

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

February 2016



Nontheist
Friends Network

Are you coming to our Woodbrooke weekend?

April 1 – 3 2016.

Places are still available – please fill in the application form in the attached file.

This weekend is planned to enable us all to share with one another our experiences of being Members or Attenders in Britain Yearly Meeting, and in encounters with other people outside our Religious Society of Friends. There is much to learn and benefit from each other.

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.

Workshops

SPIRITUALITY IN A NONTHEIST CONTEXT - Sarah Siddle – Darlington LM This workshop is to explore the idea of spirituality in a nontheist context. After a brief introduction we will have an open discussion about our ideas of what is meant by the *Spiritual*, what our personal experiences of the spiritual might be, and how far our ideas of things like beauty are culture dependent. This might include our ideas about right and wrong. The discussion will not be tied to any particular direction: it will be free-flowing and may lead us in some interesting directions!

BOOK OF DISCIPLINE REVIEW GROUP - THEOLOGY THINK-TANK - Michael Wright with David Boulton – will share their experiences of being part of the Theology Think Tank, established by the Review Group (set up by Meeting for Sufferings) to consider the question: ***“Is it possible to re-frame the differing perspectives of British Quakers, which often been characterised by the shorthand ‘theism/nontheism’, so as to be less polarised?***

This group of nearly 30 Friends have been exchanging emails since September on this topic, and are to hold a residential face-to-face exploration of the issue at Woodbrooke February 19-21.

If you have ideas for leading a workshop please send your proposal as early as possible to our Clerk.

Speakers

David Parlett – Croydon LM *My present understanding of God* David describes himself as “a non-theist in that I don’t believe in the *existence* of God, yet I am a theist in that what I believe in is the *presence* of God”

Miriam Branson – Bewdley LM *Talking about God in the Society of Friends*
Miriam says she can offer an analysis of why we don’t talk about God very much in our Meetings; our/her fear of doing so; and why she believes it would be a lot better if we did.

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. **Any other offers to Speak – please send details to the Clerk.**

Michael Wright: Clerk - michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

Conference fee £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.

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

More in this Newsletter – see below

Formal notice of our AGM & last year’s minutes pages 3 & 4

An Invitation to explore ideas – more from my piece in January pp 4 - 6

Prayer Beyond Belief – a weekend exploration at Glenthorne in May p 7

Some books to recommend pages 8 onwards

Notice of the Annual General Meeting of the Nontheist Friends Network

The Annual General Meeting of the Nontheist Friends Network to be held at
Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre
1046 Bristol Road, Birmingham. B26 6LJ
on Sunday April 3rd at 9.30.a.m.

AGENDA

1. The Minutes of the last Annual General Meeting which was held on March 21st 2015. * *see attached later in this newsletter*
2. Clerk's Report
3. Treasurer's Report
4. Membership Secretary's Report
5. Proposal to add the sentence in bold italics below to our Statement of Aim of the Network. **This is giving the required 10 days notice in advance of any proposals to amend our constitution**

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 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.

6. Appointment of Steering Group for 2016/17
The Current Steering Group is: Trevor Bending, Frank Bonner, David Boulton, Miriam Branson, Gisela Creed, Deepa Parry-Gupta, Hugh Rock, Sarah Siddle (Treasurer and Membership Secretary), Brian Wardrop, Michael Wright (Clerk), Michael Yates.
Frank Bonner, Miriam Branson, and Michael Yates have stated they do not wish to be appointed to serve as members of the Steering Group for this coming year.
7. Any other business for the Annual General Meeting should be notified to the Clerk before March 10th.

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on March 21st 2015

Minutes of the previous AGM – The minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting held on March 22nd 2014 were read.

Clerk's Report – The Clerk gave an account of the Network's activities during the year. He and Sarah Richards spoke at events organised by Quaker Committee for Christian and Inter-faith Relations at Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath. Jean Wardrop spoke 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, as some Friends expressed their distress to him after hearing it, Michael Wright wrote a personal response to the content of the book of the lecture. Nearly 90 copies of his 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 might expect be expected, were utterly rejected in others.

Membership Secretary's Report – Our Membership Secretary, Miriam Branson reported a current paid up membership of 65 – (*with 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.

Michael Wright: Clerk

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An invitation to explore ideas

In the January Newsletter I invited readers to respond to my thoughts in preparation for participating this coming weekend at Woodbrooke in a gathering of 23 Friends to explore issues of theism/nontheism.

I am grateful to the five Friends who responded, but their thoughts do not fit together in such a way that I can easily give feed back on their contributions – expect to say that one Friend emphasized a concern not to attribute what I believe other Friends might be thinking, so I should stick to what my own thoughts are, and leave others to speak for themselves.

I did cop out in January of responding to the question below. Here are my current thoughts in response to this question.

Can we find fresh ways of articulating the condition of British Friends in our time?

I think we can if we focus on a number of features of the Quaker way.

Quaker Conversations – Public conversations are often polarized. Television and radio discussions so often seem to be two people with opposing views each putting their point of view as strongly as possible, and really not listening to the other point of view.

The current debate on whether we should be in or out of the European Community is such an example. I want to encourage in my local meeting a series of public conversations that invite people to present their case in a Quakerly way: beginning and ending in shared reflective silence, then seeking to listen to each other, maybe having one or more pauses for silent reflection and digestion of what has been heard. Am I being naive, simplistic, or over-optimistic? I hope not. We are planning to start doing so on a Sunday afternoon in May, with a Quaker MEP who grew up in our meeting who is in favour of us remaining a member of the Community, and finding someone from the other point of view who is prepared to present their case, and listen, within this Quaker setting. Our aim will be to understand rather than to argue – to discern rather than dispute. See A&Q 17

Transformation – The report in *The Friend* this week (Feb 18) of the Friends World Committee for Consultation Plenary Meeting, held in January in Pisac, Peru is very much focused on Transformation. The Quaker Way has always regarded personal transformation, and the transformation of society as important fruits of our vision and life-style. Has our vision become a bit pedestrian, so we jog along content to be participants in a Society, but not necessarily radically changed by our commitment as Quakers?

Hospitality – I recently read a book on the Bible, in which I was struck by a number of themes that run through those books that I hadn't really considered closely before. One of these themes is hospitality, and the emphasis in Middle Eastern culture of giving hospitality to the wider family, to the visitor or the stranger. For myself I want to take a fresh look at the hospitality offered in my home, and in our Meeting Houses, – for food, fellowship, and exploration of Quakerly attitudes and testimony. See A&Q 18

Love – what does love demand of us? The Quaker way is surely a challenge, an encouragement, and an inspiration to us to love, and to accept love from others. Thankfully Friends have been in the forefront of accepting all types of loving relationships, in which love changes us, and those we engage with. Taking a fresh look at the way in which George Fox, James Nayler and other Friends over the centuries have shown love – including David Amos' response to being stoned in a Palestinian orchard (Reflection in *The Friend*, p12 February 12th 2016) is indeed both a challenge and an encouragement. This demonstration of a loving spirit is what has brought so many to enquire about sharing the Quaker way. See A&Q 28

Generosity – Understanding and living with a generosity of spirit, with fellow Quakers, and with people who challenge or disagree with the Quaker way, is something we could, with benefit, come to look at afresh. Some of us naively thought we would not encounter a narrowness of spirit with the Society of Friends, but quite a number of us have done so – either seeing it demonstrated by Friends who share our approach to religion, or being on the receiving end from those who think we have no place in our Society. See A&Q 22

Simplicity – I am encouraged by certain Friends to explore afresh our witness to simplicity in life-style, environmental care, and many other ways. I have not found it easy, but step by small step I recognize a number of changes in my life, prompted by being a Quaker. See A&Q 41

Diversity - I heard on *Thought for the Day* this morning (Feb 18) Tom Butler, former bishop of Southwark, talking about the tension within the Anglican church world-wide over issues of human sexuality. He concluded with consideration of the tension between order and diversity, for the good of all, which he believes lies at the heart of any healthy society. We emphasise that diversity in all sorts of ways, but it is also at the heart of the tension within the Religious Society of Friends on our different views and experiences of the “divine”. I hope we can find a way of holding that tension – for the good of all.

Weekend course at Glenthorne

May 6-8 2016

Prayer beyond belief

Led by Michael Wright

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. Courtesy, generosity, hospitality and compassion are also expressions of prayer. Such spiritual exercises can feed our preparation for Meeting for Worship. Advices and Queries 8-16 are considered in some detail from this perspective.

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.

The course cost is £170.

For booking details see: www.glenthorne.com or phone 015394 35389

Glenthorne Quaker Centre, Easedale Road, Grasmere, Cumbria. LA22 9QH

Course leader contact information:

Telephone: 07966 527697 or 01642 851919

Email: michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

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Books

Here are some books which may be of interest to those who wish to explore experiences and thoughts that have influenced some members of the Nontheist Friends Network

You will find reviews and other details of all these books if you Google and title and author.

Books by David Boulton

The Trouble with God – *building the republic of heaven*. 2002 David Boulton recounted his own religious journey, from childhood within the Plymouth Brethren to an adult journey via socialism to humanism. Then he embarks on God's journey – human understanding of God from earliest times to the present day. Then he looks at language and culture, in which religious content is threaded through the literature, art and music of our culture. He wants us to value the myths of faith, as we seek to create the heavenly republic on earth.

Who on EARTH was JESUS? – *The modern quest for the Jesus of History*. O Books. 2008. Described by Marcus Borg as: "The best and most thorough account of the breadth and variety of historical Jesus scholarship. Lively, informed, fair, and highly recommended."

Godless for God's Sake – *nontheism in contemporary Quakerism*. Edited by David Boulton 2006.

27 Quakers from 13 Yearly Meetings in four countries tell how they combine committed membership of the Religious Society of Friends with rejection of traditional belief in a transcendent, personal and supernatural God.

(available from Nontheist Friends Network £9.50 plus postage)

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With or Without God – *why the way we live is more important than what we believe* – by Greta Vosper. Harper. 2008 She argues for a radical change in Christian churches with an emphasis not on beliefs but on just and compassionate living, by spiritually aware and open-minded people.

Christianity without God – by Lloyd Geering. Bridget Williams Books 2002. Geering was a New Zealander, Theology Professor and Presbyterian. He sees the modern secular form of Christian culture as the logical consequence of the basic doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. He links modern humanism with the neglected Wisdom stream of the Old Testament, and says the world now needs to cultivate the wisdom of Christianity not a supernatural saviour.

Christian Atheist – *belonging without believing*. By Brian Mountford. O Books. 2011. This is based on conversations with 12 people who remain participants

in Christian church life and worship but who cannot accept the metaphysical claims or dogmas. He believes the ground between atheist and religious adherent is a fertile source of meaning and value.

God Revised – how religion must evolve in a scientific age. By Galen Guerngerich. Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. An American Unitarian Minister (and former Mennonite) charts the divide between modern world views and traditional religious dogmas. As we have revised our understanding of so many things in life through the explosion in knowledge, he argues we need to revise our understanding of God in the light of this too.

Treasure beneath the hearth – myth, gospel and spirituality today. By Edward Walker Christian Alternative publishing 2015. Walker calls for a fresh evaluation of myth, and an approach to the gospels through modern, critical scholarship, with insights from depth psychology.

Buddhism without beliefs – a contemporary guide to awakening. By Stephen Batchelor. Bloomsbury. 1997. He demystifies Buddhism by explaining what awakening is and how to practice it.

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist . Spiegel and Grau paperbacks. 2011. An account of his personal journey of exploration.

Two books by Karen Armstrong

A History of God – from Abraham to the present. Arrow Books. 1993 – an account of the evolution of belief.

The Case for God – what religion really means. Bodley. 2009 She explores the practice of religion – ritual, myth, prayer and practice of the Golden Rule – as the essence of religion, rather than speculative beliefs.

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The Changing Faces of Jesus by Geza Vermes. Penguin 2000. Modern scholarship exploring the historical figure of Jesus. Vermes was Professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford, who translated the Dead Sea Scrolls.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS – Very Short Introductions to

The Quakers – by Pink Dandelion

Christianity – by Linda Woodhead

Paul – by E.P.Sanders

Humanism – by Stephen Law

Books on the Quaker Way

An Introduction to Quakerism by Pink Dandelion. Cambridge University Press 2007. He charts the growth of the Quaker movement, its ideas and practices, from the 1650s to the present day, both in Britain and in North America.

The Spirit of the Quakers by Geoffrey Durham. Yale University Press 2010. An anthology of Quaker religious experience.

Being a Quaker – a guide for newcomers. Geoffrey Durham. Quaker Quest 2011 As it says – an excellent introductory guide for newcomers.

Listening to the Light – *how to bring Quaker simplicity and integrity into our lives.* Jim Pym. Rider. 1999 An insight into practical mysticism in the Quaker way.

Portrait in Grey – *a short history of the Quakers,* by John Punshon. Quaker Home Service 1984.

Light to live by – *an exploration of Quaker spirituality.* By Rex Ambler. Quaker Books 2002.

Reader – have you other books you can recommend and offer a brief review – not more than 100 words for each title please. I will include any responses from you in future Newsletters.

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