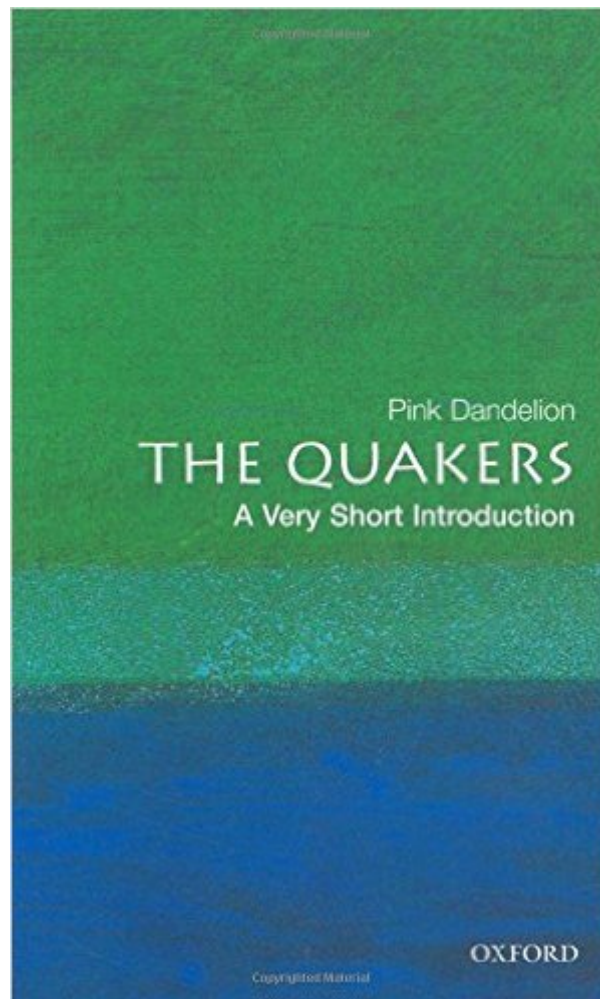


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The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



Synopsis

Here is the perfect introductory guide to the history and ideas of the Quakers, one of the world's most fascinating and enigmatic religious groups. Emerging in England in the 1650s as a radical sect challenging the status quo, the Quakers are now best known for their anti-slavery activities, their principled stance against war, and their pioneering work in penal reform. Famous Quakers include Thomas Paine, Walt Whitman, Lucretia Mott, Herbert Hoover, James Dean, Judi Dench, and A.S. Byatt. And while the group still maintains a distinctive worship method to achieve a direct encounter with God, which has been at the heart of the movement since its beginning, Quakers today are highly diverse: some practice a protestant evangelicalism, others are no longer Christian. In this generously illustrated book, Pink Dandelion, the leading expert on Quaker Studies, draws on the latest scholarship to chart the history of the sect and its present-day diversity around the world, exploring its unique approach to worship, belief, theology and language, and ecumenism. It concludes by placing the Quakers in the wider religious picture and predicting its future.

About the Series: Oxford's Very Short Introductions offers concise and original introductions to a wide range of subjects--from Islam to Sociology, Politics to Classics, and Literary Theory to History. Not simply a textbook of definitions, each volume provides trenchant and provocative--yet always balanced and complete--discussions of the central issues in a given topic. Every Very Short Introduction gives a readable evolution of the subject in question, demonstrating how it has developed and influenced society. Whatever the area of study, whatever the topic that fascinates the reader, the series has a handy and affordable guide that will likely prove indispensable.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

THE QUAKERS: A Very Short Introduction by Pink Dandelion is a pretty substantial presentation of Quaker life and belief in 160 pages. Dandelion divides the book into the chapters History, Worship, Belief, Theology and language, Ecumenism and finally The future of Quakerism. I grew up in a Philadelphia suburb founded by Quakers, but I could never really get a handle on what the religion was all about. Dandelion delineates three clear strains of Quakerism today, from the Evangelicals who have structured services to the Conservatives who balance Scripture and the "inner light" and finally the Liberal Quakers who are not longer explicitly Christian and don't necessary acknowledge the existence of a God. In the final chapter, the author speaks of the probable developments in Quaker demographics, with the first two denominations surviving in the Global South, and the third declining just like other postmodern Christian denominations. The author notes that Quakers are most visible in protests against war or injustice. The only failing of the book I see is that she does not talk more about the organizations involved and how they are viewed by various Quaker denominations, or how they respond to Cold War allegations that they are Communist fronts. That for me would have made this a perfect introduction.

In many ways, "The Quakers: a Very Short Introduction" is a quite a well-built and desirable guide to Quakerism, both literally and figuratively speaking. (Its small size, good typography, modest price, and high-quality paper clearly add to its enjoyability.) Given that it's generally clear, well-researched, and wide-ranging, I concur that this is a great book for a serious student of the faith -- but only when read in conjunction with other viewpoints. Because frequent Quaker schisms over the past two centuries have led to so much complexity in the varieties of Quaker experience today, the book's ability to survey them all is a remarkable accomplishment. But I would like to spend the rest of my space on some difficulties I encountered while reading it. Let's start with the fundamentals. The core chapters cover history, worship, belief, theology, and ecumenism. The potential for redundancy ought to be apparent from the mere list. All of these chapters compare and contrast various aspects of theology and polity across the flavors of Quakerdom, and -- given the strict size restrictions imposed by the series format -- do so in a redundant way, chewing up extremely valuable real estate that should have been devoted to three other crucial aspects of a religion -- namely: praxis, sociology, and impact. There may be some faith traditions in which one or more of these facets

might not be of the utmost importance, but Quakerism is clearly not one of them. I would go so far as to suggest that if you do not understand how Quakers put their faith into practice in a wounded world (both individually and corporately); how Quakerism historically organized a unique, very powerful transatlantic cultural and economic network; and what kind of historical impact Quakers have made in the fields of peace-work, human rights, and so on, you have really missed the whole point. This serious defect is only partially addressed by a timeline at the end. The work of Alice Paul in securing suffrage in 1920 isn't mentioned; nor the influence of Quakerism on Ralph Waldo Emerson or Walt Whitman; nor of Thomas Paine on American democracy; nor of Bayard Rustin on civil rights; nor the Quaker role in the rise of New York shipping or Massachusetts whaling. References to the accomplishments of the American Friends Service Committee are only fleeting. The fact that the book is relatively Anglo-centric (which in many respects can actually be a plus for the American reader) doesn't excuse this lack of historical perspective. Even the book's central concern -- the historical evolution of the sect's many liberal-conservative schisms -- left me with a few nagging questions. I am still at a loss to reconcile Dandelion's terse account of George Fox's fateful encounter with the Seekers with Catherine Albanese's placement, in her acclaimed "A Republic of Mind and Spirit," of the Quaker origin-story within the influence of metaphysical religion (the Hermetic tradition, The Familists, and Jacob Boehme). An equally perplexing problem is understanding how some Evangelical Quakers can justify their irresistible urge to inject Quakerism with the sacraments so firmly rejected when Quakerism was established. I also found Dandelion's quirky account of theology in my own unprogrammed Quakerism too much of a straw man, an utter misrepresentation of "the status of speech" in silent worship: "words are not seen to be of practical use in expressing spirituality." (page 80). This is Nonsense of the First Kind: a proposition I find unjustified in either fact or common opinion. In addition, we soon thereafter encounter Nonsense of the Second Kind: an assertion so patently contradictory that it literally is non-sense, a leap of illogic. In many places Dandelion documents greater or lesser amounts of Evangelical antipathy to gays and lesbians; but then he tells us that while "Liberal" (that is, "unprogrammed" in the USA) Friends are "exclusive," "Evangelical Quakerism is ultimately more inclusive. It both seeks and welcomes everyone" (page 112). Even leaving aside these "pelvic issues" on the conservative-liberal divide, the book has by this time redundantly documented Evangelical use of a credal litmus-test to exclude heretics for even minor deviations. Moreover, "Short Introduction" resorts to quirky, confusing (if not indeed confused) terminology and concepts whenever Dandelion is wrestling with his attraction to/repulsion from "Liberal" Quakerism. He introduces an idiosyncratic use of the term "realism" as replacement for the perfectly-apt term "dogmatism." And then, he redefines the term "non-theism" to

mean "militant atheism," which is a totally unacceptable misreading of the non-theist position; one that should have been disallowed. (page 110). (Indeed, on several occasions while reading the book, I wondered whether the series editor was just asleep at the wheel.) Before closing, I want to address one matter which is only implied, though never explicitly stated: namely, that the greatest divide among Quakers is between those who "accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior" and those who do not. I don't think so; not when the practical fundamentals are carefully weighed. I think there is an even deeper divide between those who believe God responds to personal petitions and those who do not; but then, I think the same applies to every religion ever invented. In short, it's a great, but greatly-flawed, introduction to The Quaker Way, and will serve you quite well in the context of reading another historical survey. I was fortunate enough to read it alongside Chuck Fager's quite complimentary "Without Apology: A Manifesto Of Liberal Quaker Theology."

The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) I bought the book with the hope of clarifying & focusing my answers when I am asked about the Friends. It is a great help, easy to read, concise, and to the point. I would recommend it to newcomers, who are beginning to gather information, as a starting point.

Succinct and outstanding as a work for anyone curious or interested in the Quakers. Pink-Dandelion does exactly what one expects from the title of this book: introduces the reader to Quakerism. History, essential differences, historical figures and their significance, changes over time, and modern day Quaker aspects are all included. What really puts this particular book into a class by itself for me is the author's writing. Easy to read, right to the point, and not an ounce of fat. If I were to select one book for someone wanting to quickly get a handle on who the Quakers are, this might well be the one.

This book contains all the basic information that I was after: history, denominations, belief and the possible future of this religion are here presented clearly and thoroughly enough for a small book. I found the scheme on denominational differences (page 108-109) particularly interesting to really understand the peculiarities within the various Quaker groups. Recommended.

The subject is, to me, fascinating. The Quakers started as a group in 1652 - by 1947 it has won a Nobel Prize in Peace and by now it has 340,000 members worldwide. Their use of silence in gaining spiritual insights and of consensus in making decisions are both famous and distinct. In the past

three centuries, it has evolved. The perennial issues that affect Christianity as a whole also affect the Quakers. These issues are:- How much emphasis should be put on spiritual experience, and how much on scripture?- How traditional doctrines should remain? Is progressivism true?- How congregational should the organization be? Should worship be programmed?- Can one have a "Christian" stance on controversial subjects like abortion and sexuality? Like other forms of Christianity, its membership is still burgeoning, particularly so in Africa. Likewise, the spirit of ecumenism is also flourishing, to a certain degree. This introduction is brief and succinct; and highly readable. Four stars.

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