



Nontheist Friends Network

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

Newsletter March 2019

Unity, Diversity, Boundaries: Our Residential Conference 2019

The annual Nontheist Friends Network Annual Conference this year will be held at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham from 29 to 31 March 2019. There are still some places available. This year in particular, in considering diversity, we want to emphasise the participatory nature of our Gathering and small group explorations stimulated by keynote speakers.

Our explorations and discussions will be led by three well known speakers covering the diversity and wide spectrum of different views amongst Quakers in Britain today:

Marisa Johnson (FWCC-EMES) is secretary of FWCC EMES, a role that has allowed her to engage, at first reluctantly, but eventually with passion and conviction, the vast diversity of culture, theology and practice within the Quaker World Community. She will draw on this experience to help us appreciate the gift of our differences within our own Quaker community.

Tony Philpott (Quaker Universalist Group): Tony's academic background is in geography, religious studies and education. Geography taught him the 'models' approach in the philosophy of science, and education emphasised the importance of psychology and sociology in explaining human behaviour. Tony incorporated these ideas in his 2013 book *From Christian to Quaker*. Tony entered into membership at the end of 2003 after retiring as a head teacher. He is at present Clerk of the Quaker Universalist Group.

Hugh Rock (NFN) has been a student of religion since retiring from business in 2007. He has a special interest in Quaker Faith and has published a number of articles on the subject in *Friends Quarterly*, *Quaker Studies* and other religious journals. (And see also his contributions to the NFN website.)

Amongst the questions we will be considering at this year's gathering are:

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

Rising prices at Woodbrooke mean that this year's conference (2019) will now be charged at a cost of £250 per participant. (And unfortunately we are not able to repeat last year's considerable subsidy). We believe however that a further opportunity to consider serious spiritual questions in Woodbrooke's delightful location (not to mention the catering) is something not to be missed.

For enquiries, full details, and application forms, please contact: Hugh Rock: email: hugh_rock@btconnect.com (replacing (at) with usual @), tel. 07500 914440

2019 NFN conference BOOKING FORM (pdf)

(NB. Conference ends on Sunday 31st March, but Friends MAY be able to book B&B accommodation direct with Woodbrooke for Sunday night if they wish)

This, the eighth conference organised by the Nontheist Friends Network, will include opportunities to share and learn about aspects of its work – a forum for Friends who view religion as a human creation. **Our aim, as always, is to explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys.**

To be, or not to be...

When we founded the Nontheist Friends Network eight years ago we promised ourselves that one of our aims would be to lay the network down as soon as it had clearly served its purpose – that purpose being to achieve broad recognition that those of us who self-identify as nontheists have an acknowledged place within a twenty-first century liberal, theologically diverse Religious Society of Friends: 'a radically unfenced Quakerism', as Philip Gross beautifully describes it.

Have we now achieved that purpose? We are officially a Quaker Recognised Body. Our members have participated, by invitation, in the *Qfp* revision preparation group, where it was

formally accepted that Friends have the right to label themselves (but not the right to label others). And the Society's own surveys show that those Friends who have chosen to label themselves as nontheists (or humanists, or atheists) have been doubling every ten years and by the last count make up some 14.5% of the membership.

That might seem to make a case for 'mission accomplished'! But steady on! There remains significant hostility towards nontheists in some sections of the Society, as expressed in Friend Derek Guiton's book *A Man Who Looks On Glass*, and in continuing suggestions that the Society's membership criteria should be tightened to exclude applicants who view religion (and God) as a wholly human creation. That makes a case for keeping up the good work.

But how best to do it? Is the Nontheist Friends Network as presently constituted best fitted to the task? If it is true that there are now some 14.5% of members identifying as nontheists of one sort or another, that's something around 2000 nontheist Friends (in Britain alone). But our Network has never achieved a membership of much more than a hundred and is now less than half that. It seems that most nontheist Friends, for one reason or another, don't feel the need for an organised Network. Some, perhaps, are happy for us to fly the nontheist flag on their behalf. Some may fear that actively promoting nontheism is divisive or unnecessary, perhaps content to watch traditional theism fade and die under the weight of its own contradictions. Some may prefer to stay in the closet, understandingly reluctant to cause hurt or trouble among friends. Whatever the reason, only a tiny fraction have felt a leading to join the Network, and that fraction is falling, to the point where we may soon be joining the many Quaker bodies which have trouble in finding enough office-holders to keep the van on the road.

Despite the current dip in active members, my own view is that the Network still has work to do; still has its own contribution to make to a 'radically unfenced Quakerism' responding to the challenges of our fractured times. Our conferences, our newsletter and our website give a voice to Friends whose commitment to 'whatsoever things are true, honest, just, lovely and of good report' is not tied to belief in a supernatural, transcendent deity. But we can only go on voicing that commitment as a recognised body if Friends come forward to play a part in what it takes to run a Network: serving on the steering group, filling the vital roles of clerk, treasurer and so on, and participating in the collective discernment on what we do and how we do it.

Our steering group, made up of volunteers endorsed by members at our AGMs, have served both the Network and the Society of Friends of which it is a part. This year there are vacancies. If you feel a little pinprick of a leading to offer your services, please don't be backward in coming forward! Contact Gisela Creed, our clerk, either at the conference or by email to [jgcreed\(at\)btinternet.com](mailto:jgcreed(at)btinternet.com).

David Boulton

About the Nontheist Friends Network

Our 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 1 May. If you'd like to join, or remain on our contact list for 2019-20, 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 and much interesting reading can be found at our website <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>

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 or David Parlett at Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY.