



Nontheist Friends Network

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

Newsletter April 2018

Annual conference afterthoughts...

Amazing

I had an amazing time at the non-theist conference. It was full of some very rich and rewarding discussions... The 'non-theist' faith isn't my own position but I do see it as an important strand of Quaker thought and I hope to come along to future gatherings.. Thanks do need to go to the organisers because these things do take some organising.

Pete Broadhurst

The twenty-first century and the need for the bilingual (at least) Quaker

Go to Woodbrooke? No worries. I'll be there. Any stay, just a couple of days or, please, a lot longer, offers thinking time, friendly company and green, green surroundings. But going there is not hiding from the world. Just outside the gate is the ever-busy Bristol Road that goes up the hill and on to the centre of Birmingham.

Well, we're here for the seventh Non-theist conference. (Yes, there is talk during the weekend of changing the name of the network to something a little less forbidding. Perhaps even a little inviting). The conference is setting out to discuss 'Quakers in 2032: What will our society look like?' (At this point, am I the only one working out how old I'll be in 2032? It's going to be a close call). Complementing this discussion was an exploration of some relevant issues as set out in the new publication *God, Words and Us*. (Both our Monday and mid-week study group are currently working through it).

But first, Linda Murgatroyd gave us some helpful facts and figures about religion in Britain. In 2015 49% of those surveyed had no religion. The figures showed declining Christian engagement (and a doubling of the Muslim population between the 2001 and 2011 census). Interestingly, Quaker numbers are holding up comparatively well. David Boulton gave a historical overview entitled 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: what our past tells us about our future'. Both these talks in their own way were exploring current and shifting paradigms.

One very interesting question asked what if our model of the future for Quakers is dependent on continuing liberal views in wider society? What might happen to the Quakers if the rise of populism and fascism continues? (One speaker asked us all if we read *The Guardian*? No prizes for guessing most of us did). Harvey Gillman was also, as ever, in great form. He gave his listeners lots of things to think about...for example, being present in the moment, the invisible church and the passive/aggressive squabbles in meetings. It was the latter point that could be said to have emerged as another theme of the conference. Stories emerged in main sessions and in the smaller discussion groups about non-theists feeling intimidated (yes, that was the word used) by theists in meeting. Harvey had made the meaningful point that Quakers are also concerned, if not more so, about the God between us than the God within.

Here's a personal reflection. Each of us makes our own choice about the language we use to define and conduct our relationship with God. Language can be subversive and inventive and also can evoke and carry on traditions and culture. Surely it is possible to say that one language, one discourse, be it non-theist or theist, should not predominate. (The nature of the traditions and culture that hold us together as a group is perhaps another discussion). After all, it could be that in some way each one will be found meaningful and understood by us all. In the twenty-first century, in the new globalised and multicultural context, surely it will be necessary and beneficial to understand and communicate in more than one language?

Helen Johnson

Some thoughts by Harvey Gillman

When I received the invitation to speak, I was very moved and spent a long time challenging myself as to how I would express myself. One day on a train, which is where thoughts often occur to me, I began to reminisce over the many questions that enquirers used to put to me when I was Outreach Secretary of British Quakers (1983-2001). A dialogue/meditation took shape in my mind. Each day for a month I revised this meditation. I sent the result to *The Friend*, which published it in the Christmas edition of 2017.

Here it is:

Questions

They asked him: 'What do you believe?'

He replied: 'We are alive together on this fragile earth. What we do has meaning and consequences. We can fail and fall. We can love and nurture.'

They asked him: 'What is the light you talk about?'

He replied: 'It shines sometimes. It casts a shadow. It reveals. It warms. It burns. It may be found in the heart of each but is owned by none.'

They asked him: 'What is your faith?'

He replied: 'The light will shine even when our eyes are closed through sleep or blinded by fear.'

They asked him: 'What is your prayer?'

He replied: 'To keep my arms open. And my heart. And my eyes. That my lips may sometimes move.'

They asked him: 'What would you die for?'

He replied: 'My question is rather, 'For what, for whom do I live this day, this hour?''

They asked him: 'What is your God?'

He replied: 'The creative silence that welcomes beyond the edge of words. The light that burns in the darkness. The wind that is my breath, our breath, blowing where it wills. God is not the name of God and the wind has no name and blows through the doors and the windows of many temples.'

They asked him: 'What is your authority?'

He replied: 'The restless communion of the winding path. Visited sometimes by grace.'

They asked him: 'What happens when we are dead?'

He replied: 'Death has taught me a concern for life, for open doors, and arching bridges. For the challenge of this moment, for the challenge of this transient life. Moments of unknowing. Glimmers of more. A discovery.'

They asked him: 'What have you learned in your seventy years?'

He replied; 'We are not just our names, our past, our spoken and written words. We are all anointed. Our country, our deepest faith, has no flag, no borders. We may be each other's purgatory or hell, or even paradise.'

They asked him: 'What is your hope?'

He replied: 'That we may continue to cherish our questions, cherish each other. That we be not afraid to be silent with each other. That in spite of the pain we and the day inflict upon each other, we still can believe, have faith, pray, and even dare to love. My hope is that we go on hoping, though our hearts and our history and the shadows of the moon may teach us to give up hope. That despair may not be the last word.'

Hope for the future

The question 'Where will we be in 2032?' was prompted by the prognostication that, at the present rate of membership loss, there would be only one Quaker left in Britain by that year. I can't say that we reached any answering prognostication, but it was fun trying. In my case it has given rise to an 'afterthought' prompted by Harvey Gillman's startling extension to it: 'Will we [the RSoF] still need to exist? Do we deserve to?'

That afterthought was an extension of my recent Powerpoint presentation to Croydon Friends entitled *Quakers Before Quakers*, in which I pointed out that the claim that 'Quakerism began in 1652', on a poster in our entrance hall, is presumptuous. It stands up only if by 'Quakerism' you mean the starting point of our present Society. But all the elements of belief, vocabulary and testimony that we now regard as Quaker essentials had been current in various forms throughout Europe for several centuries before.

The 10th century Greek Orthodox saint Symeon 'The Theologian' declared that the divine light 'shines on us without evening, without change, without alteration, without form. It speaks, works, lives, gives life, and changes into light those whom it illuminates'. The 12th-century Waldensians stoutly opposed oaths, war, and capital punishment, and declared 'A church is not a building but a company of good persons... Everybody can preach, including laymen and women'. 'The real Church', said John Wyclif in the 14th, 'is not the ecclesiastical system with inalienable magic rites but the society of good persons holding their spiritual gifts from God, and rendering service appropriately.' The 'invisible church', described by Robert Barclay in 1678, was foreshadowed in the 16th Sebastian Franck: 'We possess an inborn capacity to hear the inward Word of God... [it is] the Word of God, the Lamp of the soul, the Inward Light...' Everyone must prove the authority of their religion and through this truth and insight enter spiritual unity with all who form the invisible Church. 'The true Church is not a separate mass of people, not a particular sect to be pointed out with the finger, not confined to one time or one place; it is rather a spiritual and invisible body of all the members of Christ... The assembly and communion of all truly God-fearing, good-hearted, new-born persons in all the world, bound together by the Holy Spirit in the peace of God and the bonds of love...' Later, in Holland, the Collegiants held meetings for worship based on silence as we still do today.

My afterthought was this: just as there were 'Quakers before Quakers', albeit in all but name, so there will surely continue to be 'Quakers after Quakers', even if that charitable entity now known as 'The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain' no longer exists. So long as I believe in the future of humanity, so I will continue to believe in an 'invisible church', consisting of those 'silent assemblies of God's people' that moved Robert Barclay to feel the evil weakening in him and the good raised up. David Parlett

Bookish thoughts

Although only 100 pages long *God, Words and Us* is profoundly important. As I wrote in a letter to *the Friend* (8 December): 'I believe it has the potential to make the same impact as *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*. That essay, written in 1963 by a group of Friends helped to shape the liberal, tolerant zeitgeist of the 1960s and eventually led to British Friends pioneering same sex marriage. The essay called for 'a release of love, warmth and generosity ... that will weaken our fear of one another ... this search is a move forward into the unknown; it implies a high standard of responsibility, thinking and awareness – something much harder than simple obedience to a moral code.' ... *God, words and us* explores 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy', showing us possible ways to reconcile the irreconcilable.'

'The spirit blows where it will.' (*John 3:8*)

Last paragraph of a review published in the Mid-Essex AM Newsletter. The whole can be seen on the NFN website. Laurie Andrews

'Many of us are prone to binary simplification in moral and theological debate ... You have to be one thing or the other. There's nothing in between. You certainly can't be both at the same time. This is not only a boring look at the world; it is also inaccurate. Nothing is that simple ... The human experience of religion is various and complex ... there are as many hues on the religious spectrum as there are on gender and sexuality. We should

acknowledge that and come to a more generous and comprehensive understanding of this important aspect of human experience ...'

(From *Waiting for the last bus*, the new book by Richard Holloway, former bishop of Edinburgh, via *Laurie Andrews*)

I'm quite new to Quakerism (four years), and it was my first NFN conference. I was impressed by people's variety, sincerity, friendliness, commitment, awareness, attitudes, and more. Nice venue too. I felt my interest in Quakers rekindled, and so I was happy to volunteer to be on the steering committee. I know that some felt that there was not enough time for open discussion participation.

This is hardly a review, but I'd like to briefly mention a book which had strong effect on me: *Lust for Reverence* by Gimbernat (a pseudonym). This talks about our desire to submit, be led, be conditioned. It gives one pause for thought about the dangers of this, but also suggests that we view it as an instinct not to be suppressed but to be understood and managed for the best. It's a brilliant book in my view, and a pleasure to read.

Piers Maddox, Totnes Meeting

Membership renewal

Please note that if you didn't renew your membership at the Annual Conference, subscriptions (£10) are due on 1st May. Cheques may be sent to our new membership secretary, David Parlett (contact details below). Or you can pay by internet transfer to Nontheist Friends network, sort code 09-01-29, account #00485810 with reference M19 followed by your surname (and an initial if another member has the same surname!). We do hope you will feel able to continue to support the network in this way.

The screenshot shows the website for Nontheist Quakers. The header includes the logo and the text 'NONTHEIST QUAKERS'. Below the header, there is a navigation bar with 'HOME', 'ABOUT', and 'EVENTS'. The main content area features a post titled 'GOD, WORDS AND US' dated November 30, 2017, by Trevor. The post text discusses a new 100-page book from Quaker books, edited by Helen Rowlands, which summarizes findings from a 'think-tank' set up by the Revision Preparation Group (RPG) of Meeting for Sufferings to consider issues prior to a possible revision of Quaker Faith and Practice. It mentions that NFN's David Boulton and Michael Wright were part of the think-tank in a personal capacity. A synopsis of the book (Michael Wright) and a succinct review (David Boulton) are also mentioned.

On our website...

Reviews and synopses *God, Words and Us* can be found on our website at <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>, where you will also find a link to Rhiannon Grant's review (and other goodies) at <https://brigidfoxandbuddha.wordpress.com/>

The Nontheist Friends Network exists to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation.

Steering Group - Trevor Bending (Webmaster), David Boulton, Gisela Creed (Clerk), Jo Jaffray, Piers Maddox (treasurer), David Parlett (Membership Clerk), Deepa Parry-Gupta, Tim Regan, Hugh Rock, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle.

Our Newsletter usually appears four times a year. Contributions, please, to David Parlett, 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY, Tel 020 8764 0950, quakers@parlett.eu

The next NFN conference will be at Woodbrooke over the weekend of 29-31 March 2019