

# Nontheism among Quakers and beyond

Nontheist Friends Network invited four speakers to their annual conference in March 2014 to help them focus on issues within and beyond the Society of Friends in Britain.

## Brian Mountford

Brian is the author of *Christian Atheism* and vicar of St.Mary's, Oxford - the university church. For his book he interviewed a number of people who remain loyal to their church although they have taken leave of God.

He found that what keeps them as regular attenders at church services are their attachments to their religious community, to the moral compass that gives them, and to the aesthetics of the spiritual life – prayer, music, art and architecture. He talked of the tension between pre-modern and post-modern views of religion.

He said many people find their way into membership of a religious community through participation in social, musical or practical action. This in turn leads to a deeper commitment.

He spoke of the benefit of honest doubt. Doubts are important as they can lead to people trying out different ways of being, praying, living, and believing. These can lead on to experiments, different experiences, insights, and commitments. They can lead to a greater clarity in understanding and articulating what that person feels able to commit themselves to.

He saw the need for a core commitment, which holds the community together. This, for the mainline churches has been a common statement of belief. He wondered what the common core might be for Quakers. Some said our common core is the practice of Meeting for Worship and the way we conduct our Meetings for Worship for Business. Others wanted to include our shared testimonies. Another suggestion was that the Advices and Queries provides that common core.

## Paul Parker and Helen Rowlands

The Network invited Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, and Helen Rowlands, Head of Education at Woodbrooke to speak to us of the Whoosh! Epistle which was read during a period of silent worship at the start of their session. They explained how that came to be drafted, from a Quaker Life threshing conference of Friends in 2012 whose conviction was “that our experience-based religion is increasingly what many people are looking for. Growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth, but are hungry for a path of personal and social transformation.”

Their theme was how can diversity and disagreement be handled well, in the Society of Friends? The Whoosh! Epistle includes the challenges: “Can we acquire the confidence to find our own words to express the ways in which we understand the

divine?” and “Can we encourage others as they reach for the language that is right for them?”

A development from that 2012 conference is the “Vibrancy in Meetings Initiative” which is naturally leading into the review of our book of discipline: Quaker Faith and Practice (QF&P). They were clear that it is important that there should be a period of patient exploration over the next couple of years as we Friends learn from each other, and explore many topics in honest open conversations, in conferences and local meetings. They discern that the Society is not yet ready to begin revising QF&P without this exploration and discernment. They felt it important that we begin by sharing ways of describing and expressing what unites us, while at the same time exploring the richness of our diversity.

## Being Friends Together

Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath in August 2014, will be told of a further initiative by Quaker Life. Its theme is “Being Friends Together”. We are all invited to embark on a nationwide programme of learning, encouraging each local meeting to become a learning community. All Friends are encouraged to play a full part in these Quaker conversations, and develop contacts beyond our own Society of Friends with people with whom we can work even if they do not share our views.

In the discussion which followed, David Boulton reminded the conference that the Steering Group had agreed the text of a public statement, printed in *The Friend* earlier this year, that the Network is not seeking to impose nontheist language in any revision of QF&P. It stated that the words of George Fox and others “are a precious part of our common Quaker heritage. What we hope a revision might accomplish is what every previous revision has accomplished, namely that any new edition speaks afresh to a new generation, reflecting the dynamics of change to which our Society, like every other group, is inevitably subject.

“Over the last thirty years the Religious Society of Friends has become more theologically diverse, more accepting of views that challenge traditional understandings of ‘God’ and ‘Spirit’ as transcendental realities. We simply hope that any revision of our inspirational writings will reflect this greater diversity, without in any way devaluing tried and tested Quaker language.”

Paul Parker said he had noted the Network’s links with other ecumenical and international groups, which could be of value in this process. In introducing Paul and Helen, Michael Wright had referred to the links members of the Network have with the Progressive Christianity Network – with whom we are co-operating in the planned national speaking tour in September (to Newcastle, Manchester, London and Oxford) of Gretta Vosper, a minister in the United Church of Canada and author of “With or Without God”; with Sea of Faith, Modern Church, and Breathing Space. He also drew attention to international links with nontheists in Canada, USA, New Zealand and Australia.

## Network's aim

At the Network's Annual General Meeting that weekend, a new description of the Network's aim was agreed – **“to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys.”**

Michael Wright was appointed Clerk of the Network for three years in place of David Boulton who has been the Convenor since the Network was founded. Tributes were paid to David for the considerable work he has done to establish the Network as a Listed Informal Group, with ecumenical and international links, as well as engaging in conversations with other Friends who have different views and experiences.

Other members appointed to the Steering Group were: Trevor Bending, Frank Bonner, David Boulton, Miriam Branson, Audrey Regan, Sarah Richards, Maureen Tinsley, and Michael Yates.

## David Boulton

David was the final speaker at the conference. He set the Network in the context of theological exploration and biblical criticism over the past 200 years, beginning with Deism and Unitarianism, followed by the works of German Lutheran pastors such as David Strauss *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, both translated into good English by Mary Ann Evans – George Eliot.

He charted the development of ideas about God through John Robinson's *Honest to God* and Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God*, and *Sea of Faith*, and could have mentioned his own *The Trouble with God*. He praised the work of the New Zealand Presbyterian theologian, Lloyd Geering – particularly his *Christianity without God*, and *After God*. He spoke also of the Jesus Seminar in America and the more recent rise of Progressive Christianity on the east coast of America.

He told us of his own links with people in America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, as well as with ecumenical groups in Britain such as Progressive Christianity Network, Sea of Faith, and Breathing Space. In interfaith work he spoke too of the books of Stephen Bachelor: *Buddhism without beliefs*, and *Confessions of a Buddhist atheist*.

Furthermore he spoke of the secular humanist movement, some of which can be sterile and fundamentalist, but not all are like that. The Sunday Assemblies which have sprung up in many cities are groups we might constructively engage with. David encouraged us: “Don't just think in Quaker terms but reach out to connect with others.”

Finally he raised the question: “Where is religion going next?” and recommended a new book from an American Quaker nontheist, Os Cresson *Quaker and Naturalist Too*. see David's introduction to his book elsewhere on this website. (NB – In American, “naturalist”

means one who regards religious experiences as natural; in British English it is used to mean one interested in nature – a biologist for example)

## Going forward

Friends present at the weekend certainly felt the energy to engage in the numerous Quaker conversations that are likely to take place over the coming years as local meetings seek to become Meetings for Learning. The exploration of experiences, and ways of describing our experiences, will eventually filter in to the review of Quaker Faith and Practice.

The Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) organised a day conference at Friends House in January entitled: “Faith – what has God got to do with it?” They are following this up with a series of four encounters at Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath in August to which they have invited three members of our Network to participate. The three who have responded to this invitation are Bonnie Grotjahn, Sarah Richards and Michael Wright.

Our Network have also requested two occasions at Bath for an Open Forum for people to come and find out about Nontheist Friends Network, and there will be a table-top display of information about us on two evenings Tuesday and Wednesday during that week.

The new Steering Group now seeks to engage Friends of different persuasions in conversations of mutual respect and inter-change, learning from others, ready to share our experiences and insights. We are open to responding to invitations to provide a speaker at study days, conferences, and other exchanges.

At the discussion on our aim at the AGM, members asked that we should address issues of sustainability, exploring the numinous, and the practical application of our approach to the Quaker way in social engagement alongside people with views very different to our own. This is the way forward we shall seek to address in the coming months.

Michael Wright