



Nontheist Friends Network

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

Newsletter July 2018

Looking forward

Our next annual conference will be at Woodbrooke and is already booked for 29 - 31 March. Members of the Steering Group met at Lancaster meeting house in July to consider at length a proposed theme and title, and agreed as the theme 'Unity, Diversity, Boundaries' with the title 'Under Revision'. A number of potential speakers have been approached and we hope to announce them later this year.

Membership

Our outgoing membership secretary Sarah Siddle reported that NFN membership figures have been lower than for last year, though it is difficult to be precise as we have been counting only those who have paid their subscription! We have more on our list who at their request or agreement continue to receive the newsletter and updates on forthcoming events. Yearly membership subscriptions run from 01 May. If you would like to become a member, or remain on our contact list for 2018-19, please send a cheque for £10 (or more!) made out to 'Nontheist Friends Network', together with full contact details including an e-mail address if you have one. Alternatively, you may prefer to pay by electronic bank transfer. Details are available from Membership Clerk David Parlett (1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY, tel 020 8764 0950, email quakers@parlett.eu). In order to comply with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) we ought not to keep for too long contact details of Friends whose membership has lapsed, so if you are in any doubt about your current status please contact the treasurer or membership secretary.

Personal experience: God and Worship

A talk by Audrey Regan for Quaker Quest at Leigh Meeting in June

My late husband and I met at, married and worked in Congregational Churches in Thundersley and Basildon, where we met many kind, wonderful people and liked the democratic nature of the Church.

However, there reached a time when we were, increasingly, finding hymns and sermons contained words and sentiments we could not agree with.

Simultaneously, Dan was investigating the Quakers and going to Quaker Meetings whenever he was away for the weekend.

Moving from Basildon to Benfleet seemed the ideal moment to go to a Quaker Meeting. This was on Canvey and we soon applied for membership.

When visited, I expressed some concern that I would no longer be going to Communion but that I wanted to go with my husband on this. Once in, I took to Quakerism like a duck to water.

Quakers have no creed to repeat or subscribe to, but what seemed to be the bedrock of Quaker values was the words attributed to George Fox who founded the Quaker movement 'Walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.'

Many Quakers would be happy to take that statement 'that of God' at face value, my own interpretation is that there is something of intrinsic value in every human being. I specially love the part that says 'Walk cheerfully' for that suggests we should have a predisposition to think the best of everyone and listen to their story regardless of creed, colour, sexual orientation, fat or thin, rich or poor.....etc. (the neighbours/West Indian meter reader)

Looking back, it is extraordinary to think how far I have travelled from conventional Christian beliefs to now having no belief in God and considering all religion a human construct.

But, this last conviction put me in a sad dilemma as I was very unhappy at the thought of leaving Leigh Meeting. On the point of resigning, I met a Friend at Britain Yearly Meeting (Frank Bonner) who showed me his card authorising him to be a Celebrant of Humanist Weddings. It was a huge relief to know I was not alone.

Soon after, my elder Son pointed out a Conference at Woodbrooke Quaker College specifically for Q's who had no belief in God. There we met some Friends who had had rather bruising encounters with their Local Meetings when they first spoke of their non-theism. However, Friends throughout Britain were content for a non-theist network to be set up within Quakerism. We, in turn were most keen for our fellow Quakers to understand that we were not a lot of 'Johnny-come-latelys who wanted to change the S of F's into a branch of the Humanist Society. Rather, most of us were Friends who had been in the Society for a long time (50 years in my case) and had served the Society in various capacities.

I have been very fortunate to be a member of a Quaker Meeting that is happy for our Society to be an inclusive one, not an exclusive one – so they accept even me!

There is infinite variety within Friends. We have Buddhist Quakers, C of E Quakers, Christo-centric ones, non-theist Quakers, all of which was very well explained on the Quaker website for some time:

"There is a great diversity within the Quakers on conceptions of God and we use different kinds of language to describe religious experience. Some Quakers have a conception of God which is similar to that of orthodox Christians, and would use similar language. Others are happy to use God-centred language, but would conceive of God in very different terms to the traditional Christian trinity. Some describe themselves as agnostics or humanists or non-theist and describe their experience in ways that avoid the use of the word God entirely."

So what is such a 'motley crew' doing when we gather for Meeting-for-Worship? We sit in silence on Sunday morning, the silence occasionally broken by a Friend standing to speak briefly of something they think right to share. This form of Worship is unusual, odd some may say and it requires a sense of trust each with the other and a willingness to sit quietly and enter into the creative peace we achieve together.

At the first Non-Theist Conference that I spoke of, there was much discussion about Meeting for Worship and, 'to a man' we all expressed how much it meant to us to be able to go to Meeting on a Sunday morning. We compiled a list of some reasons why this should be so:

- to find a space behind/below myself, my ego
- to have a piece of the action, to be a part of the whole
- to be part of a community of shared values
- to get in touch with the teacher within
- to try to discern what love requires
- to preserve an empty space for selfless thought
- to centre thoughts on each Friend present.

I suspect if you could look into each Friend's head of whatever persuasion, you would find Meeting meant something slightly different.

For my own part I have various ways of giving myself up to the silence. One comes from something I witnessed at the small Meeting on Canvey Island. One of two little boys who came with their parents had an empty chair beside him. Onto this he quietly put, one by one, the contents of his pocket, much what you might imagine, string, a stone from the seafront, penknife and so on. So if I come to Meeting with my mind in a whirl, worried about a member of my family, concerned to do the right thing by a friend, cross with myself for doing something I regret – whatever is praying on my mind at the time, I sit and, one by one, lift out of my mind and thinking each of these concerns so that I can truly settle into the silence and be calmed and be refreshed thereby.

Another way is to do one of the things on the Conference list and centre thoughts on each Friend present.

And Debbie was right in what she said about Meeting last week, that it is something you get better at and find you can 'centre down' more quickly and easily with time.

So, some Friends in Meeting for Worship will be praying or opening themselves to the word of God. Others like myself will be finding a quiet and creative peacefulness. The important thing is that, whatever our differences, everyone will find something special about sharing in that time that we set aside and in being with others in an inclusive, loving, non-judgemental acceptance of our differences and receiving strength to go out and 'walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.'

Trivialising?

Earlier this year a lot of hoo-ha arose from an article by Simon Jenkins in *The Guardian* entitled 'The Quakers are right – we don't need God'. This was somehow related to his learning of the then imminent Yearly Meeting session on a possible revision of *Quaker Faith and Practice*. It was followed on 13 May by an edition of May BBC1's 'The Big Questions', asking whether religion needs God, with particular reference to the theist/nontheist dialogue among Quakers, and the decision to revise the Red Book that had just been taken. Participants included David Boulton and Rhiannon Grant, but it was hard for them to make much headway in the face of the presenter Nicky Campbell's ineptitude (and the fact that only 20 minutes of the hour-long programme were spared for this topic). One NFN reviewer wrote 'Well done to David and Rhiannon, but no brownie points at all for Nicky Campbell who seemed to want to trivialise the issues. I felt it was an unsatisfactory programme on the whole, as indeed was the previous one I watched which had Rachel Muers on it. If you haven't seen it you haven't missed much. David and Rhiannon did a good job of correcting misapprehensions about Quakers, but the rest was disappointing'.

Research questions for nontheist Friends

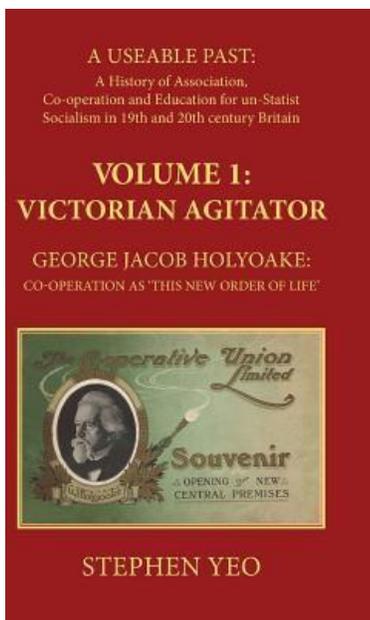
Patrick Cremona, currently finishing a masters in Magazine Journalism at Cardiff University, has written to seek our help in answering questions about aspects of our Quakerism. He writes:

"The piece that I am currently working on is part of a series of articles exploring spirituality in the twenty-first century, which will form my major project for my masters, and will also hopefully be pitched to other outlets once it is finished. This idea for this particular feature was inspired by both the Simon Jenkins article you linked [on the NFN website] and a conversation with a (non-religious) friend of mine who has recently started attending Quaker meetings. Its aim is to explore ideas of religion, theism and spirituality, and the differences

between them, with specific reference to Quaker meetings. While I found the aforementioned Jenkins article interesting, it didn't include quotes from Quakers and this is where my article would differ. Rather than being an opinion piece, I would be looking at comparing the viewpoints of different people who attend Quaker meetings and their attitudes towards religion and spirituality... I aim to conduct thorough research on the topic, and I am planning on attending a Quaker meeting in Cardiff in the near future."

Patrick has sent us a questionnaire and readers are invited to respond to him via <patrick.cremona@hotmail.co.uk>.

1. How long have you been attending Quaker meetings?
2. What were your original reasons for attending, and what were your views about theism at the time?
3. To you personally, what are the differences between religion, theism and spirituality?
4. Have your views regarding religion, spirituality and theism changed over time?
5. Why did you join the Non-theist Friend network? Has doing so enhanced your experience as a Quaker?
6. Have you noticed a general trend towards a more non-theist approach amongst Friends in general?
7. In a world where traditional religion is continuing to steadily decline, in what ways do Quaker meetings offer an alternative form of worship?
8. Although religion has been declining, spiritual activities and mindfulness practices are in vogue. Do you think a less rigid form of spirituality can replace more structured, organised religion in the twenty-first century, and what are the advantages of this?
9. What would you say to someone with no religious beliefs who was interested in attending Quaker meetings?



Victorian Agitator: George Jacob Holyoake

by Stephen Yeo, EER Edward Everett Root Publishers (Brighton 2017), Hbk. 246 pp. £65.

Reviewed by David Boulton

'Nontheism' is not an elegant word. Half Latin and half Greek, it lacks the worldliness of one and the beauty of the other. Why substitute it, then, for its pure-Greek antecedent 'atheism' which has served its purpose for more than two thousand years? It's a question some of us wrestled with a few years back when we founded the Nontheist Friends Network. Because the word was for a time at the centre of Quaker controversy, it was thought by some to be an original Quaker coinage. In fact its only true begetter was the nineteenth century self-confessed 'agitator' George Jacob Holyoake, better known for inventing the words 'secularism' and 'jingoism' among many others.

Holyoake was attracted to Owenite socialism and influenced by Auguste Comte's 'religion of humanity'. In 1842 he was jailed for six months for saying he didn't believe in God. At the time he described himself as an atheist, but by 1852 he was troubled by the popular misunderstanding which associated atheism with rampant immorality and hedonism. He wrote: 'Atheist is a worn-out word. Both the ancients and the moderns have understood by it one without God, and also without

morality... Non-theism is a term less open to the same misunderstanding, as it implies the simple non-acceptance of the Theist's explanation of the origin and government of the world'

Surprisingly, this quotation is not included in Stephen Yeo's book, *Victorian Agitator, George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906): Co-operation as This New Order Of Life*; Volume 1 in a three-part series called *A Useable Past: A History of Association, Co-operation and un-Statist Socialism* in 19th and early 20th century Britain. A former principal of Ruskin College, Oxford, and former chair of the Co-operative Heritage Trust, Yeo is a dedicated disciple of Holyoake, sharing the old agitator's passion for what E P Thompson in *Out of Apathy* called 'the long and tenacious revolutionary tradition of the British commoner... expressed most naturally in the language of moral revolt'. For Holyoake and for Yeo, the 'new order of life', of 'moral revolt', was (and is) epitomised in the concepts of co-operation, consent and community.

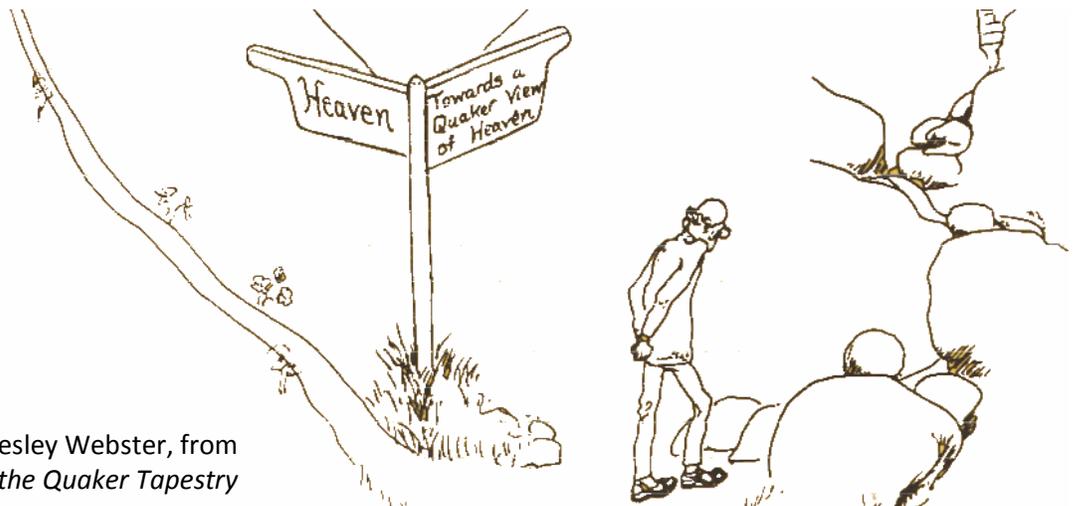
I confess that for me, the most enlightening pages here were those which freely quoted Holyoake's own voluminous writings. Take this, at the very beginning, illustrating his concept of ethical secularism (from *The Trial of Theism*, 1858):

'Going to a distant town to mitigate some calamity there, will illustrate the principle of action prescribed by Secularism. One man will go on this errand from pure sympathy with the unfortunate; this is goodness. Another goes because his priest bids him; this is obedience. Another goes because the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew tells him that all such persons will pass to the right hand of the Father; this is calculation. But another goes on the errand of mercy because it is an errand of mercy, because it is an immediate service to humanity; this is Secularism, which teaches that goodness is sanctity, that Nature is guidance, that reason is authority, that service is duty, that Materialism is help.'

Secularism for Holyoake, the inventor of the word, was not the binary opposite of religion. He understood it in its original meaning as the life of this world and our times, including freedom for as well as from religion. Yeo asks at the end, 'Could moral idealism be unearthed once more, as one of the buried assets of the Co-operative Movement?', answering that 'it might be best to admit that we don't know'. Looking back to the Owenite Society, which Holyoake joined in 1838 when he was 21, he wonders whether 'in our extraordinarily disjointed times' it is really so quaint. Could it be 'a seed, ready to be sown for another season?'

The pleasure of reading this book is its constant reminders that the dilemmas, dreams and preoccupations of those of us who hope to build the republic of heaven now that God is no longer on the throne, have history. We tread where others have trod — others like George Jacob Holyoake. It's a pity the hardback is inexplicably priced out of most general readers' pockets at £65 (though cheaper from some online bookstores).

This review appeared first in Sofia, the Journal of the Sea of Faith movement (No 128, June 2018, p.22), and is reproduced by kind permission of its editor Dinah Livingstone.



Cartoon by Lesley Webster, from
Not the Quaker Tapestry

Jesus Potter Harry Christ

by Derek Murphy, published by Holy Blasphemy Publishing,
paperback, from £16.67
reviewed by Piers Maddox

This is an interesting book, very readable yet more serious than its cover suggests. To quote the Introduction:

‘The primary aim of this investigation is to increase awareness of the fact that a debate over the reliability of the historical Jesus exists ... and that a strong case can be made in favour of a mythological, literary character that was mistakenly assumed to be historical by later Christian converts.’

Murphy plausibly argues that Alexandria was the likely geographical origin, with astrology and numerology featuring in a deliberate blending of pagan and Jewish thought.

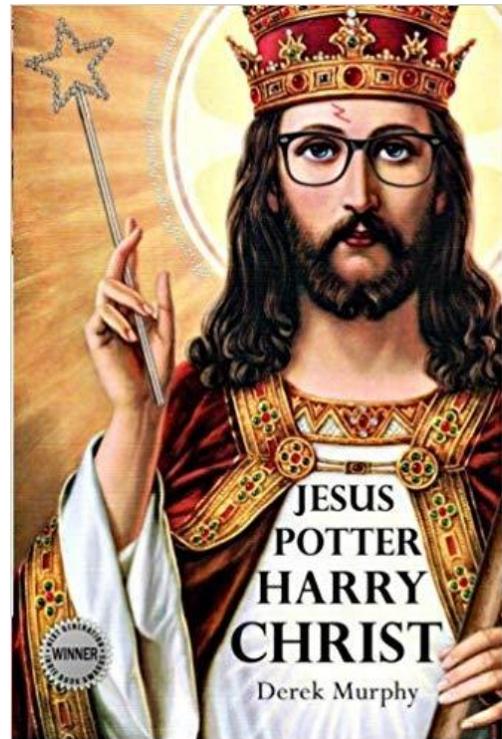
I hadn't realised the Christian (and resurrection) dimension of Harry Potter so was startled by Murphy's comparison of the merits of Jesus and Harry as literary influences:

‘Christ teaches suffering, meekness and humility; renounce this life and look forward to the next. Harry reminds us to embrace each moment of happiness. Jesus says that anything that happens is God's will: God is in control. Harry takes full responsibility for this world – God (Dumbledore) is dead, and there is no one else to stop the evil in the world except us. Also, while Jesus knew he would come back, and then live forever, Harry had no such hope; hence his sacrifice was much more courageous.

‘Religion provides comfort to get us through suffering, and endure pain and misfortune in hopes of a better afterlife. Literature like Harry Potter inspires us to stand up and fight against injustice. Jesus, as son of God and divine being, represents a level we can never reach. He is perfect but we are sinners. He is not an example that we can model; he is the sun that makes us feel ashamed of our shadows.

‘Harry, in contrast, is fully human; he doubts, sins, expresses emotions, makes poor decisions, and eventually makes the ultimate sacrifice – which importantly he had no desire to make. By his example we can compare ourselves, and through his mistakes we can recognise our own. His determination is an inspiration to us, through which we can learn that justice means taking action without guarantee, without a promise of salvation, without the support of a supernatural being that promises redemption. True ethics are not found in following law, but in making difficult decisions and being willing to act regardless of the consequences.

‘Most importantly, Harry Potter is popular in a way that Jesus is not...Harry is a much more humane, in depth, vibrant character than the Jesus of the gospels, infinitely easier to identify with, champion, and even love.’



'Take heed, dear friends...'

Under this title, Roger Warren Evans, of Neath meeting, has sent us copies of how a Quaker nontheist might rewrite *Advices & Queries* which he prefaces as follows: 'Advices and Queries is one of the best-known and influential works of modern Quakerism. Yet for me it does not reflect my own perceptions of non-theist thought. This seeks to be a re-statement of its values and perceptions, as seen by a non-theist Member, and reflects only his own views'. We welcome contributions to this discussion, but no individual contribution should be assumed to have the endorsement of the Steering Group or the Network. A copy is obtainable from (email) roger@warrenevans.net.

Waiting for the Last Bus

This is not a review of Richard Holloway's latest book, in which he reflects upon the approach of death – rather, it is an edited extract that particularly appealed to me.

After a lifetime of struggle with, and frequent feelings of revulsion towards, religion I still think of myself as a religious man. But I now practise religion in a way that passionate protagonists on both sides of the God Debate dislike intensely. The frustration I attract reminds me of an incident a few years ago in the debate about gay marriage. Campaigners posted this slogan on the side of London buses:

SOME PEOPLE ARE GAY
GET OVER IT

It was aimed at Christian groups who understood human sexuality not as a spectrum of different shades but as a stark choice between right and wrong, the permitted and the forbidden. Many of us are prone to this kind of binary simplification in moral and theological debate, but it is amplified by those whose favourite discourse is the adversarial. You are either with them or against them. 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 way to look at the world; it is also inaccurate. Nothing is that simple... The tragedy is not just the absurdity of trying to purge the world of its crazy variety, but the pain and hurt it causes those who can't or won't force themselves onto our narrow templates.

It's time we realised that the human experience of religion is also various and complex. There are those who firmly in and those who are firmly out of religious institutions. There are those whose belief is strong and those whose unbelief is equally unyielding. And like the majority of the population whose gender and sexuality are clearly printed, they are the ones who claim to define the territory for the rest of us. But 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.

In the context of the theme of this book — death — there are those for whom religious observance in this life is a way of guaranteeing their status in the next. Their gaze is on the world beyond and how to get there. But for some of us life after death has little attraction, and we even doubt it exists. It is life before death we concentrate our attention on. We want to make it more just and abundant and joyful for everyone. And some of us find that meditating on religion's best narratives, and listening to its wisest teachers, and being moved by its music and poetry, strengthens us for that work. We don't want to prise others out of their systems of belief or unbelief any more than we want to be boxed into them. Even if we disagree on the best deal after death, why can't we agree on a good deal for everyone before death? Anyway, the gulf between us is not as wide as it may appear. Religions that believe

we go on to life after death all say its quality will depend on how we lived before death. Do good in this world and good will be done unto thee in the next, is the mantra. So whatever the final calculation, this world becomes a better place — exactly what those of us with little interest in eternal life want as well. Everyone wins.

But in my experience, if you adopt this dialectical approach to religion, you get caught in the crossfire of its main protagonists. Both the champions and the despisers of religion attack you with equal contempt. It's the binary game again. You have to be one thing or the other. You can't be both at the same time or anything in between. Well, tough. Some of us are. Get used to it.

It appealed to me because there are times in my own meeting when I want to get up and say 'Some Friends are non-theist. Get over it!' **David Parlett**

The screenshot shows the website for Nontheist Quakers. The header features the logo and the title 'NONTHEIST QUAKERS'. Below the header is a navigation menu with links for HOME, NEWS, ABOUT, EVENTS, FAQ, ARTICLES, CONTACT, and HOWTO. The main content area displays a blog post titled 'SOUNDS OF SILENCE – CBC RADIO CANADA' dated June 20, 2018, by Trevor, with 1 comment. The post text reads: 'Paul Parker, the recording clerk for British Quakers, says the Quakers are looking to redefine what it means to believe in God – because the faith doesn't tell you what to believe. (Podcast on Radio Canada).' A link is provided to listen to the full episode: <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/sounds-of-silence-1.4688305>. The right sidebar includes a search bar, a 'FOLLOW BLOG VIA EMAIL' section with a 'FOLLOW' button, and a 'RECENT POSTS' section with the title 'Theism vs Non-Theism* or Quaker Spirit?'. The left sidebar contains navigation options like 'FOLLOW OUR WEBSITE RSS FEEDS', 'TOPICS IN POSTS', and 'PAGES'.

On our website...

The NFN website currently provides a link to a podcast on CBC Radio Canada in which Paul Parker, the recording clerk for British Quakers, says the Quakers are looking to redefine what it means to believe in God — because the faith doesn't tell you what to believe. It last 54 minutes and can be heard at <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/sounds-of-silence-1.4688305>

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, Toni Calam, 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 appears three or four times a year. Please send contributions to David Parlett, 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY
Tel 020 8764 0950, quakers@parlett.eu*