

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

November 2016

IN THIS NEWSLETTER



Are you coming? We hope so - to

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.*

From *The Quaker Way – a rediscovery* page 31.

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 unmistakeable..He was a storyteller 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.

March 24 - 27. 2017. £210.

Enquiries and Booking Forms - contact: Hugh Rock: email:
hugh_rock@btconnect.com. 07500 914440

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

Conference programme

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

Hope to see you there. I will be sending out another Newsletter before too long with some notice of books you may find of interest.

Please note: David Boulton's Open Letter in response to Derek Guiton's criticism of David and of nontheism in the Religious

Society of Friends is now available from Quaker Bookshop – it is titled *Through a glass darkly – a defence of Quaker nontheism*, price £7. It is a constructive read.

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