

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK



www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

April 2015

Are you going to BYM? - If so – please let me know. It would be good to meet.

There will be a stall at the Groups Fair, and an Open Meeting at which NFN offers itself to those who want to question us, or exchange views with us, or support us.

I shall be at BYM from Friday to Monday – I would welcome the chance to meet, and to have support on either of these events.

Look at Documents in Advance – there is plenty for us to contribute to the discernment on ways forward for the Religious Society of Friends.

Michael Wright – Clerk of NFN. michaelwright80@virginmedia.com 07966 527697

If you intend to phone me, please wait until the evening of April 22nd. I shall be abroad in the meantime. Thanks

NFN at Sea of Faith

Our Network is looking to make links with other organisations in sympathy with our aims and outlook. One of these is the Sea of Faith Network, which “explores and promotes religious faith as a human creation” and draws much of its membership from the mainstream churches.

David Boulton has accepted SoF’s invitation to be one of the keynote speakers at its annual conference in July, the theme of which is *Towards a Better World*. David’s talk is titled “Utopia: a Good Place or No Place?”, and he plans to explore the Utopian tradition and reassess its value for those who dream of a better, healthier world from the perspective of progressive religion and humanism. He will follow the talk with a workshop on “Being a nontheist in a theist church”, drawing on our experience in the NFN and exploring what it might mean within progressive mainstream churches.

Also on the platform will be Andy Pakula, a nontheist Unitarian minister who was invited by Tim Berners-Lee as guest editor of the BBC’s *Today* programme to give an alternative “Thought for the Day” from an atheist perspective.

The conference is at Leicester University from noon on Thursday July 23 to 1pm on Saturday July 25. Details from www.sofconference.org.uk or email bookings@sofconference.org.uk There is an early-bird discount for early bookings.

Our Conference in March

Future of NFN

Your Steering Group had a bit of a panic in January when we only had 6 people signed up to come to the conference, and there had been a drop in people who had paid up to Membership. As it turned out we had 49, but four people were unable to attend because of the illness of two of them.

The panic experience in January skewed the conference to rethink what NFN is about, and the way forward. This was quickly resolved in the discussions on the Saturday morning, in which Friends present declared very strongly the need for the continued existence of NFN, and the value of the Woodbrooke conferences.

In the light of that, we have booked Woodbrooke for our **2016 conference April 1-3**, and made provisional bookings through to 2020.

We also made some decisions about starting our Financial Year on May 1st, with Membership fee of £10 starting from May 1st each year. You will each receive an invitation to Membership later in April.

We appointed a Steering Group with 3 new members, and losing some who have stepped down. We plan to meet as a Steering Group at Woodbrooke in August and plan the next conference, and a range of other activities. This Newsletter, sent by email, will keep you all up to date.

Keynote Speaker

Our Keynote Speaker was Jan Arriens, who had given a very stimulating and helpful address at Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath. We invited him to develop his thinking from that address. He did so, in a way that intrigued and refreshed some Friends, but others were less inclined to share his thinking or his wavelength.

He talked of the creative tension in the modern world between science – observation, experiments that can be replicated, statistical analysis on the one hand, and intuition or ‘feeling’ on the other. He referred to the writings of Karen Armstrong who draws a distinction between ‘mythos’ and ‘logos’. Armstrong sees a big swing towards the rational in the last few centuries, yet Jan is intrigued and indeed fascinated by the experiences people have recorded which are difficult to explain or explore with normal science.

The reason he gave for introducing this theme was that with the big swing towards the rational in the last few centuries, he was concerned that nontheists were discounting the mysterious, the numinous, and the mystical. He referred to the division between left and right hemisphere of the brain. In earlier life he had discounted this concept, but has been obliged to consider it afresh in the light of various published works, and his own explorations.

He quoted the philosopher turned neurologist Ian McGilchrist who has written *The Master and his Emissary* which he regards as a brilliant book. McGilchrist argues the

human brain has to attend the world in two completely different ways: the right hemisphere experiences 'the live, complex, embodied, world of individual, always unique being, forever in flux, a net of interdependencies' and in the other the left hemisphere in which we experience 'the virtual world that it has created, which is self consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other.'

He then explored a variety of unexplained phenomena, and quoted from Pim van Lommel, a Dutch cardiologist who in 2007 published *Consciousness Beyond Life*, which explored experiences described later by people described at the time as 'brain dead'. He writes of people recounting their experiences of 'enhanced consciousness'. This Jan says is 'a brave and indeed pioneering attempt to marry up empirical data – no matter how confounding – with contemporary scientific theories concerning the nature of matter and consciousness.'

Jan spoke too of Jill Bolte Taylor's book *My Stroke of Insight* – what she learned from having a stroke. Another example was from Mary Neal's *To Heaven and Back*, and the experience of a personal friend of Jan's.

Mystical experiences

He said: 'Although mystical experiences contain a lot of dross, there are also experiences from which there is no evident physiological explanation or association and others which defy the laws of physics as we know them at the present time. He talked of distinguishing between two different types of experiences: paranormal, and mystical experience.

He said: 'I would therefore conclude that mystical experience – which has been so central to the rise of religions all over the world – does have an inherent validity and that we can only lead fully realised lives if we embrace the Mystery. We may want to get beyond the human concepts such as God, but that does not mean throwing out all the bathwater of religion.'

He noted that all these experiences have a strong moral or ethical content and lead to profound changes in people's lives: to substantiate this claim he quoted from a number of well-known Quakers who have written or talked about their life-changing experiences, George Fox, James Nayler, John Woolman, Elias Hicks, Rufus Jones, and John Wilhelm Rowntree, George Gorman, and Harvey Gilman.

He then asked: 'Where does this leave the nontheist movement in Quakerism?' He sees it as 'a logical outcome of liberal Quakerism and indeed the tension between logos and mythos that has characterised Quakerism from the beginning.'

Nontheism, he argued, 'shares in the tensions between reason and intuition, and head and heart, that have been with us from the beginning'. He urged the Network to 'maintain the idea of facing both ways. The tension between reasons and intuition will not go away. But in tilting rationally against "God", don't throw the baby out with the bathwater and discard the mythos....Quakerism has a deeply mystical base.'

He said the real battle, as he saw it, 'is not between theism and nontheism, but between nontheism and reductionist humanism. When religions arise out of mystical

experience, people seek to make sense of that experience and their own intuitive inner awareness through the use of metaphor. The danger arises when the metaphor ossifies and becomes real and is venerated in its own right.'

I have here given a précis of the text from which Jan spoke, and quoted excerpts, on a theme to which he has obviously given much thought. Michael Wright

Workshops

We had five workshops in which people had the opportunity to explore

A fish out of water? Miriam Branson explored with those who attended her workshop

- What makes life easier for a non-theist in their local meeting?
- What makes life more difficult for a non-theist in their local meeting?

Mind your Language Jean and Brian Wardrop provided Friends with the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences on:

- What do we mean by 'inclusive' language?
- What is 'exclusive' language?
- How does inclusive/exclusive language make us feel, and what, therefore, are the implications for inreach and outreach?

An exercise of prayer - Michael Wright shared experiences of a form of prayer not address to any god, and invited Friends to try them out.

Everyday Mysticism – Maggie Taylor-Saunders explored with her group ideas of Spirituality – what some people call 'Spiritual But Not Religious'.

Is spiritual experience real or worthwhile? Trevor Bending invited Friends to share their own experiences, or absence thereof.

It has taken some time to agree the draft of the Evaluation Sheets, which have only just been sent to Conference Members. I can offer feedback on these workshops in a future Newsletter.

Ways forward for NFN The Annual General Meeting

After coffee on the Saturday the whole conference engaged in considering various ways forward for NFN and decisions on these matters were later agreed at the Annual General Meeting after tea.

Clerk's Report – I gave an account of our activities during the year – with Sarah Richards and myself speaking at events organised by Quaker Committee for Christian and Inter-faith Relations at Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath, and Jean Wardrop

speaking at a joint London Quakers and Quaker Universalist event at Friends House. Other speaking events are scheduled for the coming months. We are exploring possible co-operation with other groups which share some of our concerns.

In response to the Swarthmore Lecture at Bath, and the distress some Friends experienced at feeling rejected, I wrote my response to Ben's book. Nearly 90 copies of my essay have been sold from the Woodbrooke bookstall, and many more have been circulated by email, and received a very positive response in some quarters, and as you might expect – utterly rejected in others.

Membership Secretary's Report – Miriam Branson reported a current paid up membership of 65 – (*we have an email contact list of over 200*) The Steering Group was asked to review the whole picture of membership and contact lists, and to draw up a new membership application form for use from May 1st. It was agreed that annual membership will be £10 from May 1st.

Treasurer's Report – illness prevented our Treasurer from being with us. Her report showed a bank balance of around £7,000. She proposed a future financial year from May 1st – April 30th which from next year will give us a more accurate understanding of our finances after the expenses of the annual conference have been fully met. This was agreed.

Website – Brian Wardrop who provides us with technical support told us the website which went live in August 2013 has had an average of 8 visits a day, and about 60 downloads a month. The discussion group has 47 members, but spasmodic use. We agreed to explore future possibilities.

Proposals to change the Constitution – after careful discernment it was decided not to suspend the constitution and introduce radical changes. Some small amendments will be brought forward to the next AGM.

Steering Group – those appointed for 2015-16 are Trevor Bending, Frank Bonner, David Boulton, Miriam Branson, Gisela Creed, Hugh Rock, Deepa Parry-Gupta, Sarah Richards, Brian Wardrop, Michael Wright, and Michael Yates.

After the AGM, the Steering Group agreed that the aim of the Network be slightly altered with the addition of the second sentence below – and the next AGM asked to incorporate this into our constitution – to read:

The Network's aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We want to ensure that our Religious Society of Friends in Britain is an inclusive rather than an exclusive Society. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences, and journeys.

Quaking with Laughter – in the evening we were greatly entertained with some stories, a challenge, and a quiz. Jane Burns who recited "Albert and the Lion" wrote

some additional verses which she has kindly agreed to share with you all – they are at the end of this Newsletter.

Sunday morning discussion

Ways forward for NFN - Making our contribution

On Sunday morning we considered some possible contributions that we as a Network, and as individuals, can make to the Religious Society of Friends. Both Jan Arriens and Michael Wright put forward ideas.

Jan Arriens – Value both logos and mythos – the mystical tradition of Quakerism

said he valued the contribution of Nontheist Friends Network to the Society. It has been raising ideas needed within the Society. George Fox had challenged the churches on their use of scripture and dogma. He didn't need church buildings, or dogmas. In 2015 NFN knocks away one of the last remaining dogmas – God.

So there are two choices for the way forward.

One – retain the 'empty plinth' – the inner awareness and connectedness – continuing the progression of liberal Quakerism. This is a logical development of what has gone before. OR

Two – go down the road of secularism and atheism.

Jan said we need to look at the language we use. We have to revise Quaker Faith and Practice, and Advices and Queries. He said he doesn't want to lose the underlying. Quakerism is a stripped down form of religion – if you lose the sense of 'the other' you lose the essence of Quakerism.

Mystical experience ties in with the developing Quaker tradition. It doesn't deny its existence or come up with flimsy rejections. It is part of the human condition. His appeal to us was to engage with these things – they make life richer and fuller.

What is consciousness? Consider both the left brain and right brain concepts. Are we are fundamentally wired to have both logos and mythos within us?

His last point was that the smaller organisation (NFN) has to decide whether it stays within the tradition or not.

Michael Wright - Engagement with Quaker education and developmental ideas

Young Friends - I brought some findings of views and beliefs of Young Friends, gathered by Simon Best of Woodbrooke, and asked for help from any Network members in close touch with Young Friends to help us find appropriate ways to

reach Young Friends and invite them to contribute to our thinking. **All NF Networkers – please respond if you have good contacts with Young Friends.**

New Expressions of Quaker Community – this is a resource pack from Quaker Life for meetings interested in being a more creative community, and being open to exploring new ways of being a Quaker community, and who are seeking radical or fresh ways of engaging with local communities outside their meeting house door. A copy was sent to each Local Meeting Clerk last autumn.

It has some guidance of ways of working with the material, and the programme begins with Friends sharing their journeys into Friends, exploring understanding ourselves and our local communities, and shaping possibilities for the future.

We can all encourage our Local Meetings to engage with this material.

Being Friends Together – This is a learning project from Woodbrooke and Quaker Life. It has a great variety of material, which can be downloaded from the internet (It costs £5 a year to access and download the material. They hope all Local Meetings will consider joining) Its themes include:

- ***Growing as community together*** – warmth, welcome, wholeness; gifts, ministry, leadership; knowing each other in things that are eternal...and everyday
- ***Deepening the life of the Spirit together*** – Quaker spirituality; worship; spiritual practice and prayer
- ***Exploring our living tradition together*** – Quaker history and roots; Jesus and the Bible; the Quaker way: rooted in Christianity, open to new light.
- ***Being in the world together*** - Testimony; economic justice; peace; sustainability

These two programmes – New Expressions, and Being Friends – are ones we can each encourage our Local Meetings to engage in.

Five Year Strategy – Last year I invited everyone in touch with our Network to offer thoughts on ideas for the new Five Year Strategy, but I received not one response. This was an opportunity we failed to take up. There is an opportunity for Friends to contribute to the discernment of the new Five Year Strategy when it comes for consideration at Britain Yearly Meeting.

BYM – I hope Network Friends will consider coming to Britain Yearly Meeting, May 1-4 at Friends House, and contribute constructively to our discernment as a Yearly Meeting. If you are coming – please let me know. If you are able to support us at the Group Fair, or a tea-time meeting on the Sunday – we will be grateful for your support.

Regional NFN events – Can Friends in different areas of Britain consider hosting a NFN regional event? Are there possibilities in Glasgow, Bristol, Exeter, York, London, Chester or Manchester, Norwich/East Anglia – or anywhere else? If you would be willing to arrange something in your area, please let me know.

Contact with other groups – At our conference in 2014, Paul Parker our Recording Clerk said he thought that NFN ecumenical and international contacts could help the Society in a variety of ways. We have contacts with Friends in the USA, Canada, and Australia. We will explore further possibilities during the coming year.

Feedback from the conference – impressions of response from the discussion groups and feedback to the plenary session:

- We can contribute to shaping the way forward for Quakers
- Grateful to Jan for stirring us up with his mystical message – but not a road that discussion group wished to travel.
- One Friend recently discovering her lost Christianity and finding it not incompatible with being a nontheist.
- Both value and possible danger of contact with other groups. Labelling oneself ‘nontheist’ might set up other Christians in a conflict which might not otherwise be there.
- Network has been obsessed with process – too much focus on ‘housekeeping’
- Need for a moral direction.
- Testimonies are the fruits of spirituality – they are not aspirational but are the results of a Quaker lived life.
- We can create bridges with people who are stuck – theologically, spiritually.
- Fear that nontheists will split off and form a separate group. Pay attention to those anxieties.
- We need to communicate with other Friends that we are very much Quakers.
- Dislike the phrase ‘that of God in everyone’ – it has become a creed. Why cannot we say what we mean in 21st century language -‘god’ is a meaningless word. It used to be the explanation, which we no longer need, for natural events. What is important is love and compassion.
- When we hear definitions of god that nontheists do not believe in, I think nontheism is mainstream Quakerism.
- We struggle with metaphor. ‘Light’ and ‘God’ are metaphors. Meet people at their deepest need – with wonder, mystery and joy

Following the reading of Albert and the Lion at the Quaking with Laughter evening at the Non-Theist Conference at Woodbrooke, the following ditty came to mind....

So time went by for the Ramsbottoms
They went to church - they always had
Ma enjoyed the singing of hymns
Pa said the preacher weren't too bad

But they got tired of all the rituals
thought the'd look round and see
Other ways of thinking of God
And how worshipping might be

So one day they went to the Quakers
The doorkeeper seemed friendly and kind
Pa said that Quakers were good people
Tending to speak their mind

For many years they went to Meeting
Ma helped with refreshments and teas
They made good Friends and did their best
But not always quite at ease

One day Ma said to Pa
'what do you really think about God?
Are there questions to be asked
Things not being said?

Pa said he had heard of Non-Theists
(Still Quakers you understand)
There was a Conference being held
And so the weekend was planned

They arrived at Woodbrooke
Both very impressed
A beautiful house and garden
And cooking at its best

Listening and talking.....
Still quakers through and through
For themselves, and their beliefs..
they needed to be true

Jane Burn Banbury and Evesham Area Meeting

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