

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**

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



Nontheist  
Friends Network

**July 2015**

All Friends will have the opportunity to play a significant role in an important project which begins this October called

## ***Read Quaker Faith & Practice***

From October 2015 through to March 2017, there will be a well-publicised monthly programme of ways of looking in detail at different chapters in *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Soon we will all be hearing about it.

There will be a programme of ideas for discussion groups, regular columns in *The Friend*, a Facebook discussion page, and Twitter chats, which Friends will be encouraged to expand on in their local and area Meetings, local newsletters, personal discussions, and online.

This is an initiative by the Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group, established by Meeting for Sufferings. They are encouraging all Friends to get to know our current book of discipline well, before considering again whether or not it is time for a revision with a complete overhaul of the text.

It will be an opportunity for all of us to engage with other Friends in exploring a wide variety of aspects of our understanding of being Quaker. The topics will be much more varied than just the issue of theism/nontheism, though this will feature prominently. I find that a number of passages reflect the concerns of Friends 30 and more years ago, and there is a need for addressing current issues which do not currently feature or are not given sufficient attention. Among them that I identify are: environmental concerns, social justice and poverty, human rights, freedom of information, social media, safeguarding, equal pay and the living wage, same sex marriage, transgender, organ donation, concerns around assisted dying, inter-faith liaison, and ecumenical co-operation. Others will no doubt think of different topics.

The decision to make such a revision has not yet been made. A proposal to do so came to BYM at Bath in 2014, but the Meeting was not of one mind to go forward with it. As with the previous revision more than 30 years ago, Friends are being asked to really engage with the current text, and offer suggestions for changes, additions and deletions.

### **A Network exchange of ideas**

The Nontheist Friends Network Steering Group will meet for 24 hours at Woodbrooke on August 13/14 to plan our Annual Conference April 1-3 2016, and consider ways in which we will engage, encourage and support Friends in our Network to listen to the views of others, and express their own views in this ***Read Quaker Faith & Practice*** project.

**You are invited to send me, before August 12<sup>th</sup>, any thoughts you have for:**

- **The topics/content/conference structure/speakers for our Woodbrooke weekend conference: April 1- 3 2016.**
- **How you suggest we can help Friends in our Network engage with and express positively their ideas and opinions about the content of Quaker Faith and Practice over the next 18 months.**

## **Reframing dialogue around theism/nontheism**

The Revision Preparation Group (RPG) appointed by Meeting for Sufferings were last year given, as part of their Terms of Reference, a list of topics identified by MfS from their consultation in 2013-14 of “issues not covered or sufficiently covered in *QF&P*”. Top of the list came theism/nontheism. They feel this shorthand term is an inadequate description of the issue as it tends to imply an either/or approach which doesn’t acknowledge the variety and nuances of thoughts which exist. They rather see different colours of a spectrum, and seek to frame conversations about issues of belief and identity in a different way.

They have now invited David Boulton and myself – and others – to join with them in a process of finding a more helpful way of framing this issue. They ask us as concerned individuals, to work with others to listen, understand, and see if it is possible to find fresh ways of articulating the current condition of British Friends. This group will include some people who are used to ‘thinking theologically’ and some who might simply see themselves as concerned Friends.

We have not been invited to be spokespersons for our Network, but to engage creatively and analytically with others from a range of personal positions, exploring ideas and ways of expressing them.

Our NFN is a supportive Network, not a means of developing Group-think. I envisage exchanging and testing some of the ideas I will offer to the RPG with other Friends through this Network and in my Area Meeting and elsewhere. I expect to be challenged, perhaps encouraged, and prompted to clarify ways of explaining my own views to others, and as I listen to them explain their views to me. I will offer some draft ideas from time to time in the Newsletter, and I will value feedback, comment, and criticism from you all. I will seek to listen, consider, and reflect further – but inevitably what I offer to the RPG will be the views that I hold, open to the challenging responses of others including those in the RPG. Where I think it might help, I will bring forward thoughts others have put to me that I may not entirely share. I shall not be looking for a NFN mind-set, and David has made clear he won’t be either.

I hope Friends in this Network will take every opportunity to engage in discussions about the current content of *QF&P*, and seek to identify fresh material that might be helpful for any future revision group to consider. Perhaps some individuals will try their hand at writing paragraphs which could be helpful.

This is a great opportunity for us all to engage creatively with what being Quaker means to each of us, and learning from other Friends with different ideas. In this way, we can all grow personally, spiritually, and creatively.

**Michael Wright**

A Friend at our Woodbrooke Conference in March borrowed one of our small display banners for a meeting or conference. I failed to record which Friend did so. I will be so grateful if she will contact me. If it is no longer needed, I would be grateful to have it back to be available for others to borrow. Michael Wright

## **Congratulations**

Two members of our Steering Group have married recently. Warmest congratulations to Trevor Bending who has married Georgina Wright, and to Sarah Richards who has married Alan Siddle.

## ***Sapiens – a brief history of humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari**

I facilitate a Book Club at Middlesbrough FMH. One of the books that I am suggesting we might read there in the autumn is *Sapiens*. I am attaching, as a separate file, my summary of his book, which may be of interest to some of you.

## **The meaning and purpose of our lives!**

I was invited to speak at the Quaker Universalist Conference at Woodbrooke in May. It was only when I had agreed to speak that I discovered the four invited speakers were given the identical challenge: to speak on the meaning and purpose of my life! Well I don't think in those terms, so I had to respond in the best way I could. I spoke from notes and was asked to write them up into a narrative which was published in the current edition of the *Universalist* – their quarterly Journal. I have been asked to make the text available to members of the Nontheist Friends Network, so it is attached as a separate file to this Newsletter.

I hope with the next Newsletter to be able to circulate the text of David Boulton's address at the Sea of Faith conference this month.

## **Membership of the Network**

I remind you all who receive this email that Membership of the Network costs £10 a year, from May to April. A number of you have not yet renewed your membership. I am attaching as a separate file a Membership Form, which needs to be sent with the subscription (payable to Nontheist Friends Network) to Sarah Siddle, at 8 Ashleigh Grove, Forest Hall, Newcastle upon Tyne. NE12 8EY.

The NFN Steering Group will consider next month whether to continue this emailing to everyone who in the past has expressed an interest in receiving it, or only to those who have paid their Membership Fee.

The opportunity to exchange views on our website Discussion Group is confined to Members. If you wish to receive the stimulus of this exchange of views as we all engage with the *Read Quaker Faith and Practice* project I think it will be important to renew your Membership.

If you no longer wish to receive this Newsletter please let me know.

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**Newsletter Editor: Michael Wright** [michaelwright80@virginmedia.com](mailto:michaelwright80@virginmedia.com)  
**07966 527697**

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**



The Network's aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences, and journeys.

## **Membership application form**

We warmly welcome all Friends and Attenders who share our general outlook and aims. If you have questions, please contact us by email via our website:

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

Membership of the Network costs £10 a year, **which runs from May 1<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup>**. If you would like to become a Member of our Network for the coming year, please send your cheque or postal order, payable to Nontheist Friends Network to our Treasurer, together with the following information

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Postal address \_\_\_\_\_

Post code

\_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone:    Mobile: \_\_\_\_\_

Landline: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Local Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Area Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

To: Sarah Siddle, Treasurer of NFN, 8 Ashleigh Grove, Forest Hall, Newcastle upon Tyne. NE12 8EY.

**Sapiens - the history of humankind**, by Yuval Noah Harari. London, Vintage Books 2014  
(This is not a "review" of his book, just my summary of his thesis)

This book is an account of the development of human beings. His website <http://www.ynharari.com> sums up the theme of his book neatly:

*History began when humans invented gods, and will end when humans become gods.*

*Sapiens rule the world, because we are the only animal that can cooperate flexibly in large numbers. We can create mass cooperation networks, in which thousands and millions of complete strangers work together towards common goals. One-on-one, even ten-on-ten, we humans are embarrassingly similar to chimpanzees. Any attempt to understand our unique role in the world by studying our brains, our bodies, or our family relations, is doomed to failure. The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively.*

*This mysterious glue is made of stories, not genes. We cooperate effectively with strangers because we believe in things like gods, nations, money and human rights. Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money and no human rights—except in the common imagination of human beings. You can never convince a chimpanzee to give you a banana by promising him that after he dies, he will get limitless bananas in chimpanzee Heaven. Only Sapiens can believe such stories. This is why we rule the world, and chimpanzees are locked up in zoos and research laboratories.*

## **The Book**

The book itself begins with considering how homo sapiens, from being one among several human species and quite low down in the food chain, became the species that dominated all other animals species, and obliterated many of them in the process. Harari traces the development of homo sapiens through the Cognitive, Agricultural, and Scientific/Industrial Revolutions to our current Technological Revolution.

He states that about 50,000 years ago there were several human species but sapiens were very different from the others in their genetic code, physical traits, cognitive and social abilities. They discovered fire and its different uses, particularly to cook food. They invented boats, oil lamps, bows and arrows, needles, and developed new ways of thinking. Language developed - an amazingly supple means of sharing and storing information. With this Cognitive Revolution homo sapiens could talk not only about demonstrable information but also create fictions, legends, and myths: these corporate myths included such notions as that of a nation, of money, human rights, laws, justice and religions.

We are animals whose physical, emotional and cognitive abilities are shaped by our DNA, and the long era before agriculture when our bodies and brains adapted to the demands of hunting and gathering. Only in the last 10,000 years did homo sapiens begin to devote more time to domesticating some plants and animals.

Harari argues that this was not such a good idea as we often suppose it was. It reduced the variety of their diet, obliged them to protect their crops and herds, and ere long the small groups of families of similar status gave way to larger groups of rulers and peasants. The peasants had a much poorer diet, less freedom to roam, and no role in corporate decision-making. Oppression and exploitation became rampant, and in time great empires ruled vast numbers. Within these larger groups, stories were shared, and myths developed of loyalty to unseen gods.

With the development of forms of writing and recording numbers, human behaviour changed from bartering and exchanging favours to a money economy with trade and the accumulation for some of vast wealth. The political development of empires spread ideas, institutions, customs and norms as well as languages and religions. As trade and empire exerted their influence, so religious ideas were

carried to new places. Traders and armies of empires encountered new gods and new traditions as they travelled.

## **The rise of monotheism**

However with the rise of monotheism, Christian and later Muslim worshippers of the one God sought to convince others of the truth of their convictions. Christian missionary evangelism served as a model for Islam in the 7th century. Harari argues that monotheists have tended to be more fanatical than polytheists, often aiming to exterminate all opposition. He says that in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in France on August 24 1572 between 5,000 - 10,000 Protestants were slaughtered by Catholics: he estimates that more Christians were killed by fellow Christians that day than in the polytheistic Roman Empire throughout its entire existence.

His critique of Christianity (he is a secular Jew) is that it developed a pantheon of saints whose cults differed little from those of polytheistic gods. He says Zoroastrianism exerted a major influence on all subsequent Middle Eastern and Central Asian religions, and inspired Gnosticism with its sharp distinction between body and soul. With this dualism and its option for the good God and the bad Satan, of heaven and hell, good and evil, body and soul, he says monotheism is a "kaleidoscope of monotheist, dualist, polytheist and animist legacies, jumbling together under a single divine umbrella". He accuses monotheists of incorporating a variety of ideas and practices from several religion traditions into their dogmas.

Equally trenchantly he argues that liberal humanism is a direct legacy of the traditional Christian belief in free and eternal individual souls. Similarly he sees socialist humanism, with its emphasis on the equality between all humans, as being built on monotheist foundations.

## **The Scientific Revolution**

He argues that the Scientific Revolution differs from all previous traditions of knowledge in three critical ways:

- The willingness to admit ignorance, and to challenge current ideas and theories
- The centrality of observation and mathematics
- The development of new technologies

The power of the British Empire to rule the seas, and lands across the seas, rested on the discovery of the means of preventing scurvy in sailors and soldiers on long voyages. Later canned food enabled soldiers to remain on battlefields much longer, which (with the invention of barbed wire and the machine gun) was crucial in World War 1. Railways and steamship transported armies and their provisions. Inventions and fresh knowledge were the engines of power.

Global power shifted to Europe between 1500 - 1750. The Chinese and the Persians did not lack technological inventions but they lacked the values, myths, judicial apparatus and socio-political structures that took centuries to form and mature in the West, and which could not be rapidly copied and internalised. They thought and organised their societies differently. The key difference between East and West was the mindset. Those who allowed the young to challenge the thinking of the older generations, who felt compelled to say "we don't know" and took steps to observe, discover, and experiment, could harness the technological bonanza better than anyone else.

While the Scientific Revolution owes a lot to ancient traditions from classical Greece, China, India and Arabia, it nevertheless took its unique character only in the early modern period hand in hand with the growth of European empires. Europeans, particularly the British, believed that to govern conquered lands effectively they must know the languages and cultures of their subjects. They knew their empires

very well, far better than any previous conquerors, or even the native population itself. He suggests we could fill an encyclopaedia with achievements – and with their crimes.

## Capitalism and technology

The development of capitalism has also been crucial to the development of our modern world culture. Credit financed new discoveries, and those societies where investors could depend on their investment being honoured were ones where capitalism flourished. It failed to do so where autocratic rulers confiscated investments at a whim. The fly in the ointment of free-market capitalism is that it cannot ensure profits are gained or benefits shared, in a fair way. The world economic pie of 2014 was far larger than the pie of 1500 but is distributed so unevenly that many African peasants and Indonesian labourers return home after a hard days work with less food than did their ancestors 500 years ago he argues.

He looks to the future and sees homo sapiens gaining control of many new materials and energy sources, while simultaneously destroying what remains of the natural habitat, and driving most other species to extinction. Ecological turmoil might endanger the survival of homo sapiens, and much else besides.

Prior to the industrial revolution, the daily life of most humans ran within three ancient frames: the nuclear family, the extended family, and the local intimate community. It might be rough, but it was stable. Over time, states and markets used their growing power to weaken the traditional bonds of family and community, and encouraged people to 'become individuals'. The liberation of the individual has come at a cost. Life over millions of years have shaped us to live and think as community members: within two centuries we have become alienated individuals. New aptitudes, behaviours and skills do not necessarily make for a better life. There is an important cognitive and ethical component to happiness, and our values make a great difference to our quality of life. Now the only constant in life is change.

He suggests the Cognitive Revolution apparently involved just a few small changes to the shape of our brains, and wonders whether another small change might begin a second Cognitive Revolution, creating a new type of consciousness with the potential to transform us into something very different. We don't yet know how to do this, and the main obstacles to moving towards it are ethical, religious, and political objections.

Scientists have already been able through a government sponsored German company, to design a brain implant to enable blind people to gain partial vision. Monkeys, implanted with electrodes, have been trained to control detached bionic limbs through thought alone. Genetic programming is moving ahead with the Human Brain Project, founded in 2005 which hopes to recreate a complete human brain inside a computer, with electronic circuits emulating neural networks. In 2013 this project received a grant of €1 billion from the European Union.

At present only a tiny fraction of these new possibilities have been realised, but the ability to do so are developing at breakneck speed. He suggest lawyers need to rethink issues of privacy and identity; governments to rethink matters of healthcare and equality; sports associations and educational establishments need to redefine fair play and achievement; pension funds and labour markets to adjust to a world in which 60 is the new 30. Mapping the first human genome took 15 years: today a person's DNA can be mapped in weeks. The era of personalised medicine that matches treatment to individual DNA has begun. What might happen once medicine becomes preoccupied with enhancing human abilities?

He concludes that a Frankenstein myth confronts homo sapiens with the fact that the last days are fast approaching. The next stage of human history will include not only technological and organisational transformations, but also fundamental changes in human consciousness and identity. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. It seems homo

sapiens are accountable to no one. Is there anything more dangerous he asks, than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?

What this suggests to me is that having a greater understanding how the power of God's perceived perspective has dominated ethical thinking for two millenia, the challenges that now face us require a radical rethink from us all on what might contribute in the future to the natural world, to human justice and peace, to an equitable and stable sharing of resources, food, water, technology, and power. How that will be achieved is very difficult to forecast and achieve. It is an enormous challenge.

He is an engaging lecturer: you can listen to some of his lectures if you Google ynharari.com (his website) or Youtube yuval noah harari (contains several lectures by him).

Michael Wright. July 2015

QUG Conference address 2015

## The Meaning and Purpose of Life

Hello. I am here as the representative from the Nontheist Friends Network. However I am not here to argue a line, or present a case for Nontheism, but perhaps explore with you whether there are areas for possible collaboration between our two groups, and to share my experiences, views, and reactions to the questions Tony has faced us with.

Actually (with others) I am uncomfortable with the name Nontheist. I am a Quaker, and never sought to define myself more narrowly until I joined the Network after being invited to be the keynote speaker at their conference. Members spent two years choosing a name: they have explained to me that of the various names they considered, for various reasons this is, for those who chose it, the least worst option. I accept it but am not comfortable with it. Others want it to show their commitment to plain speaking - they don't want to pretend they are one thing that they are not.

### **I am**

When I sat down to write what I might say today I was somewhat shell-shocked to realise what I had agreed to do. I don't remember reacting to the topic for this conference when first invited to speak at it – perhaps I didn't know the topic then. Tony has set me a mammoth task.

#### **What is the meaning and purpose of life – and my life in particular?**

I never think in those terms. He has given us a list of possible purposes in life – but I none of them entirely fits with me.

It's a bit like my experience as a vicar, dressed in a black cassock. I heard a little child say: "Mummy – what's that man for?"

I exist – I don't really understand why. The simplest answer is that I am here because of my parents love and joy in each other, and because they wanted a second child.

I don't have a conviction that I have any destiny to fulfil.

What am I for? I don't know. I just am.

Rather like my Swiss Army penknife – I have multiple possible uses and some potential.

## QUG Conference address 2015

The day after this conference, I am due to conduct a funeral for friends I have known for 40 years. He died some weeks ago, and donated his body to medical education and research; she died a week ago. They were both gifted teachers: he with a quirky sense of humour, she with a great love of family, and of light music. Their son has chosen these words for me to read:

### Success by Ralph Waldo Emerson

To laugh often and love much;  
 to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children;  
 to earn the approbation of honest critics and to endure the betrayal of false friends;  
 to appreciate beauty;  
 to find the best in others;  
 to give of one's self;  
 to leave the world a little better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition;  
 to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation;  
 to know that even one life has breathed easier  
 because you have lived – this is to have succeeded.

The key elements in my life have been:

I grew up in a loving family. My parents had socialist values, and were entirely non-religious. For them friendship, and hospitality were always important. My mother's father (a widower by the time my parents married) lived with us almost from the time they were married. They provided a home for my mother's unmarried sister for more than 30 years. They opened their home to homeless people: a recently demobbed soldier just after the war, and then a former Welsh Fusilier who had German wife & stepson and in the late 1940s few would offer such hospitality to them, or to the Nigerian who came to our town to learn about how railways were managed. A black man was very unusual, and prejudices were strong – but my parents welcome him. Later they provided a home for elderly person who had been housekeeper for a local minor worthy, and lost both her position and her home when he died. As I have grown older, my admiration for my parents and their values has grown.

I looked forward to having my own family. With my first wife, I had a son and two daughters. Unfortunately we did most of courting by correspondence, and discovered once we married we really didn't know each other very well. The marriage last 17 years. Four years after that ended, I remarried 31 years ago, and have very happy relationships with my children and their partners, my wife's two children and their partners, and we share our nine grandchildren.

I regard Quakers as another, wider family, whom I also cherish, and am grateful for.

**So what have I done, or will I do, with being here? Who am I?**

## QUG Conference address 2015

As a teenager I was sceptical about religion – I questioned, challenged, argued with the RE master at the High School. I set out to do some research and disprove religion. Then one summer evening, as I was standing at the open window in my bedroom looking at the Wiltshire downs, I had a most wonderful experience. I felt a great love and joy and peace: it was astonishing. I thought God had found me. It was such a remarkable experience that it changed my life.

My girl-friend at the time and her family went to the local Anglican church – I went too, and then asked to be baptised. Shortly after that I left home to begin work in Shrewsbury as a newspaper reporter. I had always been keen on writing, investigating, asking questions. I consider myself a wordsmith.

I joined a lively church, St. Chad's the round church in Shrewsbury, with lots of young people. I was confirmed, and within months one of the two curates suggested I consider ordination. I resisted the idea, but it eventually grew on me. I was sent to an ordination selection conference, and expected to be told to come back in a couple of years time. To my surprise they recommended me for training.

I began at a one year course in Durham, with about 30 other young men from the whole spectrum of churchmanship of the Church of England, from the very high to the very low. They seemed to spend most of the time arguing about doctrine and liturgy. I nearly went off pop! As a fairly new Christian, I wondered if this was really what it was all about. Then I discovered the Quakers – and I went regularly to Durham Quaker meeting after the compulsory Anglican communion service on Sundays. I asked them about Quaker theology – and no one could help me. I decided it must be important, and stayed with the Church of England.

However the little copy of Advices and Queries they gave me I treasured. I copied every word of them into a little hard-backed prayer notebook and they shaped the whole of my life as an Anglican for the next 40 years. When I came to Quakers in 1998 I found there had been two revisions of it in between.

After a further three years training at Chichester Theological College, I was ordained. I was always more interested in the drama of the liturgy, and in pastoral care, than in theology. I continued to practice as a journalist.

For me, Jesus was, and remains, a lodestar. Like Tony Philpott I also have made a journey from Christian to Quaker. Being part of a Quaker Meeting is very important to me.

**My understanding of God?** – God is a human construct. How can it be other? Over 30,000 years (from art and writings) concepts of gods and God are very varied and changed considerably. From the multiple gods of Egyptians, Greeks, and early Old Testament, concepts evolved into one God, revered first by Jews, then by Christians, then by Muslims. At the heart of these religions, as of several others, is the Golden

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Rule: do to others as you would like them to do to you; and its reverse: and don't do to others what you would not like them to do to you.

Through centuries of human life, much was explained by reference to God. In the last 200 years, there has been an explosion of knowledge, and now we have natural explanations for much that previous generations attributed to God.

I used to want to know answers to many questions – now I am content to be. Not knowing is OK. There is so much in life which is a profound mystery. I live with that.

When I came to Quakers again in 1998, I was listening for the voice from the beyond. Then I came to realise I was listening to the voice from inside me, not outside me. I came to leave God behind. For four years I was bereaved of God. I missed God, but did not want to find some artificial replacement.

I heard a scientist on the radio say that there were more planets, stars and other things in the universe than all the grains of sand, on all the beaches, in all the world! I thought that was ridiculous – but that was when I was so very unaware of the vastness of the universe. Now my imagination no longer stretches to envisage that any creative mind responsible for such a vast and complex universe, can be intimately concerned with my life, and the decisions made in our small Quaker Meeting.

**The Bible.** I have grown up with an awareness of the Bible. At one time I think I was dealing with much of it as history. Now I deal with it as myth in the sense that the symbolism and metaphors in the biblical events weighs far more with me than history or factual verification.

There are Meta-narratives such as The Exodus story. Its historical accuracy is immaterial to me. I can explore the metaphor: of a human life enslaved – maybe by a powerful influence of a parent, a sibling or a partner, a religious tradition, a lack of confidence in oneself, and journeying out of that condition of enslavement with all the anxieties and difficulties of moving from a familiar but uncomfortable situation to one which seems even scarier and with more risk and uncertainty. Through trials and tribulations the journey is towards the Promised Land. This metaphor I have explored with a number of people over the years, and many find much that makes sense to them in exploring this metaphorical journey, and helps them makes sense of significant parts of their own life.

The same can be done with the Exile, with aspects of Jesus' life. Whatever the circumstances that led his disciples to believe in his resurrection, the metaphor of suffering, death and new life is one which can have great resonance with many who are helped to explore it as metaphor, rather than explore it as history. Within the gospels we find poetry, parable, questions and answers, teachings, conversations, actions, and relationships, from which we can draw important insights, inspiration, encouragement, and challenges. Similarly there are within the Hebrew scriptures so much rich imagery which can feed our spiritual lives. I regret these are not used more widely by Quakers these days.

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In the scriptures I can discard things I don't like: divine anger, genocide, and divine jealousy. I pick and choose. Everyone - even fundamentalists do. There is much that is lovely that I identify with and can usefully use.

George Fox and early Friends challenged the biblical literalism of their contemporaries and focused on the Spirit which they perceived to be the source of those Scripture. I too reject the literalism common not only among evangelical and catholic preachers and teacher, but also far too widely among modern liberals.

As Freud used the myths of Ancient Greece, I can find valuable insights among the scriptures of the Hebrew and Christian faiths.

**Jesus** – of all the religious teachers and prophets – he is the one I have grown up with: much of his teaching inspires, challenges, encourages, and motivates me.

I have moved from a concept of God in whom I trusted in the past, but I do realise that many people cannot think of prayer without a divine being to pray to. For myself I no longer need one, but I can fully appreciate that talking to God, or to Jesus is a helpful, indeed essential concept for some, and I have no wish to close down that option for them.

Within the Quaker community, I would so like those who are committed to God to allow the freedom to those of us who, having climbed the mountain, and not found in the cloud what we were told we would find, have come down to continue the pilgrimage journey with the rest of the pilgrims. We don't need a golden calf to fill a gap or to worship, but we still aim to get to the Promised Land - the destination of our journey in trust and love. For us it is a promised life in this life, not the next one.

In the Book Club I facilitate at our Quaker Meeting in Middlesbrough, we have just been reading *"There is a God"* by Anthony Flew. He has been a renowned champion of atheism for much of his adult life: he was an academic philosopher. This book recounts how he has now changed from atheism to theism because of the discovery of the complex pattern of DNA, and because without a creative Mind he cannot otherwise account for how life came from inanimate matter, and then managed to reproduce itself, adapt, and reproduce its adaptations. MY I acknowledge the mystery, and that it makes sense to trust there is a creative mind responsible for all this. My imagination just doesn't stretch that far. The concept of God I knew in the past is too narrow, too small, to help me make sense of all that we now know. I am left wondering and so I get on with life as I find it.

I cherish the Quaker way – I have been nurtured by it – and I continue to be nurtured by it.

All of us share the experience of the Quaker method of discernment and prayer through gathering in silence, listening to a wisdom that is greater than the insight of each individual, and finding inner resources for taking action in hope. Some of us do not

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ascribe either the insight or the inner resources to a divine origin, but to a natural one. Others are prepared to leave the matter open.

Many religious traditions explore the power of silence: not all of them regard the fruits of such waiting in silence as god-given, but all agree on its potential to effect change – sometimes profound change – in those who practice it.

### MY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

- Silence – alone or with others
- Awe – at the wonder of everything. I don't do worship and praise, but I do do wonder and awe
- Gratitude – count my blessings
- Concerns – seek the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference
- Self-examination – *“The unexamined life is not worth living”* Socrates
- Service – to the Quaker community – to the wider community – neighbours – friends – family
- Relationships –
- The arts (including reading and reflecting)

*Living with a Wild God* (Granta. 2014) is Barbara Ehrenreich's “non-believers search for the truth about everything”. Her final chapter of this autobiographical work, *The Nature of Other*, is an astonishing survey of the relationship between humans and the Other or Others. She suggests one “possible biological analogy for the relationship between humans and the Other or Others would be symbiosis.”

She also says “There are other possibilities than ‘creatures’ or ‘beings’ of any kind. Science has always wrestled with the idea of an immaterial will, or agency, at work in the universe, and for centuries it was thought to be expressed through the ‘laws of nature’. God might be dead, but he rules on, or so it was thought, through his immutable laws. At the smallest, quantum, level there are no laws at all, only probabilities.”

“Since we have long since outgrown the easy answer – God – along with theism of any kind, we have to look for our **who** within what actually exists... Sometimes, out of all this static and confusion, the Other assembles itself and takes form before our very eyes.”

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### **A pilgrim community**

I quote her words simply to illustrate how complex and wonderful to many of us are the spiritual experiences of engagement with the intricacy and delicacy of matter, and the joy and transformation which is available through a spiritual journey, and in the waiting in silence, trusting that in so doing, we shall be changed. The traditional concept of God simply no longer seems to work for many of us, to convey the breadth and wonder of which we are profoundly aware, and which we find breathes through our individual and community life. Life was much simpler for George Fox and early Friends: but in our journey, we have moved beyond the place where he stood.

The modern Quaker concept of us all being on a spiritual journey, in which where we were five years ago is perhaps a good deal different from where we will be in five years time, is one that many of us find liberating and beautiful. We are a pilgrim community, on the move, discovering new places, reflecting on new experiences, understanding things differently.

Some Friends do not want to be on the move, and feel very unhappy with this idea, rather like many of the children of Israel on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land (Exodus 16). It would be good if we could all relax about the language that others with different perspectives use in ministry in our meetings, and that they will allow us to speak 'from the heart' in language that fits our experiences. We can be a multi-lingual society as we journey in pilgrimage. Going back to some 'ideal' Quaker way is not an option: but moving forward in faith, in trust, in hope, love and joy certainly is.

### **Christian qualities matter more than dogmas**

One of the main difficulties we face is that we do so little to teach Quakerism. As we do not have a church hierarchy to lay down what is or is not an acceptable part of the Quaker way – it depends upon us all doing our part in articulating it and coming to discernment about what is right – or appropriate - and what is not.

*Quaker Life* has encouraged us to engage in *Sharing our Journeys*. This has been so very fruitful in many meetings. We do not learn from one another enough. There is sadly, an intolerant tendency amongst some Friends to be abruptly critical where they disagree with something said. Such a response challenges the wisdom of Advices and Queries (12), which encourages us to "Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God's word for you, it may be so for others."

Do we not all endorse the statement in Advices and Queries 2 that "Christianity is not a notion but a way"? As G.M.Trevelyan wrote in his *English Social History* (Longmans. 1944) "The finer essence of George Fox's queer teaching, common to the excited revivalists who were his first disciples, and to the 'quiet' Friends of later times, was surely this – that Christian qualities matter much more than Christian dogmas. No Church or sect had ever made that its living rule before. To maintain the Christian

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quality in the world of business and of domestic life, and to maintain it without pretension or hypocrisy, was the great achievement of these extraordinary people. England may well be proud of having produced and perpetuated them. The Puritan pot had boiled over, with much heat and fury; when it had cooled and been poured away, this precious sediment was left at the bottom.”

Many of us are Quaker because we seek to live out those Christian qualities, which matter to us much more than Christian dogmas.

Gretta Vosper, a Minister in the United Church of Canada, presents Christians with a paradigm shift which has three challenges: An intellectual challenge; a practical challenge; and a spiritual challenge. In her book *With or Without God – why the way we live is more important than what we believe* (Harper, 2008) she writes: “What the world needs in order to survive and thrive is the radical simplicity that lies at the core of Christianity and so many other faiths and systems of thought – an abiding trust in the way of love expressed in just and compassionate living.

“Out of the multitude of understandings of religion, spirituality and faith; out of the varying views of the origins, nature and purpose of life; out of the countless individual experiences of what might be called divine; out of it all may be distilled a core that, very simply put, is love.

“This core message carries its own authority. It needs no doctrine to validate it, no external expert or supernatural authority to tell us it is right. Love is quite demanding enough as a foundation, sufficiently complex and challenging without the requirement of additional beliefs, unbelievable to many.

“The church the future needs is one of people gathering to share and recommit themselves to loving relationships with themselves, their families, the wider community, and the planet. Such a church need not fear the discoveries of science, history, archeology, psychology or literature; it will only be enhanced by such discoveries. Such a church need not avoid the implications of critical thinking for its message; it will only become more effective.

“Such a church need not cling to and justify a particular source for its authority; it will draw on the wisdom of the ages and challenge divisive and destructive barriers. Such a church, grown out of values that transcend personal security, self-interest, and well-being, could play a role in the future that is not only viable but radically transformative and desperately needed.”

She says further: “The spiritual realm of which I speak is no less connected to who I am than is my emotional and psychological dimension. It is integral to my structure, my experience of life. I know of no proof of God beyond personal experience, and I cannot acknowledge that proof as substantial. What I need to understand is how I may continue to develop myself spiritually, open myself to learning, and stay committed to living with integrity.

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"I am not, in any way, attempting to wrest from anyone his or her sense of a relationship with God or Jesus. If that moves people to live lives of justice and compassion, I heartily celebrate it. They live with God and honour life through their belief."

The apostle Paul described the fruit of the Spirit as: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control" Galatians 5.22 Those qualities I cherish as the fruit I hope is nurtured in my life through my Quaker practice.

When conducting funeral services (which I often do as an Independent Celebrant) I frequently say: *It is as natural to die as it is to be born. Life is a journey, in which we each experience joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, overcome difficulties, grow, learn and develop, achieve goals, share love and laughter, give service, and discover truths.*

That sums up for me much of what life is about. I know that we live on in the genes of our children and grandchildren, in the impact we have on the lives of those who live on after us, perhaps in some solid creative achievements, but otherwise we are like the sparrow who flew through the hall of the king of Northumbria when he was considering whether to be a Christian or not. One of his Thegns said that the sparrow comes out of the darkness, from we know not where, flighs through the well lit hall and out into the darkness we do not know either. Our life is a brief spasm, if it has meaning and purpose, I have not yet discovered it.

My life has been a journey of discovery – I am still engaged in that journey. However I don't discern some divine purpose for it but I do seek to make the most of it.

Michael Wright

