

BRITISH QUAKERS AND A NEW KIND OF END-TIME PROPHECY

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ABSTRACT

This research note challenges the accuracy of Dandelion's claim that British Quakerism will survive until 2108 and presents two mathematical calculations of the point when there would be no Quakers left in Britain. It concludes that the 2108 figure may not be so far from the truth although this depends on the date from which decline is charted. The article also raises questions about the date at which a critical minimum might be reached.

KEYWORDS

Quakers, Britain Yearly Meeting, membership, secularisation, decline, extinction.

Dandelion's two recent publications in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2002, 2004) both claim that Quakerism in Britain will survive until 2108. This figure is contrasted with Steve Bruce's argument that Methodism in Britain will be dead by 2031 with Anglicanism not far behind (2003: 61). Dandelion, whilst agreeing with Bruce's summary of secularisation, argues that British Quakers will survive longer than these other groups because they are in some ways less 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 "hiccups" 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

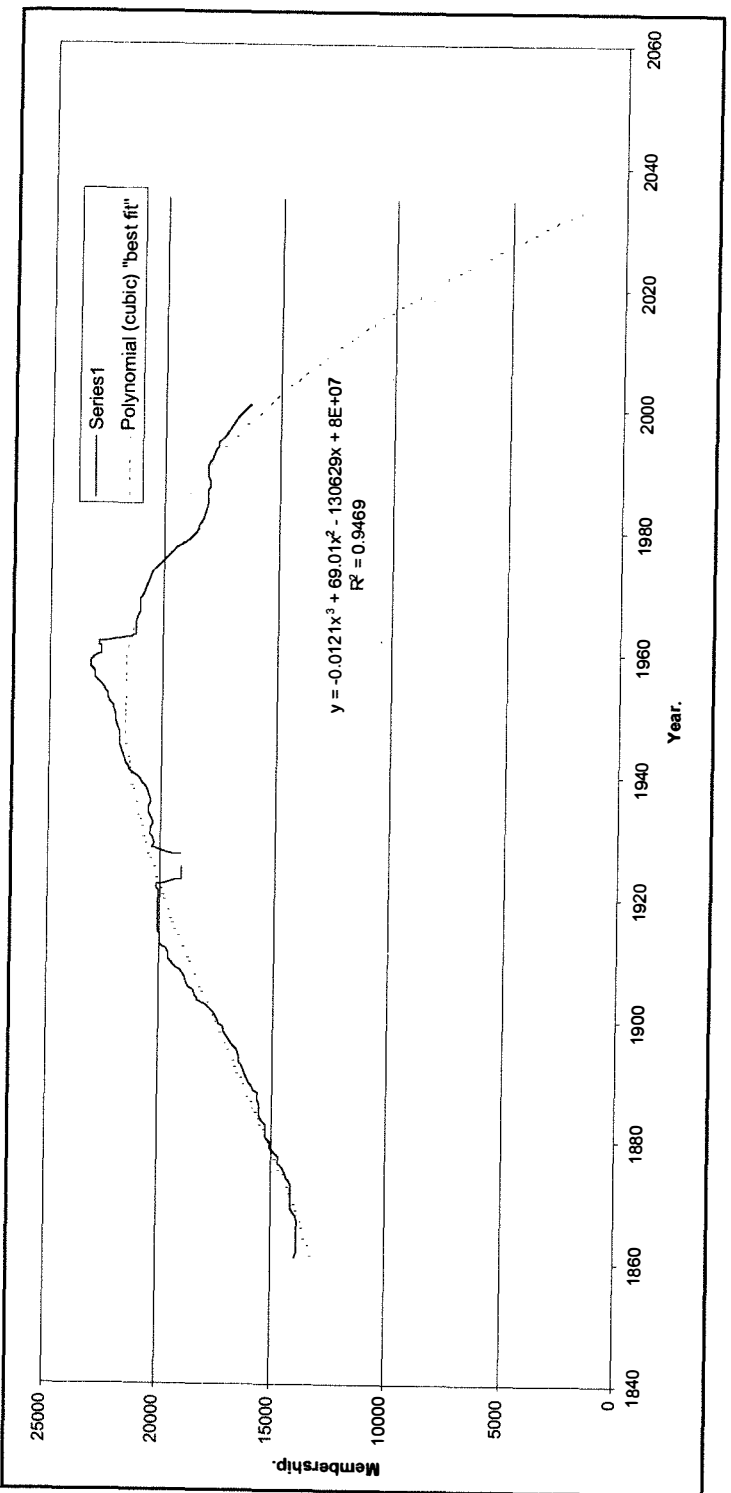


Figure 2: Quaker Membership 1861 - 2001: Projection to Zero Membership at 2037.

Year	Membership	Year	Membership	Year	Membership	Year	Membership	Year	Membership	Year	Membership	Year	Membership
1860	13,844	1880	14,981	1900	17,346	1920	19,994	1940	21,005	1960	22,724	1980	18,549
1861	13,844	1881	15,113	1901	17,476	1921	20,047	1941	21,377	1961	22,704	1981	18,391
1862	13,809	1882	15,113	1902	17,617	1922	20,069	1942	21,502	1962	22,752	1982	18,303
1863	13,761	1883	15,219	1903	18,221	1923	19,076	1943	21,604	1963	21,194	1983	18,131
1864	13,755	1884	15,381	1904	18,332	1924	19,039	1944	21,736	1964	21,154	1984	18,045
1865	13,756	1885	15,380	1905	18,466	1925	19,081	1945	21,812	1965	21,125	1985	18,076
1866	13,786	1886	15,453	1906	18,677	1926	19,26	1946	21,819	1966	21,066	1986	18,071
1867	13,815	1887	15,531	1907	18,860	1927	19,044	1947	21,847	1967	21,040	1987	18,087
1868	13,894	1888	15,574	1908	19,019	1928	20,256	1948	21,888	1968	20,966	1988	18,010
1869	13,995	1889	15,836	1909	19,348	1929	20,252	1949	21,969	1969	20,910	1989	18,070
1870	14,013	1890	15,961	1910	19,522	1930	20,357	1950	21,988	1970	20,807	1990	18,084
1871	14,021	1891	16,102	1911	19,612	1931	20,351	1951	22,056	1971	20,680	1991	18,072
1872	14,050	1892	16,244	1912	19,765	1932	20,328	1952	22,244	1972	20,561	1992	17,934
1873	14,085	1893	16,369	1913	19,942	1933	20,383	1953	22,385	1973	20,440	1993	17,802
1874	14,199	1894	16,412	1914	19,962	1934	20,430	1954	22,497	1974	20,297	1994	17,579
1875	14,253	1895	16,476	1915	20,007	1935	20,453	1955	22,701	1975	20,063	1995	17,518
1876	14,441	1896	16,674	1916	20,059	1936	20,404	1956	22,871	1976	19,754	1996	17,327
1877	14,604	1897	16,854	1917	20,052	1937	20,444	1957	22,979	1977	19,559	1997	17,189
1878	14,710	1898	17,031	1918	20,028	1938	20,563	1958	23,107	1978	19,161	1998	16,978
1879	14,984	1899	17,153	1919	20,014	1939	20,824	1959	23,094	1979	18,845	1999	16,729

Source: Yearly Meeting Minutes - Tabular Statements.
 1860: No data.
 1926: No data - No returns from Australia and South Africa.
 1947: Successive books give 21,377 and 21,374, 21,374 used.
 1953: Successive books give 22,358 and 22,385, 22,385 used.
 1963: Successive books give 22,717 and 21,194, 21,194 used.

Figure 1: The Religious Society of Friends Membership Data 1861 to 2001.

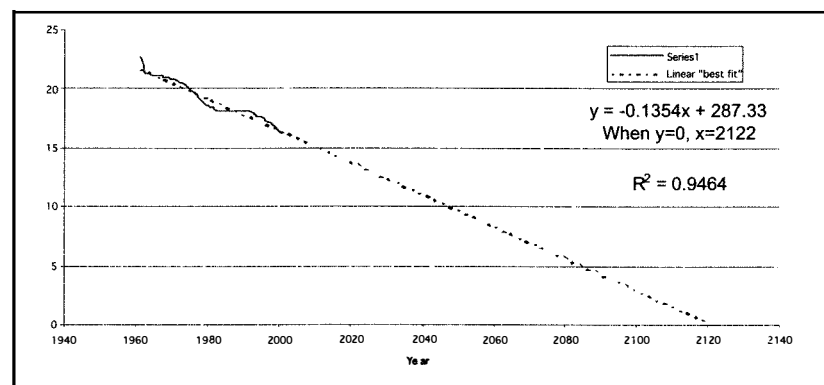


Figure 3: Quaker Membership 1962 - 2001: Projection to Zero Membership.

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.

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