

Essex & Suffolk Regional Gathering 27.06.15

'6 Quakers and Nontheism'



Around 30 Quakers from this region gathered at Stansted Meeting House in Essex, for a day of exploration, discussion and socialisation. I had been asked by Susan Garrett, Clerk to Regional Gathering, to repeat my talk previously given to London Quakers as part of their presentations around theism and nontheism.

However, I decided that perhaps, a better representation of nontheism amongst British Quakers would be with a presentation by a panel of local members of the Nontheist Friends Network. We called this presentation '6 Quakers and Nontheism' to echo the idea of differing theologies amongst Quakers in the way that The Kindlers publications expressed this concept in their set of booklets entitled '12 Quakers and God; Jesus; etc.

Friends gathered at Stansted seemed to relate to this way of presenting our faith. Lively group discussions and questions in a plenary session, followed our individual talks. We hope that a few misconceptions about nontheists within Britain Yearly Meeting, have been dispelled.

Transcripts where available of the six separate talks are appended to this document.

The speakers were:-

Laurie Andrews, Maldon, Essex

Audrey Regan, Leigh on Sea, Essex

Tim Regan, Cambridge

Barbara Richardson Todd, Ipswich, Suffolk

Brian and Jean Wardrop, Chelmsford, Essex

Jean Wardrop
Billericay Local Meeting

Jean Wardrop



Over the past couple of years, BYM and MfS have encouraged us to think about our individual faith and lives as Quakers, 'Being Quaker, Doing Quaker'. As a result of this, I began to think deeply about why I am a Quaker and to formulate that reasoning. This is how I express my faith.

I am a passionate Quaker.

I believe in reverence for life, for love, for beauty.

I believe in making peace not war.

I believe in equality and justice for all.

I believe in simplifying my lifestyle so that I am not exploiting peoples, creatures or the resources of this wonderful world.

I believe that truth and integrity are paramount in my daily life.

Within meeting, I have the opportunity for self-examination, reflection and reconnection with those things that are most important in life.

Within meeting my beliefs can be discerned, nurtured and developed.

I believe that, through love and compassion, I can strive for wholeness within myself, with others and the world around us.

I believe life is the journey.

My personal approach to prayer is akin to those expressed by Harold Loukes in 1967 and quoted in QF&P 2.23.

"Prayer is experienced as deeper than words or busy thoughts. 'Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts', said Fox. It is marked by a kind of relaxed readiness, a 'letting-go' of the problems and perplexities with which the mind is occupied, and a waiting in 'love and truth': the truth about oneself, the truth about the world, deeper than the half-truths we see when we are busy in it about our own planning and scheming, the love in which we are held when we think of others more deeply than our ordinary relations with them, the love that at root holds us to the world. Prayer is not words or acts, but reaching down to love: holding our fellows in love, offering ourselves in love; and being held by, being caught up in love. It is communion, an opening of the door, an entry from the beyond. This is the point where secular language fails, for this cannot be spoken about at all: it can only be known. Sometimes in meeting for worship I can experience the 'oceanic feeling' that psychologists speak of.

As Pierre Hadot put it "time for worshipping life or the universe itself and feeling deeply rooted in it, in a mystical communion with it and with the other human beings surrounding us."

Or as James Reimermann, an American Quaker, explains, meeting for worship for him, is like "stepping into a warm bath".

I try to express my faith in straightforward, 21st century language. I find Quaker jargon and quasi-religious sound-bites confuse and are open to mis-interpretation.

This can cause a barrier to dialogue, especially with those new to Quakers or when we are reaching out to the general public.

However, when Friends use language that I would not use, for instance in their ministry during meeting, or when they are speaking or writing from their own experience, I try to remember the section of A&Q 17 which says:-

“. . . . When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to sense where they come from and what has nourished the lives of others. Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people’s opinions may contain for you. “

For me religion is, as another American Quaker, Os Cresson put it, “a matter of how we live our daily lives”.

For me, the unity within Quakerism is expressed in orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.

Again I quote Os Cresson, “The embrace of religious diversity in our midst can be our gift to the world around us where differences in belief matter so much. Let us be patterns of living together and loving each other, differences and all. Let us openly and joyfully celebrate our peculiar combination of Quaker diversity and Quaker unity.”

Finally I quote from Henry Cadbury’s 1957 Swarthmore Lecture, the poem ‘Outwitted’ by Edwin Markham:-

*“He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle that took him in!”*

Thank you for listening!

Laurie Andrews



I believe in God, the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the holy Catholic church, the communion of the

saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, Amen.

Well, I do not so believe. My wife, Jenny, on the other hand who, as well as being a member of the Religious Society of Friends is churchwarden at St Mary's church in Maldon, says the Apostles' Creed at Mass each Sunday. Quakers say we have no creed but the word God appears 38 times in Advices and Queries, Holy Spirit in different forms, five times, and Jesus, or Christ, also five times. The introduction asserts, 'As Friends we commit ourselves to a way of worship which allows God to teach and transform us...' So who or what is this taken-for-granted God? And who decides?

According to a recent survey, 18 per cent of Friends are non-theists. Linda Murgatroyd, writing in the Friend, noted that 'there has been some significant change in Quaker beliefs in the last ten years ... three main groups of Friends – traditional, liberal and non-theist – each used many different kinds of words to describe their spiritual experience.' I'd like to describe my own spiritual experience.

In A Little Book of Unknowing our Friend Jennifer Kavanagh writes, 'Faith came upon me in the wake of a trauma, not as any kind of crutch, not as anything that came from my will, but as a new challenge in my life, a new dimension that in my newly cracked open state I was able to access. It took the form of an invitation – indeed, a requirement – to be myself, to be true to an inner voice, the voice of the Spirit. It meant listening, letting go of the need to control, and allowing my life to be guided. I didn't know what was happening but I was in a changed state ...' She goes on, 'As we open ourselves up to the vast unknown, placing ourselves into a place of ultimate vulnerability and ultimate trust, we find ourselves in a state from which that deeper unknowing arises.'

I came to Friends in 1984 as the result of a personal crisis. I could not overcome my addiction to alcohol and at the end, totally defeated, tried to kill myself. A psychiatrist suggested I should attend Alcoholics Anonymous and the group I joined met at a Quaker meeting house. A poster in the notice-board outside said, 'A silent Quaker meeting for worship can be a quiet process of healing and a journey of discovery'. That spoke to my condition so I plucked up courage one Sunday and went to my first meeting for worship. I was not asked what I believed but was welcomed and accepted for who I was. Friends' acceptance of me when I was at my lowest ebb and most vulnerable was a practical demonstration of non-judgmental love. It kept me coming back.

In my 'newly cracked open state' I became teachable, I opened myself to the 'vast unknown'. The more I learned about Friends the more I noticed striking similarities between AA spirituality and Quakerism. Both are practical, non-hierarchical and non-creedal. AA's programme of recovery is codified in 12 steps, six of which mention the word God, but agnostic and atheist pioneers in the fellowship insisted on the qualifying clause God – as we understand Him, so that no alcoholic could be excluded, regardless of their belief or lack of belief. In any case, like Advices and Queries, the Steps are helpful suggestions, not a set of rules; 'for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.' Advices and Queries urge, 'Do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth.' As an agnostic, that encourages me. We are called to 'welcome the diverse expressions of faith' among us and 'respect that of God in everyone though it may be difficult to discern'. As an agnostic I substitute the words good and love and light for God and that works for me; after all the Bible says God is love. The Psalmist said, 'The fool has said in his heart there is no God.' I lack the certainty to say there is no God and my non-theism is not atheism or anti-God.

Do I pray? Of course I do, but I doubt very much that anyone is listening. To me prayer is an act of humility. When I pray I am saying I don't know all the answers and that I need help. In prayer I access that 'inward source of strength' as it says in Advices and Queries.

George Fox said, 'Your teacher lies within – look not forth.' And AA says, 'With few exceptions our members find they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource, which they presently identify as their own conception of a power greater than themselves; most of us believe this awareness of a power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it God-consciousness.'

That is my personal creed. And 'Attending to what love requires of me' is my faith in practice.

Barbara Richardson Todd

Losing God and Finding Friends: Barbara Richardson Todd



Rooted as a Roman Catholic in my early childhood, I spent the next 40 or so searching and exploring other flavours of Christianity, eastern religions, philosophies and ideologies yet never finding the right fit for me.

Along the way I met many wonderful and interesting people and could have stayed within their particular faith environment but for my realisation that this was not my belief and I could not go along with it or I would be hypocritical and disloyal to myself and my conscience.

A few years ago, through opportunistic meetings and following a TV programme, which discussed the history of God(s), things fell into place and I realised that, for me, there was no god. God was, like religion, a man made construct developed to provide explanations for people in the days before science. Armstrong (1) describes God as a "starter kit" from which we are supposed to move on and evolve.

This revelation left me with a tremendous sense of loss. There was no protector or guardian angel to look after me and I had to take responsibility for my own life.

As well as a feeling of personal bereavement, there was a loss of the good things that religion can offer: the architecture of many beautiful buildings, the music, the joy of singing where no one cares what you sound like, loss of praying - of talking and believing that someone listened and cared, traditions, weekly get-togethers, rituals, feasts, communal meals and celebrations. There is no comfort given on the loss of a loved one, no promise of heaven, as there is no belief in an afterlife. Most of all I missed a sense of community and of belonging; being with others who shared the same beliefs, ethics and actions.

I felt alone.

According to the 2011 census, (2) 25% reported no religion which was a 10% increase in the last 10 years, and New findings by the National Centre for Social Research have confirmed the long-term collapse in affiliation with the Church of England and the huge increase in non-belief.

"The proportion of people saying that they are Anglican has fallen quite dramatically in the last ten years, coinciding with a rise in people saying they are not religious," NatGen noted.

The percentage of non-religious people has increased from 31% in 1983, to 49% in 2014. Conversely, the share belonging to the Church of England has fallen from 40% to 17% over the same time period.

What is clear is that old style Church is on the way out."

<http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2015/may/british-social-attitudes-church-of-england-decline-has-accelerated-in-past-decade/>

and also showing that in fact there were a lot of people like me but I wondered if they were concerned and if so what were they doing about it?

Around the same time various authors and thinkers were coming to the fore with similar thoughts and leading the way for atheists: the "four horsemen" (3) Dawkins, (4) Harris, (5) Dennett (6) and Hitchens (7) were seen as the new angry atheists. Dennett describes losing faith as breaking the spell and Dawkins believes god is simply a figment of the imagination.

Harris wrote of craving "something else" which is not easily defined but is more than material possessions. Although a religious scholar, Ehrman (8) found that the Bible and other scriptures failed to provide him with the answers he wanted. I agree with de Botton* (9) who thinks that we should learn from religion and take from it what is good, wise and beautiful and he even wrote new "commandments" or virtues for atheists (see appendix 1) Even in the Bible, Phillipians 4 v8 ,concurs that "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things".

Books are informative, they provide evidence and help ease the feelings of not being the only one thinking along these lines but they don't cure the need for a community.

What was needed was a safe space for non-believers to meet and develop a new tradition and I found this through Suffolk Interfaith Resource Centre (SIFRE) of which I have been a part for more than 20 years. Even though my faith had been wavering, changing, evolving, I found comfort in conversing with others who had strong commitment or interest in religion and spirituality. An opportunistic encounter at a SIFRE meeting led to an exploration of several websites and forums. Some organisations have national conferences and may also have local meetings such as the Humanists (10, see appendix 2).

A recent development, was the first meeting of an atheist "church" entitled the Sunday Assembly (15, see appendix 6) which it is hoping to roll out across the globe.

It appears I am not alone in my thoughts and many more are now coming together to form communities of people who live a good life with virtuous beliefs but who are not religious in the main sense of the word. There are groups of people gathering on a regular basis, giving focused attention to how to live and love well, and organizing themselves together to do good in the community. But still for me something was missing.

I like Stedman (16) and his "faitheism"* which calls for dialogue not division between the religious and the non-believer and to bridge the gap between the angry atheists and religious pluralism in an interfaith world. He states that the "other" does not exist: we are in it together as a diverse humanity, respecting each one on our journey through life and the improvement of society. Stedman asks us to honour the unique humanity in everyone and he urges us "to step boldly and defiantly across dividing lines of religious and nonreligious identity and share our experiences in hope that we might build understanding through relationships of commitment and cooperation."

Suddenly it all began to come together: I found the Sea of Faith Network (11, see appendix 3) and joined a local group of friendly, intelligent and funny people; through this I met two wonderful, enlightened people who were Quakers and non-theist. The Religious Society of Friends, (12) is a diverse community believing every life is sacred and that there is 'that of God in everyone.' It is not specific, but left to us to

decide the meaning, and from this the testimonies of truth, equality, peace and simplicity arise. Quakers are accepting and tolerant of any one's viewpoint whether theist or not and anywhere in between on the spectrum; within the Quaker organisation there are interest groups such as the Nontheist Network (13, see appendix 4) and the Universalists (14, see appendix 5).

"A nontheist Friend, or an atheist Quaker, is someone who affiliates with, identifies with, engages in and/or affirms Quaker practices and processes, but who does not accept a belief in a theistic understanding of God, a Supreme Being, the divine, the soul or the supernatural. Like traditional Friends, nontheist Friends are actively interested in realizing centred peace, simplicity, integrity, community, equality, love, and social justice in the Society of Friends and beyond".

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nontheist_Quakers

Much of what people actually do in church or a religious institution —finding fellowship, celebrating birth and marriage, remembering those we have lost, affirming the values we cherish—can be accomplished with a sense of God as metaphor, as story, or even without any mention of God at all.

Atheists, nontheists, agnostics and non-believers are still able to appreciate the religions, faiths and views of others without sacrificing their own personal values and see each one is as valid as the other. It is healthy and right for non-religious people to be in conversation with the religious to identify areas of shared concern such as environmental issues, poverty, militarism and so forth, and to work together for the good of all. "All religions are beautiful and true" (17) for those that believe in them.

"Please be patient, those of you who have found a rock to stand on, with those of us who haven't and with those of us who are not even looking for one.

We live on the wave's edge, where sea, sand and sky are all mixed up together: we are tossed head over heels in the surf, catching only occasional glimpses of any fixed horizon.

Some of us stay there from choice because it is exciting and it feels like the right place to be".

Philip Rack, 1979

Quaker Faith and Practice 20.06

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Appendix 1

Alain de Botton : The 10 commandments for atheists are:

- 1 Resilience – Keeping going even when things are looking dark.
- 2 Empathy – The capacity to connect imaginatively with the sufferings and unique experiences of another person.
- 3 Patience – We should grow calmer and more forgiving by getting more realistic about how things actually tend to go.
- 4 Sacrifice – We won't ever manage to raise a family, love someone else or save the planet if we don't keep up with the art of sacrifice.
- 5 Politeness – Politeness is very linked to tolerance, the capacity to live alongside people whom one will never agree with, but at the same time, can't avoid.
- 6 Humour – Like anger, humour springs from disappointment, but it's disappointment optimally channelled.
- 7 Self-Awareness – To know oneself is to try not to blame others for one's troubles and moods; to have a sense of what's going on inside oneself, and what actually belongs to the world.
- 8 Forgiveness – It's recognising that living with others isn't possible without excusing errors.

9 Hope – Pessimism isn't necessarily deep, nor optimism shallow.

10 Confidence – Confidence isn't arrogance, it's based on a constant awareness of how short life is and how little we ultimately lose from risking everything.

Appendix 2

The Humanist Society

Appendix 3

Sea of Faith Network

"Exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation..."

Appendix 4

The Quaker Nontheist Network

The Nontheist Friends Network UK (NFN UK) is an informal group within the Quaker movement aiming to

- (i) provide a supportive framework for Friends with an agnostic, humanist, atheist or related world-view, and those who experience religion as a wholly human creation;
- (ii) join with all Friends who are interested in exploring varieties of nontheism as a recognised strand within modern diverse liberal Quakerism; and
- (iii) strengthen and celebrate theological and spiritual diversity by promoting dialogue at all levels within the Religious Society of Friends.

Nontheistfriends.org presents the work of Friends (Quakers) who are more concerned with the natural than the supernatural. Some of us understand "God" as a symbol of human values and some of us avoid the concept while accepting it as significant to others. We differ greatly in our religious experience and in the meaning we give religious terms

Appendix 5

The Quaker Universalist Group

The Quaker Universalist Group welcomes people from both inside and outside the Religious Society of Friends:

- those wishing to explore the underlying universalism of Quaker thought and practice, its relevance to the variety of religious groupings in modern society and its widening horizons
- those who will appreciate the Quaker Meeting for Worship based on silence, where personal differences of belief may be absorbed and where they may come to experience an underlying peaceable unity

- those who are open to and value the stimulation that can arise from the spiritual insights of other members, including those that come from different religions or cultural backgrounds or profess no religious affiliation
- those who wish to be more open about their faith and to fashion, through the experience of a deeper spiritual exploration, a new philosophy that gives meaning to our contemporary world
- those who seek an uncluttered way of worship that is tolerant, healing and holistic, and calls for everyday living with integrity;
- those who can reach out to Friends in local Meetings and help move the Society forward with love, joy, courage and exuberance to find together a new and united vision.

Appendix 6

The Sunday Assembly

The Order of Service

To begin with we are following a format which people are familiar with and it is just going to get better from there as we hone the heck out of it.

- Welcome / notices
- Song
- Guest speaker
- Song
- Reading
- Final Address
- Song

Community

With time we want to build a community around The Sunday Assembly (yes, there'll be tea at the end). We'll let people know about nearby volunteering opportunities, ways to join in locally and try to turn good intentions into action.

New research: 49% have no religion, Anglican Church collapse continues, Islam increases ten-fold since 1983

Posted: Tue, 02 Jun 2015 10:43

New findings by the National Centre for Social Research have confirmed the long-term collapse in affiliation with the Church of England and the huge increase in non-belief.

Strikingly, the research also found that there had been a ten-fold increase in those identifying with Islam in the past 32 years. In 1983, Islam represented around half a percentage point of Britain's population but in 2014 it had reached 5%, the research found.

"The proportion of people saying that they are Anglican has fallen quite dramatically in the last ten years, coinciding with a rise in people saying they are not religious," NatCen noted.

The percentage of non-religious people has increased from 31% in 1983, to 49% in 2014. Conversely, the share belonging to the Church of England has fallen from 40% to 17% over the same time period.

This means that by-far the single largest group of people is the non-religious. Based on estimates from the Office of National Statistics, there are 24.7 million non-believers in the UK. The next single-highest group is Anglicans on 8.6 million. However, according to the NatCen figures, the "nones" have outnumbered Anglicans since at least 1994- when there were over 2 million more non-believers.

The picture is different for non-Anglican Christians however. Roman Catholics have dropped by only 2 percentage points, from 10% of the population in 1983 to 8% last year.

Immigration is thought to be propping up numbers of non-Anglican Christians. Naomi Jones, Head of Social Attitudes at NatCen Social research explained, "Members of other Christian and non-Christian religions have remained relatively constant and even increased.

"The numbers of Catholic and non-Christian people in Britain may have been supplemented by migrants with strong religious beliefs.

"We know from recent NatCen research that people are less likely than in previous years to see being Christian as an important component of being British. Therefore, fewer British people may feel that the Church of England is an important part of their identity nowadays."

NSS spokesperson Stephen Evans commented on the research, "new findings emerge almost every month confirming just how irreligious UK society is. This obviously strengthens the case for a secular UK. At the very least it goes to show how nonsensical it is to speak of the UK as a 'Christian country'- as NatCen point out.

"The collapse in affiliation with the Church of England continues to make its role as an Established church untenable and wrong. It would be better for both church and state if they parted company."

Other research, surveys and polling have found similarly high levels of non-belief. In April 2015, the National Secular Society criticised the Prime Minister for his claim that the UK was "still a Christian country" after polling from YouGov found that 62% of Britons said they were not religious.

<http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2015/may/british-social-attitudes-church-of-england-decline-has-accelerated-in->

Brian Wardrop



At A-level I took pure maths, applied maths, and physics.

At university I studied engineering, and the whole of my working life was spent in engineering organisations.

So I guess that I am a left-brain right-handed techno-geek!

During my schooldays I became very interested in the ancient civilisations of the Near-East. They appreciated the central role of the sun in their lives, and many of them worshipped it as a god.

By about two hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the Greeks had identified the sun and moon as astronomical bodies, and used their newly developed geometry to make a first estimate of the distance of the sun from the earth. *So not a god, but still important to life.*

By the 19th century, scientists had measured the power density of the sunlight on earth, and knowing the distance of the earth from the sun were able to make an estimate of the total power being radiated from the sun: 400 million million million million watts.

What, they wondered, could be the source powering the sun? Wood? Coal? Gas? Oil?

No fuel that was then known to man could explain this prodigious power output.

Victorian scientist could either believe in a supernatural source, or choose to be agnostic – that is, accept that an answer might one day be found but for practical purposes it had to be put to one side, and the life giving light and warmth of the sun valued for what it was.

A possible answer to the source of the sun's power was found 30 years after the Victorian era ended, when two theoretical physicists showed that when two hydrogen atoms were fused together under extreme pressure and temperature, they formed a helium atom and released prodigious amounts of energy. Atomic processes such as this nuclear fusion have been used to successfully explain the observed characteristic of stars, including the sun.

Unlike the power source of the sun, no convincing theories of how the cosmos and life on earth came about have yet been found, and so on these I am agnostic.

Concerning life changing religious experiences of many people over the centuries, I am more inclined to seek an answer in the staggering complexity and delicacy of our human brain than in a supernatural being.

I can understand the comfort to be derived from a belief in an omnipotent, supernatural being which created all existence and participates in the minutia of human life, but this theist mind-set is not for me.

I derive great benefit from sitting in my Quaker community allowing my periods of reflective contemplation to give an opportunity for my 'inner teacher', or 'conscience' as I prefer to know it, to engage with me.

For me, the most valuable Quaker aspiration is in the sentence from the Elders of Balby in QFP 1:

“Our diversity invites us both to speak what we know to be true in our lives and to learn from others.”

I have no need of a heavenly father to support and guide me, and so I am comfortable to be labelled a nontheist – ***and long may our Quaker diversity persist!***