

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**

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

**January 2016**



Nontheist  
Friends Network

## **In this issue**

***Exploring ideas*** – page 2 - 7

***Your opportunity to offer your comments on my initial response to questions posed to the Think Tank on theism/nontheism within British Quakerism. M.W.***

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Details of our annual conference at Woodbrooke  
April 1-3 2016 page 8 & 9  
*Currently about half full – so if you hope to come....*

***Booking form is an attached file with this Newsletter.***

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*Weekend course at Glenthorne May 6-8*

### ***PRAYER BEYOND BELIEF***

*Led by Michael Wright – details on page 10*

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## **KNOWLEDGE, BELIEF AND FAITH**

**An article by Bob Booth, first published in Quaker Universalist, and reproduced here – in an attached file - by permission.**

*Bob suggests that our increase in knowledge leads to a more universal faith and that this should affect revision of Advices & Queries and Quaker Faith & Practice*

# An invitation to explore ideas

I am part of a diverse group (invited by the Revision Planning Group) which is consulting together by email, and some of us will be meeting face to face at Woodbrooke - February 19-21 - to explore responses on this issue from a variety of perspectives.

The questions posed to us by the Group are in bold type. The responses are my thoughts - I will welcome comments from you - whether supportive or critical, in helping me to think further through my responses to them. I am quite ready to take on board perspectives, information, and views which I have not considered before this, to help me develop my own thinking and responses.

**Michael Wright - email: [michaelwright80@virginmedia.com](mailto:michaelwright80@virginmedia.com)**

The Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group has asked the question:

***Is it possible to re-frame the differing perspectives of British Quakers, which have often been characterised by the shorthand 'theism/nontheism', so as to be less polarised?*** That is what we are setting out to discover.

## **When we talk about God, what is it that we mean?**

The Quaker Life Outreach leaflet "*Quakers Today*" says: '*Every Quaker will have their own interpretation of the word "God", but in fact we all have a great deal in common and try not to spend too much time on definitions.*' With such a statement I feel at home as a Member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.

I think of God as a subjective projection. I think that people who believe in God have a belief in a Being that accords with their imagination and their needs. For some, God is kind, compassionate and loving; for others God is all those as well as being demanding, judgmental, and can be punishing. Some think of God as a distant being; others think of God as very personal: one who is leading, guiding, loving and protecting them in the intimate details of daily life.

I recognize that those who have a profound trust in such a god, are often empowered to great commitment, dedication, and even sacrifice in the service of their God. I think those of us who do not share that trust may have a similar strength of commitment and dedication, but probably do not share their willingness to sacrifice ourselves, to the same degree.

Others find it hard to describe what they mean by God. They experience Something, but are not quite sure Who or What that is. As they wish to avoid an anthropomorphic projection, they use words such as Power, Light, or Spirit, to convey a sense of source of guidance, wonder, awe, inspiration and inner strength.

Some have trust in a Creator, as a rational explanation of the origin of all that exists. The medieval Schoolmen produced rational "proofs" to show that the concept of

God is a necessary First Cause. That seems to me more of a rational understanding of a concept rather than an emotional commitment in a relationship. I recently read *There is a God* by Anthony Flew (Harper 2007) (subtitled: *How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind*). This philosopher, and life-long atheist, says that the discovery of DNA, and the fact that life emerged from inanimate material convinced him that there is a creative intelligence behind all that exists. I respect his view but do not share it.

The concept of "God" has met personal and corporate needs of people for millennia - with a variety of personalities and concepts. The classic gods are those of the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Norse, the Hindus, and many many more that were once powerful and popular, which have now faded from the current scene.

The Hebrews, who lived at first in an environment of many gods, were led to devote themselves to one God, who became the God of the Christians and Muslims. The experience and ways of thinking of early Christians developed the concept of the Trinity which is a unique theological concept, and one not shared by either Jews or Muslims.

Whereas I once had a traditional Christian orthodox concept of God (that I learned at school and was reinforced at church and theological college), that concept no longer relates to my experience. While there are many things I do not understand and cannot explain, I am very content to live with mystery and unexplained phenomena.

There are times when I experience feelings such as a deep peace, joy, and love; I find inspiration and encouragement, discover new insights, and leadings through spiritual activities in Meeting for Worship, in private prayer and contemplation, through reflection on readings, from experiences of relationships, from art and literature, music and other creative arts, and of the natural world. I can quite understand that many people regard these as experiences of God. I did so myself in the past.

When I was a teenager I had an overwhelming experience - out of the blue - of love, joy, and peace, that produced a profound change in me, challenged and changed my thinking, and led me to choosing to be baptised, confirmed, and later ordained. I thought at the time that it was an experience of God - the "Hound of Heaven" catching up with a rebel - me - who at the time was seeking to demonstrate God didn't exist. Now, I regard that experience as a natural one, not a supernatural one.

**When some of us call ourselves Christian, or Nontheist, or any other label, what do we really mean?**

I prefer to describe myself as a Quaker. I acknowledge myself to be one inspired by Jesus of Nazareth, by many Quaker voices, and by many other voices. I do not describe myself as a Christian - that is a designation that stems from the deification of Jesus in the letters of Paul of Tarsus, and in the great councils of the church in the fourth century. These days "Christianity" is so coloured by evangelical theology and fundamentalist concepts that I do not share, and that I prefer not to identify with.

I explain life without reference to God. I do recognise that God is significant, indeed essential, to many Friends and many Christians. I aim to be sensitive to their convictions and experience, and respectful of them. I recognise the experiences they talk about, without myself feeling the need to explain the source of them as God.

I prefer not to identify myself by a negative term, and so although I belong to the Nontheist Friends Network, I am not happy with its name. (Fellow members of the Steering Group of which I am Clerk know that, but also know that I accept it as their choice of the least worst of several possible titles they considered before opting for this one, a year or so before I joined it.)

I describe myself as a Quaker. I seek to be generally loyal to the Quaker tradition. I value Quaker history and testimony, practice the shared discernment characteristic of Quakers, fully participate in Meeting for Worship, and give service to my local Quaker community as a Trustee, amongst other responsibilities.

What some Friends discern as the will of God, I discern as a wisdom that emerges from practising the Quaker way, a corporate discernment that springs from seeking wisdom within the Quaker business method.

**Are we using different language to describe similar experiences, or do we have fundamentally different experiences that lead each of us to identify as Quaker?**

I think we are using different language to describe similar experiences. When I came to Quakers (for the second time) in 1998, I was looking for traditional Quaker experiences, and explaining them in traditional terms. I was waiting/listening/open to leading from a "beyond". It was after a year or so that I came to realise I was listening for a voice from within myself, or within the meeting. In time, I came to regard that voice as a natural phenomenon, not a supernatural one.

**Are there aspects of our tradition which we need to re-engage with, re-discover, re-claim for today?**

I would very much like to see British Friends re-engaging with and rediscovering the Bible as a source of stories, inspiration, and challenge. Early Friends were very clear that they sought to be guided not so much by the words of scripture, but by the Spirit whom they discerned as the source of scripture. They viewed the scriptures as revelation from God: those of us who have no belief in a god, naturally do not regard the scriptures as a revelation from a divine source.

I, like many others, value the books of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as work of history, religion, and literature which arose from the experiences of people in those days, and the bedrock material for many of the ethics and values, as well as art, music and literature of our civilisation.

The Quaker way of addressing biblical material has great relevance today. We pay attention not to the literal words so much as the spiritual insight, experience and wisdom that can be drawn out of them. The Jewish *midrash* tradition is one that

draws such insights from biblical material. The Bible is a treasure we need to refresh ourselves with, and find the confidence to share with others who value the scriptures, (including those who take them literally) but regard them differently from us. The Quaker way of regarding biblical material relates well to modern scholarship, and modern story-telling. It also can be a valuable way of engaging with inter-faith dialogue.

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

I think that there are a number of possible ways in which we can do so, but prefer to return to these in a later Newsletter.

### **How do we relate to wider contemporary theological movements?**

British Friends are not alone in encountering a difference among their membership between people who explain life with reference to God, and those who explain it without reference to God. Quakers are just much more open about acknowledging these differences.

While there are certainly a vast number of Christians who are committed to a relationship with the orthodox notion of God, there are, in my experience, quite a number of members of mainline churches who struggle to articulate or to identify with classic orthodox Christian belief, including belief in God. These people mostly keep quiet about it because to express their views would in many cases bring obloquy upon themselves, and in some cases they would be rejected and ejected from the fellowship that is important to them. Mostly their theological dilemmas and doubts are hidden behind a veneer of conformity, for fear of rocking the boat.

There is an international (rather hidden and discrete) network of Christian and Jewish clergy, based in north America, who no longer believe in God, yet still function as clergy. The practical difficulties of salary, pension and tied house make it a big hill to climb to be honest about their situation as their views change. I am pleased that British Quakerism allows for a much greater degree of openness and honesty: that to me allows for greater integrity.

There are movements in North America, New Zealand and Australia for example with luminaries writing such books as

- Gretta Vosper - a minister of the United Church of Canada - *With or Without God*
- Lloyd Geering a Presbyterian Professor from New Zealand - *Christianity without God*
- Brian Mountford - Vicar of the University Church in Oxford - *Christian Atheist*
- Val Webb - Australian theologian - *In Defence of Doubt*
- Galen Guengerich - American Unitarian - *GOD Revised*

George Fox had his transformational experience of an inner voice telling him that Christ Jesus alone could speak to his condition. His previous searchings with clergy,

within himself, and within the Bible, led him to a radical new understanding and practice of the faith he had grown up with, and which he had found life-less. His own experience challenged the accepted understandings of faith in his day.

The background to his transformation lay in the teachings of Martin Luther and other luminaries of the Reformation, together with the thinking and practices that developed from John Wycliffe in England, Jan Huss in Bohemia, the Mennonites and other radical Brethren in German-speaking lands. He enunciated a view of Jesus and his teaching that was not at all acceptable to the orthodox Christian thinkers of his day, for which he and other early Friends suffered much.

Since that time, there has been an explosion of knowledge - about the world in general, and in the realm of Biblical studies and theology. It is not surprising that while some people are convinced that the traditional words and concepts have life, truth and vigour today, others, as I do, question some of these, based on our current knowledge, experience, and ways of reasoning. We are radical in our day. Our inspiration and values draw deeply upon the teachings of Jesus, and of George Fox amongst others.

New radical movements within the Christian tradition have never been easily accepted at first. There was considerable resistance to Francis of Assisi and his friars, to Protestant reformers, to George Fox and early Quakers, to John Wesley and the Methodists, to the Evangelical revivalists, the Oxford Movement within the Anglican church, to Conscientious Objectors, to feminism and to equal treatment for both genders, and for people of different ethnicities, sexual orientation, and physical abilities.

Our appeal for religious practice without god is part of a tradition (agreed a minority one) that is as old as Christianity. The publication of *Honest to God* 50 years or so ago caused quite a furious reaction in the western world. Since then, traditionalists have hung in - with the zealous ones attracting converts to vibrant (and often large) congregations (yet seeming to modern western thinking to be narrow and irrational) and the less zealous ones finding fewer and fewer adherents.

I believe there is a place for those who are committed to belonging to a religious community - particularly the Quaker one - for whom experience and conviction lead us to a commitment to religious practice and fellowship without commitment to a god. It is radical - it is also spiritually, socially, and ethically fulfilling. We walk side by side with those who trust in God, on a pilgrimage of discovery and service, respectful of our fellow pilgrims, and quite ready to learn from them, even if we describe similar experiences using different words. We would like the opportunity to make it clear to people who are not Quakers that this is a legitimate way of being Quaker today.

### **What are the implications of all this for the unity and diversity of our meetings?**

My conviction is that the Quaker tradition - inevitably changed and shaped as it has been over more than three and half centuries - can cope with shared experiences explained in different ways. As long as the Meetings for Worship are regarded and practised as the basis of our spiritual life and transformation, and our Quaker Business Method is valued and practised as the source of wise discernment, our

testimony to love and peace, to equality and justice, to integrity and to respect for our environment are regarded as key to our Quaker way, based on the inspiration of the classic myths and writings of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, I trust that we can hold our unity in diversity. We are a pilgrim community - on a journey of discovery - and that community is a rainbow community of different colours in the spectrum of the one light.

**“Does anything unite this diverse group beyond our common love and humanity?” (Qf&p 29.16) “[Is there] anything Quakers today can say as one?” (Qf&p 29.17)**

I believe there is. The Quaker way, from the beginning, has been one of personal and corporate transformation. We are changed by belonging to the Quaker community. It is a learning community, in which we are each changed by our shared experience of our largely silent gatherings, by the common commitment to our Quaker testimony, by our Quaker business method, by our common heritage within the tradition that stems from the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and a willingness to be "open to new light, from whatever source it may come."

There is a real danger that we might lose sight of the fundamental basis of being Quaker - personal and corporate transformation. The Quaker tradition has from the beginning expected those who follow the Quaker way to seek by personal and corporate discipline, to have their lives changed through the Quaker spiritual practices: Meeting for Worship, personal spiritual practice focused on quietness, personal prayer, reflection on material from the Bible and other religious classics, and engagement with the current practices of "the world" in order to bring our own lives, and that of the communities in which we live, more and more to adopt the values taught within our tradition.

It is a tradition that is markedly different from other religious traditions, though there are many areas of common ground. We don't fit the general pattern of religious practice, and long may we continue to hold the light that we have been given to shine and illuminate those who wish to find it, as well as those who value it but choose not to walk in it.

Michael Wright

# 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 £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.***



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**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. *I have had two offers so far.*

**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. *I have had one offer so far.*

**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](mailto: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

### **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.

## 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.

#### **Course leader contact information:**

Telephone: 07966 527697 or 01642 851919

Email: [michaelwright80@virginmedia.com](mailto:michaelwright80@virginmedia.com)

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*An Attender at a Quaker Meeting in the Brighton area is looking for support and encouragement from Friends within reach, when seeking to be open about their theological position. If you can help, or you know of a Friend who can, please let me know – Michael Wright*

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