

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

December 2015



In this issue

Details of our annual conference at Woodbrooke
April 1-3 2016

**Note: reduced fee for booking made before
December 31st 2015**

Booking form is an attached file with this Newsletter.

* * * *

Weekend course at Glenthorne May 6-8

PRAYER BEYOND BELIEF

Led by Michael Wright – details on page 4

* * * *

An invitation to explore ideas – beginning on page 5

*Your opportunity to offer thoughts, and comment on
others' thoughts about theism/nontheism.*

NFN Woodbrooke Conference

April 1 – 3 2016

Celebrating our diversity

Exploring Varieties of Nontheist Experience

Sharing experiences & learning from one another

- **Workshops** – could you offer to lead one?
- **Speakers' Corner** – would you offer to speak?
- **Base Groups** – engaging with the same group of people

Friday: After a welcome, and brief introduction to the theme, we will go straight into Base Groups to share our experiences in Friends.

Saturday: Speakers Corner – opt for who you want to hear.

Workshops - 75 minutes – each offered twice

Base Groups – & after supper - Quaking with laughter

Sunday: AGM - later Plenary (as led) & Meeting for Worship

This gathering is an opportunity to really engage with each other in sharing ideas, experiences, and ways of being and expressing ourselves. We have some interesting topics and workshops – and will welcome offers from members who also have something to share. See details below: -

Conference fee

Book before December 31st 2015 - £195.00

Book by December 31st for the lower cost

Book after January 1st 2016 - £215.00

Please do not let a lack of funds prevent you from coming. Ask for a bursary from your Local or Area Meeting – several have provided bursaries for our conferences.

If neither of your Meetings are able to help you, we will help you.

* * * * *

Workshops – We will give details later of the choice of workshops available. If any of our members has ideas for leading a workshop please send your proposal as early as possible to our Clerk.

Speakers – Have you a topic you would like to speak on for up to 10 minutes? We would like to hear your topic – and a brief outline of what you have to say – as early as possible. Please send details to our Clerk.

Base Groups – We want to provide the opportunity to share with the same group of Friends on more than one occasion our understanding of the range of experiences, practices and ideas about nontheism, from within and beyond the Religious Society of Friends.

Michael Wright: Clerk - michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

Please complete the attached Booking Form – in separate file attachment - and return it with your cheque payable to Nontheist Friends Network to

NFN Annual Conference,
Loddon Park Farmhouse,
Twyford. RG10 9RY

Tel: 07500 914440

Weekend course at Glenthorne

May 6-8 2016

Prayer beyond belief

Led by Michael Wright

Clerk of the Nontheist Friends Network

Spiritual exercises which explore and experience deep silence can be transforming without needing words, mental pictures, or a divine being. Prayer can still be enriching, with or without God.

It can include the practice of awe and wonder, rather than worship; of gratitude, empathy and appreciation of others, of self-examination, and reflecting on our concerns, our values, and our. It can include Such spiritual exercises can feed our preparation for Meeting for Worship.

This relaxed weekend explores and experiments with such spiritual exercises “on the hoof” while walking for example, or being “still and cool” while sitting. Advices and Queries 8-16 are considered in some detail from a nontheist perspective.

Course leader contact information:

Telephone: 07966 527697 or 01642 851919

Email: michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

* * *

The Network’s proposed aim

The Steering Group has agreed to propose to the AGM at the Conference next April that the aim of the Network, as stated in our constitution shall be amended to include the words in italics, 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 Society.* We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences, and journeys.

* * * * *

An invitation to explore ideas

From Michael Wright

This is an invitation to you Reader, to share in an exploration of ideas. Meeting for Sufferings has set up a Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group. That Group has invited some people, of whom I am one, to explore issues relating to spiritual experience, belief and language in Britain Yearly Meeting.

One of its key topics is to be ways of expressing ideas about our Quaker understanding of God. They feel that “theism/nontheism” is an inadequate description of the issue, and is unhelpful, as it tends to imply an either/or approach which doesn’t acknowledge the variety of insights which exist. They wonder if more helpful ways of framing this issue can be found.

In the next Newsletter in the New Year, I shall offer some of my own ideas on some aspects of these issues. I prefer to work by offering a draft, and receiving comments, criticisms, suggestions for reframing, and for clarifying ideas as I progress to a final draft. If you are willing to help me by engaging in this process, I shall be very pleased indeed. The final edited piece will not be a committee draft but will be my own thoughts, after they have been challenged, encouraged and influenced by feedback that I receive.

In the meantime, I will welcome your thoughts on three key issues, set out below.

Mystery, Metaphor, Meaning

Our religious language seeks to describe, and maybe to explain, experiences, relationships, and convictions. How these are described and understood vary from person to person. In a Meeting for Worship, each of us shares a common experience, yet the impact of that experience is different for each one of us.

What we get from any event is filtered through our individual life experiences: much will depend upon our current pre-occupations, pressures or opportunities, our state of health, our upbringing and education that have shaped our beliefs, convictions, and our relationships.

An insight that sometimes comes in the quiet of Meeting for Worship will be understood by some Friends as an insight from “outside” or “beyond” us. For others it may be identified as a personal response to a request for help, an answer to prayer. For some it may be regarded as a welcome and mysterious “gift” and may be described as an experience of the Light. Others, including myself, are inclined to regard such an insight as an occasional and natural consequence of spending time with others devoted to being “still and cool” in our minds.

Sometimes the shared experience is a shared awareness of a corporate experience, which can be quite profound.

How do you describe the experience of the insights that come to you in Meeting for Worship?

Much of our religious language is in metaphor – an attempt to explain our understanding of concepts and experiences that are difficult to describe so we find it helpful to use ideas and words that come close to what we are trying to explain. So often concepts of the divine are conveyed in anthropomorphic metaphors and we end up with concepts of God as the magnificent loving, all knowing father. Such a metaphor has become more of a problem than a help to many people.

Some people find poetry, and Quaker language such the “Light” is more helpful. Rex Andrews in his recently published book *GOD in a nutshell – a short guide to the big question* (reviewed in The Friend November 26th 2015) prefers to use the name God, thinking of it as “X – the Power we live by”, and others use “Life-force”. As Andrews writes in the Introduction to his book: “These man-made gods, *constructed* of various elements welded together, are artistic and poetic creations. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, many people fail to recognize the symbolism, anthropomorphism and other poetic devices used in their construction, and find themselves embattled about unimportant, extraneous details.” His book “proposes a concept of “God” appropriate for the 21st century. How far he succeeds you have to judge for yourself.

Do you find a need for metaphors in speaking of your experiences? If so – which do you find helpful? How else do you seek to explain your experiences in the shared silence of Meetings for Worship?

Our Network for nontheist Friends seeks to support those of us who regard religion as a human creation, rather than a divine revelation. Amongst us there is a wide range of thinking about religious content, and what some of us call “spiritual experiences”, and others may call “creative thinking”, or use other terms altogether. Some us cherish a sense of mystery, even mystical, whereas others find such concepts meaningless.

The Quaker way is clearly not just about compassionate direct action and campaigning for peace, justice, and hospitality. Fundamental to it is our experience of shared silence – whether as “waiting”, “being open”, “seeking to be led” “engagement with the Light or the Divine”. This is the area it will be helpful to have some responses from readers of this Newsletter.

How do you describe “Quaker spirituality”? How do you try to explain what you are doing in a Meeting for Worship to an enquirer?

POSTSCRIPT: I was hoping to offer some of my answers to these questions – but have run out of time to get them clear. I need to send out this Newsletter this week to remind readers of the discount available only until December 31st for our annual conference at Woodbrooke April 1-3.

**Newsletter Editor: Michael Wright michaelwright80@virginmedia.com
07966 527697**