

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk



May 2016

IN THIS NEWSLETTER

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Current issues – Collection of nontheist reflections; outreach leaflets; and a possible conference on Jesus.

Woodbrooke Conference – report of April 1-3

Reading, watching, listening – some books, blogs & websites

Prayer beyond belief

Britain Yearly Meeting – 2016 & 2017

File attachments:

Clerk's Report

Treasurer's Report

Membership Secretary's Report

Website report

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Welcome Friends to our occasional Newsletter – the May edition. Life for me was rather hectic after our AGM on the first weekend of April, which is why it has taken me a long time to produce this edition. Apart from the AGM there are just these items at present to report.

I have enquired to know what might be any follow up from the conference in February exploring aspects of theology, but have not heard anything. I hope to report more later in the summer.

Our perspective on the Quaker Way

Quaker Books has recently published *Living our beliefs* – which is a collection of quotations from various sources – rather like Quaker faith & practice – which has been developed and edited by young Quakers. They have long wanted something akin to Qf&p but shorter, more accessible and more concise. It is available as an ebook at www.ygspace.org.uk/living-our-beliefs, and available in print price £6 from Quaker Bookshop.

Your Steering Group met briefly after the AGM and (without knowing about the Young Quaker publication) decided to plan something similar. **If you have suggestions**

for content for such a short publication of quotations and sayings which reflect our approach to the Quaker way, please do send them to me. I will start work in earnest on gathering material for such a publication in July. I will make a fresh appeal on this in the next Newsletter.

Revising outreach leaflets

Quaker Life are currently revising the set of outreach leaflets widely available in Meeting Houses. At our conference, the view was expressed that the current version of *Your first time in a Quaker Meeting* is so worded that people who tend not to use “God” language would find it off-putting. We are exploring the possibility of finding more open ways to invite people in to the Quaker experience.

Jesus – for Quakers?

One Friend has suggested we might arrange either a one-day or weekend conference on Jesus. Another Friend has questioned whether such an event would focus on what Jesus means for Quakers, or a wider spectrum.

I have recently read three books, two of which you might find relevant in thinking about this topic:

Biblical Literalism – a Gentile heresy by John Shelby Spong. He makes two key points – one is that Matthew’s gospel (for this is focused on that book) was compiled as a set of readings to parallel the readings of the Jewish Torah in the synagogues attended by early Christians. The order, and choice, and length are all designed to complement the readings for the major Jewish festivals. This helps to make far more sense of the order, content, and method of understanding the four biblical gospels. I learnt a lot, and found it fascinating.

The other point he makes is that the myths, stories, analogies in the gospels were understood as myths by their first Jewish hearers, but when the Christian community separated from its Jewish roots, Gentiles took literally what Jews took metaphorically. Then so much of Matthew’s gospel makes far more sense. It is not a book for trained theologians – but is written in a style and approach that is very readable to us all.

The Gospels before Jesus – by Bart Ehrm. He is a historian, who has made a study of the way in which people remember events, and pass on accounts of them to others. Drawing on several studies of how mixed our memories are, between what we accurately remember and what is shaped by our culture, our expectations, and our current concerns. He applies this understanding to the gospel accounts of Jesus life and ministry. We remember the past only as it is relevant to the present, he argues.

So many of the memories of Jesus in the gospels are written out of the needs of the early Christian communities many years after Jesus’ death. He gives a critical analysis of many of the great events of Jesus’ life, and makes a distinction between the “gist” of an incident, and the detailed account of it – which as so often in the gospels is different from one to another. He sees the gospels as much more than historical sources: they are also works of art. All memories are distorted he demonstrates. These “are deeply rooted and profound memories of a man, memories that ended up transforming the entire world.”

The third book is a book on theology which is not Jesus-centred. It is however one that many of our members might well find speaks to them.

Grounded – by Diana Butler Bass. She is an historian, lecturer and facilitator of Christian education programmes in the United States. She is a popular author of books such as

Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening and
A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story

Her latest book is

Grounded: Finding God in the World--A Spiritual Revolution. She explores the natural habitat – earth, water, sky, - then the human geography of relationships. Here theme is finding a spirituality in natural things. It happens that as I write this, I am preparing to go and hear her speak at Birmingham on May 14 about this book. I will offer more on this in the next Newsletter.

Michael Wright

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Woodbrooke Conference April 1-3

We had about 40 Friends present. This year we had no “guest speaker” – instead we did it ourselves.

David Boulton opened with an account of non-theist activities in America, including the Unitarian Universalists. He spoke of the contribution the Sea of Faith has made through it several local groups, and of the Progressive Christianity Network. He spoke of the work of Gretta Vosper – who describes herself as “minister, author, and atheist” – author of *With or Without God* – a fascinating read if you don't know it. I mentioned *The Clergy Project* in North America – a network of Christian ministers and Hebrew rabbis who have no belief in God but choose not to declare that publicly. The Unitarian Church in Britain was also mentioned.

He urged nontheists to take every opportunity to assure Friends who do not share our view of God that we are not campaigning to remove God from Quaker faith & practice, but recognise and value the inspirational language of Fox, Penn, Barclay and others, as well as those Friends who currently find that language their own.

Miriam Branson gave a short talk asking *Why don't Quakers talk about God in our Meetings?* She drew on a selection of letters she has in response to asking that question. Difficulties in defining what we mean, sensitivity to the feeling of other Friends were highlighted. Miriam encouraged Friends to talk about these issues – part of Quaker testimony to truth, to help others to know that their views are held by others in the Society, and we should never assume that we know what other Friends are thinking or feeling.

David Parlett then talked about being a Non-theist who doesn't believe in the existence of God, yet he trusts in the presence of God. Then we began the first (short) session in our six base groups, where we had some very fruitful exchanges of ideas and experiences.

WORKSHOPS

There were three workshops on Saturday.

Martin Drummon – explored Life in the Spirit, rooted in our biology

Sarah Siddle – explored Holy without God, a discussion on what spirituality means to us

David Boulton & John Lampen – explored Minding our Language, an exploration of the meaning of words around our experiences.

Base Groups – met again after coffee for people to share with others something of the workshop they had been in, and explore issues as they wished. Then we had lunch, and the afternoon was free, with an optional session in the early part to share books etc.

Reading, watching and listening – I led a session in which some of us shared books, websites, and programmes we have been reading/watching and which we thought others might like to know about. Those flagged up are at the end of this newsletter.

Theology Think-Tank – After tea David Boulton and I described our very positive experiences at the event in February, organised by the Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group. I reported on this in the March Newsletter in some detail, and in *The Friend* March 17th – *Friends Talking About God*.

Quaking with laughter – As usual Frank Bonner organised a rollicking evening of entertainment, and Sarah Siddle let the Woodbrooke Epilogue.

AGM – in a break from tradition we held the Annual General Meeting on Sunday morning. The minutes are below. After coffee we had a very constructive sharing of reflections on the weekend.

2017 – our Woodbrooke weekend will be March 24 – 26. We hope to welcome you there.

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Nontheist Friends Network (Britain) held on April 3rd 2016 at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham

Present - There were 22 Members present.

Minutes of the previous AGM – The Clerk summarised the minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting held on March 21st 2015.

Clerk's Report. The Clerk has spoken at a number of events. The Steering Group met in August to plan the 2016 conference and has revised our publicity leaflet. Sarah Siddle was appointed to serve as membership secretary as well as treasurer. Those on our email list who had not subscribed as members were asked if they wanted to remain in contact, resulting in a much shorter email list which is almost all members. Responses to a request for ideas for the 'Theology Think-tank' as part of the process of preparing for a possible revision of QFP numbered only three: we

note that members do not seem to be motivated to exchange ideas amongst ourselves. David Boulton and Michael Wright were invited to be part of the consultation as part of the Revision Preparation Group. The main means by which new people make contact with us is via our website. Brian Wardrop has done sterling work in designing and maintaining this: Trevor Bending is now taking over this work. Brian Wardrop was thanked for his work, and Trevor Bending for his willingness to take on that responsibility. We hope that some Friends will offer to join our Steering Group to replace those whose service is finishing. His report is a separate attachment to these minutes.

Membership Secretary's Report – The Membership Secretary reported a current membership of 84. Her report is a separate attachment.

Website – The Clerk read Brian Wardrop's report on the website, which is a separate attachment. Tghuis provided us with an account of how our website has been visited and used. It went live in August 2013. Visits to it have averaged about 240 a month, or 8 per day. This is similar to the previous year. Roughly 44% of visits originate from the USA, compared to 41% from the UK. Downloads have averaged 50 a month. Most visits have been to: *Articles & Links*, *What is Nontheism?*, & *Frequently asked questions*. Brian was thanked for his work, as was Trevor Bending for agreeing to take on this role.

Change to the Constitution – The meeting agreed to add a sentence to our statement of aims. The addition is the second sentence of the aims which now 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 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.

Steering Group – those appointed for 2016-17 are Trevor Bending, David Boulton, Gisela Creed, Jo Jaffray, David Parlett, Deepa Parry-Gupta, Tim Regan, Hugh Rock, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle (Treasurer & Membership Secretary), and Michael Wright (Clerk).

Michael Wright: Clerk

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Reading, watching & listening

Shared by Michael Wright

Living the Questions – The wisdom of progressive Christianity – by David M. Felten & Jeff Procter-Murphy available from www.eden.co.uk £12.99 available on Kindle.

This is an excellent introduction to all the main concerns of progressive Christianity, and quotes widely from authors such as Borg, Crossan, Spong, and many others.

This is an American progressive Christianity website with a whole series of DVDs – see www.livingthequestions.com

Biblical Literalism – a Gentile Heresy – by John Shelby Spong (HarperOne. 2016)

This commentary on Matthew's gospel provides a lot of helpful information on reading the Bible with a modern, intelligent approach to a mixture of myth and remembered history. I find it fascinating in the insights it provides into how the people who composed this gospel understood Jesus in Old Testament terms – as the new Moses, the new David, the new Suffering Servant. It also shows how the gospel was structured to tie in with the readings of the Jewish scriptures at the festivals in the synagogues, where initially Christians were Jews or converts to Judaism. It makes far more sense to me to understand the order of passages in Matthew – it is something of a revelation! www.johnshelbyspong.com

Is a Radical Church possible? – reshaping its life for Jesus sake – by Adrian Alker (Christian Alternative Books, Winchester 2016) This book will either be a bombshell in the mainline churches – or a damp squib. It follows the thinking of the two books above, and challenges clergy and lay members to properly address modern biblical scholarship, the knowledge explosion of the last 200 years, and the heart of what it means to follow Jesus – not in doctrinal slavery but in the spirit of the man of peace, of sorrows, of compassion, of openness, godliness, love, and service. www.pcnbritain.org.uk

Silence Your Mind – Ramesh Manocha (Orion, London. 2014) see his website www.beyondthemind.com This book has helped me greatly to understand what I am doing in being silent, whether in Meeting, or elsewhere.

Sapiens – a brief history of humankind – Yuval Noah Harari (Vintage, London 2011) www.ynharari.com and www.youtube.com/user/YuvalNoahHarari Fascinating. Try Youtube and see for yourself.

Shared by Susan Farley

From Christian to Quaker – A spiritual journey from evangelical Christian to universalist Quaker by Tony Philpott. Tony is a member of the Quaker Universalist Group. As befits a retired headteacher the book is full of explanatory tables! On first reading I found this slightly offputting, but it was helpful the second time around. He describes his journey from evangelical Anglican in his teens to his current place as a universalist Quaker. It “spoke to my condition”. Complimentary copies have been given to Meeting House libraries so you may find one in your library. If not the book can be ordered from Tony at 2 Willow Rise, Haddenham, Aylesbury, HP17 8JR. tonyp@qug.org.uk. Cost is £8.00 plus £2.00 and please make cheques payable to A. Philpott.

Quaker and Naturalist Too, Os Cresson. Os is an American Quaker. In his terminology “naturalist” means non-theist. A collection of very interesting essays. Gives a good review of non-theist thought over the centuries. Available from Amazon for £11.31.

Just as you are: Buddhism for Foolish Beings by Kaspalita Thompson and Satya Robyn. A fascinating book about Pureland Buddhism written in a very readable way by this husband and wife team who run a temple in Malvern. I was fascinated by the likeness to Christianity in the way they think about grace etc. so possibly not for a

full-blown non-theist. But as someone who is attracted by Buddhist thought and philosophy it provided an easy and accessible introduction to an attractive form of Buddhism. I felt it was a bit like Christianity without the blood and gore! We downloaded it from Amazon for £3.99 but it is also available as a paperback for £7.99.

Quaker Blogs etc.

(A brief and partial list!)

Transition Quaker (Craig Barnett) <http://transitionquaker.blogspot.com/>

“As our society enters its long energy descent, Quaker Meetings may come to provide both a refuge for people struggling to adapt to changing social realities, and also a midwife for a gradually emerging culture. British Quakerism could offer long-tested practices of communal support and discernment, and insights into spiritual values for human life that do not rely on material growth. Quakers, in partnership with communities of other faiths and traditions, may help to weave part of the fabric of a new, sustainable civilisation.” (from Barnett’s essay, ‘Quakers in Transition’)

Stephanie’s Blog (Stephanie Grant) <http://www.stephanie-blog.co.uk/>

A thoroughly Quaker blog with a Buddhist perspective and an interfaith slant.

Brigid, Fox & Buddha (Rhiannon Grant) <https://brigidfoxandbuddha.wordpress.com/>

A Quaker Pagan Buddhist blog, with lots of interesting thoughts about how Quakers understand themselves and their place in, and critique of, society.

A Quaker Stew (Stuart Masters) <http://aquakerstew.blogspot.co.uk/>

A Quaker with an interest in aspects of the Anabaptist, Wesleyan and Eastern Orthodox traditions who works as a tutor at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, UK. The blog aims to share writings that explore the Quaker way and its relationship with other Christian traditions, particularly those (such as Anabaptism and Methodism) which share a concern for peace and justice.

Silent Assemblies (Mike Farley) <https://silentassemblies.wordpress.com/>

A Quaker blog on living the contemplative life in the 21st century.

Jolly Quaker (Mark Daniel Russ) <http://jollyquaker.com/>

Quaker religious education, the Bible, and how the concept of New Monasticism can be applied to modern British Quakerism, from the Nurturing Friends and Meetings Tutor at Woodbrooke.

Acting in Faith <http://www.afsc.org/blogs>

The blog of the American Friends Service Committee.

The Mindful Business Services Blog <http://mindfulbusinessservices.com/blog-2/>

Quaker blog packed with practical advice and Quakerly musings from Wendrie and Vincent Heywood, admin, management and IT consultants and Quakers in Business stalwarts.

Thanks to Susan's husband Mike for these.

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Prayer beyond belief

I led a weekend at Glenthorne, May 6-8 on Prayer beyond belief. Themes covered from a nontheist stance were:

- Silence your mind – understanding the value of mental silence
- Awareness and Awe
- Concerns, hospitality and relationships
- Thankfulness
- Self-examination and biblical explorations
- Discernment and clearness

I can offer a shorter one-day exploration of these themes if any Friends want to invite me to offer this from the autumn onwards.

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Britain Yearly Meeting

BYM at Friends House over the Spring Bank Holiday weekend will focus on aspects of *Living out our faith in the world*. I will not be at YM but other nontheist Friends will be – you may well meet old Friends there. There is no NFN event this year – but we expect to make our presence well known at Yearly Gathering at Warwick University at the end of July 2017. I hope to see many of you there.

Michael Wright: Clerk of Nontheist Friends Network.