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Pagan Quakers — A Sign of the Times?

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Like Israel in the Old Testament, the Church has had constantly to guard against its own paganization. The threat of a pagan invasion has always been real and present, and the paganisms can take the form of any number of ideologies, idolatries, and belief systems.

A warning about the danger of paganization in our own times comes in the form of a news story from [Religion News Service](#) and [Christianity Today](#). It seems that a significant branch of the Quaker movement is intentionally mixing Quaker thought with explicit nature-based paganism.

As reporter Matthew Streib explains:

“It seems that now, in most liberal meetings at least, you can always find a few members that identify as pagan,” says Stasa Morgan-Appel of Ann Arbor, Mich., who has facilitated a Quaker pagan interest group since 2002.

Quakers — officially the Religious Society of Friends — are divided into four main branches, three of which are explicitly Christian. Pagans have been generally joining the liberal fourth branch, the Friends General Conference, which counts 30,000 members in North America, including Morgan-Appel.

The Quakers (or the Society of Friends) have been historically averse to creeds and confessions. George Fox, the group’s founder, believed that all doctrines were mere “notions” and that the most important source of authority for the believer was an “inner light” of revelation.

Clearly, this leaves the door wide open for subjective reinterpretations of theology and doctrine and eliminates any possibility of a normative (orthodox) definition of the faith. By the end of the twentieth century, Quakerism included everything from non-theists and atheists to those whose beliefs were at least similar to those of evangelical Christians.

The paganization of the liberal Quakers is the inevitable result of this absence of doctrinal and theological standards.

As Streib reports:

Across the board, the number of Quakers is dwindling, to roughly 100,000 in the U.S. But if Quakerism continues to catch on among the estimated half million pagans in the U.S., those who embrace both traditions predict that could reverse the Quakers’ downward trend. Still, some Quakers worry about losing their own traditions through the process of accepting new ones.

In the last decade, this dual faith has sprung up around the country, including Quaker-pagan gatherings, seminars, an extensive presence on the Internet, and even explicitly Quaker-pagan congregations. There may be only several hundred Quaker pagans, but among American Quakers, their presence can be distinctly felt.

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The key insight in Streib's article comes in the words of Marshall Massey of Nebraska, a more conservative Quaker who is concerned about the loss of the group's historic identity:

"We are an easily acculturated movement," he says, explaining that Quakers' egalitarian, non-creedal tradition makes it very susceptible to outside influences. "But Quakerism has become, on the liberal end, an indefinable refuge for people who regard themselves as mystics or experientially religious and have problems with sources of authority."

This single paragraph is a parable of American religion. The Quakers' egalitarian structure and rejection of creeds leaves it susceptible to *any* theological or ideological influence. Thus it is just natural that the group would attract and harbor those who "have problems with sources of authority."

Yet, not even Marshall Massey is ready to call for an end to the group's paganization, arguing that such an effort would be "un-Quakerly."

The emergence of pagan Quakers is a reminder that paganism is always close at hand. In this weird postmodern age, the old paganisms are back even as newer forms emerge. The pagan Quakers also serve as an example of what happens when the authority of the Bible is replaced with the authority of the "inner light," and of what happens when no creed or confession defines the boundaries of belief.

What is to prevent your church from being next in line to be paganized?

