

Report on the 2016 Non-Theist Quaker Conference at Woodbrooke

The Conference was from 1st to 3rd April and Conferees from Glasgow, Devon, from East, West and several Counties in between gathered to hear an introductory talk by David Boulton. David reminded us that the term Non-Theist came from George Holyoake of the Rationalist Group and spoke of the other Groups who share some of our beliefs that all religion is a human construct. He cited:

- The Unitarian Universalists in the US and Canada
- Humanistic Judaism. In the US they are non-theist and believe Jewish history is a human saga
- Sea of Faith Network that sprang from the BBC series led by John Tewson. There are 20 – 30 Groups active and their Newsletter explores religious faith as a human concept and people from all the main-stream denominations are involved
- Progressive Christianity Network – not expressly Non-Theist though many of the people involved think of themselves as such, Richard Holloway being the best known. They are also strong in the East and West coasts of the US
- Unitarianism in the UK and
- The Clergy Project.

David said we would be hearing reference to the revision of Quaker Faith and Practice under review at the present time. He urged us to take every opportunity to assure our Theist Friends that nothing was further from our thoughts than any suggestion of wanting to remove ‘God’ from the inspirational language of Fox and Penn and the other founding fathers of the Society and indeed of all past and present Friends for whom God is a living reality.

There followed two ten-minute talks from our own members, firstly Miriam Branson who posed the question ‘Why don’t Quakers talk about God in their Meetings? Miriam’s trawl of letters to The Friend had revealed; discomfort some Friends have about people not believing in God, the Society moving away from the Founding Fathers, difficulty of arriving at definitions, the “I believe in God and always have done” stance and not wanting to categorise or look at what some Friends mean by God being in relationships these and other attitudes that amounted to ‘best to brush it all under the carpet.’ However, Miriam suggested there were reasons for Friends to talk about these issues, such as:

- Truth
- Differing views not being silenced
- Friends and Attenders needing to know the diversity within the Society,
- We shouldn’t assume we know how our other Meeting Friends feel.

David Parlett took the next ten minutes talking about being a Non-Theist in that he doesn’t believe in the existence of God, yet being a Theist in that he believes in the presence of God.

This will serve to show the diversity even among us Non-Theists.

These short presentations were followed by a time in our Base Groups and this proved to be a good formula for a weekend that had no main speaker but where everyone present could contribute.

Saturday began with a short introduction to the three workshops from which we then chose one to attend. These were:

- The Life of the Spirit – rooted in our biology - by Martin Drummond
- Holy without God – an exploration of spirituality – by Sarah Siddle and

- Move gently – or minding our language – by David Boulton and John Lampen.

Again, time back in our base groups proved its usefulness in giving the opportunity for us to give each other an idea of the Workshops we did not attend.

The workshop I attended was based on an article that appeared in The Friend on 16th January 2009. The article was headed by a quote from Robin Hawes writing in The Friend on 12 December 2008.

There is a danger in our religious society of an intolerance and over-zealousness regarding words and definitions that perhaps is not consonant with our ancient tradition of holding and living by a faith that is non-credal.

Distinctions between personal and public language were looked at. Differences in personal language, 'especially when used in ministry should not merely be accepted by Friends but cherished as a mark of the searching and free-thinking spirit of modern Quakerism.' In the public language of the Society, the task is to find a form of words 'that is as inclusive as we can make it.'

David Boulton spoke of the hurt he felt when told he did not belong in the Society but then reflected on whether he had inflicted hurt on others. John Lampen reminded us of the value of time spent listening to each other above discussion that can lead to argument.

David emphasised the shock of change that Friends have had to cope with. In the 17th Century Friends believed themselves to be saved by the blood of Christ and to have a life after death. The 20th Century has been a time of turmoil begun, perhaps by the Universalists in the 1970's with the number of believers in the last three decades down 78% - 60% - 53% with the far fewer Non-Theists doubling each decade. The language of Yearly Meeting Epistles 100 years ago, 50 years, 20 years and now has changed. Non-Theists are a movement from within the Society being people who have been members and have served the Society for a long time and it would be wrong to think of them as a movement from outside the Society trying to change it for everyone. We are not a Trojan Horse. So, what binds us together? Attendance at meeting and a belief that there is something of intrinsic worth in every human being. (As an aside it was noted the word 'Religious' was added to the Society's title to differentiate us from the many Friendly Societies that were springing up in the late 19th Century.)

The Society does not stand still. Central is our openness to the journey, finding a way to express our thoughts without failing to acknowledge the position of others.

Early afternoon brought an optional event at which Friends were able to share what interests or energises them from reading – books, articles & websites or watching/listening to U-tube, DVD's or radio.

Later, on Saturday afternoon, everyone piled into the Cadbury Room to hear Michael Wright and David Boulton speak about the Theology Think Tank event organised by the Quaker Faith and Practice Revision Preparation Group in February. Michael and David were there by personal invitation along with other dare-I-say 'weighty' Friends. As the existence of the Non-Theist Quaker Network had been top of the list of items the Revision Preparation Group were to look at, all the participants were asked to bring to the session a question around the topic. They had each to pick

five and the Friends who chose them, had to discuss and formulate a report of their discussion at the end of the session to be put, straightway, onto the laptops provided – an exhausting process. The Reports from each Group were then put together so that they could inform the work of the Revision Preparation Group.

The evening session of 'Quaking with laughter' came as light relief. The other delights of the Conference were the evening Epilogues, morning Meeting for Worship, food, fellowship and the drifts of dainty daffodils in the gardens.