



Nontheist Friends Network

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

Newsletter September 2017

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.

Some of you will be reading this because you put your email on our contact list at the recent Yearly Meeting Gathering. We hope you will find this edition of interest. If you would now like to join us, please send your name, address, phone number(s), and say which are your local and area meetings, to the Membership Secretary, 16 Maltby Court, Darlington DL1 4DZ with a cheque for £10 payable to Nontheist Friends Network. If you would rather pay by internet transfer, please email sarahsiddle@yahoo.co.uk for details of our bank account.

NFN Conference 2018

"In 2005 Quaker Studies analysed the trends of falling membership of the Society of Friends as dwindling to 0 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?"

Our 2018 conference will take place at Woodbrooke over the weekend of 9-11 March. The title is 'Quakers in 2032: What will our society look like?' and we are delighted to confirm that our three speakers will be Linda Murgatroyd, Harvey Gillman, and David Boulton. It's now being advertised in the Woodbrooke brochure and on our website at <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/events/nontheist-quakers-annual-residential-conference-2018/>.

Please book early as numbers may have to be limited. 40 places are available at a cost of £199.

At Yearly Meeting Gathering 2017

It was good to meet up with Friends from all across BYM at Warwick University for Yearly Meeting Gathering.

Qf&p – Revision Preparation Group

Lesley Richard, Clerk of the Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group reported to the main session on Sunday evening. She said the Church Government Advisory Group, (with whom they have been working closely) has described the current church government sections of *Qf&p* as "barely adequate". This part of the Red Book has not been revised since 1964. As they feel there is no sense in "doing half a job" the Revision Preparation Group is minded to recommend to Sufferings that the whole book be revised as soon as possible.

She also reported on the outcome of the discussions that David Boulton and myself were part of last year on our Quaker use of language about God. These were fruitful explorations as we explored the wide range of understandings among Friends of how we account in many different ways for our shared experiences. The Group is to publish in the autumn a booklet entitled *God, Words and Us*. It will be

widely available to encourage similar explorations in local and monthly meetings. This will be an opportunity for Friends to initiate, or to participate in, discussions on this subject. I hope this will prove to be fruitful.

Non-theist Friends Network- THERE IS A PLACE FOR US

We had a good Open Meeting on the Monday afternoon, attended by 60 people. It was titled: *There is a place for us*. This was intended to convey our concern that the Religious Society of Friends remains an inclusive Society.

It was advertised both on the conference programme, and in a sizeable advert in *The Friend* for that week. A thousand free copies of that edition of *The Friend* were available at the conference, so we took advantage of the opportunity to publicise the Network. We gave away free copies of our new format Newsletter, specially printed for YMG, together with our leaflet about the Network.

Gisela Creed from West Scotland Area Meeting, Clerk of our Network, opened the event and welcomed everyone. There were, I believe, eight Network members present, so 52 enquirers!

I spoke about the work David and I were involved in with the "Theology Think Tank" mentioned above, and emphasised our role in providing an assurance to Friends in local meetings that there is indeed "a place for us" as Quakers.

I also explained about the changes in the website, and the regional meeting planned for Bristol in October, and the one we hope to hold in York in the new year.

David Boulton spoke of his tour of four English university Humanist Societies. He also explained about the book Derek Guiton has written *A man that looks on glass* - which is a criticism of the Network and of David in particular. David published a reply - which was available for sale at this meeting and at our table at the Groups Fair - *Through a glass darkly*. Derek has now published a response to David's book *The Beyond Within*, which was for sale on the Friends House bookshop stand at the conference. There was an open question and answer session after this, at the end of which Sarah Siddle our Membership Secretary and Treasurer invited those interested to join the Network.

Groups Fair

Groups Fair was held on both Tuesday and Wednesday evenings from about 7 - 9 p.m. Lots of people came to our stall and chatted, many of them providing their name and contact details for Sarah to follow up.

Prayer beyond belief

I had offered the conference organisers to hold a workshop on *Prayer beyond Belief*. This was scheduled for the Thursday morning, but an admin error put me down twice, so I did the two hour workshop on both Sunday and Thursday mornings. I had 50 at the first, and 60 people at the second. Both resulted in constructive discussions on spiritual practices that are not focused on God. I now have a number of requests to provide this workshop at some local meetings as far apart as Surrey, Leicestershire, the West Country, and possibly Scotland.

Yearly Meeting Gathering

The Gathering was unusual for me as I was able to attend only three evening sessions on Saturday and Sunday and Thursday, and then the two on Friday because of my workshops and having volunteered to serve on the Pastoral Care desk my two shifts were both during YM sessions.

I was able to attend various afternoon workshops, and the Swarthmore Lecture. This was meaty, and reflected a political concern that seemed to have little specifically Quaker content. Unfortunately it was delivered in a dull monotone which made concentration difficult. I shall catch up on key contributions to YMG which are now available on YouTube.

Michael Wright

From Elizabeth Ray-Jones

Everything was auspicious for this year's Gathering - venue, accommodation, weather, Swimming Pool! As ever, we were advised not to attempt too much, and as ever, it was impossible advice to follow. I hoped to get a daily swim in that splendid pool. I managed it once.

From 9.30 Sunday morning to 17.00 Friday afternoon we were invited to attend a stream of thought-provoking lectures, or to watch a disturbing play about refugees seeking asylum, or to join a practical workshop..... or to learn more about many things including non-theism. Even in a large room it was difficult to squeeze in all those who wanted to attend this subject. I don't know if many or any of those who came to Michael's or David's talks will become members of the NFN, but it is a subject of great interest nowadays. Michael has a rare gift of finding the right words to express feelings that many find hard to articulate.

It was a wonderful week, but Alan and I hadn't enough energy left to join in the fun after supper on Friday evening. Perhaps next time?

From Andy Vivian

My visit to Yearly Meeting Gathering was just for the Monday from about 12:30 to the end of the Swarthmore lecture.

There was a good atmosphere and I found the opening workshop I attended on using social media to be well presented and useful. As I was only there for one day, I missed the follow-ups.

I didn't stay for the whole of the NFN meeting on Monday afternoon since I realised that the ground being covered by David was pretty familiar. At the point I left I was thinking that David Boulton might have focussed less on the organisational aspects of NFN and more on the ideas of non-theism, but of course that may have changed after I'd gone.

I thought the Swarthmore lecture was unengaging though I feel sure that the material was important. I think the book will be a better way to accumulate that Catherine West had to say.

One final point of encouragement. We had a new person come to our Forest of Dean meeting on Sunday. He'd previously been along to our monthly Quaker Library talks in Newnham including one when the subject was Derek Guiton's *A Man that Looks on Glass*. We had a lively discussion - at least two of us putting the case for non-theism. On Sunday, he said that was the first time he realised one could be a Quaker and a non-theist and that was why he's decided to come along.

Welcome to Ronald

Ronald Pearse, a name that will not be unrecognised to many of us, joined the NFN in July and kindly responded to an editorial invitation to tell us more about himself.

The editor surprised me - a "new boy" in both the NFN and in the Friends' community generally - by inviting me to write about my background and what led me to join the NFN. But here goes - very briefly! Before retirement as an Anglican parish priest in Leicestershire I became a founder member of the Sea of Faith Network, following years of very gradual dissatisfaction with the theology I had been trained to operate from. After retiring I was fortunate in finding a traditional parish church in which I was welcomed, despite my theological standpoint - and my wife and I attended there for many years.

Then we moved to Surrey and into deeper retirement and increasing physical limitations. I made use of a fallow time without attending church to read, think and to "explore" the websites of churches for miles around, looking for one I could comfortably link with. Lack of success in this led me to explore (on paper) the Religious Society of Friends and the Unitarian Church, seeking postal advice from prominent fellow SOFN members, one from each body.

I gained great respect for both organisations, but the balance eventually tipped in favour of the former because (a) its local outpost was geographically nearer and (b) its mixture of silent meditation followed by opportunity for talk attracted me and (c) the NFN has been officially recognised as a special interest group for Friends. Before starting to attend meetings at the Purley Meeting House I sought an opportunity to talk with a long-standing member there, making clear that I was nontheist in outlook and would not, could not, deny my Anglican past. All this was accepted without hesitation.

As soon as I started attending, I applied to join the NFN.

Ronald Pearse

Book reviews

Just as attending a C of E primary school at a tender age gave me a good grounding in the Bible so did concurrently reading *The Children's Encyclopædia* give me an equally good grounding in the theory of evolution. Having never had any problem reconciling the two it never ceases to amaze me that there are still people who take the Genesis account literally. Much of my reading since childhood has concerned the supposed 'conflict between science and religion', and in recent years has concentrated on human cognitive evolution. This has led me to regard God not so much as a 'human creation' as a 'human co-evolutionary'. So it's not surprising that two titles jumped out at me when I was last in Foyles: Barbara J King's *Evolving God* (Chicago Press, 2017 edition), and Robert N Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

A biological anthropologist and expert in the social life of the higher primates, King places the beginnings of religious sensibility in a sense of belonging, of species togetherness. She illustrates her argument with numerous real-life examples of anthropoid behaviour, and on this basis speculates on a likely development of a sense of religious awe in progressive human species, with chapters on apes, australopithecines, *H. erectus*, Neandertals, and ultimately *H. sapiens*. The last two chapters are *God in the Genes* and a 2017 addendum on *God and Science in 21st Century America*.

Although much of it was (perhaps necessarily) too speculative for my taste, I stuck many little bookmarks in paragraphs of particularly striking interest - such as (p.53) the question 'Do apes follow rules?'. The 2017 addendum, perhaps not surprisingly, I found rather depressing. There really *are* people like that!

Sociology professor Bellah is a much tougher proposition. Confronted with over 700 pages of solid print I must confess that I skipped chunks of it (very selectively, of course!) In fact, what seized my attention when I first picked it up and browsed was the opening of his 'Conclusion' (p.567), in which he writes 'In the course of completely rewriting Chapter 2, "religion and Evolution", I discovered the

importance of play among mammals and the extraordinary way in which play in animals provided the background for the development of play, ritual and culture among humans'. This could hardly fail to excite me in my capacity as a professional games designer and historian, and I was immediately sold on it. When I go back to it, as I surely will, I hope to fill in the bits I skipped, mainly four chapters on details of religious evolution during the Axial Age (c. 800-200 BCE).

I'm also reading, if less assiduously, *Evolution and the Fall* (2017, ed. William T Cavanaugh *et al*, Eerdmans Publishing Co, Michigan), which I picked up at Friends House, and have just started Karen Armstrong's *History of God* (Vintage, 1999). Earlier this year I was absolutely bowled over by Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: a Brief History of Humankind* (Vintage, 2011). In fact, I can safely claim that I read every word of it with growing delight and enlightenment.

David Parlett

There's more on our website!

Recent posts:

Quaker peace work: link to article in *The Times* about Quaker international peace work;

A place for nerds in the Society of Friends: Brigid, Fox, and Buddha: by Rhiannon Grant, our keynote speaker at the 2017 NFN conference;

Meeting your maker: "One thing all of us have in common, theists and non-theists, is that none of us is exactly sure what 'meeting our maker' will be like": some thoughts by webmaster Trevor Bending;

About ministry: Discussion by Rhiannon Grant, David Boulton and others on Ministry etc.

More? Why not contribute something of your own? We're at <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>

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

to this newsletter are always welcome. Please send them to (editor) David Parlett, 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY, Tel 020 8764 0950, email quakers@parlett.eu.