



# Nontheist Friends Network

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

## Newsletter May 2019

### We'll be at Yearly Meeting

*Britain Yearly Meeting 2019 takes place at Friends' House, Euston, London, 24-27 May.*

The Nontheist Friends Network will be holding a special interest meeting on Sunday the 26th from 12.30 to 13.30 in the William Penn Room 2, which holds 40-50 people.

Under the title Unity, Diversity, Boundaries, the case for an inclusive Society of Friends, open to all we will continue our exploration of the theme of this year's Conference in April. The meeting will be in the shape of a forum with a short introduction by David Parlett and an informal panel discussion.

We have also booked a space to take part in the Special Interest Groups fair on the same day, 5.45 pm.

We hope as many as possible will attend, especially those who were unable to be at our conference this year or from meetings where they feel in a slightly uncomfortable minority. It's a good place to meet like-minded Friends.

### Unity, Diversity, Boundaries

*Edited from the fuller account of our 2019 conference on our website at  
<https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>*

The Conference was attended by just over 30 people, a few of whom only attended on the Saturday. Our feedback forms were mostly very positive, and the Saturday afternoon trip to the Bourneville Carillon was greatly enjoyed by those who decided to go.

The conference began on the Friday evening with a 'getting to know you session', first with each of the Steering Group members explaining who they were and then small groups of 'neighbours' asking various prompted questions of each other. These groups were 'fluid' in that first one and then another member of each group was asked to move to a neighbouring group so that a good mixture was achieved. This was followed by an introduction to the history of the NFN and its present situation by David Boulton. Questions about the future of NFN were then left to be followed up ahead of the AGM on Saturday evening.

On Saturday morning our first speaker was **Hugh Rock** of NFN, who spoke on what he thought was a defining characteristic of Quaker practice: 'The authority of no authority: the paradox of Quaker unity through diversity' as the 'actual, unifying, but rather difficult to summarise, practice of Quaker Faith.' which referred to the absence of a priesthood or hierarchy ('The refusal of priesthood tells of the reliance and validation of individual experience.');

the discernment of 'God's will' or 'the sense of the meeting' as part of the 'Quaker business method' in Meeting for worship for business. ('The refusal of vote taking within the Society is a powerfully equalising principle. It recognises, unusually, that democracy may be a form of dictatorship'). He went on to illustrate this with a practical example drawn from John MacMurray's statement that 'the central conviction which distinguishes the Society of Friends is that Christianity cannot be defined in terms of doctrinal beliefs' (Swarthmore Lecture 1965, p50). Hugh saw this 'authority' deriving from an absence of 'authority' as a key aspect of Quaker unity enabling the acceptance of great variety in belief (perhaps from nontheism to evangelical Christianity) under one roof and great fluidity in our boundaries. Unity, diversity and boundaries being the theme of the conference. (The post-conference text of his talk is linked to from our website.)

Later we were addressed by **Tony Philpott**, Clerk to the Quaker Universalist Group, who gave a carefully thought-out presentation of the history of 'universalism', in various senses, throughout

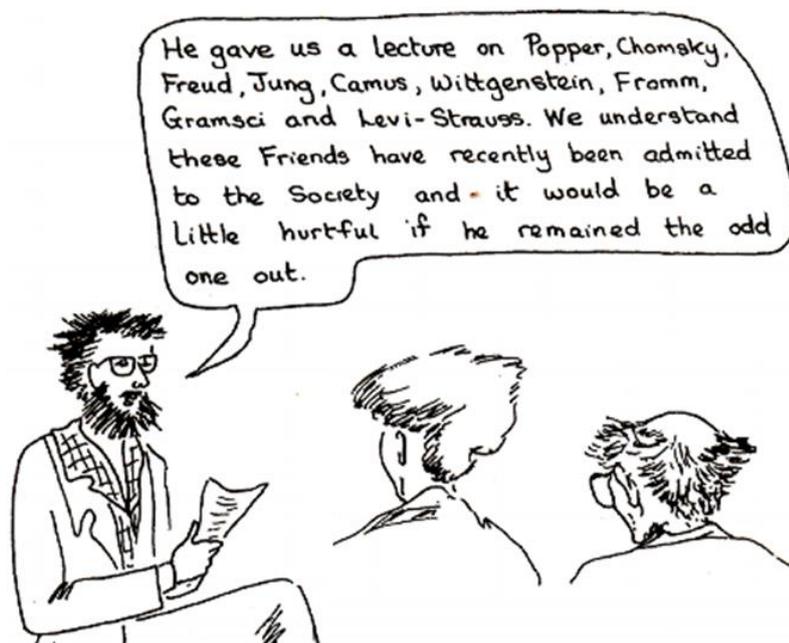
Christian history, referring to inclusivity and exclusivity, and then the history of Quaker universalism from George Fox, Margaret Fell, William Penn and others through to the 1990's and the forming of the Quaker Universalist Group (QUG). He gave, by way of example, a personal account of his own journey 'From Christian to Quaker', the subject of his book of that name, which also deals with a broad range of religious viewpoints (varieties of Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Atheist and Quaker). Tony examined unity, diversity and boundaries within Quakerism in Britain Yearly Meeting, based on Ninian Smart's 'Dimensions of the Sacred'. He then looked at issues to do with definitions, membership, etc., and suggested that Quaker universalism may have much to offer as a solution to the problems raised by diversity.

On Sunday morning our third keynote speaker, **Marisa Johnson** from Friends' World Committee for Consultation – Europe and Middle East Section (FWCC-EMES) spoke on 'The gift of difference in the World Family of Friends', addressing the vast diversity of culture, theology and practice within the Quaker World Community. Her account was illustrated with slides and a moving video from the meeting of FWCC representatives in Peru in 2016. The video illustrated that 'vast diversity of culture, theology and practice' in a way which no text would have done. Marisa's talk was also deeply personal, relating her own spiritual journey from her native Italian Catholicism to a London Church of England ('because it was there'), then Methodists, and then to the 'Sea of Faith' and Quakers in Cambridge, as well as the personal journey from being a child and young person in Italy to a married woman in England. Marisa spoke about how, through her international work, she has come to value the 'uncommon ground' and how she moved from celebrating the freedom from dogma to trusting her leadings to keep her safe during very dark times in family life. Many present were I think moved near to tears by Marisa's account and the illustration of the great diversity across the world family of Friends. Marisa finished with a word game she has devised to illustrate how certain (for example, biblical) words can be re-phrased in ways which are associated with quite different emotions. There is a link to text of Marisa's talk in the fuller version of this summary on our website.

Our Saturday afternoon programme continued with three short presentations volunteered by course participants.

**Roger Warren Evans**, South Wales, spoke on his own version of a nontheist re-statement of the values and perceptions of Advices & Queries without using the word 'God'.

**Kitty Rush** from Massachusetts spoke on "New Bottle Quakerism" - finding words to describe the Quakerism of today which would be useful to theists and non-theists alike';



Visitors Report – cartoon by Lesley Webster from NOT the Quaker Tapestry (QAN 1997)

**John Senior**, Mid-Wales, on 'Quaker spiritual practice – Advices & Queries 1 and 3 shorn of supernaturalism, a toolkit'. (John has a further session on this topic on 30th May – see advertisement on page 3.)

These were followed by the option of further discussion of these presentations or a walk through the park to Bourneville for a Carillon performance.

After Tea and before Supper, the Saturday programme continued with open discussion around reflections prompted by 'To be or not to be' (paper, David Boulton 2019, as included in participant packs, on the future of

NFN) preparatory to the Nontheist Friends Network AGM itself.

Saturday evening had our usual 'Quaking with Laughter' followed by Woodbrooke's Epilogue. The Conference closed on Sunday after Marisa's talk, a plenary session and finally lunch.

It is also worth noting that participants included those from the following (Area) Meetings: Bath, Cambridgeshire (3), Chilterns, Gloucestershire (3), Ipswich, Kendal & Sedbergh, Leeds, London West (2), Massachusetts (2), Mid-Thames (2), Mid-Wales, North-East Thames, South London (2), South Wales (2), Southern Marches, Sussex, Taunton, Torquay, Warwickshire, West of Scotland (4), Wirral (E&OE!).

### New Friends

We welcome two new members into our network and invite them to tell us a little about themselves.

**Simeon Elliott** writes: I am now regularly attending the Brighton LQM. I have also joined the Quaker Socialist Society and I am hopefully going to attend the Salter Lecture next Friday at Friends House at 12.30. If there are NFN friends going to that perhaps I could say hello!

I have been a long-standing member of the Labour Party and CND, and I remain politically active, particularly in issues of housing, child poverty, climate change and peace. I have now retired (early, from teaching in SEND provision) - hooray; which enables me to work in various voluntary projects across the week, including in a day centre for young homeless people; supporting self-advocacy in drops-ins for adults with learning disabilities, and conservation work

with bumblebees and the Sussex Downs. I am also involved in developing a community beehives project in an impoverished part of Brighton, aiming to develop community cohesion.

I have been engaged in things like this for much of my life; but I have only recently realised the spiritual aspect of my engagement in these issues.

**Eliot Walker:** My mother's family were descended from the Lloyds of Dolobran. The family, originally landowners in Wales, became iron masters and bankers, eventually founding what became Lloyds Bank. But what was extraordinary was that they achieved all this after being imprisoned with unbelievable cruelty in Welshpool goal for their Quaker beliefs. Charles Lloyd 'the Quaker', as he was known, was put with others 'in a dirty nasty place...being a low room...the felons and the malefactors in a chamber overhead, their chamber pots and excrements etc. often falling upon them.' Even more extraordinary was that his wife Elizabeth eventually went to join him 'on the little straw, that was his bed' and endured the

## *Finding Inner Stillness*

### *An Experiential Exploration*

*following leads given in*

*Advice & Queries 1 & 3*

**Dolobran Meeting House**

**Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019**



10.00 am for a 10.30 am start

Please bring packed lunch - tea / coffee / biscuits provided

Finishing 4.30 pm

Suggested donation £5 on the day to Dolobran Meeting House

Dolobran Meeting House is off the Meifod via A495 to Pontrobert Road

Grid ref. SJ124124

For directions and access details see List of Members & Attenders

For further information and bookings please ring John Senior on  
01597 870277

same privations that he did. Charles Lloyd spent ten years in prison, and Elizabeth's first son was born within the prison walls in August 1662, and named Charles after his father. He, and his descendants, went on to found the major iron and steel industries and eventually the bank that carried the Lloyds name.

This prison story, and there were others my mother told me, had always impressed me. The Quaker link resulted in me attending Quaker schools, first Sibford, then Leighton Park. However, it is important to point out that my mother was not religious. She never attended a Quaker meeting as an adult, although she may have had to as a child. She had a great interest in the history of the Quakers, but not in Quakerism itself. My father, having been in the army and rather militaristic in his views, could not reconcile himself to any kind of pacifist belief so Quakerism was not for him either.

I too am not 'religious', but became a member of the Quakers in 2008. I have reread the statement I made when I joined and think it still holds true. I said I felt 'in tune with 'listening to the silence' and whilst I am not a believer in an external creator God I believe in the inner spirit and inherent goodness of man.' By the latter, I meant that if man worked on his nature he could be a better person, and I think that hope remains. We can encourage each other to be 'gooder' and that's something Quakers work hard at. There are many times when I have found Meeting very moving, there is a power there which it is very hard to explain.

But the fact remains that I do not believe in 'God' and this causes all sorts of problems. For instance, I find it very difficult to read out those Advices & Queries in which the word God appears. So there are many times when I have wondered if I should be part of the Quakers at all. In one of these 'low' periods I came across the website of the NFN and suddenly realised there were others like me who also had great difficulty with the God word. I went on to read David Boulton's *The Trouble with God* and it inspired me not to leave the Quakers, but stay with them. And so I thank NFN for that.

## On our website...



Currently on our website at

<https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>

- Report on 2019 NFN Conference
- Events News
- Buddhism, Meditation and God
- Religion as a human creation – or not?
- Yearly Meeting Events
- A Conference Reflection
- Website and 2019 Conference
- Recent gathering at Woodbrooke
- Previous Newsletters

*The aim of the Nontheist Friends Network 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.*

*NFN Steering Group members: Trevor Bending (website), David Boulton, Gisela Creed (Clerk), Piers Maddox (Treasurer), David Parlett (Newsletter & Membership Secretary), Tim Regan, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle, Roger Warren Evans. 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 to David Parlett at 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY**