



Annual conference at Woodbrooke, 24-26 March 2017

About 45 of us came to this year's weekend conference at Woodbrooke - some from haunt of coot and fern, others from various incarnations of the Big Smoke, and one from the wilds of Houston, Texas.

A few came only for the Saturday, the day when our two guest speakers addressed our twin themes. In the morning Rhiannon Grant spoke on the topic 'God - or whatever you call it' and after lunch John Lampen introduced us to 'Jesus - whoever he may be', though it would be fair to point out that both averred that, while they understood what we were getting at, the titles presented to them by the Steering Group were not necessarily those they would have chosen for themselves. (Neither, in fact, self-identifies as a nontheist.)

Rhiannon Grant has a PhD at the University of Leeds on how Quakers use religious language. She is now Tutor for Quaker Roles at Woodbrooke and Lecturer in Modern Quaker Thought with the University of Birmingham, through the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies. Her current Quaker service includes the Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group. Her talk can best be summed up by quoting her opening paragraph: "This is a talk with two halves [...] In the first half I'm going to ask: can we say anything about God, and if we can, what are we doing when we say things about God? In the second half I'm going to ask: what kinds of things do Quakers typically say about God, and what should we, as a community, do about talking about God?". The full text can be found at <https://brigidfoxandbuddha.wordpress.com/>.

John Lampen, well known as a Quaker Peace educator, writer and Swarthmore Lecturer (1987, *Mending Hurts*), opted for a more interactive approach. He started by asking how many of us had a 'Christian background', whether by previous involvement with a mainstream church or by education in a church school of some sort. Nearly all of us - not greatly to my surprise - had. What then, he asked, do we know "beyond a reasonable doubt", about him? - and with the aid of a flip-pad he listed all the indisputable facts that we could come up with between us. This produced a quite surprisingly long list, though if you remember that there are people out there who refuse to accept evidence even for the historical existence of Jesus I suppose it would be more accurate to say that the facts listed were those which all present could more or less agree on.

After each of these talks we split into five groups of about nine each to share our responses to them.

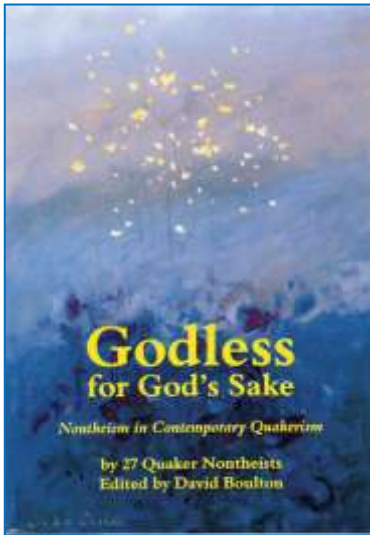
Saturday evening was, as usual, devoted to individual party pieces under the general title 'Quaking with laughter', though the laughing element was optional and some Friends preferred to make more serious contributions.

On Sunday morning we held our AGM both before and immediately following coffee break, and from 12 to 12.30 we concluded with a period of worship (or stillness, or whatever you call it).

It would be only right and proper to add that over the weekend, despite the occasional icy blast, we enjoyed some of the sunniest weather that many of us had seen for a long time. **D.P.**



*Bliss was it that dawn to be at
Woodbrooke...*



An invitation to conversation...'

Godless for God's Sake has been credited with kick-starting the dialogue between nontheist and theist Friends when it was first published nine years ago in 2006. In fact, it brought into the open a subject that had been quietly making ripples for at least a couple of decades. Written by 27 Quaker nontheists from 13 Yearly Meetings in the USA, Britain, New Zealand and Australia, and addressed to 'readers who seek a faith or world-view free of supernaturalism', its first edition topped the list of best-selling books in both the London and the Philadelphia Quaker bookshops. Chuck Fager, editor of the *American Quaker Theology*, asked rhetorically: 'What have we come to in Friends' religious thought when the most exciting book of Quaker theology I've read in recent years is produced by a bunch of Quaker nontheists?' An unapologetic theist himself, he added: 'The proper response to the testimonies in these pages is not scorn or

witch-hunts but an invitation to further conversation'.

Godless had to be reprinted twice within 12 months, then several times on a print-on-demand basis, until stocks were exhausted. But publication of recent books both attacking and defending nontheism, coupled with concerns about how the controversy might affect plans for a revision of Quaker Faith and Practice, have prompted new demands for *Godless*, resulting in a fresh reprint, generously financed by the American-based nontheist Friends planning group.

Copies are available from the Quaker Centre Bookshop, telephone 020 7663 1030, price £9.50. All proceeds (after bookshop discounts) go to the Nontheist Friends Network. You read it when it first came out? Read it again with fresh eyes – or why not treat your meeting library to a copy?

David Boulton

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Nontheist Friends Network (Britain)

March 26 2017 at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham.

Present There were 30 Friends present. Prevented: Sarah Siddle, Treasurer and Membership Secretary.

The Treasurer The Clerk reported that the Treasurer and Membership Secretary was prevented from being present because her husband suffered a stroke five days beforehand, and at the time was still in hospital. The Meeting sent their greetings to Sarah, and their good wishes for her husband Alan, and held them in the light.

Minutes of the previous AGM The Clerk summarised the minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting held on April 3rd 2016.

Clerk's Report The Clerk read his report which is attached to these minutes. In that report, he informed the meeting that the Steering Group brings forward the name of Gisela Creed to be Corresponding Clerk for the coming year. Other roles will be agreed within the Steering Group. The meeting thanked Hugh Rock for his work in dealing with conference bookings and liaising with Woodbrooke. The Meeting thanked the Clerk for a full report of the Network's work during the year. In response to one Friend's enquiry, Trevor Bending explained some of the thinking behind the response from QUG. Rhiannon Grant who was present also explained that the RPG is preparing a booklet and study programme to take forward the fruit of the Theology Think Tank.

Membership Secretary's Report The Clerk read the Membership Secretary's report, which notes a current membership of 56, and is attached to these minutes. The meeting thanked the Membership Secretary for her report.

Treasurer's Report The Treasurer has been unable to give us a current financial statement due to her husband's sudden illness. We ask Sarah to provide such a current statement which will be published as soon as possible in our Newsletter. The meeting thanks Sarah for her work as Treasurer, and asked the Steering Group to note Sarah's request for an Assistant Treasurer to be

appointed, someone she hopes may be willing to take over her role as Treasurer and Membership Secretary at the next AGM.

Website Report Trevor Bending introduced the meeting to the current website, and invited a wider participation by members in comments and contributions. The meeting thanked Trevor for his work and looked forward to members making more use of our website. Further suggestions for the new website can be sent by email to: trevor@humber.co.uk. We decided to close the email discussion group and to use the website for discussion instead.

Clerk The meeting appointed Gisela Creed as Clerk for the Network for 2017 - 18.

Steering Group Those appointed for 2017-2018 are Trevor Bending, David Boulton, Gisela Creed, Jo Jaffray, David Parlett, Deepa Parry-Gupta, Tim Reagan, Hugh Rock, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle, and Michael Wright.

Network's future The Meeting felt strongly the Network is needed within BYM. All members were urged to explain ourselves better, and to emphasise our approach to inclusivity within BYM. We were urged to publicise and distribute our new Membership leaflets.

Annual Conference Some Members would like regional study days, to promote conversations on aspects of theology. Some value the residential conference where there can be interaction with other members, which is not so easy at day conferences. There could be a mixed pattern in which open discussions can take place at regional one-day events in one year and a residential weekend in the next. The Network was encouraged to seek to offer bursaries to help people to attend Woodbrooke conferences. The Steering Group was urged to ask members to offer to organise regional conferences in their areas. The Steering Group will consider all these ideas.

Collection of Quotations It was agreed to begin to develop this idea by putting the current collection on the website.

Exploring issues of theology The Revision Preparation Group (RPG) booklet will provide a focus for discussing the theology of God from this autumn. The Steering Group will consider how best to participate in using the booklet. Rhiannon Grant has offered to liaise between NFN and the RPG on how to take this forward constructively. The meeting gratefully welcomed her offer.

Newsletter A discussion about the circulation and availability of the Newsletter took place which the Steering Group will take note of.

Thanks The Meeting warmly thanked Michael for his work as Clerk of the Network for the past three years.

CLERK'S REPORT 2016-17

Steering Group Those appointed for 2016-17 were Trevor Bending, David Boulton, Gisela Creed, Jo Jaffray, David Parlett, Deepa Parry-Gupta, Tim Regan, Hugh Rock, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle (Treasurer & Membership Secretary), Michael Wright (Clerk). They have maintained email contact during the year, and been consulted as a group on all matters that have arisen. In September the Steering Group held a 24 hour meeting here to plan this conference and other matters.

Quaker Recognised Body In December 2015, Meeting for Sufferings agreed to replace the existing Listed Informal Group (LIG) arrangement with 'Quaker Recognised Bodies' (QRB). The process to implement this change began in January 2016. Nontheist Friends Network has applied to be a QRB and we have received a response from Michael Booth at Friends House informing us that our application has been received and a member of staff will be appointed to liaise with the Network to help us on the next steps to become a QRB.

Our website Since our last AGM, Brian Wardrop has been very helpful in initially supporting and then handing over responsibilities to Trevor Bending who is now responsible for our website. This has been redesigned and continues to be an important source of contact for people who discover there is a place for them within Quakers.

Newsletters Over the last 12 months I have written and emailed 9 Newsletters – in April, May, September which was followed a week later with a supplement – October, November, December 2016, and January and February 2017.



At time of writing our website is to be found at <https://nontheistquakers.wordpress.com/>
 Now that it has been redesigned we agreed that it should revert to the original <http://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>
 This is expected to happen before our next issue.

Theism/nontheism In 2015 David Boulton and I [Michael Wright] were invited by the *Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group* (set up by Meeting for Sufferings) to join a Think Tank, to explore the question: “*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?*” That group of 25 members met for a residential conference at Woodbrooke in February 2016, and my account of the weekend was published in *The Friend* a few weeks later.

The matter was then considered further by the *Revision Preparation Group*, of which David and I were not members. At the conclusion of the February conference a number of those present, including the two of us, expressed the hope that Area and Local Meetings might be helped to engage in similar discussions in the same constructive way

that we had done at Woodbrooke. However in September, a note of record of those discussions was considered by the RPG, and Friends were simply invited to consider that summary report which was circulated to all members in the supplement to our September Newsletter. The RPG asked for any groups who intended to use it to feed back to them. I am not aware of any having done so. However, one of the two key themes of this 2017 weekend conference is to explore our understanding of “**God**” within the Religious Society of Friends, led by Rhiannon Grant.

Literary attack on David Boulton & NFN Earlier in 2015 Derek Guiton had produced his book *A Man that Looks on Glass* which he described as “challenging the supposed inevitability of the ‘Godless’ strand in British Quakerism” and as “a rejoinder to Boulton...the leading Quaker nontheist.” This book was discussed at our conference last year, and David Boulton wrote a response - *Through a glass darkly* - to each of Guiton’s criticism, robustly defending the Society’s inclusivity and openness to religious diversity. The tone of David’s book, published last September, is much warmer than Derek’s.

Quaker Life leaflets The Steering Group raised with *Quaker Life* whether they might consider redrafting the leaflet *Your First Time in a Quaker Meeting*. We offered to send our own suggestions for the text. The Group felt the current leaflet does not adequately reflect the diversity amongst the Society, and off-putting to some potential Attenders. *Quaker Life* asked a non-Quaker to redraft a number of leaflets to introduce enquirers to the practice of Quaker life and spiritual practice in language they would understand. We asked to be involved in the consultation process on these – but that proved very unsatisfactory. We raised a number of concerns and offered suggestions on drafting, but are not aware that any of our proposals were accepted in the revised versions of these leaflets.

Approach to Quaker Universalist Group The Network has explored possible co-operation with Quaker Universalist Group on two projects: (1) a collection of quotations reflecting inspiring and encouraging thoughts; and (2) a possible day seminar on Jesus. QUG replied to say that they felt there were likely to be too great a difference in views between us to make either project feasible.

Collection of quotations We have invited Members of the Nontheist Friends Network to contribute their ideas to such a collection of quotations. Two members have responded with their collections, and I have added some of mine. I have printed copies of these quotations for Friends at this conference to look at afresh, and consider whether this is a project to take further or not.

Jesus The suggestion of a consideration of our understanding of Jesus and his teaching these days is featured in this weekend conference, led by John Lampen who first suggested the topic.

Other suggestions were put forward through our Newsletters for initiatives by members of this Network such as *Quaker Conversations*, our understanding of *Transformation*, taking a fresh look at *Hospitality* as a key Quaker theme, asking “*What does love require of us?*”, looking again at *Simplicity*, and at *Diversity* – none of them has raised a response from anyone.

Do we need NFN & annual conferences? The question has been raised about whether we continue to need this Network and whether its objectives have been achieved within the Society. Also questioned has been the issue of whether an annual conference continues to be appropriate. These matters await the discernment of Members at our Annual Conference.

Appointments My triennial term of service as Clerk ends with this Annual General Meeting, and the Steering Group brings forward the name of Gisela Creed to serve for either one or three years as she feels able to commit. Other responsibilities amongst the Steering Group are for that Group to discern. I am very grateful to Sarah Siddle for her work as our Treasurer and Membership Secretary during the past year. She has reshaped the way the accounts are shaped, and ensured they are subject to external examination. I am also grateful to Trevor Bending for taking over from Derek Wardrop the responsibility for our Website. David Parlett has agreed to be responsible for the Newsletter from this AGM for which I am grateful. *Michael Wright, Clerk, March 2017*

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT 2017

Last year I reported an increase in membership from about 52 up to 84. This year the numbers have dropped to 56, just over the previous level. One or two Friends who chose not to renew their membership gave reasons for this: there is a sense that we are less necessary than we used to be, as Friends with nontheist views become more accepted in the Society. Lack of activity was also mentioned, though it is hard to see what kind of activity we could undertake. Possibilities include a Facebook page and an email circulation on the lines of the old QuakerB, where an ongoing email correspondence is circulated to everyone who wishes to be included.

The Steering Group welcomes any suggestions about how the way the Network functions could be improved, so that we can give you value for your subscription. Meanwhile I propose that the subscription be held at £10, with a discount rate for new members joining between 1 January and 30 April of £15 for the remainder of the membership year (which runs from 1 May to 30 April) and the whole of the next one. *Sarah Siddle, Membership Secretary.*

We have been recognised...

Nontheist Friends Network was accepted as a Quaker Recognised Body by Meeting for Sufferings on 1 April 2017. Also recognised that day were the Quakers and Business Group and Quaker Concern for Animals.

Future Conferences

The dates of our next two conferences have been confirmed with Woodbrooke as: 9th – 11th March 2018, and 29th – 31st March 2019 (Put them in your diary now!)

Afterthoughts

Atheism defines itself as the absence of a belief in god. How can it be a religion? That is like saying that "Off" is a TV channel, or not-playing-tennis is a sport.

Graham Lawton, discussing the proposition "atheism is just another religion", in *New Scientist*, 15.04.2017

Overheard on a Birmingham bus - a young man quoting his church-going grandmother: "I can't believe I still believe this stuff."

Quoted in *Portholes*, newsletter of SoF, April 2017

Next Newsletter

There is no agreed periodicity for the appearance of this Newsletter. The Steering Group will be meeting in July to plan the 2018 annual Conference and that may give rise to something to report in the next issue. Contributions (including illustrations) are always welcome. Please send them to David Parlett on quakers@parlett.eu