

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**

[www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk](http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk)



## **December 2016**

**Are you coming?** - to **Our open conference**  
March 24 – 27 2017 See details on pages 5-7

### **IN THIS NEWSLETTER**

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## **Articulating some of our perspectives on the Quaker Way**

Earlier this year, Quaker Books published *Living our beliefs* – which is a collection of quotations from various sources (Quaker and others) which has been developed and edited by young Quakers. They have long wanted something akin to Qf&p but shorter, more accessible and more concise. It is available in print price £6 from Quaker Bookshop. Your Steering Group met briefly after the AGM last April and (without knowing about the Young Quaker publication) decided to plan something similar.

**If you have suggestions for content for such a short publication of quotations and sayings which reflect our approach to the Quaker way, please do send them to me.**

**I am now gathering contributions.** You might like to begin by looking at the quotations in the attached file which will all be part of the collection from which we will choose when the time comes.

Here are some of the section topics that I am suggesting for this collection.

- **Being Quaker - belonging and sharing with Friends**
- **Our Quaker history and tradition**
- **Silence**

- **Simplicity**
- **Love**
- **Integrity**
- **Sustainability**
- **Jesus**
- **Other world religious teachers**
- **Different Advices and Queries**
- **Life journeys**

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## **BOOKS**

***Through a Glass Darkly*** – by David Boulton – available from Friends House Bookshop £7. **Have you read the review of David’s book in The Friend (December 16)** by Ian Kirk-Smith, the editor of The Friend? The review, and the book itself, are well worth reading.

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Recently I visited Rex Ambler at his home in Cumbria and he showed me two books in his library which interested me enough to buy a second-hand copy of each of them, and I flag them up in case any of our readers are interested to know of them.

***Spirituality and the Secular Quest*** – edited by Peter H. van Ness – in the SCM World Spirituality series (London 1996). The content of the first part ranges from precursors of secular spirituality in Greece and Rome, and others from sources outside Europe. Selections from the European Enlightenment and from the American Experience, are followed by chapters on the emergence of historical consciousness, the flowering of the romantic spirit, and contemporary postmodernism.

Part Two has chapters on holistic health practices, psychotherapies, 12 step programmes, feminine spirituality, gay spirituality, and the social justice struggle. The a section on Nature includes scientific inquiry, naturalistic recreations, and ecological activism. The final section on Culture has chapters on Arts, Sports, and Games.

***GOD IN ALL WORLDS – an anthology of contemporary spiritual writing***, edited by Lucinda Vardey. (Pantheon Books, New York 1995). The quotations are all from the previous 50 years, and from a wide range of religious traditions including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Gaia and goddess worship, New Age and agnostic beliefs. It is described as “an inspiring contemporary guide to the spiritual journey.

## ***Biblical Literalism – a Gentile Heresy – by John S. Spong***

This is a commentary on the gospel of Matthew – but very readable, not at all the typical dry biblical commentary. Spong’s view is that Christian scholars and teachers have for centuries misunderstood all four gospels because they have regarded them as historical records mixed with a theological perspective, rather than as Jewish *midrash*, which “requires a knowledge of Jewish culture, Jewish symbols, Jewish icons and the tradition of Jewish storytelling.”

He regards the way the Bible is used and understood is frequently an embarrassment. It “reflects a worldview of an ancient, pre-modern time and holds as truth many things that no one believes today.....on almost every page it depicts God as a supernatural, miracle-working deity who lives just beyond the sky of a three-tiered universe.” He grieves for its outcomes which include biblically based anti-Semitism, and “representatives of militant Islam beheading...in order to protest what they believe the Christian world has done to followers of Muhammed throughout Western history.” He includes in the catalogue of crimes that stem from *biblical literalism* the enslavement of people of colour, women reduced to second-class citizenship, homophobia and other forms of intolerance.

Spong has spent a life-time studying and treasuring the Bible – but not with a literalist approach. These distortions of a true biblical vision of life are due to misunderstanding and misusing the text. “So I am driven to find a different way to read the Bible that allows me simultaneously to be both a person of faith and a person thankful for and dedicated to the century in which I am privileged to live.”

His main theme is that he is convinced Matthew’s gospel was written for the earliest Christians who naturally worshipped week by week in their synagogue, hearing the regular systematic readings of the Torah, and observing their great festivals. He believes Matthew’s gospel is planned to provide complementary readings related to the Hebrew scripture readings week by week. The way he sets out his case is very interesting, and informative. I read Matthew’s gospel in a new way in the light of his book, and find it fascinating. I hope you will too.

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***Sceptical Christianity* by Robert Reiss** (Jessica Kingsley. London.2016) is a book by the former sub-dean of Westminster Abbey. It shows one aspect of some critical thinking among Anglicans – it is seeking in some ways to catch up with the writings of Borg and Spong.

He quotes the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks – “it is the job of science to take things apart to see how they work, it is the job of religion to put things together to see what they mean”.

Of change in theological thinking he writes: “The notion that the Church has always believed the same thing throughout its history cannot be sustained by any careful examination of Church history.”

He quotes Wilfred Cantrell Smith in *Questions of Religious Truth*: Christianity, I would suggest, is not absolutely true, impersonally, statistically; rather it can *become* true, if as you and I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorise it, insofar as we live it out from day to day. It becomes true as we take it off the shelf and personalize it, in dynamic actual existence.”

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## **Websites you may find interesting –**

<http://pcnbritain.org.uk> - The Progressive Christianity Network Britain

<http://www.modernchurch.org.uk> - Liberal faith in a changing world

<http://quakerspeak.com> - an American Quaker site with good articles

<https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4952/preaching-to-the-converted> - interesting article by Julian Baggini

## **NEWS**

### **Games man honoured**

That is the heading on page 4 of *The Friend* (December 16) about David Parlett of Croydon Meeting, who has been appointed a Visiting Professor of Games Design at the University of Suffolk.

David, who is a member of the Nontheist Friends Network Steering Group – and will be taking over from me as Editor of this Newsletter from April 2017 – has published several books on games and contributed to academic volumes such as *The Oxford Book of Card Games*, and *The Oxford History of Board Games*, and has invented a number of board games himself.

### **Britain Yearly Gathering**

Are you coming to Britain Yearly Gathering at Warwick University, Coventry, July 29 – August 5 2017. This too will be a chance for Network members to meet one another. Do let us know if you are planning to come so we can provide a contact for one another.

## **Prayer beyond belief**

If any group or meeting is interested in exploring the possibility of a day on the topic of Prayer beyond belief – please let me know. I provided a weekend retreat at Glenthorne in May on this topic, have spoken and written about it elsewhere, and am due to provide such a day for Milton Keynes Meeting in September.

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# **Our open conference**

March 24 – 27 2017  
At Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre

## **"God - or whatever you call it" & "Jesus - whoever he may be"**

An exploration in small groups stimulated by our keynote speakers - Rhiannon Grant and John Lampen.

### ***God – or whatever you call it***

Rhiannon Grant, a staff member at Woodbrooke, has run a number of Quaker workshops exploring this quotation from Rex Ambler – “*God – or whatever you call it*”. There are many ways of articulating what Friends mean by “the Light”, “the Spirit”, “the Divine” or “God”.

Meeting for Sufferings last year established a Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group (RPG) who in turn invited 25 Quakers from a broad range of views to explore whether we can make the issue “less polarized”. Rhiannon Grant is gifted at helping Friends to do just that.

Our aim as a Network is to “explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys.” We want to ensure that the Religious Society of Friends is an “inclusive rather than an exclusive Society”, and we are seeking in this conference to take this exploration forward.

Rex Ambler writes: *There are many ways of thinking and feeling about God...the variety is vast and bewildering. I am thinking of a very fundamental meaning of the word which we should all be able to recognize and accept. It is the sense of God as the ultimate reality of our life, whatever that might happen to be. We are not referring to a particular being that we could imagine or describe, but to whatever reality it might be that lies behind or beneath all the particular realities we know of....It is not so much a sense of God as that word is commonly understood, as a sense of 'a God-shaped hole'. I have no idea what it is – it may even be a huge void or an absence – but I may have a very clear sense that without it, and without a positive relationship to it, my life is incomplete and unsatisfactory.*

## **Jesus – whoever he may be**

John Lampen's Pendle Hill new booklet "Making a Portrait of Jesus" is, I believe, now available, and we plan to have copies on sale at our conference. He takes an unusual in-depth look at the man Jesus – his personality, teaching and behaviour – in a way which shows how singular, gifted, different, challenging, and encouraging is the Jesus of the gospels.

*He writes of Jesus: An extraordinary man..He could be passionately angry. His humour is unmistakable..He was a story-teller of genius; his parables are like good poems...his sayings are sharp and memorable..his moral teaching is found as much in his deeds as his words...He was sensitive to the way men discriminate against women..Jesus championed children in words and action...told his followers not to use violence, but his advice has been misunderstood.*

*I rejoice that the stories of Jesus have inspired countless people to live good lives and minister to those around them. At the same time, I am aghast at the failure of institutional Christianity to embody the teaching.*

As Advices and Queries Number 4 states: "The Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teaching of Jesus." It goes on to ask how we interpret our Quaker trust in the light of this heritage, and how "does Jesus speak to you today?"

In recent years, much new light has been shed on our understanding of the portrait of Jesus in the gospels, how the gospels came to be written and for what purpose. Two books in particular help us catch up with current thinking:

***Who on EARTH was JESUS? by David Boulton***  
***Biblical Literalism – a Gentile heresy by John Shelby Spong***

## **Work in groups**

This conference will provide plenty of opportunity for participants to share with and learn from others taking part. The first evening will give a brief introduction to some current initiatives by members of the Network – followed by time in groups to share news and discuss those initiatives.

There will be further group sessions after each of the two keynote speakers, and a relaxing Saturday evening enjoying *Quaking with Laughter*.

On Sunday morning, there will be a short session for the AGM of the Network, followed by a group session before our gathering for Meeting for Worship to end the conference.

# Conference programme

March 24 - 27. 2017. £210.

Enquiries and Booking Forms - contact: Hugh Rock: email:  
[hugh\\_rock@btconnect.com](mailto:hugh_rock@btconnect.com). 07500 914440

***The Booking Form is a separate attachment with this Newsletter for  
Members of our Network.***

## **Friday evening**

7.30 – Welcome. NFN Initiatives – including

- Think Tank – next steps
- Our concern about Quaker outreach leaflets
- Book of Quotations
- David Boulton's response to Derek Guiton
- David Boulton's tour of four universities – *Quakers & Humanism*

Time in small groups

9.30 Woodbrooke's Epilogue

## **Saturday**

7.30 – 9 Breakfast

8.30 – 9 Woodbrooke's Meeting for Worship

9.30 – **God – or whatever you call it** Rhiannon Grant

10.45 – Coffee

11.15 – 12.45 Groups – responding to Rhiannon's theme

12.45 – 3.p.m. Lunch and relaxation break

3.p.m. **Jesus – whoever he may be** John Lampen

4.15 Tea

4.45 – 6.15 Groups – responding to John's theme

6.15 Supper

7.30 Quaking with Laughter

9.30. Woodbrooke's Epilogue

## **Sunday**

8-9 Breakfast followed by clearing our rooms

9.30 AGM

10.30 Coffee

11- 11.40 Groups

11.45 – 12.30 Meeting for Worship & Farewells

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