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Constructing a Spiritual Research Method in Management and Organisation Research: the case of the Quakers

This paper engages with the issue of how to best research religious/spiritual organisations. Whereas the sociology and anthropology of religion study religious phenomena in different cultural settings (but do not necessarily address organisational questions) and organisational studies try to unravel organisational phenomena (but are still a bit wary to include religious and spiritual elements in for instance examining organisational culture or processes of management and decision-making), the question how to study religious/spiritual organisations in such a way that it does justice to both the religious/spiritual dimensions as well as to the organisational ones is still unresolved. We will argue that Organisational Ethnography offers the kind of comprehensive methodology needed to investigate organisational processes of and in religious/spiritual organisations.

The paper uses the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) as an organisational case where Organisational Ethnography may help illuminate the rich and context-specific processes that give meaning, identity, and purpose to actors. Specifically, we examine the peculiarly Quaker process of decision-making as the core focus to do so.

The Quaker Business Method (QBM) is a fascinating example of how theology and organisational process are intertwined and interdependent. Based upon the theology of early Quakers, and the concept of the Light within, the process of making decisions is a largely silent process that seeks to reach unity in decisions through corporate discernment – seeking the will of the spirit or God.

In sharp contrast to traditional, secular and often noisy decision-making processes, QBM has no voting or leadership, and instead a Clerk invites contributions to proceedings – out of the silence - from those present – “the matter is now before you, Friends” - in order to ‘sense’ the emergent unity of the meeting. In turn, the Clerk writes and seeks unity for minutes in real-time in order progress business matters. QBM is understood, however, to be much more than a process, and constitutes an important and culturally-specific symbol of what it means to be a Quaker. Silence is, in this context, generative in that it is an active, collective and social process that fosters a sense of common identity and purpose. It also requires those present to have a shared understanding of the process, and shared commitment to it.

QBM has recently interested a number of scholars who have examined its relationship with knowing/unknowing, the role of silence as a communication device, and its transferability to contemporary organisations. Despite these important contributions that further our understanding of the method as a process, we argue that the practice needs to be understood within the wider cultural context as both an organisational and religious/spiritual practice.

The main contribution of our paper, then, is to offer a research approach that scholars interested in organisational processes of and in religious and spiritual organisations can use that allows a more holistic understanding of the religious/organisational axis.