



# Nontheist Friends Network

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

## Newsletter November 2018

### Unity, Diversity, Boundaries

#### **2019 NFN Conference Gathering and AGM at Woodbrooke Study Centre Birmingham Fri-Sun 29-31 March 2019**

All members of NFN are invited to attend the AGM which will take place on the Saturday (30 March) of our annual gathering at Woodbrooke. We hope to see as many of you as possible at the conference – it's our best opportunity each year to gather together with like-minded Friends. If you can't make the whole weekend please consider coming for the day on Saturday or just for the AGM.

Under the title *Unity, Diversity, Boundaries* we will be asking -

- Can there be unity in diversity? • Are there boundaries to diversity?

Speakers: Hugh Rock (NFN), Marisa Johnson (FWCC-EMES\*), Tony Philpott (QUG)

Cost £250. Application forms for the conference can be downloaded from the Conference page of our website at <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>. Contact for bookings and further information: [hugh\\_rock@btconnect.com](mailto:hugh_rock@btconnect.com)

\* Europe and Middle East Section

### More on diversity

Under the title *Answering that of God in everyone* Woodbrooke will be hosting “a national gathering on diversity and inclusion” on the weekend of 18 - 20 January 2019. It will aim to equip Friends to make a diverse and inclusive community where all are welcomed a reality, offering key note speeches, workshops, opportunities for informal discussion and all age worship. “Diversity will be explored in a variety of forms, including race and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and gender, in an intersectional way.” In a way this might be regarded as complementary to the NFN conference, as it does not mention diversity in its theological sense, which is our own main focus. Further information at <https://www.quaker.org.uk/events/diversity-and-inclusion-national-gathering>. - DP

### Across the pond

David Boulton recently circulated to members of the Steering Group Jim Cain's brief report of the American Nontheist group's activities at the recent FCG Gathering (the Friends General Conference equivalent of our Yearly Meeting).

“Greetings All. I believe I attended all of the Nontheist presentations at the Gathering and I think all were well received. John Hunter's presentation on Monday and my presentation on Tuesday had 30+ participants. Most participants were familiar with Nontheism but there were several who came to find out more about it. I think they came informed and with a good impression. I was in the Virtuous Instinct for Truth workshop comparing the Quaker method with the scientific method and several workshop participants attended Nontheist events. As the week progressed there was some fall-off in Nontheist attendance. There was lively discussion during John's final presentation/discussion *Where to From Here* re next year's Gathering but I don't recall

anything was definitely decided about a Nontheist workshop. There was considerable discussion regarding the name Nontheist and whether it was the best name for the group. I believe there was considerable agreement that the Nontheist Room should continue next year.”

Appended to Jim’s report was this comment from Robin Alpern, one of the contributors to *Godless for God's Sake*: “Will Friends ever stop complaining about the word Nontheist? Will we ever hit upon a better term? Stay tuned!”

## Welcome!

Friends who have joined or confirmed their membership of the NFN since our last issue include Maddy Piper, Maria Haines and Callum John Hawthorne. We welcome them into our membership.

A Friend who joined at Warwick last year wrote to the editor:

“I was particularly interested to read the review of Helen Rowlands' book and the report of the last conference. My hesitation over joining the network up till when I did has been based in a similar discomfort over using binary theist/non-theist language. I have been a Friend all my life (60-plus years now) and realised when I was in my mid-teens that the 'God' my mother had taught me to believe in was a fiction, but it's only in recent years that this has seemed to become more of an issue in the Society of Friends, as what used to be a Christocentric minority (when I was in my teens and young adulthood) has gradually moved centre-stage and attracted others like themselves into the Society, and become emboldened in using exclusive and intolerant language towards those who don't share their theological position. (My last visit to Woodbrooke was at a small conference looking at the results of Ben Pink Dandelion's research on the composition of the Society, at which a fellow-participant declared ' anyone is welcome in my meeting - except people who say they don't believe in God, of course' - and in the small group in which she made this statement, only I and one other very long-standing Friend seemed to demur.)”

## Dutch connections?

Emma Moretto wrote to us via our web page to ask “For some time now, I’ve been interested in Quakerism and especially the nontheist variety. I’ve found this website to be very informative, but so far I haven’t been able to find a lot of information regarding nontheist Quakers in for instance the Netherlands or Belgium. I read that you hold international conferences etc in the UK, would you perhaps know of any Dutch attendees that I could contact? I would love to know more about the possibility to attend silent meetings in the Netherlands or to speak to nontheist or agnostic Quakers”.

As a helpful starting point, Trevor Bending directed her to lists of European meetings obtainable from <http://www.fwccemes.org/fam/> (click on “Find a meeting” and choose a country). Other readers may find that useful when travelling abroad.

## Friendly farewell

*David Boulton’s thanks to Ian Kirk-Smith appeared in The Friend of 9 November*

I was moved by Ian Kirk-Smith’s wistful farewell (2 November) as editor of the Friend. He says he feels privileged to have done this ‘strange God job in London’, as a mystified former BBC colleague put it, but the privilege is surely ours. I know from the one week I spent as guest editor of our magazine just how much hard graft and sheer resilience the task demands, especially on a shoestring budget and with scarily limited resources. Ian’s Inner Light, the Light of Christ as he calls it, drove him to produce a magazine that was open to every Quaker voice and every varied expression of Quaker conviction. Theist,

nontheist and none-of-the-above were equally welcomed in the continuing conversation that he took pleasure in encouraging in his twenty pages a week.

Thank you, Ian. Now enjoy your well-deserved retirement with your family in Ireland, finding the time at last to 'do the washing up properly'.

## Review: Secrets of the Exodus

*The Egyptian Origins of the Hebrew People, by Messod and Roger Sabbah. Helios Press, 2004. Available as a pdf from Scribd: <https://www.scribd.com/>*

While reading about Pharaoh Akhenaten (the first known monotheist, who died in 1334BCE) I came across this book. There are a lot of crazy books written about Egyptology beliefs (spaceships, mushrooms etc), and this one is so startling that it might seem to be another, but I think not.

The origin of the Jewish people is not entirely clear. As I understand it, it is thought that there were native outcast settlements in Canaan of Apiru living in hilltop communities, away from the cities but sharing Canaanite gods, including El and Baal (and goddess Asherah). At some point nomadic herders called the Shasu arrived from the south, bringing the god Yahweh. And there was influx of some sort from Egypt. There's mention of a nomadic people called 'Israel' on the Merneptah stele of 1203BCE. In 900BCE a monarchy of Israel was founded in the north of Canaan. In 722BCE it was overrun by the Assyrians. Many people fled south, where the kingdom of Judah was established, with Jerusalem growing from a small town of 15 acres to one of 150 acres. In 586BCE the Babylonian empire took Jerusalem. The first biblical books were written during and after the Babylonian exile, which ended in 539BCE, when the exiled elite were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. By then Egypt was arch enemy of Babylon, and had become a legendary enemy of the Jews, which perhaps explains why the earlier time in Egypt is portrayed as enslavement in the Bible.

Some say there's a link between the Great Hymn to the Aten and Psalm 104. Freud saw similarities between Akhenaten and Moses (an Egyptian name). While some symbols and myths of the Bible come from Babylon or Mesopotamia, many are Egyptian in origin, and this book touches on some.

First the book looks at the period following Akhenaten's death, particularly the Pharaoh Ay. It's said that when Armarna was abandoned, the pharaoh promised to resettle the inhabitants 250 miles away on the edge of the empire, in Canaan. But there was border turmoil, so they had to wait and wander a little in the Sinai. Second, biblical parallels are explored. Then similarities between Tutankhamun and Hebrew religious dress (such as blue stripes and seven armbands) are looked at. Finally, there's much about the derivation of Hebrew script from hieroglyphs, the argument being that the script developed as shorthand for use by the cosmopolitan population of Armarna. These things are hard for a non-expert to evaluate, but I've been unable to find counter-arguments. If anyone knows of any, I'd be interested to hear. A book I recommend.

**Piers Maddox**

## Religion, Language, and the Human Mind

I couldn't resist the title of this collection of essays as it mentions three of the subjects I most read about, though it's proving a substantial read. Most accessible for me was Ian McGilcrist's *God, Metaphor, and the Language of the Hemispheres*, which explores how metaphor is chiefly managed by the brain's right hemisphere, leaving the left to deal with literal language use. (Cross-overs between the two lead to amusing results!) Linguist David Crystal also writes about 'theolinguistics', a topic not much heard of these days. *Edited by Paul Chilton and Monika Kopytowska, published by Oxford University Press (2018). Hard cover £71, but cheaper at Amazon.*

**DP**

**Non-theist Friends Network**

Website/Log of the Non-theist Friends Network in Britain

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**NONTHEIST QUAKERS: ANNUAL RESIDENTIAL CONFERENCE 2019**

Nontheist Friends Network Annual Conference 2019 will be held at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham from 29th - 31st March 2019. An open conference and this year in particular, in considering diversity, we want to emphasise the participatory nature of our Gathering and small group explorations.

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## On the web

There's plenty more to read and talk about on our website at <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/> Recent additions include details of our 2019 conference, Non-theism and Quaker marriage, Membership, privacy and data, and much more. To keep up to date, you can follow the blog via email, enabling you to receive automatic notifications of new posts.

## Aims of the Nontheist Friends Network

*The Network's aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We want to ensure that our Religious Society of Friends is an inclusive rather than an exclusive Society. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys.*

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 the Treasurer or Membership Clerk.

## Who we are

Current members of the NFN Steering Group are: Trevor Bending (website), David Boulton, Toni Calam, Gisela Creed (Clerk), Jo Jaffray, Piers Maddox (Treasurer), David Parlett (Newsletter & Membership Secretary) Deepa Parry-Gupta, Tim Regan, Hugh Rock, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle. Proposed changes to Members of the Steering Group are brought before the AGM for approval.

**The Newsletter appears irregularly three or four times a year. Contributions are always welcome. Please send them by email to [quakers@parlett.eu](mailto:quakers@parlett.eu) or David Parlett at 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY.**