

# The food co-op and the hate group

**IT** certainly seems wholesome enough, looking at the shelves of fresh locally baked organic whole grain bread lined up at my local food co-op in Buffalo. Each neatly bagged loaf bears the homey label of the Common Ground Bakery, located a few miles away in Hamburg, New York. A visit to the Common Ground Bakery verifies this bucolic image. There you'll find a small shop with smiling friendly bakers and the aroma of fresh bread.

What's not readily apparent is that shoppers on four continents are simultaneously walking into Common Ground Bakeries and experiencing the same illusion of a small independent community bake shop. In actuality, however, what they're walking into is the local franchise of a growing multinational organization, The Twelve Tribes, which dedicated to spreading a reactionary racist, anti-Semitic, sexist homophobic ideology.

The press started paying attention to the Twelve Tribes around five years ago when their Common Ground bakeries entered into the concert/events catering business, showing up at music festivals in Europe and Australia as well as stateside venues such as Buffalo's Elmwood Festival of the Arts (where they were subsequently banned). Along with their tasty snacks and sandwiches, came leaflets, booklets and a recruiting spiel.

When they set up shop at Britain's Glastonbury Festival in 2000, they caught the attention of The Guardian after disseminating pamphlets arguing that Jews are a cursed people, and magazines arguing in favor of racial segregation. When they appeared at Australia's Woodford festival a year later, Australia's Courier Mail cited the group's reclusive leader, Elbert Eugene Spriggs, as claiming "It is horrible that someone would

## **THE FOOD CO-OP AND THE HATE GROUP / 2**

rise up to abolish slavery – what a wonderful opportunity that blacks could be brought over here [the U.S.] as slaves.”

The Boston Herald reports that the group teaches their home schooled children a doctrine of white racial superiority. The Herald cites Spriggs as arguing that submission to whites “is the only provision by which [blacks] will be saved.” Hence, he explains, the civil rights movement brought “disorder to the established social order.” Spriggs goes on to defend slavery as being part of the natural order, explaining that “if the slaves were mistreated it was the fault of the slaves.” He then croons on about how the antebellum south maintained a proper social order – how black slaves “had respect for people. They got along well because they were submissive.”

While the Twelve Tribes has never officially explained or denied Spriggs quotes, they currently follow them up by advocating for racial segregation both in their publications and on their website. In a piece entitled “Multicultural Madness,” for example, they tell the story of a “rich young yuppie” living in an integrated neighborhood. “From one side of his house,” they write, “comes the throbbing bass of his neighbor’s stereo as they gather out back for some reggae.” On the other side of their besieged yuppie, the mud people are “laughing raucously over the grating syncopation of something called rap”. The piece goes on to explain, “Let’s face it. It is just not reasonable to expect people to live contentedly alongside of others who are culturally and racially different. This is unnatural.”

People, they explain, have an “instinctive desire to live with those of like mind, to congregate in neighborhoods with those of the same race and ethnic origin.” This, according to the Twelve tribes, is because we have a “natural loathing of perverse and immoral people.”

The group, however, still purports not to be racist, arguing that segregation is part of God’s natural order, in essence blasphemously passing the racist ball to God. The Twelve Tribes isn’t racist, you see, they just worship a racist god. Whenever communities question local Twelve Tribes businesses about the group’s racism, the group parades John Stringer, an African-American member, to personally counter the charges. Stringer, who they shuffle from city to city and pimp on their website, argues that “our race is becoming increasingly known for its self-destructive behavior.” According to Stringer, blacks are responsible for their own history of subjection. “The only way to save our race,” he explains, “is that we would submit to reason and responsibility, just as all the other minorities who are thriving.” This simplistic and ahistorical rationale fits right in with the enlightened racism often espoused in liberal circles, while obfuscating persistent institutional racism and supporting racist stereotypes. This is obvious to people who actually listen to Stringer, instead of just looking at him.

In actuality, black folks like Stringer need to submit to more than “reason” and “responsibility.” The Boston Herald cites Twelve Tribes leader Elbert Spriggs, explaining that blacks “must come to [the Twelve Tribes] with the attitude to be a servant.”

### **Anti-Semitism**

Twelve Tribes members dismiss charges of racism, explaining that they can’t possibly be racist since they sing black spiritual songs in their homes. Likewise, the group claims that charges of anti-Semitism are also false, because they sing Israeli folk songs, give themselves Hebrew names, and have a purported Jewish person traveling the country saying so. Their Jew, Shalom Israel, as it turns out, isn’t Jewish.

The Twelve Tribes argue that all Jews are born “cursed.” According to the group, Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus and hence “called down the guilt of his murder on themselves and their children.” This is “why God has not been able to protect the Jews from century after century of abuse at the hands of wicked men.”

The Twelve Tribes argue away the fact that today’s Christianity and Islam both descend from the Judaism of Christ’s time, explaining that the curse of the Jews is cancelled by renouncing one’s Jewishness. “For Jews who follow our master, however,” they write, “these curses are removed.” This, they argue, is why they aren’t anti-Semitic – because they will help any Jew who is willing to renounce their culture, history and beliefs. If the Jew ceases to be a Jew, they are welcome among the Twelve Tribes. Likewise, African-Americans willing to blame themselves for their own historic oppression, are also welcome among the Twelve Tribes.

### **Misogyny**

While individual Blacks and Jews can earn the right to work wage-free in a Common Ground bakery by renouncing their people and struggles, women have no such option. They will always be women, who, according to the Twelve Tribes, were created solely “to be a friend and a helper for man.” Like a dog. They explain that women have two basic purposes – “to be a wife and a mother.” As a mother, a woman is supposed to raise her children as directed “according to her husband’s heart.” Any additional or alternative life goals, or failure to “submit” to a husband’s “loving” demands, goes against “God’s proper order.”

They lament that, “Sadly enough today though, many women strive to be something ‘better.’” “Woman,” they explain, “is not meant to rule over man.” Hence, according to the group’s website, “they strive to be what they are not. They want careers, or money, or whatever they think will give them identity and fulfillment...” A true woman, however,

they argue, "doesn't need to become 'greater' than she was created to be."

Interestingly enough, one of the things it seems the Twelve Tribes believe that women were created to do, is bake bread for long hours without receiving a paycheck. This natural order seems to have bestowed upon the Twelve Tribes a competitive advantage over other organic whole grain bakeries who still have to dole out Caesar's image to their heathen work forces.

### **Child Abuse**

The Twelve Tribes has come under repeated fire for child labor violations in many of their factories and businesses. In one celebrated case, The Twelve Tribes' Cambridge, New York based Common Sense Natural Soap & Body Care division, lost a lucrative contract manufacturing Estee Lauder's Origins line after Estee Lauder found children working in the Common Sense factory. The Twelve Tribes call the charges "false, unfounded and slanderous," claiming that the 14 year old boys were simply helping their fathers at work. In a similar incident, Robert Redford's Sundance mail order catalog cancelled their contract with the Twelve Tribes' Common Sense Furniture division after the Coxsackie, New York furniture factory became the subject of a child labor controversy.

The New York State Department of Labor also busted the group for using child labor in a Palenville, New York candle factory and for assisting in construction work in another group-owned facility in Oak Hill, New York. The Twelve Tribes claim that it is beneficial for children to help their parents work instead of, they explain, "wasting their free time on empty amusements and dissipation, which leads only to bad behavior."

The Twelve Tribes seems obsessed with "bad behavior," writing off entire "countries like Scandinavia" [sic] as plagued with the malady. Their response to bad behavior on the part of their children, however they define it, is for the adults to indulge themselves in bad behavior of their own, whipping kids with a reed-tipped device they call "the rod." On their website they explain that "To discipline your children is tantamount to loving them. . . . it shows the child they are loved and cared about."

Children who have escaped from Twelve Tribes compounds, along with adult ex-members, talk of abuse – not love. Noah Jones, for example, left the group's flagship compound in Island Pond Vermont at the age of 22. In an interview with Burlington's ABC TV affiliate (WVNY), Jones claimed "They spanked me from my feet to my neck, all the way. I was black and blue, basically head to toe." He recalls being beaten with the rod and locked in basements as a child and later, when he got older, he says he was beaten with a two-by-four.

Jones was ushered to freedom by a sort of underground railroad that, according to

## **THE FOOD CO-OP AND THE HATE GROUP / 5**

WVNY, has “helped dozens of teenagers and children” to escape abuse at the Island Pond community. One of the ‘conductors,’ speaking to WVNY, explained “The anger of these kids coming out is amazing. They’ve been hit by so many people that they can’t even count ...”

Zeb Wiseman, another escapee, told The Boston Herald that his mother was sick with cancer, but the Twelve Tribes denied her medical care. Wiseman explained how, in addition to beating him and locking him in basements, the group mentally tortured him. When his mother died, they told him his mother’s death was an example of how God punishes sinners. Wiseman claims that he was shuffled between Twelve Tribes communities and was beaten daily from the time he was five until he was fifteen. Among the sins for which he would be beaten, according to Wiseman, was listening to “outside music.” He also claims that his schooling stopped when he was 13 and that he began working when he was ten years old.

Twelve Tribes children are home schooled until they are teenagers – then they go to work, wage-free, in one of the group’s businesses. Children do not receive High School diplomas, and they are forbidden to apply for GED degrees or to attend college. This lack of education hinders escapees in their search for work if they leave the Twelve Tribes. Essentially, the organization is breeding its own work force.

### **Acquiescence**

The Guardian quotes a 24-year old Jewish woman attending the Glastonbury Music Festival as being “shocked on two counts.” She was shocked “first,” she explained, “that they [Common Ground] were there at all, and secondly, that no one else seemed to care.” It’s this apathy – this gross willingness to silently acquiesce to the presence of a hate group, that is truly appalling. But it’s also enlightening.

The Twelve Tribes is building its empire by feeding off of the resources of some of the world’s most progressive communities – specifically because they are also apathetic and self-indulgent enough to support even those organizations who are ideologically opposed to their very presence. Hence, we see the Twelve Tribes prospering, for example, with a restaurant on Ithaca’s signature Commons, despite that city’s history for progressive politics. And we see them opening up on the fringes of alternative and activist communities across New England – often finding a distribution network for their products among food co-ops and hip health food stores. In my hometown of Buffalo, our newly expanded Lexington Food Co-op is The Twelve Tribes largest independent bread retailer, with Common Ground bread dominating their shelves.

The aforementioned concertgoer explained to The Guardian that “People forget there

is no such thing as a benign racist, no matter how tasty his vegetarian couscous." This is the problem. The bread is good. And the Common Ground people seem friendly enough. Peace Studies scholar and anthropologist Robert Knox Dentan writes: "The impoverishment and polarization of U.S. politics means that we expect our enemies to be all-evil, but they're not." Dentan goes on to explain that "Heinrich Himmler famously loved dogs and children. There's a chilling photo of him hugging a little Jewish boy as the kid was waiting for the train to Auschwitz. The Twelve Tribes," Dentan surmises, "would be nice to that little boy too, as long as he converted to their brand of Christianity. They're not, most of them, mean people." Dentan goes on to explain that "fascism isn't going to come to the US in the form of goose stepping Stormtroopers (SWAT teams aside). It's certainly going to depend on the help of extreme religious groups like the Tribes."

### **The co-op's response to hate**

The analogy is frightening. Three weeks after I shared with the Lexington Co-op management and board the data which I subsequently used in this article, I received an official response signed by their store manager and a member of their board. It started out reading, "The Co-op takes it very seriously that one of our primary, longstanding local producers is being labeled a 'hate group.'" On the next line, however, they write "We have never found Common Ground or its members to be anything but friendly and warm to our customers and staff." No doubt this is true. But by all accounts Osama bin Laden is also very personable and soft spoken and has gentle eyes. And if he baked bread, the Lexington Food Co-op and the shoppers on Ithaca's Commons would probably buy it from him – despite his fascist fundamentalist ideology.

Yes, the Common Ground bakers in Hamburg are "friendly and warm." But their money is supporting a white supremacist empire. Their leader, Eugene Spriggs, is cited in The Boston Herald as lamenting the end of slavery and celebrating the assassination of Martin Luther King. Money spent on Common Ground breads goes directly to supporting Spriggs' group's multinational business and real estate investments – including a new "mega development project" the group is currently putting the finishing touches on in Tampa, Florida. As self-indulgent liberals continue to buy tasty loafs of bread from "nice" bakers, they continue to fund a growing economic empire that continues to target vulnerable minorities around the world.

Put simply – when health conscious consumers spend money on Common Ground bread, they fund, for example, the publication and distribution of anti-Semitic literature in Brazil. The problem is that self-indulgent Common Ground customers get immediate gratification through the enjoyment of tasty baked goods while not directly, at this

## **THE FOOD CO-OP AND THE HATE GROUP / 7**

moment in time, suffering the effects of the bakers' hate speech.

In their letter, the Co-op management goes on to explain that they will look into the allegations presented here, writing, "Our plan is to research the available information in greater detail and within context. We will share this information and consult with spiritual and moral leaders from the community, member-owners, Common Ground themselves, and other Co-ops. We will then make a decision on how to proceed."

To quote a tired cliché, this isn't rocket science. Companies such as Estee Lauder and LL Bean, which are not particularly progressive, figured this out long ago and stopped carrying Twelve Tribes products. There is no context in which such hate speech is acceptable. And it shouldn't take consultation with a "spiritual" or "moral leader" to figure this out.

*Joseph Wetmore provided research assistance for this article. To read the Twelve Tribes / Common Ground response to charges of racism etc., see their website at [www.twelvetribes.com/](http://www.twelvetribes.com/). Twelve Tribes products are sold under the following brand names: Common Ground Café; Common Ground Bakery; Common Sense Natural Soap and Body Care; Common Sense Furniture and Yerba Mate Teas.*