

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk



Nontheist
Friends Network

Supplement to September 2016

Theology Think Tank

The Theology Think Tank that David Boulton and I have been participating in this past year eventually agreed a summary of where we reached in our discussions. This summary is printed below.

Inevitably, those of us who have taken part in the email exchanges, and the face to face meeting at Woodbrooke last February, will have gained far more from the process than other Friends who simply read this summary. It is always liable to be open to misunderstanding, however things are expressed. However, for myself, I think it a good summary of what I have experienced. I have found the process of exchanging views with other Friends on the topic the Group were set has been stimulating and helpful, with great respect given and received on all sides.

The question posed to us was: "*Is it possible to re-frame the different perspectives of British Quakers, which have often been characterised by the shorthand 'theism/nontheism', so as to be less polarised?*" The summary statement seems to do that well.

A booklet

A booklet is being planned (to be published by Quaker Books), which will include selections from some of the contributions that have been made by members of the think-tank, both during the weekend and online. There will also be some linking and explanatory text to make sense of the process, and to explain any theological vocabulary in an accessible way. The booklet will also contain exercises for Friends to use in their own Meetings, to encourage face to face sharing of religious experience and belief.

The group responsible for this booklet write: *We hope that this publication will encourage Friends to make use of some of the creative ways of reframing the discussion about religious diversity that the think-tank has generated.*

Friends are to be encouraged to develop something akin to the discussion and exploration which those of us who have been part of the Think Tank have taken part in. I have found this a very valuable experience, and I hope that Friends throughout BYM will seek to make use of this material in the same constructive spirit that the 25 or so of us who have been part of this exercise have.

For me, the key has been initially describing to one another our experiences before we start to explain them. I am currently introducing Rex Ambler's book "*The Quaker Way – a rediscovery*" at a series of discussions in our Area Meeting. One of the points Rex makes as the introduction to this book is this:

“...unlike most other religious groups we may know of, their [Quakers’] way is not based on an official teaching, a doctrine. There is no creed, or statement of belief. Quakers haven’t first of all worked out what they believe, or ought to believe, and then attempted to put it into practice. They start at the other end. They practice it first, then they work out how best to understand it or communicate it.”

Amongst British Quakers today there are a variety of ways of understanding and communicating our experiences. We have much to gain by sensitive, open, and respectful listening to one another, trying to understand each other’s description of our experiences. Then, as the metaphor of the caravan in the desert (see below) shows we are a mixed group on our shared journey, each of us making new discoveries, sharing our experiences, and moving alongside one another as a coherent group.

I look forward to the publication of the booklet, and exploring how we may use it to encourage mutual explorations with Friends locally.

Michael Wright – Clerk of Nontheist Friends Network.
Michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

The note from Craig Barnett on behalf of the sub-group that drafted this summary invites feedback from those who read it without having shared in the whole process. I will be glad to pass on any feedback you have to offer – which will also be of interest to the Steering Group of our Network which meets at Woodbrooke on September 28th.

"Where we’ve got to as a group"

A report of the Theology Think-Tank to the Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group, August 2016.

We agree that the Religious Society of Friends is a community centred on the practice of waiting, listening Meeting for Worship. We agree that differences of understanding about what it is we listen to or worship, do not prevent us from practising Meeting for Worship together.

We agree that the community can benefit from the presence of a diversity of spiritual paths. We have used the image of a caravan travelling together through the desert – some in the centre, carrying luggage and supplies; others scouting the way or exploring nearby routes; all visibly travelling as part of the same body.

Open and honest discussion of our understandings and the things which help and harm us has brought the group closer, and we have found that it is better to be direct rather than evasive about our differences.

In particular, we have become clearer that labels people claim for themselves can sometimes be helpful, although they are not always necessary; while labels applied to other people can be hurtful and misleading. We have heard that in general, 'nontheist' is a label people claim for themselves, while 'theist' is applied by others to those who are not nontheists.

The use of any binary pairs of terms or opposing categories seems to us to misrepresent a much more complex situation. Within our Society, there is a kaleidoscope of experiences and expressions, of presence, of absence, connections, separation, within, outwith, beyond, past, present, future. To reduce this marvellous collection of shifting shapes and colours to a simplistic 'black and white' model of two possible positions is to lose or disguise much which is potentially enriching.

Instead, we can consider the range of spiritualities within our Religious Society using other, richer models. Within the group, we have explored *via positiva*, experiencing connection; *via negativa*, letting go of assertions and assumptions; *via creativa*, gaining insight through creative activity; and *via transformativa*, a surrender to the process.

These can be understood as different forms of consciousness, apparently contradictory but not in fact antithetical. We have also heard about a third, second or first person experience of the divine, in which God can be spoken of as It, Thou, and I; fictional, personal and impersonal understanding of God; God as a verb as well as a noun; focusing on our shared story and practice, or other dimensions of religion besides belief; and many other possibilities.

Our experience as a group is that we can be helped and at times transformed by deep listening to one another. Even where we continue to disagree, which we certainly do, we have been able to understand one another better through listening, and ourselves better through the challenges others provide.

* * *

Dear Friends,

We would like to clarify that this document is the think-tank subgroup's attempt at a summary of where the whole think-tank has reached so far in its discussions, which was presented to a recent meeting of the Revision Preparation Group. It is also important to note that it is purely a record of the think-tank's process and does not represent the views of the Revision Preparation Group.

The think-tank subgroup is happy for the report to be circulated or published by think-tank participants, provided that these points about its status are made clear to potential readers. We would appreciate hearing from any groups who do intend to make use of the report, as well as any feedback from readers.

With thanks and in Friendship,

Craig Barnett

on behalf of the Theology Think-Tank subgroup September 13. 2016

