

A New Religion Fights for Peace: The Case of the Quakers in Korea

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ABSTRACT: The historical perception of the Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers, as a fringe element in the seventeenth century Puritan movement, as well as its presence and active engagement with the Korean government over issues of peace, pacifism, and conscientious objection, raise the question of both the religion’s status in Korea and what in scholarly discourse is called a new religion. The article discusses the definition of new religions (aka new religious movements), herein defined as religious groups that exist with neither social nor cultural continuity with the dominant religion(s) of whatever culture they may be found in. Given that definition, Quakers are found to be a new religion in Korea.

KEYWORDS: Quakers, Peace Movements, Pacifism, Conscientious Objection, Religion in South Korea, New Religions (Definition), New Religious Movements (Definition).

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Now an international organization with some three centuries of history behind it, the Society of Friends, popularly called the Quakers, has three strong credentials for consideration as a new religion. First, they are pacifists, with a lengthy record of commitment to spreading “peace” on both the organizational and individual level, a perspective on the world that remains a decidedly minoritarian point of view in spite of its lengthy history. They not only refrain

from participation in war and violent resolutions of individual and social conflict, but also promote efforts to build a just and peaceful society, and nurture individuals to live in peace among themselves and with their neighbors. Second, while emerging from Puritan Christianity, they established themselves at such a distance from the center of that tradition that, due to their “outsider status,” they suffered centuries of persecutions that included arrests, torture, imprisonment, and even executions by various governments, accompanied by significant social ostracism. Third, relative to Korea, the particular focus of this paper, they arrived only in the 1950s on the heels of the Korean War, and are thus only in their second generation of participation in the local environment. As a Korean religion, they are quite new—newer than many of the more familiar Korean new religions such as the Unification Church or Chondogyo (Baker 2008; Kim 1988; Grayson 2002; Buswell and Lee 2007; Lee 1996).

In addition, the three factors taken together make the Quakers, who have in the last two generations found some degree of real respect and inclusion (if not agreement with their policies) in the larger Western religious community, an excellent subject around which to focus a discussion of our still malleable definitions of just what constitutes a “new religion.”

Introducing the Quakers

Quakers emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century in England at a time in which the Puritan movement, dedicated to further “purifying” the Church of England in the wake of its separation from the Roman Catholics, and its adoption of the Anglican “middle way” advocated by Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603), was peaking even as it divided into a number of competing segments. While the most conservative of Puritans proposed working within the structure of the Church of England, which dominated Great Britain through its episcopal leadership, most Puritans proposed dramatic structural changes that included the elimination of bishops, the dioceses they led, and the clerical priesthood, and also abandoning a high view of the sacraments (Allen and Moore 2018; Angell and Dandelion 2013; Bacon 1999; Baltzell 1979; Barbour and Frost 1988; Birkel 2004; Hamm 2006; Kennedy 2001; Peck 1988).

The Presbyterians sought the replacement of the bishops by a leadership of presbyters (i.e., elders), including both the ministers (teaching elders) and

laypeople (ruling elders). The Congregationalists wanted the authority for running the church placed in the local congregations. While the Presbyterians and Congregationalists wished to keep the national church—merely revising its ruling structure, the Baptists (who largely agreed theologically with both) wished to do away with the national church altogether, and create not just a congregationally empowered church but one separated from the government and consisting of only those people who wished to belong to it. They were the first major champions in the English-speaking world of the separation of religion from the state.

Still in the Puritan mix, the Quakers stepped further away from the religious community and the theological consensus shared by the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. Without directly attacking central tenets of Christian orthodoxy, the Quakers refused to issue a creedal statement, and called for new theological emphases based on personal religious experience. They also further separated themselves from any participation in the government by withdrawing from what they perceived as the necessary evils of the state—including the making of war and the management of a criminal justice system. They refused to participate in the army, serve as magistrates, and swear the oaths generally required to testify in court. They promoted a simple life, separated from outward evils, while their word was assumed to be honest and straight-forward (Willcuts 1984).

Religiously, they also sought a simple and literal reading of the Bible apart from the sophisticated theology of traditional churches. They sought a direct relationship with God, which they assumed had been promised by Christ without the need of mediation by the clergy. Their drive for simplicity also led them to develop a uniform dress code, which as an unintended consequence made them immediately visible in any social setting. The simple unadorned style of clothing challenged the upwardly mobile as much as the wealthy, making them both religious and social lepers.

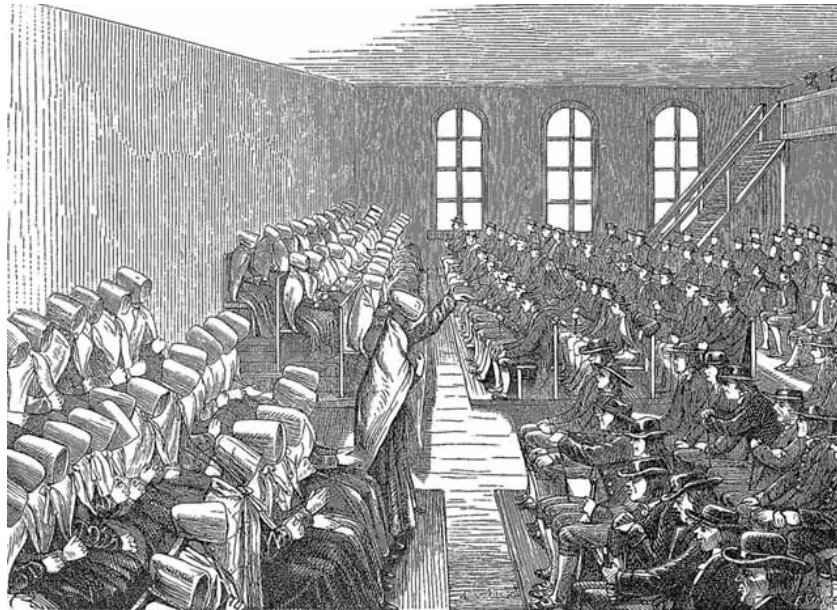


Figure 1. Early Quakers dressed simply and divided the sexes when they worshipped.

As they gathered for worship, they did away with liturgy, and gathered without clergy in silence to await the movement of the Holy Spirit within their fellowship. The community heard any who felt moved to speak during their gatherings, and members tested their words as to their worthiness for acceptance. Sometimes, in their gatherings, the movement of the Spirit led members to tremble as they experienced the Spirit. Those who observed such trembling, or quaking, labeled the Friends as “Quakers.” Thus, at many levels, the Society of Friends presented a very distinctive new religion, which differed from commonly accepted norms on multiple levels.

To America

At the end of the seventeenth century, British Quakers accepted into their membership one William Penn (1644–1718), the son of a prominent naval officer who helped reestablish the monarchy in England after the period of the Commonwealth. Because of his father’s service, the king was indebted to the Penn family, and to pay off the debt he gave William Penn a land grant in the American colonies. Penn used the land to create a haven for the Quakers (Murphy 2018). The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania became a testing ground for religious freedom and attracted every odd sect and new religion that existed

across Europe, including the Mennonites, the Amish, and the German Baptist Brethren. Though Quakers lived quite openly and even prospered in Pennsylvania, elsewhere in the colonies their status as a questionable religious sect remained much the same as previously in Great Britain, especially in New England where they acquired an outlaw status and could be arrested on sight. After arrest, they were most often banished, but some were executed when banishment did not work to keep them outside Massachusetts and its neighboring colonies (Baltzell 1979).

Adding to their marginalized status in the American colonies and in the early years of the American republic was their adoption of an anti-slavery stance. The Quakers were the first religious group that, as a corporate body, challenged the growing institution of slavery. Once they discerned that slavery was an evil, they denounced it, and members set their slaves free and distanced themselves from the practice. As slavery continued to grow, they became founding members of the new anti-slavery societies (Soderlund 1985; Jordan 2007). Early Quaker opponents of slavery deeply affected John Wesley (1703–1791), and led the Methodists to copy them in denouncing slavery and swelling the membership of the antislavery cause (Matthews 1965; Melton 2007). When, in the early nineteenth century, the Methodists weakened their strong anti-slavery stance, the Quakers strengthened their commitment, which costed them any chance of establishing their community in the American South, where slavery was most entrenched, and led them into backing the abolitionist call for an immediate discontinuance of slavery in the United States.

The strong abolitionist stance came to haunt the Quakers as the American Civil War began. As staunch pacifists, they refused to take up arms and fight for the destruction of slavery, and were subsequently left on the outside in defining the peace that followed.

Quaker pacifism would find some broader support in the late nineteenth century, as additional new religious groups that supported conscientious objection to war appeared, including the Seventh-day Adventists, the Bible Student movement founded by Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), whose main branch was later known as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Pentecostal movement. Through their combined efforts, the American government slowly developed an alternative service program, which allowed young men to engage in various non-violent public betterment programs in place of military service.

Through the twentieth century, the Quakers worked to expand the rights and opportunities for conscientious objectors in countries around the world.

Though remaining a relatively small movement, with never more than a few hundred thousand members, the Quakers multiplied their efforts by making common cause with other Peace churches and with individual pacifists in a wide variety of church groups. Members played a leading role in such organization as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and supported movements such as the nonviolent activism of Martin Luther King (1929–1968).

In their search for a more just society, they were also active in a variety of progressive social causes. British Quakers became, for example, the first Western religious community to engage the gay and lesbian community, and in 1963 issued *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*, a pioneer study calling for a reorientation of the religious community's attitudes toward gay and lesbian people (Heron 1963). Though the views expressed in that pioneer report are now widely shared in Europe and North America, such was not the case when it was issued, and it served to re-marginalize the Quakers even as their work on peace was gaining pockets of support throughout the Christian community as a whole (Mellor 2009).

Quakers shared in the growing pacifism in the United States that spread through the mainstream Protestant churches in reaction to the carnage inflicted upon the armies forced to fight World War I. Dramatic images of the future damage that awaited, as governments developed ever more effective instruments of death, nurtured fears in the wider religious world. In the United States, support for pacifism (which helped keep America out of World War II even after the fall of France) largely collapsed in the face of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Quakers and members of the other Peace churches faced significant public criticism through the war, only recovering a voice as people began to consider the implication of the atomic bomb and the possibility of its being used in any future global combat. And as the world watched, President Harry Truman (1884–1972), the man who had authorized the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, guided the war in Korea. While bringing the war to a ceasefire, on terms that satisfied no one, he did so without luring China into the conflict and while withstanding the temptation to drop another bomb on a North Korean city (Brock 1968; Nuttall 1971; Morehead 1987).

The Quakers in Korea

The American Friends Service Committee had been established during World War I to support conscientious objectors. After the war, it evolved into the major vehicle for Quakers to engage in peacemaking activity, its first target being the rebuilding of Europe. The organization would change as different issues came and went, but following World War II, it immediately mobilized resources to assist a world of refugees, for which it and its British equivalent won the Nobel Peace prize in 1947. That continuing effort in support of refugees brought both British and American Quakers to Korea in the mid-1950s, where they subsequently set up a base in Kunsan, on the western coast of Korea, some hundred miles south of Incheon. Beginning with an effort to counter malnutrition, the AFSC eventually developed a wide-ranging program that included the building of homes, organizing schools, anti-illiteracy programs, and a spectrum of medical services, the overall program being aimed at making the people among whom they worked self-sufficient.



Figure 2. Early Quakers in Kunsan.

The intent of the Quakers had not been to spread their movement, merely to do their peace-building work and move on. But once in place, some of the people among whom they had been working made know their desire to continue their relationship with Quakerism. Before leaving, the Quaker personnel in Kunsan

put those who wished to become Quakers in contact with two Quakers then residing in Seoul—Reginald Price (1911–1977) and Arthur Lyon Mitchell (1916–2000)—who assisted in the organization of regular weekly meetings, which grew to become a formally recognized congregations (called by Quakers a monthly meeting) in 1964. In 1967, that congregation acquired its own meeting house. The members would be responsible in 1960 for the translation of the first piece of Quaker writing to appear in Korean, a short work, *The Faith and Practice of Quakers*, by American Quaker mystic theologian Rufus Jones (1863–1948).

Ham Sook Hon

The Quaker began as a small movement of primarily Korean believers directly influenced by the social work carried out by their fellow believers in the mid- and late 1950s. Among the first members was one person who was blind, and who became a catalyst for the initial group to become activists in support of Seoul's blind residents. Not being a religion that engages in high pressure evangelism, that initial group grew slowly, but in 1967, just as it moved into its new building, it gained a great asset in the person of former schoolteacher and social activist Ham Sook Hon (1901–1989). Ham had initially encountered the Quakers in Kunsan, and later began to hang out among them in Seoul (Kim 2001).

Important in Ham's development were several years he spent in Japan following his graduation from high school. While attending college in Tokyo (1924–1928), he met and studied with Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930), a Japanese Christian who had founded the Nonchurch Movement (Mukyōkai) after breaking with the Christian missionary establishment. Though theologically orthodox, Kanzo had famously questioned the nature of church organization and worship. He had also questioned the importance of the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. He was an outspoken pacifist (Hiroshi and Shinn 2013; Howes 2006).

Upon returning to Korea, Ham would emerge from obscurity in the 1930s, during the Japanese occupation era, when he published an early serialized version of his book, *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea*, in a Christian monthly, *Songso Choson*. Japanese authorities reacted strongly by closing down the magazine and seizing and destroying all the copies that contained Ham's

articles. They extended their attack on Ham's ideas by arresting him; he spent his first prison sentence in West Gate Prison in Seoul. Only after the end of Japanese rule could he publish his book in full. As successive editions appeared (Ham 1985), he also moved from the more traditional Christianity passed to him by Uchimura to a much more liberal Christian perspective, as he had come to feel that Christianity was not the one true faith, nor the Bible the whole truth. It was simultaneous with his own theological change that he encountered the Quakers in Kunsan, with whom he found an immediate resonance.

He moved south after the Communist takeover of North Korea, but again found himself in trouble in 1958 after publishing articles critical of President Syngman Rhee (1875–1965, in office 1948–1960), whose rule he considered dictatorial. Rhee would be forced from office two years later. Over the several decades following his attaching himself to the small Seoul monthly meeting, Ham would take his fellow Quakers on a dramatic pilgrimage, while the meeting house would provide Ham with a haven for his crusade to bring full democracy to South Korea and make a place in the country, still officially at war with its northern neighbor, for conscientious objectors.

In the early 1960s, Ham moved to America to attend classes at Pendle Hill, the Quaker study center at Wallingford, Pennsylvania, and then went on to spend time in England. Crucially, his time in the United States coincided with the emergence of Martin Luther King whose non-violence activism greatly energized and offered new directions to Ham's previously established pacifism. Shortly after his return to Korea, he formally joined the Society of Friends, in the midst of which he began to articulate and act upon his own version of non-violent activism. The next decade would be spent in opposition to Korean president Park Chung-hee (1917–1979, in office 1963–1971), who initially came to power as the leader of a military coup in 1961.

Over the rest of his life, Ham would actively protest what he saw as an autocratic regime subverting the Korean Constitution, his protests leading to repeated arrests and several stints in prison (1976, 1979), culminating in a period under house arrest beginning in 1980. Following the end of the regime that Park set in place (1987), Ham would finally enjoy a brief moment of success. Seoul hosted the 1988 Olympics, giving to a number of Asian religious leaders (many of whom would be known as founders of new religions) the opportunity to organize what they termed the Peace Olympiad in the city. The aging Ham was

selected to head the event, which culminated in the issuance of a declaration calling for world peace. Meanwhile, his fellow Quakers nominated him for the Nobel peace prize.



Figure 3. Statue of Ham Sook Hon in Seoul.

Since Ham's death in 1989, the members of the Seoul Friends meeting have continued his fight for rights for conscientious objectors in Korea, whose only options, given the role played by the military in the country's life, have been to serve in the army or to go prison. Finally, in 2007, their efforts bore fruit when the government began to offer forms of alternate service. Also in the new century, a second monthly meeting has been opened in Daejon.



Figure 4. The Quaker Fellowship in Seoul, Korea.

Quakers as a New Religion

The Society of Friends has emerged in Korea over the last half century, and now stands as an independent outpost of a global movement with roots in seventeenth-century England. It inherits the history of what is appropriately viewed as a new religious movement of past centuries, which has now attained in the West some entrance into the religious establishment. In the United States, both the Friends United Meeting and the Friends General Conference are members of the National Council of Churches, and internationally of the World Council of Churches. In 2013, when the World Council of Churches' 10th Assembly gathered in Busan, South Korea, the Quaker delegates made it a point to visit the Seoul monthly meeting while in the country and celebrate there the assembly's theme, "God of life, lead us to justice and peace." It is to be noted, however, that South Korean Quakers are affiliated with neither the Christian Council of Korea nor the National Council of Churches in Korea.

Raising the question of whether the Korean Quakers are properly termed a new religious movement, however, speaks to the more basic issue of definition. A decade ago, sociologist David Bromley and I engaged in a conversation on that topic, each drawing on their very different background as a sociologist (Bromley) and religious historian (Melton). The results were later published as an article in which we proposed a definition that we hoped could be applied internationally, which suggested firstly, that the designation of any group as a new religious movement should include a reference to time and place. That is to say, any given religious group could simultaneously be considered a new religion in one context and not a new religion in another context (Bromley and Melton 2012). Thus today, the Hare Krishna movement manifests as a new religion in most Western countries but is seems very much integrated into the religious establishment in India. In like measure, groups may change their status over time, with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which earlier in the twentieth century was almost the definition of a new religious movement, having forced its way into the dominant religious establishment in the United States by its success in becoming the largest religious body in a half dozen states, and assuming a prominent role in one of the major political parties.

Sociologically, we recognized four "types" of religious groups based upon their social and cultural resonance with the larger religious community.

1. Established religions essentially create the religious environment of a country, and thus have the resonance with the larger culture, are aligned with the religious powers that be, and have access to their country's political leadership.

2. Sectarian religions are groups that are aligned culturally with the dominant religion(s) of a country but, due to various factors, have only limited access to the more established religious or political leadership. They are culturally aligned but lack social power.

3. Ethnic religions are groups that primarily serve a single ethnic/linguistic group that exists in sharp contrast to the dominant religious culture of a particular country in which they have a presence, and hence manifest a sharp cultural alienation, but may be related internationally to a community that is part of the religious establishment in another country. Through their religious ties to an ethnic homeland, they have access to power in the countries in which they are a minority. Thus, Thai American Buddhists are religiously very different from the dominant religious community in the United States, but the state religion of Thailand. At the same time, through the Thai government, the Thai American Buddhists have access, however small their community is, to the powers that be in Washington, D.C.

4. Finally, there are the new religions. These religions are initially defined by their sharp religious break with the dominant religious culture of their homeland. They may exist either as an entirely distinct religion, or as a variant of the dominant religion that is nevertheless distinct enough in its beliefs and/or behavior as to be unacceptable to the dominant religious community. Thus, the Unification Church, with roots in Christianity, was found unacceptable to the Christian community upon its arrival in the United States due to its assertion of a spectrum of heterodox beliefs and a variety of unusual behaviors (including its arranged marriages).

Along with their cultural discontinuity, new religions have little to no access to power, either religious or political. While they may momentarily manifest a quietly produced entrée to power, that access will be quickly withdrawn when it becomes public knowledge. By definition, a new religion is both culturally and socially alienated from the society in which it exists (though over time, it may join the religious establishment and in the rarest of cases may even come to dominate it).

Given this definition, the Quakers of Korea certainly appear to fit the definition of a new religion. They exist apart from the two largest religious communities in Korea, the Buddhist orders and the Protestant Christian churches. They are completely different from Buddhism (not to mention the Confucianist and Korean shamanistic communities) and remain apart from the Protestants, which even in their more liberal wing are much more conservative than their Western counterparts. Throughout their history, Quakers have claimed a degree of orthodoxy, at least relative to the essential Christian beliefs, though they do not have a creedal statement as do, for example, the other Peace churches like the Mennonites.

Quakers have argued that their differences related not so much to theology as to issues of worship, personal devotion, and sacraments. However, increasingly through the twentieth century, Quakers have voiced views decidedly at odds with the exclusive claims of Christian faith, leaning toward Unitarianism and even Humanist perspectives. In recent decades, Quakerism has become a very open community, welcoming a wide variety of beliefs. Ham Sok Hon voiced his own departure from the orthodoxy of his younger years, as he backed away from a belief that the Christian faith was the only true religion and the Bible the whole truth (Ham 1985). He was known to cite his adherence to the Friends as due to their “pacifism, egalitarianism, community spirit (group mysticism), and active participation in here-and-now social affairs rather than longing for a ‘heaven or Kingdom of God’ after life” (“Legacy of Ham Sok-hon” 2017).

In following through on their vision of a just and peaceful society, South Korean Quakers have consistently shown themselves at odds with the political powers that have dominated the country, and their loyalty has been questioned in light of the ongoing state of war in which the country was left in 1953. At the same time, Quakers remain a distinct minority in their original homeland (the United Kingdom). In the United States, where they now have their largest membership, they remain too small to show up on most religious surveys. Thus, while other Christian churches operating in Korea might qualify as an ethnic church (with significant power bases in the West), the Quakers remain a small and largely powerless group championing a minority message.

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