

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

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Nontheist
Friends Network

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Talking about God

David Boulton and I were at Woodbrooke last month for the “Think Tank” weekend at the invitation of the Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group (RPG). It was an intense and very valuable weekend.

There were 23 of us in all, including Helen Rowlands who organised it, and Paul Parker who joined us for the Sunday morning. The invited group was gender balanced, and the age range was from under 30 to over 80, from across BYM.

We were there to address the question: ***"Can we reframe current Quaker conversation so that we don't get stuck in the polarizing shorthand of 'theism/nontheism'?"***

Getting to Work

How we were asked to set about it was fascinating. Helen described it as Open Space agenda setting. On the Friday evening, she invited all of us to write questions we wished to address on an A4 sheet, and pin it to a board. We were to put on that sheet one of the stickers she had prepared, each of which had a time slot of 75 minutes, and a room name on it. There were two time slots on Saturday morning, two more in the afternoon, and one after supper in the evening, and several rooms.

The Friend posing the question was to host the discussion of their question with whichever of us chose to join them. They were also asked to produce their own typed report of their discussions afterwards (using one of four laptops available she

provided in the Cadbury Room). These reports were then posted during the day as they were written, for all of us to read.

There were 17 such questions for discussion. Few of us managed to cope with 5 groups on Saturday, but most of us did 4.

When we met on Sunday morning we were each given a complete set of these reports, and given 45 minutes to read and digest them, before we regathered. Then we were asked to identify how to take forward significant elements arising from these discussions, and to identify practical ways of doing so. A number of suggestions were offered to the RPG .

So what happened?

There was to me a wonderful spirit of mutual listening, sharing, and seeking to understand those whose views were different from our own.

One thing was very clear to me – it is easier for me to explain my convictions and what I trust in, than it is for many people to do so who talk about God. Clearly the concept of God as an immense divine Being, a human write-large, in a three-decker universe, was not owned by anyone, but the word still have tremendous significance for some Friends.

There was a pleas to stop thinking in terms of a theological range with a polarity of extremes at either end. Many Quakers seem to be less than clear about how to put convictions into words. Mostly the discussions explored nuances, experiences, and concepts of religious experiences that sought to help Friends who have different views communicate constructively with each other.

Some Friends said they find the use of the word “God” meaningful in some contexts and not in others. One Friend finds “God” “the best way of describing what’s going on”. The language we use is less easy than the inner knowing. As Christianity is not a notion but a way, we help each other along the way, even as we change our minds.

Some Friends felt a strong desire for new language as we seek to express our religious experiences. Another was sceptical of such talk. Yet another described himself using different language in different contexts. It was acknowledged that "God" so often has anthropomorphic concepts, shaped by the language of hymns and prayers, which confuse or seem inadequate, and which some Friends find so unhelpful they decline to use.

Some techniques used in worship sharing - Godly Play, Philosophy for Children, and various forms of creative work - were commended as helping us acknowledge and manage the discomfort of describing our experiences differently. Using words such as "life, nourishment and heritage" helped some Friends develop metaphors that deepened their awareness and understanding of one another's joys and pains. We need to be continuously fed with balanced spiritual nourishment and discipline, they concluded.

To see the Light in each other

It was said that we need to continually strip away our comfort blankets, to hear the dissonant voices to challenge us towards new understandings and insights. “We need a bigger picture of creation and transformation: if we can uphold experience different from our own, we express the paradox of faith and avoid sectarianism. We

need to seek, affirm and celebrate diversity, and use our knowledge of religion and theology to understand each other, to see the Light in each other.”

The group that wrote those sentences above that I have just quoted drafted a rewrite of Advices and Queries 17 to read: *Do you respect that everyone has truths which may be expressed in different ways? Can we celebrate our different experiences and the way we express them? Seek to understand and explore language and other ways that help this. Do not allow the strength of your truths today to stop you from hearing others, or exploring yours tomorrow.*

There was a plea that Friends should avoid hurtful talk about another’s deepest experience as if it is delusional. There was also one Friend who was mystified as to why anyone who does not believe in God should apply to become a Member of the Religious Society of Friends, and would prefer that there be no place in BYM for those who do not acknowledge God.

One group was concerned to explore what emotional baggage we each bring to this subject. This includes anxiety about fearing being hurt, and of hurting others. Anger was also identified: we are protective of the group we identify with, and can be angry with those who dismiss those with whom they see things differently. Love and caring can be healing in these circumstances and can involve many complex emotions.

There are closets we are reluctant to come out of – not just people who find they wish to acknowledge their sexuality, but also those devoted to God, and those who have no god. Some Friends can feel squashed or diminished by others, especially those with power, or who seem “weighty”. There was a longing for us all to live happily together as Friends. “Challenge only works where there is trust, confidence and safety in the relationship” it was said.

Try what love can do

One report states that the concepts of theism/nontheism are not the only dimension of theological dialogue. They need to be seen in the context of creativity and transformative processes. The “point” of Quakerism remains personal and social transformation. We should “try what love can do”. There was a broad welcome for the statement: *I trust in something I don't fully understand.*

Can we be a religious society that embraces different perspectives wondered another group.

A way of using an approach similar to the Meeting for Worship for Business method to explore together our understanding of God was commended to us.

That group’s report concludes: “We were reminded of two sentences in the Introduction to Advices and Queries, which seemed to summarise our whole discussion - ***Friends maintain that expressions of faith must be related to personal experiences ... The deeper realities of our faith are beyond precise verbal formulation and our way of worship based on silent waiting testifies to this.***

Models, metaphors and paradoxes were considered, and what emotional baggage each of us brings to this issue. It was acknowledged that all such models are only useful if we accept their limitations, and do not become stuck in thinking the whole paradigm they present as “the Truth”.

Another group considered whether it matters if other Yearly Meetings decide British Friends are no longer Quaker. There was a strong desire to stay in constructive dialogue with other Yearly Meetings, ecumenical and inter-faith partners, accepting their differences as we hope they will accept ours.

Book of Discipleship?

Some Friends considered what our Book of Discipline is for. No one wanted to delete “God” from *Quaker faith & practice*, but did want a revision to make clear the diversity of views today within British Quakerism. The worst outcome, they suggested, would be an unrevised book that is owned by fewer and fewer Quakers, or a revised book that causes some Friends to leave the Society. A revision could lead either to a spiritual renewal in the Society, or to a rupture in the Society. The experience of those present at this weekend consultation led us all to believe that we can manage to explore our differences very lovingly and constructively.

The revised book needs to acknowledge our diversity in its introduction, and needs to state that Friends do not have a single concept of their spiritual experiences. We use a range of words to describe the sense of one-ness with something greater than ourselves, and in understanding a sense of being guided or led in discernment. Experiencing feelings of love, peace, of being filled, even of rapture, in a gathered Meeting are shared experiences described in different ways by Friends.

There was a preference expressed that a revision be called our Book of Discipleship rather than Book of Discipline.

Is “Meeting for Worship” still the right term? Such a phrase has not been helpful in outreach, but the group that considered this found it hard to find an alternative phrase. They did not find the concept of “worth-ship” particularly helpful. “The ‘force field’ was about the all in one and the one in all.” It continues to be regarded as a collective mystical experience among Friends.

Friends recognised that “Holding someone in the Light” has become our equivalent of prayer, but not so much in an intercessory sense as an active visualization and means of focusing our own attention on that person. We may doubt our ability to pray, but can ourselves feel bathed in support when prayed for and held in the Light.”

Have we answered the question?

Have we found a way of reframing this topic to become less polarised? We believe we have. There was a gladness amongst us that we had faced some tough issues, honestly and in “Quakerly love”, and very much wanted to enable the wider Quaker community to engage with these issues as we had done, because we found it so enriching.

Michael Wright

Is a Radical Church Possible?

By Adrian Alker, (2016. Christian Alternative. Winchester) (published March 25)

This book could either create an explosion in mainline churches – particularly the Church of England – or else it will be a damp squib. Adrian Alker, now retired from

full-time ministry, challenges his church about the need for a radical re-examination of its understanding of the Bible, and its theology in general.

Currently the Church of England is putting a big emphasis on exploring various ways of evangelising. There is a controversial “management training” programme for clergy and lay people in leadership roles in order to increase the numbers of active members of its congregations. Currently the UK has the fourth lowest rate of church attendance in Europe he tell us. Alker declares this spur to evangelism is all pointless unless the church addresses the fundamental issue of its theological basis.

He writes: “I love the Church enough to want it to change radically.” He focuses his desire for change on to the orthodox beliefs which have been part of Christian doctrine for nearly two thousand years. The Christ of orthodox beliefs, articulated by the Councils of the early church, have “long since proved to be inadequate. Christian faith was robbed of its central dynamic as a transforming experience of the God power which had so filled the person of Jesus and which is about transforming lives.”

The explosion in knowledge of the last 200 years has changed so many aspects of our whole world-view. While there remains a sustained interest in matters of faith and spirituality, he believes “that we have reached the stage when, in North America and Western Europe at least, the majority of people find many of the core doctrines of Christianity beyond belief”.

A fresh theology for the third millenium

“I remain convinced that until we can be more honest about the heart of Christian faith, more honest about the use of Scripture, more honest about those big questions to do with belief in God and our understanding of the person of Jesus, then no amount of Fresh Expressions of Church will be adequate. We need to freshly express our theology for this third millennium.”

He finds theological perspectives for our age articulated in the writings of such people as Marcus Borg, Jack Spong, Karen Armstrong, Don Cupitt, Dominic Crossan, Hans Kung, Robyn Myers and many others. The Reformation 500 years ago was principally a protest against idolatry in all its forms, but he notes that “Ironically, the result was the raising up of a new idol in the Bible itself.” He wants the focus to be on Jesus, and to encourage people to grasp some of the principles of critical biblical studies.

Karen Armstrong has reminded us that the Biblical books were written by people who were trying to make sense of their world and their lives between about 2500 BCE to about 100 CE. Taking their words and thought processes literally leads us up blind alleys, for the distinctive characteristics of the Bible are metaphor and historical fact. Marcus Borg warns of the danger of confusing the two.

Any critical approach to the Bible will face demanding questions. We have to acknowledge the gulf between our world, and that of the Biblical writers. Alker pleads for churches to “take far more seriously the study and reflection upon the Bible.” In the last 30 years it is modern biblical studies which has provided liberal Christians with a rich diet of fresh understanding of ancient texts, a renewed

appreciation of the ministry of Jesus, and of how the early church understood and presented their understanding of what his life meant. Alker states that Christians are not ultimately people of the Book, but people who are inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

A plea for silence in worship!

In seeking to engage with Jesus, he is critical of much modern worship, in spite of the fact the Church of England can do ritual very well. He is unhappy with busy services full of words, corporate confessions, and recitation of creeds. “Churches of whatever tradition need to recapture the gift of silence and awe as part of the Sunday diet.” He challenges key doctrines such as atonement, and original sin. “I believe” he writes “that such emphasis on belief hangs like a dead weight over worship. If the essence of faith is the transforming power of the Spirit at work within us, as it was for those first Christians, lets free up our worship to enable the spiritual vitality to do its work.”

Adrian Alker is the Chair of the Progressive Christianity Network in Britain, and founder of the Centre for Radical Christianity at St. Mark’s Church, Sheffield where he was vicar for 20 years. Then he was Director of Mission Resourcing in the diocese of Ripon for some years until his retirement in 2015.

On the cover of his book he quotes the American theologian John Dominic Crossan: “We have in God a radical vision of distributive justice for our earth. We have in Jesus a radical vision of its lived presence on our earth. But where is the radical vision of a Church that lives with that God and in that Jesus? Read this book and learn how what is necessary must be possible. Learn also that you are the Church, while the Church lasts. And now Honest to God, Honest to Jesus, and Honest to Church abide, these three, but the hardest of these is Honest to Church.”

Will his call fall on deaf ears?

I very much identify with Adrian Alker’s diagnosis of the malady within our churches. My own experience of more than 40 years as an Anglican leads me to doubt that the majority of bishops, clergy and lay members of that and other mainline churches can embrace the changes this will require. It will disturb too many people attached to what they have always known.

I read the Church Times each week. Their recent three-part series on theology (February 12-26) doesn’t go anywhere near this thinking. The articles are philosophical, and rather theologically abstruse. Try this from February 12th:

“...God is not an instance of anything, but rather is the ground of actuality of every instance of finite existence. Or perhaps one might say that God belongs to no category, but is instead the unrestricted reality in which all the restricted categories of things are embraced.”

This language and thinking is not common amongst Friends, and I wonder what constructive part Quakers can play in responding to Adrian’s question – *Is a radical church possible?* We are not committed to the creeds that he feels are straight-

jackets on the church community. We are encouraged to explore, indeed to consider new light from whatever source it may come. Advices and Queries 5 and 7 are important challenges and encouragement to us.

I wish we Quakers were more familiar with and at home with, modern biblical scholarship, and ready to engage with it. It opens windows and doors to our understanding of Jesus, and of our own religious tradition. We certainly have a positive contribution to make in our use of and understanding of silence in worship. We tend to focus on the practical application of Christian values to issues of social justice and personal growth.

Maybe we have something to offer if we join with any of the church members who wish to engage with Adrian's book through our local Churches Together. It is designed to be used in group discussions, with questions and issues to explore at the end of each chapter. This book is an important book for Friends as well as members of mainline churches to read and digest. Is a radical church possible? Can it reshape its life to Jesus' sake? I hope so.

Michael Wright

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OUR CONFERENCE and AGM

Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham

April 1st (6.15p.m.) to April 3rd 1.30.p.m.

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?”

IS A RADICAL CHURCH POSSIBLE? – Michael Wright I can offer an exploration of the new book by Adrian Walker (published March 25th) which I have reviewed later in this Newsletter if that attracts Friends.

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.**

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.

If you want to come please contact Hugh Rock

NFN Annual Conference,
Loddon Park Farmhouse,
Twyford. RG10 9RY Tel: 07500 914440
email: hugh_rock@btconnect.com

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. Website – report from Brian Wardrop
6. 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.

7. 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.
8. 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

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

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