



## Nontheist Friends Network

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

**Newsletter December 2019**

# That's the spirit! Our Annual Conference 2020

**Spirituality** [spi:riti'uae-litti]: *the quality or condition of being spiritual. **Spiritual**: pertaining to the spirit or higher moral qualities, especially as regarded in a religious aspect. **Spirit**: a supernatural, incorporeal, rational being or personality. (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)*

Spirituality, spiritual and spirit are among the commonest words in our Quaker vocabulary. Count how many times they appear in Quaker literature! But what exactly do we mean by them? What is a spiritual person, a spiritual life, a spiritual journey? What counts as a spiritual experience? And can you be religious without being spiritual, or spiritual without being religious?

Join us to explore some of these keywords and questions and what they can mean for the way we live, at our 2020 annual conference at **Friends' House, Euston**, London NW1 2BJ from 1.30pm **Saturday 28** to 4pm **Sunday 29** March 2020.

Its title, **That's the Spirit! – Dimensions of Spirituality**, invites us to explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys.

This change from our usual weekend conference at Woodbrooke should make it more accessible to Friends in the south east, but we hope many others will appreciate that it is also substantially cheaper at £50 including refreshments, Saturday evening dinner and Sunday lunch (accommodation extra). And the 24 hours attendance will allow for London sightseeing for those who fancy it. Our keynote speakers will be:

**Andrew Copson** (Chief Executive, Humanists UK),

**Dinah Livingstone** (Editor '*Sofia*', Sea of Faith)

**Gill Pennington** (former Spirituality Tutor, Woodbrooke)

Despite the high calibre of our keynote speakers, we don't plan to leave it all to them! There will be a major session dedicated to short (max. 10 minutes) presentations by conference attendees. If you feel prompted to share your own understanding or experience of "spirit" and "spirituality", or a brief account of your own spiritual journey, please don't hesitate to offer your contribution. Help us plan the session by emailing David Boulton at [dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com), with a working title or a brief summary of what you have in mind. The more the merrier!

To book, or for further details, please email Roger Warren Evans:  
roger(at)warrenevans.net (replacing (at) with usual @ symbol), Tel: 01792 367461.

The pdf booking form <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/> can either be filled in online and emailed to Roger, or printed and filled in and sent to him at the address shown on the form.

**This, the ninth annual 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.**

## XR-activist self-defending

A news item in *The Friend* of 4 October 4 covered the arrest of 91-year old John Lynes who was charged during the Extinction Rebellion blockade at Dover Docks. Most of our readers will know that John is an NFN member and regular attendee at our conferences. His arrest was shown on Channel 4, just after he told the reporter "It's great the young people are protesting but it's my generation that has caused all this trouble, so here I am". His local meeting, Hastings, upheld him and two other members who were arrested. John was briefly placed in a police cell before being released on bail and was free to attend meeting the following day. He and seven other activists were discharged when they appeared before Folkestone Magistrates Court on 23 October. At time of writing (02.12.2019), John is preparing his (self-)defence for his trial at Folkestone Magistrates' Court on 5 December. Two others will be appearing with him, and the remaining three on 10 December. He is being well supported by Hastings LQM and has sent a link to "a short video about my coffin" – see it at <https://www.lostforwardsproductions.co.uk/dadscoffin>



*John Lynes – a man in a hurry...*

## Nontheism & discernment in the pages of *The Friend*

Two complementary articles in *The Friend* of 9 August prompted subsequent discussions mainly in the correspondence column. The first, by Neil Morgan, began "How nontheists view of discernment is giving me a headache", referencing a review of Rhiannon Grant's book *Telling the Truth about God*; in particular, by her remark beginning "When I sat in on the AGM of the Nontheists Friends Network...". Discernment, says Neil, "is a key Quaker spiritual act... different to 'deciding' or 'agreeing'... not something that can be reduced to something else... (such as, say... 'empathetic listening', or 'considering from all angles'"). He asks "[Can] Rhiannon or someone from the NFN please explain to me what they are doing when they are discerning – or at least what they think they are doing?".

There followed a piece from NFN treasurer Piers Maddox in "Let's not be tribal. No spiritual police. No exclusivist arrogance", which he wrote without prior knowledge of Neil's article.

I kept careful track of further discussion on this topic wrote a survey of them originally intended for this Newsletter. But as it would have taken up four or five pages if reproduced in full I'll offer it instead as a pdf to anyone who'd like to take time out to read it. If you'd like a copy please email me on [quakers@parlett.eu](mailto:quakers@parlett.eu) and I'll gladly send it to you. Alternatively, see <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2019/08/19/towards-a-nontheist-view-of-discernment/>

## A humanistic Quaker

I'm a humanistic Quaker, I've decided. The distinction between the noun 'humanist' and adjective 'humanistic' is significant ... it signifies a tendency and mode of expression rather than an ideology.

I see a humanistic understanding as central to the true spirit of Quakerism, for two reasons:

First, 'humanistic' expresses the focus of 'that of god IN everyone'. Just as Quaker Buddhists might talk of Buddha nature potential in everyone, so Quaker Christians might talk of Jesus' spirit potential in everyone. Early Quakers operated within the limits of the understanding and blasphemy laws of their time, but 'the spirit within' is what they felt.

Second, 'humanistic' expresses the focus on Earthly matters, via the Quakerly virtues of standing firm in support of those who are suffering, speaking truth as we see it, nurturing that of god in everyone as we understand it, and doing what we can to help make a better world. If our spirituality has any value, it will lead us to respond to the global situation at this time of global need, to embrace the spirit of activism and need for global healing, to work together nontribally. 'Hands that serve are worth more than lips that pray'. That is the humanistic commitment...to humanity. I want some way to make that commitment clear.

But is it possible to be a humanistic theist? I would argue yes...if one's notion of god is not as a supernatural being, for example if one were taken by the Chinese notion of heaven, populated not by god but by heavenly virtues we can respond to, and source of the 'laws of nature'. Similarly, one might be a humanistic Christian while denying the existence of an historical Jesus...taking Jesus as a symbol of a universal spirit found in all peoples ('...in everyone'). In fact the essence, divested of the person, is a far more useful concept I'd argue. More suited to the present day. Similarly with Buddhism, one can see Buddha as a composite of various teachers' teachings. The person is a symbol, sometimes helpful, but sometimes not.

Following this line of thought, I wonder whether we 'nontheists' should consider a name change to 'humanistic'. I think it might be beneficial, not just for our small group but for the RSoF as a whole. Few Quakers worship a supernatural being these days. It's a much more nuanced and variable activity space...a space between two modes of thinking/expression that needs exploring. The nontheist/theist distinction creates a yes-no division that is unhelpful to interaction, and thereby alienates potential supporters as well as alienating ourselves from interaction too. So I'm keen to know whether there's any support for the idea.

*Piers Maddox*

***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.***

## Website latest

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the website [nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2019/08/19/towards-a-nontheist-view-of-discernment/](http://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2019/08/19/towards-a-nontheist-view-of-discernment/). The page features the 'NONTHEIST QUAKERS' logo and a navigation menu with links for HOME, NEWS, ABOUT, EVENTS, FAQ, ARTICLES, CONTACT, and HOW TO? A search bar is visible in the top right corner.

The main content area displays the article title 'TOWARDS A NONTHEIST VIEW OF DISCERNMENT' by Trevor, dated August 19, 2019, with 11 comments. The article text begins with: 'What is discernment for you? A recent piece in *The Friend* (by Neil Morgan, 9 August issue) titled 'How nontheists view discernment is giving me a headache', argues that without the sense of revelation from God, and sense of connection with God, discernment loses its distinctive Quaker quality. So what are nontheists doing? Are they just 'listening empathically' to each other? The piece ends with the plea, 'Could Rhiannon (Grant) or someone from the NFN please explain to me what they are doing when they are discerning - or at least what they think they are doing?' (This was in a review of Rhiannon's book *Telling the Truth about God*. Rhiannon reminds us that she does not self-identify as a nontheist but is a friend of nontheists.) In response, we asked our members to share their views on how nontheists view discernment for publication in this

On the right side of the page, there is a search bar, a 'FOLLOW BLOG VIA EMAIL' section with an email input field and a 'FOLLOW' button, and a 'RECENT POSTS' section listing two articles: '2020 Conference and AGM at Friends' House' (November 8, 2019) and 'That's the Spirit! : Dimensions of Spirituality' (November 3, 2019).

The left sidebar contains the 'Non-theist Friends Network' logo, a description of the website, 'FOLLOW OUR WEBSITE RSS FEEDS' (RSS - Posts, RSS - Comments), 'TOPICS IN POSTS' (Select Category), and 'PAGES' (About, Aims of the Network, NFN Constitution, NFN Membership, Organisation of Nontheist Friends Network, Privacy & Data, Articles, Newsletters, 2017 Newsletters).

Recent posts on the NFN website include: 2020 Conference and AGM at Friends' House - That's the Spirit! : Dimensions of Spirituality - Quaker 'Advices and Queries' for Nontheists. - Towards a Nontheist View of Discernment - Book review of Michael Wright's 'Jesus today : a Quaker perspective' - Steering Group Meeting at Lancaster 24 July 2019.

## More needed!

**We need more paid-up members in the NFN! If you've received our newsletter in 2019 but not yet renewed your (very modest) £10 subscription please do so by sending a cheque to the membership clerk, David Parlett, at 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY, or if you prefer to pay electronically, email [quakers@parlett.eu](mailto:quakers@parlett.eu) for our bank details. Please also encourage like-minded Friends to join, and let us know if you would be willing to work with us. In particular, we will be in need of a new clerk soon!**

*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**