

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk



Nontheist
Friends Network

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Dear Friends,

Our perspective on the Quaker Way

The monthly discussions on Quaker faith & practice in meetings has provided an opportunity for Friends with different experiences and views on the Quaker way to share them. I would be glad to hear from any of you who have experiences to share of those discussions and in particular any that relate to the concepts of the divine, and spirituality, and what we are doing in Meeting for Worship

Earlier this year, Quaker Books 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 am now gathering contributions. You might like to begin by looking at the quotations on our website which will all be part of the collection from which we will choose when the time comes.

We shall be discussing this at the 24-hour meeting of the Steering Group at Woodbrooke on September 28/29. Without having had the opportunity to discuss ideas with them further, here are some of the section topics that I am suggesting for this collection.

- **Being Quaker - belonging and sharing with Friends**
- **Our Quaker history and tradition**
- **Silence**
- **Simplicity**
- **Love**
- **Integrity**
- **Sustainability**
- **Jesus**
- **Other world religious teachers**
- **Different Advices and Queries**
- **Life journeys**

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Defending nontheism and inclusivity

A few months ago a Friend named Derek Guiton published a book called *A Man who Looks on Glass*. Derek's thesis was that the Religious Society of Friends is in crisis, "on the edge of the abyss", and the cause of all the trouble is the rise of nontheism. More specifically, the blame is laid squarely at my door. I started the rot by founding the Sea of Faith Network (not true) and then built the Nontheist Friends Network as a campaigning body to pursue my aim of turning our Society into a secular humanist organisation. Other nontheists were recruited for my 'Trojan Horse', planted deep in the Society's local, regional and national structures. 'How can one write about any of these matters', he asks, 'without mentioning David Boulton? It would be like trying to write the history of ancient Egypt without reference to the pyramids.'

The book has sold quite well in the Quaker Bookshop, and although its relentlessly hostile, unFriendly tone has shocked Friends of very diverse views, it has become something of a rallying point for those who feel deeply threatened by our presence. It clearly requires a response, and after consultation with Michael Wright and other

NFN colleagues it was agreed that, since the book was described by Derek Guiton specifically as 'a rejoinder to Boulton', any reply should be left to me in the first place.

I have written the response as an Open Letter to Derek, tackling his mistakes, misunderstandings and misrepresentations one by one. At seventy pages it is shorter than Derek's full-length polemic, but I have taken this opportunity to explain our varieties of nontheism and make the case for a fully inclusive Society. Derek has been sent a copy of my text, with an invitation to draw my attention to anything he considers unfair. He has chosen not to respond, other than apologising for any hurt his book may have caused me.

My Open Letter will be published in September or October under the title *Through a Glass Darkly*, advertised in *The Friend*, and should be available from the Quaker Bookshop. I sense that it is likely to be my last book on the subject and I hope Friends will find it worth reading.

David Boulton

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Theology Think Tank

The Theology Think Tank that David Boulton and I have been participating in this year eventually produced a Minute which in August which we were all consulted about as to whether it reflects the experience of the group as a whole. I had hoped to be able to share the final form of that Minute with you all in this Newsletter. However I am advised that it has to go to the Revision Preparation Group (RPG) for them to decide in what way to make it more widely known.

Inevitably, those 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 the final Minute. It is always liable to be open to misunderstanding, however things are expressed. However, for myself, 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 Minute we were consulted about seems to do that well. I hope the RPG will move on from the discussion of the content of Quaker faith & practice, which it has initiated, into other constructive conversations in local meetings.

As soon as I am told I may circulate the Minute, I will send it to you all. Michael Wright

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.

I have been able to share current drafts of five outreach leaflets with members of the Steering Group and we have fed back comments to Quaker Life.

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Woodbrooke Conference March 24-26 2017

The Steering Group will gather at Woodbrooke on September 28 for a 24 hour meeting to plan our next conference in March, and other activities. If you have any suggestions for us to consider at that meeting – please send them to me so that I can share with with the Group.

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Sorry this Newsletter is more meagre than I hoped it would be. I hope to have more to tell you all after September 28th.

Michael Wright: Clerk of Nontheist Friends Network.