



Nontheist Friends Network

<http://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/> - a Quaker Recognised Body

Newsletter July 2017

'There is a place for us' at Britain Yearly Meeting Gathering

Will you be at Britain Yearly Meeting Gathering at Warwick University (29 July – 5 August)?

If so, we'll be pleased to see you at our NFN special event on Monday 31st in Humanities Lecture Room 0.15 from 2.30 to 3.30pm. Michael Wright will be introducing the session with the title 'There IS a place for us'. This will include an update on NFN activities and will allow opportunity for Friends to voice and discuss questions. We will also have a stall at the Groups Fair, and Michael is leading two sessions on 'Prayer beyond Belief'. Please notify either Michael or our clerk Gisela Creed if (a) you will be at Yearly Meeting Gathering and/or (b) attending the session on Monday. Emails: michaelwright80@virginmedia.com, jgcreed@btinternet.com.

NFN Regional Conference, South-West England

Nontheism Among Friends: Its Place within our Religious Society

Saturday October 28, 1 – 4.30pm at Bristol Redland Meeting House

How does a nontheist Quaker perspective impact on worship, ministry, Quaker practice and outreach? What can 'that of God in everyone' or 'seeking God's will' mean to a nontheist? What contribution can nontheist Friends make to any revision of *Quaker Faith & Practice*?

These are some of the questions that will be discussed in a spirit of worship sharing at the first in what we hope will be a new series of regional conferences in major cities across Britain. Bristol Friends have kindly offered to host the first, and it will be open to Friends of all theological persuasions! Speakers will include David Boulton and Hugh Rock. Our Redland Friends will supply tea, coffee and cake, and you are welcome to bring a snack lunch if required.

No pre-registration is required, but please let our hosts know if you plan to attend by emailing celia.beeson@cooptel.net. Redland meeting house is at 126 Hampton Road, Bristol BS6 6JE. We are advised that there is no parking on site, but unrestricted on-street parking nearby. Public transport: Buses 1, 2, 3 & 4 stop on Whiteladies Road (Apsley Road stop) five minutes walk away - 1 and 2 from the city centre and Temple Meads station, 3 and 4 from the city centre. Clifton Down train station is 10 minutes walk away, served by trains from Temple Meads about half hourly. The building is accessible, and you are welcome to get in touch to check particular requirements.

Future national conferences

The dates of our next two conferences are now confirmed with Woodbrooke as:

2018 9th – 11th March, 2019 29th – 31st March

(Put them in your diary **now!)**

NFN conference 2018 – Where are we heading?

In 2005 the periodical Quaker Studies analysed the falling membership of the Society of Friends as dwindling to zero by 2032, when British Quakerism would become history. We are more optimistic today. But what will our Society look like in 2032? How will it change socially, theologically and influentially? These are the questions we'll be addressing at our 2018 annual conference: 'Quakers in 2032: Where are we Heading?'. We are currently in the process of seeking speakers and hope to be able to announce names in our next issue.

Rising prices mean that next year's conference should be charged at a cost of £220 per participant, but the Steering Group has decided to subsidise it from our reserves and make a charge of **£199** in order to

encourage greater numbers. In view of the topic, Young Friends General Meeting will be invited to nominate at least four and not more than six young Friends, at a cost of £150 per head, and if YFGM itself and/or Area Meetings cannot help financially we will see if we can help further.

Our website renewed

Trevor Bending has now completed taking over the work done by Brian Wardrop in establishing our website, which can be seen at <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>
Could you write or contribute ideas for it? If so please contact Trevor on trevor@humber.co.uk

Non-theist Friends Network

Website/Log of the Non-theist Friends Network in Britain

NEWS FROM NONTHEISTFRIENDS.ORG (USA) - RSS FEED

Roots and Flowers of Quaker Nontheism (Abridged)
July 19, 2016
Os Cresson

Publications on Quaker Nontheism
July 19, 2016
Os Cresson

A Message for Future Quakers: Work for All Friends, Not Just Your Friends
July 18, 2016
Os Cresson

Meeting That "of God"
April 2, 2015
Doris Wilson

Accepting the Challenge of Non-theism
June 6, 2014
John Cowan

Quaker and Naturalist Too: a new NTF book
March 21, 2014
Os Cresson

Reviews of Publications on Quaker Nontheism in the 2010s
January 16, 2014
Os Cresson

ABOUT

Looking for a supportive framework linking Friends interested in exploring varieties of nontheism as a strand within modern, diverse, liberal Quakerism?

agnostic?
Humanist?
other?
atheist?

Then join us to celebrate and strengthen spiritual diversity and promote dialogue within BYM.

Quaker beliefs

"Quakers do not share a fixed set of beliefs.

Our unity is based on a shared practice of worship, not on our beliefs all being the same. There is no need to be in unity with Quakers on every issue in order to be part of our meetings.

Search ...

RECENT POSTS

Discussion by Rhiannon Grant, David Boulton and others on Ministry etc.
July 8, 2017

QRB status minuted at Steering Group meeting in York
July 7, 2017

Old website retired
June 26, 2017

Non-theism at QUG conference.
May 17, 2017

Five weeks later
April 28, 2017

Godless for God's sake - reprint
April 6, 2017

Facebook Group?
March 31, 2017

RECENT COMMENTS

Trevor on Old website retired

Now available on Kindle

In *Godless for God's Sake*, edited and introduced by David Boulton, 27 Quakers from 13 Yearly Meetings in four countries tell how they combine committed membership of the Religious Society of Friends with rejection of traditional belief in a transcendent, personal and supernatural God. We have just heard that, by courtesy of American nontheist Friends, it is now available on Kindle.

Welcome!

We are pleased to welcome Angela Kenny into the Network. Angela writes: "I have struggled with my 'faith', or lack of it, for many years. I attended my local Church, was very involved, but could not bring myself to say that I believed in a God. When I first started attending Quaker Meeting I felt free to explore the idea of recognising that I did not actually believe in a God or after life. This has been a revelation. I at last feel free to have my own views while being accepted. I still talk to Jesus of Nazareth, who I consider a friend and role model, but I find the concept of 'worship' challenging. I would like to think that there is power in collective thought and people can feel supported by this. I like to hold people in the light. I am still considering all this and am interested to read the opinions of others in order to hone my own."

Book reviews

Silence, Discernment, and Inner Knowing

Why Silence? – revisiting the foundations of Quaker worship – by Brian Holley, Kindlers Booklet 12. (£3) available from Friends House Bookshop.

Discernment and Inner Knowing – by Joycelin Dawes (2017) FeedARead.com Publishing. (£6) – by post from www.feedaread.com

Why Silence?

Why Silence explores what Brian Holley calls 'soul-silence'. By 'soul' he means something inner, 'not something that goes to heaven when we die'. He laments that little is said about this profound level of silence, even in Quaker circles.

He begins with George Fox's advice to Elizabeth Claypole (Cromwell's daughter) in 1658 quoted in Qf&p 2.18 Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit..... Holley says 'Whether we refer to this experience as 'divine', 'soul', 'spirit', 'alternative consciousness' or even 'God' makes no difference to the experience...Spiritual language is largely expressed in metaphors and approximations because language is so inadequate in this sphere. It is the experience that counts'.

He draws on experiences from Quaker and other religious sources in understanding and offering practices which help develop 'soul-silence'. Is 'soul-silence' an encounter with God he asks, and concludes 'it is better to leave the mystery as a mystery without definition, without labels. He says Fox discovered that the experience is a priori to any religious expression, and is common to humans of every religion, and those who have none.

The experience is key, and in exploring 'soul-silence' he warns it can result in increased compassion, and can transform us and all our relationships – so we must beware – we can expect to be changed by exploring it.

Discernment and Inner Knowing

Joycelin Dawes is an established writer on Quaker and contemporary spirituality. Her book grew out of an Eva Koch scholarship at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre. In it she compares Quaker discernment and decision-making with 'Theory U', a process of discernment and decision-making increasingly widely used in businesses, and in charitable organisations internationally. The two processes draw deeply on the experience of deep listening, of 'soul-silence' in groups of people working collaboratively. Whereas, as she says in her concluding chapter, she was 'surprised to find no authoritative explanation of British experience of Quaker discernment for such a central element of Quaker practice', the essential simplicity and diagrams describing Theory U shed an illuminating light on Quaker discernment.

Rather like Holley she writes, 'Conventional images of God are increasingly replaced by connection with a deep source in an encounter that may be profound and transformative...This highlights the difference between taking a phrase, such as 'following the will of God' literally, and understanding it as a metaphor. However God is imaged, following the will of God may be perceived as a metaphor that points towards our interaction with source, a relationship with our deepest inner place; for many this is transcendent..'

'Some of us stay with a framework of belief over a lifetime, for some it is more fluid and changeable...this is reflected for example in the difficulty many Quakers have in speaking about the nature of the source from which they act'.

There is much to encourage, stimulate and clarify for all of us in these two books. The Kindlers booklet is easier reading for Friends; the other book is, in a couple of chapters, demanding in explaining Theory U which – beyond this book – is complex. However the specifically Quaker parts are more familiar to Friends as in drawing on Quaker authors Peter Eccles *The Presence in the Midst*, Patricia Loring's works on *Listening Spirituality*, Nancy Bieber *Decision Making and Spiritual Discernment*, Elizabeth Liebert *The Way of Discernment*, and Michael Hutchinson's unpublished work on corporate discernment in area meetings, Dawes gives us lots of practical examples of Quaker discernment in practice which are most helpful.

Michael Wright

Michael is presenting a workshop on exploring 'soul-silence' and reflection, including awe, concerns, gratefulness, and personal self-examination on the Thursday morning at Yearly Meeting Gathering at Warwick (10 -12 in Chancellors 2), in a session entitled 'Prayer beyond belief'. He is willing to provide it at local or area meetings within reasonable distance of Middlesbrough – ie can he get there and back in a day.

Three more good reads

Not in God's Name – Confronting Religious Violence - Jonathan Sacks (London 2015)

God is No Thing – Rupert Shortt (London, 2016)

The Religious Case Against Belief - James P. Carse (N.Y.2008)

Former chief rabbi **Jonathan Sacks** is one of my favourite writers. In *Not in God's Name* he pursues a theme enunciated at the outset in a quotation from Blaise Pascal, namely 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction' – a motivation he describes as 'altruistic evil'. His ensuing arguments reference a variety of disciplines, including evolutionary psychology, game theory, history, philosophy, ethics and theology. His thoughts on lessons drawn from sibling rivalry (Cain and Abel) and the practice of scapegoating throw, for me, a new light on certain old testament stories that I now want to go back and read again in the wake of his analyses. If I was left with one overriding conclusion it was, in his own words, that 'The crimes of religion have one thing in common. They involve making God in our image instead of letting him remake us in his'.

I was not previously acquainted with **Rupert Shortt** (though he once wrote for *The Guardian*), but in browsing round Friends House bookshop I was struck by his title *God is No Thing*, subtitled 'Coherent Christianity' (London, 2016), and couldn't resist it. Its first and longest chapter is well summed up in his observation that 'A Christian response to the New Atheism [Dawkins, Dennett, *et al*] should make clear among much else that the Creator is not a thing, or any part of reality as we know it'. In a passage of interest to me as a Quaker he writes 'According to the Abrahamic faiths, it is through silence that we move forward spiritually... [T]he Hebrew word for the presence of God, *Shekinah*, has the same root as the Arabic word for the pause, or silence, that Muslims observe at one point in their prostrations during prayer... 'So the Jew and the Muslim are at one in the conviction that it is in silence, in stillness, that God comes to dwell among men, to be present to them, and to transfigure them, as Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor"'.

I've long admired **James P. Carse** for his curious book *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York 1986), and was fascinated to discover, after reading it, that he had been director of Religious Studies at New York University. So I went out of my way to acquire a copy of his intriguingly entitled *The Religious Case Against Belief* (London, 2008) – a title that put me immediately in mind of Rufus Jones's equally inspiring *The Church's Debt to Heretics* (1924).

'The act of belief', says Carse, 'is always an act *against*; it requires an opponent who holds a contrary belief... Belief systems thrive in circumstances of collision. They are energised by their opposites... Because belief is always belief against, it is itself an unbelief. It is the active refusal to take a rival position. Each belief must not only have an opponent; it must have an opponent whose (dis)beliefs are a perfect match. For this reason, *each is largely defined by its opposite...*'

Later, in the section headed 'Religion' (which he contrasts with 'Belief') he speaks of the importance of experience, a topic on which I recently heard some notable spoken ministry at Croydon meeting. (I have long maintained that we should speak not of our 'beliefs' but of our 'interpretations of experience'.) Carse writes: Although it makes no sense to find one experience that can be called religious, *there is a religious element in every experience...* Over the course of a lifetime, experiences we thought were fixed and identifiable can come to be quite differently perceived. What may seem unambiguous to a bride during the ceremony will look very different from her perspective as wife, as mother, and widow. Experiences are infinitely reinterpretable; they are open-ended, each penetrated by its unknown consequences, each a fit occasion for wonder'.

And later still, in a passage that will be of interest to Quakers: 'Jewish mystics came to an observation about the nature of religious language that contributes handsomely to our understanding of its peculiar appeal... they noted that the meaning of the words lies not in the darkened part of the page but in the white spaces surrounding them. Correspondingly, in spoken language the meaning is not in the sound but in the silence out of which the words emerge and into which they return'.

David Parlett

Nontheist Friends Network - The Network's aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. **Steering Group** - Trevor Bending, David Boulton, Gisela Creed (Clerk), Jo Jaffray, David Parlett, Deepa Parry-Gupta, Tim Regan, Hugh Rock, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle, Michael Wright. Our Newsletter appears irregularly several times a year. Contributions, please, to the editor: David Parlett, 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY, Tel 020 8764 0950, quakers@parlett.eu.