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British Quakers and a new Kind of End-time Prophecy

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This research note challenges the accuracy of Dandelion’s claim that British Quakerism will survive until there would be no Quakers left in Britain. It concludes that the The article also raises questions about the date at which a critical minimum might be so far from the truth although this depends on the date from which decline is charted.

Dandelion’s two recent publications in Quakers, Britain Yearly Meeting, membership, secularisation, decline, extinction. 2004) both claim that Quakerism in Britain will survive until 2108. This figure dead by 2031 with Anglicanism not far behind (2003: 61). Dandelion, whilst is contrasted with Steve Bruce’s argument that Methodism in Britain will be liberal than they may at first appear. Their strict adherence to a common form, the way in which the group is religious (Dandelion 1996), and to a shared understanding of theology as provisional, offers sectarian-like boundaries against the decline associated with most markedly with permissive groups (Dandelion 2004).

Dandelion claims he gets his date of 2108 by comparing membership for Friends in Britain in 1900 (17,346) with that in 1998 (16,978), a small percentage change which would, he claims, end at zero in 2108. No details of his calculations are given and the mathematics involved are not clear.

This research note challenges this prediction in terms of its naïve approach to membership statistics and offers a more sophisticated and probable alternative.

Figure 1 (overleaf) gives the combined adult and child membership statistics for Friends in Britain from 1861 to 2001. Whilst Dandelion’s figures for 1900 and 1998 are accurate, taking only these two points for numerical checking masks the more complex picture of membership data through the twentieth century. Putnam’s work reveals a common pattern for membership of voluntary organisations in the twentieth century, of a rise in the middle of the century and decline thereafter (Putnam 2000). In line with this pattern, Quaker membership in Britain rose to a high point of 23,107 in 1958, before declining. Factors other than secularisation which affect this numerical decline are that: a) in 1959 automatic membership of new children was abolished, b) in 1963 figures for Australia and Canada were no longer included in the British totals. However, even allowing for the “hiccup” these changes have produced, the last forty years have been years of decline. From 1962, decline of combined adult and child membership has been largely constant but for a period of stability in the 1980s.

In other words, rather than the gentle decline observable by comparing the figures for 1900 and 1998, we can see a more marked decline in the last forty years. Indeed, Figure 2, offers a polynomial (cubic) regression, a line of best fit, for the period 1861 to 2001 (where $R^2 = 0.9469$), which indicates that Quakerism would have no members in Britain by about 2037. Chadkirk bases his research solely on adult membership and argues that a distinctive and uniform trend began in 1990 (Chadkirk 2004). This trend offers an almost straight line regression leading to the loss of all members in 2032, 28 years hence. In our paper we take 1962 as the start point for a second predictive graph (Figure 3). First, this is the point at which the decline of combined adult and child membership begins to become normative. Second, it is the date marking the period that other sociologists of religion have used as the beginning of the more accelerated effects of secularisation amongst British churches.

Interestingly, plotting polynomial regression from 1962 suggests a longer lifespan for membership than our prediction using figures dating back to 1861. In Figure 3, 2122 is the date suggested for the end of Quaker members in Britain. In this sense, Dandelion’s initial figure of 2108 is not far out, but we suggest this is through luck rather than statistical acumen. Figures 2 and 3 and Chadkirk’s article (Chadkirk 2004) reveal the importance of attempting to locate clear trends to enable the use of appropriate start dates for mathematical speculation. By starting in 1990 and arguing that a distinctive and uniform trend began then, Chadkirk misses out the stable period of the 1960s thus bringing forward the date of membership extinction. We wonder whether this is too short a period on which to base such a prediction, yet acknowledge that given the small numbers in Quaker membership, terminal decline need not cover a long period.

These predictions are concerned wholly with membership statistics and do not in themselves signal the end of Quakerism in Britain, a point Dandelion also fails to mention in his earlier work (Dandelion 2004). However the number of
Figure 1: The Religious Society of Friends Membership Data 1861 to 2001.

Figure 2: Quaker Membership 1861 - 2001: Projection to Zero Membership at 2037.
Attenders in British Meetings is fewer than that of Members and has also started to fall (Tabular Statements in Yearly Meeting Minutes).

Equally, the end of Quakerism in Britain may come ahead of the loss of all Members. Whilst there are about one hundred paid staff working for the Yearly Meeting as part of a £6M annual budget, British Quakerism relies heavily on voluntary labour. Local Meetings require Clerks, Treasurers, Elders, Overseers, and the extensive committee structure of the priesthood of all believers, as practised in Britain, is all run by volunteers. Interestingly, it is already difficult to find Members or Attenders to fill the posts and in 2005 Yearly Meeting may consider proposals to radically restructure the organisation.

In 1859, the Prize Essay Competition won by John Stephenson Rowntree asked its competitors to look at the causes of decline in ‘the society’ as membership fell below 14,000 members. It was to fall to 13,755 in 1864 (Figure 1). Endogamy was abolished and the strictures on plain dress and plain speech relaxed (Kennedy 2001: 40-43). The loss of able members through disownment on grounds of marrying-out was halted and decline was reversed. As British Friends head again towards such membership figures, it will be interesting to see what reforms are proposed. Unlike the 1850s, the decline is voluntary rather than imposed (Isichei, 1970), and the structural solutions open to Quakers today are more limited.

If there is a level of membership critical to the continuation of the Yearly Meeting of, say, 5,000 members, our Figure 3 would give an end date of about 2088, Figure 2 a date of 2028. Chadkirk’s figures would suggest an end-date of 2025 (2004: 115-16). As Meetings closed there would be a further deficit of time and energy in winding up local affairs but as Chadkirk has suggested (Personal Correspondence), the present pattern of falling donation income could become boosted by huge amounts of income generated by the disposal of fixed assets. It is then likely that more people may be employed to help manage the affairs of a dwindling but ever-wealthier group of Quakers. A fate shared by, for example, the Panacea Society in Bedford whose two members oversee an estimated balance sheet of £30M. Whatever the scenario, it seems certain that from predicting the end of the world in the 1650s present-day Quakers will find themselves increasingly preoccupied with the end of their own world.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR DETAILS

Charles Stroud is conducting PhD research at the University of Birmingham on the ministry of Naomi Stillhere and the parallels between her thought and that of John Stephenson Rowntree. ‘Ben’ Pink Dandelion is author of several articles and books on the sociology of Quakerism, and works as Programmes Leader at the Centre for Postgraduate Quaker Studies, Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in association with the University of Birmingham.

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