more stringent prescriptions. In his explanation

Tim embarks on a performance of social position employing an amalgam of cultural resources within Quakerism related to nonviolence. Yet we see how other cultural resources and situational exigencies easily overshadow nonviolence.

Tim says, '...some people think [Quaker nonviolence] is more than refraining from physical violence...that...you should avoid buying goods that are produced by slave trade', and goods that are produced by companies that sell to the Pentagon. He continues: '...it's really hard to live in this day in age without buying anything from anybody that has some relation to something you should avoid'. He mentions war-tax resisters, making it clear that he agrees with the things that *others* do for the sake of nonviolence however broadly or narrowly it may be defined. Yet he adds that with his son and other family commitments: 'I don't think it's something I really can do... If you apply [belief in nonviolence] really strictly it can...change your lifestyle tremendously... [My] wife [and I] do what we feel we can, but there are a lot of things we know we could do better.' Tim's subjectivity is apparently informed much more deeply by his family life, his career, and Quakerism than by nonviolence *per se*. This is demonstrated further in a story, showing how the situational exigency of joblessness informs Tim's 'middle path', as it were.

It was 1980, Ronald Regan was President of the United States and had 'started cutting budgets', which resulted in the elimination of Tim's public sector job. Tim needed to find work somewhere else, and he was eventually offered a job at a company in a nuclear power division. He faced a serious ethical dilemma: '...did I really feel comfortable doing that? I also didn't want to go too long without a job, but then the funding came back and I was able to go back to work.' He says, 'I don't remember if I turned down the job offer or if it became clear that I would be able to go back to my old job'. Nonviolence elements certainly influenced the emergence of this dilemma, prompting Tim to stop and think about the ethical implications of working in a nuclear power division. Yet Tim also doesn't indicate that he certainly *would not* have taken the job if funding hadn't returned. Tim presents a more complicated integration of cultural resources combined with situational exigency. This is an example of how the performance of social position produces subjectivity often in the integration of seemingly disparate social positions and ethical ascriptions.

Despite Tim's reluctant resistance to making his life radically consistent with Quaker nonviolence, he thinks of himself *as* a Quaker, and did allow Quaker values (both related and unrelated to nonviolence) to permeate his life choices when this was possible. Tim talks about his divorce and his subsequent second marriage: 'My first wife was not a Quaker, and I think that is part of what caused us to drift apart... [And] part of what was important in getting married a second time...was the connection that [my second wife] and I have to Quakerism; we both are members of a meeting.' Tim continues: 'Another thing was raising my son: he never called us Mom and Dad; he only called us by our first names. We also didn't allow any toy guns or anything like that in the house... At his friends' houses he played games that we never would have approved of.' Even though, in

one instance, Tim's concern with making an income came into conflict with his commitments to nonviolence, in other cases, his commitment to nonviolence *informed* how he chose to engage in family life. The nonviolent commitment is carried along with his Quaker commitments. Unlike James where nonviolence is primary, for Tim, Quakerism is primary. Tim integrates a Quaker social position with that of father and husband, and pacifism enters his consideration only in terms of these other social positions.

Tim was raised in a Quaker family, and he talks about maintaining a loose and inactive relationship to Quakerism through High school. Only until college, when 'something spoke' to him during Quaker worship did he decide: 'I belong here'. He says, 'I remember stopping off after to tell my parents how excited I was'. This is a typical example of what I have called 'solidarity' through ritual. The ritual of 'Quaker worship' generated, for James, a sense of something *other* than him. 'Being spoken to', was a moment of existential meaning. As with James' experience of grace, this experience happened *to* Tim, and it provided the ground upon which he could confidently declare that he belongs to Quaker community. Since this experience, Quaker community has always retained a prominent place in Tim's life. This is, again, another example in which solidarity and subjectivity can be closely linked.

Tim's life is born out in terms of a looser commitment to nonviolence, and in terms of a Quaker social position that doesn't take pacifism as a primary element. Rather paradoxically, Tim still acknowledges nonviolence to be a fundamental part of Quakerism. Thus Tim's stories reflect an overall struggle to understand *who he is* (his subjectivity) according to conflicting cultural resources. Although Tim tells stories in the same way as James, Tim's life purpose is much less explicit. For James, our previous subject, making the world a more just place through specific activism clearly elucidates his sense of life-purpose. Life-purpose almost supersedes James' sense of subjectivity and solidarity. The opposite is true for Tim. Tim's life-purpose is grounded in his commitment to his career, and later to his social positions as father and husband, and to the sense of solidarity he derives from Quaker worship. Tim's 'middle way' lends to a greater emphasis on types of existential meaning like subjectivity and solidarity, wherein life-purpose is more vestigial.

### *Gloria*

As we sit down in her living room, I am struck by Gloria's piercing gaze. I am not surprised to learn that she is a doctor, and that much of her sense of subjectivity is pinned to her career as a doctor. Later in the interview, she says to me, 'I love my job', and her job is the point at which she launches a detailed discussion of her spiritual journey. Her reflection, beginning in grad school during the 1970s, is couched in spiritual terms. She says: 'I saw a billboard called "save the city one-by-one", and I realized I'm not an organizer. I'm not a mover and shaker...but I'll do that one-on-one thing...I'll learn a skill, I'll learn a trade...I'll go to nursing school. I went off to [a university in New York City]...it was a two year program...and that's where the whole leading thing comes in... I started getting,

“why don’t you go to medical school?” Leadings are thought of in Quakerism as subtle inklings toward some kind of action. They are thought to bring someone into closer relationship with their spiritual path.

This is, at least, how Gloria explains the concept of ‘leadings’ to me. In this story she intimates at her sense of life-purpose—to serve others as a doctor doing that ‘one-on-one thing’. As with James’ ‘grace’ and as with Tim’s ‘being spoken to’, she employs Quaker terms like ‘leadings’ to cultivate a sense of existential meaning (something beyond her, which guides her). These are examples of cultural resources that, when engaged in processes of storytelling, help reveal life-purpose. She talks about struggling in a time when feminism ‘hadn’t really hit hard yet’, and as a young woman she knew she also wanted to have kids and start a family.

Gloria’s concerns do not begin in the realm of nonviolence. They begin with her desire for a purposeful career and with her desire to support a family. Struggling to discern how she would ‘do both’ is part of the story, and it merely enhances her sense that she was meant to become a doctor. She says that she fell on her knees when she was accepted to a prestigious medical school: ‘...this is a gift [and] I will be a steward of this gift’. As with Tim, we see how Gloria struggles to fit all the pieces of her profession and family together. Her sense of life purpose is strongly connected to her profession as a doctor and later to being a mother and wife. Thus her life-purpose is closely linked to her subjectivity.

After talking about getting married, beginning her career as a doctor, and having children, she spends a good deal of time describing a ‘shopping period’. She, along with her husband and kids, spent the better part of a decade searching for the right Christian congregation. At each church, there were experiences that didn’t match with what she wanted for her family. Finally, she stumbled upon a Quaker meeting. After talking in practical terms about the different situational factors that led them away from earlier churches, Gloria uses spiritual terms to describe her encounter with [her current meeting]. She says:

I happened to sit down next to the clerk [the leader] of the meeting...you know how way opens...and he sat down with me and talked with me for a while after worship...and then I went to coffee and there at the inquirers table was of course [a woman who had a son the same age as mine]...then I went to talk to the director of first day [Sunday] school. So the next Sunday we all came and the kids started at the first day school.

Gloria frames this initial encounter with another Quaker cultural resource, ‘way opening’. Way opening is similar to ‘leadings’ in so far as it suggests an element beyond reality guiding someone towards what they are meant to be doing. It is a way of providing and explaining one’s existential meaning in terms of life-purpose. Saying ‘of course’ affirms Gloria’s conviction that, finally, she had stumbled upon the spiritual home she was meant to have. Here we see a clear example of the way stories can constitute meaning in positing purpose through struggle. Her life purpose is thus bound up in a sense of solidarity in Quaker community. With the following story, we see that her *subjectivity* is also bound up

in a sense of solidarity in Quaker community. As suggested, the three *types* of existential meaning overlap in unique ways for each subject.

Gloria uses the example of an experience as a member of a committee called Ministry & Council,<sup>23</sup> which is charged with the care of worship. Since worship is the center of most Quaker meetings, including hers, being a member of Ministry & Council was a rather daunting position for her. She attributes much of her recent spiritual growth to the struggle she underwent while serving on this committee. The struggle largely involved a conflict between people on the committee and in the larger Quaker meeting concerning belief in God. A great deal of animosity developed between some who didn't want their belief in God or their lack of a belief in God to be silenced. She found herself 'in the middle' of this animosity. The responsibility of directing a reconciliation process fell on her and on one other person.

The process ostensibly prompted her own considerations of God and rekindled what she refers to as a life-long struggle to 'be spiritual'. The meeting's 'healing process' resulted in a written statement, which acknowledged a common ground of belief in a 'nameless divine'. Gloria sees this conclusion as a strong example of the deep listening and compassion that is possible through Quaker business process.<sup>24</sup> For me, it is an example of solidarity—the deep identification and sense of unity that is possible when a community comes together and engages in collective ritual. Not only does this experience inform Gloria's struggle to be more spiritual, it informs her sense of membership in this particular Quaker community and by extension her Quaker social position.

For Gloria, spirituality is the key ingredient. She is not interested in nonviolence *per se*. Instead she talks about her attachment to the idea that nonviolence starts in the family. She says: '...the whole idea that you begin with peace in yourself, within family, within neighbors, at work, in your community...that's where peace begins...which is very comforting for a mother who can't go out and "do peace". Bringing up children to try to be peaceful is important work'. She challenges the idea that peace merely means *no to war*. Gloria asserts that peace is a much deeper and much more nuanced thing when lived-out in daily life. She says that this way of thinking about peace resembles the way that Quakers do business. It de-emphasizes the self, makes space for listening to others, and emphasizes connection rather than preparing arguments and standing in positions.

Ostensibly, this understanding of peace squares nicely with the life she has lived. Nonviolence, for Gloria, is somewhat of an afterthought. At the most, nonviolence has been something she strives to integrate into a life driven by other priorities, rather than the other way around. Her life-purpose is closely associated with her subjectivity—they both require stories that emphasize being led to doing that 'one-on-one thing' and to finding a way to balance this 'leading' with supporting a robust family life. Her subjectivity, especially via stories about being led toward Quaker meeting, is further grounded both in family life and in a sense of solidarity with Quaker community. The story of discovering Quaker meeting suggests that Gloria was *meant* to find it. Finally, the solidarity she describes through the conflict in her meeting connects her efforts to 'become more

spiritual' to her sense of life-purpose and subjectivity. Gloria is another example of how the processes (of storytelling, performance of social position, and ritual) and their corresponding types of existential meaning (life-purpose, subjectivity, and solidarity) overlap uniquely for each subject.

### *Christie*

Christie went to a Quaker elementary and middle school, and there she was heavily influenced. She credits her choice to become a Quaker and a war-tax resister to her early education. Her present day identities stem from her experience of the silence during the required worship at Quaker school. She says, 'The silence is what really brought me back...I wanted a place...where I could close my eyes and go into myself. I was really interested in Taoist philosophy and had really internalized that. I don't think I really believed in God at that point. That was what brought me to Quaker meeting.'

Christie describes becoming 'burnt out' during college. She did not yet understand that her spirituality could feed her activism. She saw her activism as something she ought to do, because of her privilege in the world: '...motivating myself with *have to* didn't work very well'. A realization moment arrived when she began working and living in a community that emphasized faith as the source of activism. Not until Christie found a group of other people who believed in activism based in faith, was she able to recover her own activist trajectory. Christie needed to find a community within which she could make sense of her own identity as a spiritual pacifist by engaging in community with other spiritual pacifists. In this instance, processes of worshiping and praying together, as well as working on projects together, carry ritual-like qualities in so far as they helped Christie towards a sense of solidarity in a group. However, this college group influenced how she was able to see herself, and it led to a fuller self-concept as *pacifist*—a contribution to subjectivity. Again, we see the importance of solidarity and how closely linked it can be with a person's sense of *who they are* in the world (their subjectivity).

Christie realized she could 'do activism' and at the same time derive her stamina, 'in a way that felt sustaining and that would connect me with other people and with that "something bigger" that I had been refusing to name... I now call it God, but that was a long journey.' After discussing the beliefs that undergirded the moment of her decision to become a war-tax resister and which later undergirded her social position as a pacifist, she ends our discussion by talking about the moment of decision itself. Devoid of belief content, instead it 'felt like a mystical experience almost... I really know that I have a spiritual calling to do this and it's just undeniable.' She relates this decision to her first experience of prayer, which involved 'the feeling of something that happens through you'. The spiritual *and* the community pieces fit together in Christie's story to reveal her sense of subjectivity and life purpose. As with James, Tim, and Gloria, similar cultural resources like 'prayed through', 'led to', 'spoken to', or, 'grace', help subjects frame lived experience in terms of life-purpose and subjectivity.

Lastly, Christie talks about her recent decision to move in with her boyfriend. She merely intimates at the possibilities of starting a family to which this recent decision may lead. She is not currently burdened with the responsibility to take care of children, to worry about risking incarceration in refusing to pay her federal income tax. I did not ask her whether she would consider relinquishing war-tax resistance if children were in the picture. However, I don't believe that it would have mattered. Had she intended to stop paying her federal income tax once having kids, she would have presented a justification for doing so. There would remain a justification for the converse option. In this way, the entirety of our interview (and of the other interviews) can be viewed as a performance of social position—telling stories and making assertions that show me and my interviewees how all the different pieces in their lives fit together and make them *someone*.

#### CONCLUSION: HYPOTHESIS

By identifying three distinct processes that correspond to three distinct forms of existential meaning, we thereby avoid nailing our analysis to only one theoretical wall. Theories about narrative, micro-, and macro-ritual make different sorts of assertions concerning what I call existential meaning. Instead of cramming one theoretical frame to the data, I propose mixing the theoretical frames to fit the data. A primordial theoretical undertaking has emerged, which allows us more clearly to understand one aspect of lived experience.

We can take the contents of a story and observe that it lends to certain ideas about life-purpose. Stories are also communicative tools—ways of performing social position. With my interviewees, the specific connection between life purpose and subjectivity rests in moments of mystical experience—being 'spoken to' as with Tim or being 'led to' as with Gloria. For Gloria, for Tim, and also for Christie, these moments have a further connection. They describe robust moments of solidarity, which allow interviewees to connect their subjectivity and/or their sense of life-purpose to a tacit experience of solidarity in community. Solidarity often emerges in the context of ritual, but not always, and the ritual itself never seems to be highlighted. Subjects highlight the mystical experience. Certain words often surround talk about such mystical experiences: leadings, way opening, freedom, sacrifice, grace, the divine, God, and so on.

In my analysis, I have to attend to ritual indirectly via stories and via the assertions that surround stories. This might affect their seemingly 'backgrounded' place in the interviews. The performance of social position obviously takes a foregrounded place, because the entire interview from start to finish could be called an engagement in mutual social position performance. Yet, the interviewees are asked to perform other social positions, and even to 'prove' them to me. Thus the performance element is over-exaggerated. Perhaps in everyday life we don't so explicitly attempt to self-present. Yet, I take for granted that such self-presentation does regularly occur, and thus is transferable into an interview setting.

Through this analysis, I hypothesize that nonviolent cultural resources have a relationship to the ways in which Liberal Quakers constitute existential meaning.

This relationship is complicated by various other cultural resources, by material concerns, by the exigencies of situations, by subjects' particular communities, even perhaps by social positions that cannot readily be changed (like gender, age, socio-economic status). Still, interviewees found a way to make the diverse elements of their lived-experience meaningful partially in terms of nonviolence. Although the details might have at times contradicted each other completely, they were oriented towards integration—one that would allow subjects crucially to produce and to maintain a sense of high-order meaning. What Robert Bellah called 'high-order', I call existential.<sup>25</sup>

Existential meaning emerges through a systematic correspondence between situational exigency, cultural resources, and processes of using cultural resources (storytelling, social position performance, and ritual). Thus the elements of this systematic correspondence influence how one will form their life path, or at least how one will look back on their life path to make it existentially meaningful. When nonviolence is explained as a cultural resource in terms of this system, it can be a *source* of existential meaning whilst uniquely combining with other cultural resources with myriad results. Nonviolence can be Buddhist, Christian, or Gandhian; it can be a mere principle that hangs loosely somewhere in the lofty rafters of contemporary Quaker community.

Quaker subjects are not all pacifists even though they supposedly belong to a 'traditional peace Church' called Quakerism. Yet nonviolence still influences the subjects who do not explicitly call themselves pacifists. As with Tim and Gloria, what may have at first seemed a contradiction in terms is resolved via integration with other cultural resources. Tim and Gloria make nonviolence *one element* of many in the context of actual lived experience through processes in which cultural resources are used to constitute existential meaning.

For James and Christie, nonviolence plays a more prominent role in their life-purpose, subjectivity, and solidarity. So how do we explain the divergence? How can one Quaker possess a lackluster commitment to pacifism and another identify so staunchly that he drops out of college and refuses to enlist in the Vietnam War, thus to be thrown in jail? Such an explanation I do not offer in full. I demonstrate that one factor influencing this variation is the situational exigency of lived experience. Another factor is the limited availability of cultural resources. Another factor is the specific way subjects creatively combine cultural resources through social position performance, storytelling, and ritual to make life meaningful. This creative capacity itself is unpredictable.

Thus the predictive power of the theory so far remains weak, but the descriptive power lends to a narrow hypothesis. Nonviolence needs to be an existentially meaningful cultural resource to play a prominent role in people's lives. It is more likely to play a prominent role when it is used in the performance of social position (or identity). It is more likely to play a prominent role when it is engaged in stories (myths, fairytales, and parables) that reinforce life-purpose through (nonviolent) struggle. Thirdly, nonviolence is more likely to play a prominent role within communities that encourage the ritual engagement of it.



Such a theory can be extended beyond nonviolence. Anything, technically, can be a cultural resource when it is active in the system I have established. One could thus enter into the above process with Quakerism—that Quakerism *as a cultural resource* involves a collection of associated cultural resources integrated into processes through which people derive existential meaning. The theory can be extended to other religions, and from there religion itself could be established as a collection of certain cultural resources and their accompanying processes. Many have contested the possibility that there could be a definition of religion, and perhaps its definition does not matter so much as its use in the process of making life meaningful. This, certainly, is true for Liberal Quakers when it comes to nonviolence. To test the limits of the theory, further study is called for.

#### NOTES

1. Bellah, R.N., 'The Ritual Roots of Society and Culture', in M. Dillon (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 31–44.
2. Alexander, J.C., 'Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy', *Sociological Theory* 22/4 (2004), pp. 527–73.
3. Collins, R., *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
4. Jeffrey Alexander discusses the importance of macro-level ritual in constituting existential meaning (what I am simply referring to as ritual) along with Giesen. They also introduce the concept of the 'performance' of ritual, which when married with Erving Goffman, Randall Collins, Berger, and Luckman, allows me to posit the performance of social position as distinct from macro-ritual and lending to a different sort of existential meaning, which I call subjectivity. Michele Lamont provides the basis for my understanding of cultural resources—I combine two of her own syntheses, culture as toolkits or repertoires and culture as frames. I argue that because of the systematic and linguistic nature of cultural resources—an idea borrowed from Saussure—they need to be thought about at least in terms both of toolkits and frames because they 'frame' by virtue of their limiting capacity as toolkits. Robert Bellah, Lévi-Strauss, and Rappaport in different ways help me to understand the structure of cultural resources and their use in macro-level rituals to constitute existential meaning specifically as solidarity. See: Alexander, 'Cultural Pragmatics'; Alexander, J.C., *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Alexander, J.C., Giesen, B., and Mast, J.L., *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Alexander, J.C., Jacobs, R., and Smith, P., *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Giesen, B., 'Performing the Sacred: A Durkheimian Perspective on the Performative Turn in the Social Sciences', in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 325–67; Goffman, E., 'On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction', in *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, 1st Pantheon Books ed., New York: Pantheon Books, 1982; Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*; Berger, P.L., and Luckmann, T., *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1967; Lamont, M., Harding, D.J., and Small, M.L., 'Reconsidering Culture and Poverty', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629 (2012), pp. 6–27; F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics (Text Only): Reprint Edition by F. De Saussure*, trans. R. Harris, Chicago: Open Court, 1998; Bellah, 'The Ritual Roots of Society and Culture'; Lévi-Strauss, C., 'The Sorcerer and his Magic', in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. Grundgest Schoepf, New York: Basic Books, 2003, pp. 167–85; Rappaport, R.A., *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

5. I systematize what is ultimately messy, however, and thus my theoretical discussion remains contingent.

6. Michele Lamont distinguishes between the two and I am putting them together. See: Lamont, Harding, and Small, 'Reconsidering Culture and Poverty'.

7. See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, *passim*.

8. See again Bellah 'The Ritual Roots of Society and Culture', Giesen, 'Performing the Sacred' and also Durkheim, E., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, abridged ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

9. Bellah, 'The Ritual Roots of Society and Culture', p. 39.

10. These categories are not seamless or completely distinct in empirical reality. Storytelling, performance of social position, and ritual overlap. Storytelling could be said to have ritual-like qualities. Likewise, the performance of social position could be said to have ritual-like qualities. Ritual often involves storytelling. Likewise, the performance of social position often involves telling stories. Ultimately, we cannot envision these categories in terms of reified distinctions, but merely as analytical friends.

11. Likewise, these three forms of existential meaning overlap as extensively as their corresponding processes overlap. Solidarity involves the emergence of a sense of collective subjectivity. Life-purpose involves the positing of oneself as a protagonist in a struggle, which cannot occur without influencing one's subjectivity. Life-purpose sometimes emerges in the context of solidarity—one might understand one's life narrative, for example, in terms of serving one's spiritual community as a thought-leader.

12. See Ammerman, N.T., 'Religious Identities and Religious Institutions', in Michele (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, pp. 207-24; 'Studying Everyday Religion: Challenges for the Future', in N.T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 219-38; Bender, C.J., 'Touching the Transcendent: Rethinking Religious Experience in the Sociological Study of Religion', in Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion*, pp. 201-18; Collins, P., 'Congregations, Narratives and Identity: A Quaker Case Study', in M. Guest, K. Tusting, and L. Woodhead (eds.), *Congregational Studies in the UK*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004, pp. 99-112.; McGuire, M., 'Embodied Practices: Negotiation and Resistance', in Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion*, pp. 187-200; Smilde, D., *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; and Yamane, D., 'Narrative and Religious Experience', *Sociology of Religion* 61/2 (2000), pp. 171-89. These theorists in different ways introduce the fact that any analysis of meaning and identity (which I work into my discussion of subjectivity) involves narratives, or storytelling, in which lived experience is ordered chronologically and in terms of struggles. The speaker also often places herself at the center as the protagonist. From this I posit the idea that stories generate a particular sort of existential meaning, which I call life-purpose. We in part require struggles accompanied by overcoming the same struggles to derive existential meaning, which appear as life-purpose. Importantly, the life-purpose neither comes from the struggle nor the overcoming of the struggle alone. The tension between the two produces life-purpose; for, struggle that is too drawn out is defeating and satisfactory outcomes that are too drawn out are boring.

13. Alexander, 'Cultural Pragmatics', p. 56.

14. Because they oppose the fact that some percentage of their taxes are being spent on war, war-tax resisters either intentionally live below a certain income to avoid being taxed or refuse to pay federal income taxes. Refusing to pay federal income taxes can result in negative sanctioning.

15. In this way reality itself can be socially constructed. See Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

16. I have so far avoided using a word like 'identity' because this term confuses the *experience* of social position with the presentation of it. 'Pacifist' is a social position in so far as James, one of my interviewees, simultaneously 'performs' it and cathectically attaches to it. Also, the

performance of the social position ‘pacifist’ limits the sort of cultural resources James can use in interactions; it entails certain ways of acting. Others expect James to behave in certain ways given this social position he performs. It also gives James an existential sense of *who he is*—in performing ‘pacifist’ in the actual process itself, he makes sense of his subjectivity (an aspect of existential meaning). Concepts like existential meaning, and by extension subjectivity, emerge in processes, whereas concepts like identity and social position over-indulge the static qualities of being. Identity is but one aspect of this interplay between the performance of social position and subjectivity, but it does not encapsulate the full scope. For our sake, it is probably best just to assert that identity is more or less synonymous with ‘social position’ in so far as both may be infused with cathetic attachment, but not necessarily existential meaning which happens dynamically—sometimes combining multiple social positions and identities in process.

17. See Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, p. 71.

18. Alexander explains, however, that such radical identification is not guaranteed. See ‘Cultural Pragmatics’.

19. Randall Collins takes macro ritual theories and applies them to the interpersonal or micro-level of analysis with a very high degree of detail. I am doing the reverse with a much lower degree of detail. See Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

20. Alexander details the pragmatics of ritual towards achieving solidarity, a form of existential meaning that Alexander calls ‘re-fusion’. See ‘Cultural Pragmatics’.

21. ... which might also be called interaction rituals following Goffman (‘On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction’) and Collins (*Interaction Ritual Chains*).

22. The pragmatic emphasis simultaneously provides for the structuring and innovative effects of human interaction. We are limited by the cultural resources upon which we draw to tell stories and to perform social position at the same time as the cultural resources provide material for innovation. One performs ‘pacifist’ by going to jail for refusing to enlist in war. One challenges the status quo by adopting a subversive social position, by performing it, and by becoming it. The same thing can occur with stories, in which hegemonic narratives become the source for subversive ones (see Ewick, P., and Silbey, S.S., ‘Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative’, *Law & Society Review* 29/2 [1995], pp. 197–226). The same thing can occur with macro-level rituals, say with marriage ceremonies recognizing the union between a woman and another woman, or even with protest rallies.

23. This committee can go by different names, and can be responsible solely for ‘the care’ of worship or for the care of the broader spiritual life of the Quaker meeting. The committee can also go by ‘Worship & Ministry’ or the ‘Nurturing Committee’.

24. Liberal Quakers conduct their business in the context of worship.

25. Bellah, ‘The Ritual Roots of Society and Culture’.

#### AUTHOR DETAILS

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