

## ***Nontheism among Friends***

**Conference of the Nontheist Friends Network at Woodbrooke,  
March 9-11 2012**

### **MINUTE AND EPISTLE**

One year after its formation, 95 members and supporters of the Nontheist Friends Network from all over Britain met as Friends together at Woodbrooke for the Network's inaugural conference and first annual general meeting.

In plenary sessions, break-out groups, workshops and worship we reflected on what it means to live with integrity as committed nontheists in the Religious Society of Friends, or as Friends exploring nontheist ways of being Quaker.

From the first of our three inspirational keynote speakers, Philip Gross, we learned to understand our nontheism not as a diminished but an enlarged and more abundant expression of our Quakerism – “not less, but more”. Don Cupitt (“a friend of Friends”) affirmed the possibility of new, adventurous religious thought and practice after the fading of the old metaphysics, offering fresh, contemporary interpretations of the Biblical metaphors of Light, Life, and the Fountain. “Radical Christian Humanism is not about glorifying humanity but identifying with the poor, weak and oppressed.” James Riemermann, from the USA, urged theist and nontheist Friends alike to “reveal our true selves”, not merely tolerating each other but celebrating our diversity. “If we all believed the same, what could we possibly say to one another?”

Throughout much of the conference we found ourselves wrestling with the paradox of “nontheism” as a *negative* term signifying a *positive* commitment to wholly human values. We heard that theism and nontheism need not be adversarial viewpoints but may be seen as different ways of seeking, finding and expressing meaning and purpose in our lives. We affirmed the importance of listening to each other with grace and due sensitivity.

In five workshops we explored personal journeys, spirituality and sustainability, Buddhist nontheism, Humanism, and peace activism. We let our hair down in a “Quaking with Laughter” session (with “ministry” from Friends Gerard Hoffnung and Sheila Hancock) and concluded with a powerfully gathered meeting for worship.

We are confident that nontheist Friends have a place within the broad spectrum of our creedless Society, knowing that we have much to learn from each other, and trusting that we have something to contribute.

*Signed on behalf of the Conference by the NFN steering group:*

*Frank Bonner*

*David Boulton*

*Maureen Tinsley*

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