

Newsletter

Nontheist Friends Network
A Quaker Recognised Body



March 2021

Dear Friends,
Welcome!

'Change and decay in all around I see' moaned Henry Francis Lyte, and 2020 saw its fair share of both. But not all change is bad, and the disappointing cancellation of our almost fully-booked 2020 conference and the difficulty of maintaining close contact between our members and the steering group has led us to make some changes in the way the Network is run. The momentum for change came from our December AGM on Zoom, where members asked for less reliance on a formal steering group and more on ad hoc working groups open to anyone willing to offer their service. We have begun to put such groups in place, and we welcome more new initiatives. Don't say 'Why don't you...?'. Try 'Why don't we...?'

QQQQQQQQQQ

'Ring in the new'

The AGM reappointed Tim Regan, Gisela Creed, Piers Maddox and Roger Warren-Evans to the steering group, and appointed new members Kiera Faber and Steven Goldblatt. Members standing down were Trevor Bending, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle and David Boulton. Piers was nominated as Clerk but has since stood down. Tim Regan has accepted the role of Acting Clerk. Trevor continues as webmaster and David takes on the Newsletter.

So meet our two new SG members:

Kiera Faber is a Luxembourger/American Friend currently living in Minnesota and is affiliated with Twin Cities Friends Meeting in St Paul (Northern Yearly Meeting, USA). She is an internationally exhibited artist working primarily in animated experimental films made by hand, incorporating drawing, painting and sculpture. (Google Kiera Faber to sample her fascinating work). Kiera tells us she loves cycling tandem with her husband Ben, birds of all species, and her particularly naughty cat, Chou.

Steven Goldblatt was born and grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa. He studied law and became an advocate (barrister), practicing for 30 years, mostly in the field of human rights. Parkinson's disease and its associated disabilities forced his retirement and in 1989 he came to Cirencester with his wife Jenny. He started attending Cirencester Meeting in 2018 and was admitted to membership in 2020.

QQQQQQQQQQ

Worship and Creative Conversation: a new initiative

Prevented by the pandemic from getting together in our Woodbrooke conferences and Yearly Meeting events, we are breaking new ground by organising a series of monthly *Meetings for Worship and Creative Conversation* by Zoom.

The working group organising these meetings tells us: *Each meeting hopes to offer a different topic, shaking the Quaker kaleidoscope and perhaps shining a light on different ways of looking at our (more) traditional ideas.*

The series will run on the first Thursday of each month at 7.30pm **starting on Thursday March 4th**. Email clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk to register. Once registered you will automatically receive a link for each meeting. You won't have to

continually register, and you may unsubscribe at any time. If you are new to Zoom, just click on the link and follow the simple instructions.

Each meeting will include a short presentation. The presenter on March 4th is John Senior, on 'Seeking the Light: Is Fox still Relevant?'. On April 1st William Purser will speak on 'Fox to Opium via Marx?' Future meetings will be announced on the website www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

Each meeting will be scheduled to last between 60 and 90 minutes depending on the natural flow of conversation. The format will be as follows:

- * Meeting for Worship: approximately 20 minutes for quietly gathering ourselves and connecting.
- * Creative Conversation: up to 20 minutes for presentation or raising a question.
- * Open Discussion: up to 30 minutes for creative exchanges, expressions, and reactions, hopefully fostering community and fellowship.
- * Conclusion with a few moments of gathered silence.

These meetings are open to everyone. They are intended to supplement, not replace our local meetings for worship. If you are interested in presenting a Creative Conversation, contact the MfW working group via clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk

The working group members are Gisela Creed, John Senior, William Purser and Kiera Faber.

QQQQQQQQQQ

That's the Spirit! Dimensions of Spirituality

That was the title of our 2020 annual conference, till some very unspiritual viruses intervened and forced us to cancel. But, mutating as they do, they haven't yet found a way of preventing us from meeting in the spirit via Zoom. So our three

keynote speakers will join us on three successive Wednesdays in July, each bringing us a different perspective on *spirituality*, what it means to them, and what relation it might have to religion and the secular world.

Spirituality, spiritual and *spirit* are among the most frequently used words in our Quaker vocabulary. But what do we mean by them? What do we mean by a spiritual life, a spiritual journey, a spiritual experience? Can we be religious without being spiritual, or spiritual without being religious?

On Wednesday July 7th our guest will be Andrew Copson, executive director of Humanists UK (British Humanists Association).

On Wednesday July 14th the speaker will be Gill Pennington, former Spirituality Tutor at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre.

On Wednesday July 21st our third guest is Dinah Livingstone, poet, activist and editor of the Sea of Faith journal *Sofia*.

Join us in an adventurous exploration of spiritual diversity, from the holy spirit to the wholly human spirit. Each meeting will begin at 7.30pm and will last between an hour and 90 minutes. The presentation will be followed by open discussion. This will be our virtual conference, so get the dates into your diary. More details will follow in due course.

QQQQQQQQQQ

***The Godless Gospel:
Was Jesus a great moral teacher?***

In *The Friend* on February 5th John Lampen wrote a sympathetic review of the humanist Julian Baggini's latest book *The Godless Gospel: Was Jesus a Great Moral Teacher?*. John finds the book 'very stimulating... Baggini's inquiry leads him into questions that are of wide interest. Are morals dictated by culture or are they universally valid? Are we still obliged to behave morally if there is no divine

sanction? Is it right to praise heartfelt actions more highly than the dutiful observance of an ethical code? What is the relationship between morality and the law? Should politics conform to the same standards as our private lives? How do (or should) we give moral guidance to our children?’

He quotes Baggini: ‘When I started I expected Jesus’s stripped-down moral philosophy to consist of little more than a call for charity and forgiveness, neither of which is particularly original or controversial in today’s world. What I actually found is a belief system which goes against the gentle image of Jesus as an advocate of homely moral truths that we can all easily and warmly embrace. Much of his teaching is disconcerting, and quite a bit is objectionable... It recasts him as an iconoclastic revolutionary so threatening that he was crucified.’

Trevor Bending recently reminded me of a sermon Baggini preached in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, in 2015, published in *New Humanist*. ‘Some’, he began, might be surprised to see an avowed atheist take the pulpit in a Christian church. Others will know that this is far from unprecedented, although admittedly the atheist before you would usually be an ordained minister!... But if being an atheist means fully accepting a naturalist worldview and rejecting the existence of a literal, personal God, then many churches are full of them’.

Of Jesus he went on to say: ‘If you had only read the Gospels and were not familiar with the history of Christianity, you might have been more surprised if a minister of the church was delivering the sermon, since Jesus clearly had a low opinion of the priestly caste of Pharisees and Sadducees of his time. In that light we might conclude that the near monopoly ordained Christians have had on speaking to congregations was a departure from the spirit of Jesus’s teachings. A more inclusive Church is arguably a more Christian one.’

There have been a number of books about the human Jesus of Nazareth in the last decade or so by nontheists. Two were written by clerks of the NFN: my *Who on Earth was Jesus?* and Michael Wright’s *Jesus Today: a Quaker Perspective*. Then there’s Philip Pullman’s *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, and Don Cupitt’s *Jesus and Philosophy*. Julian Baggini’s *Godless Gospel* is the latest. His Jesus is ‘a bona fide moral teacher [who] does not ask us to accept his teaching on the

basis of mere authority, but rather invites us to attend to the needs of others, to his own example and to our frailties. He wants us to think for ourselves, which is why his parables require us to work out their meaning'. Baggini likens these to the 'thought experiments' of modern science and philosophy. *Jesus understood that compassion drives personal and social change'* (my italics). A stimulating read!

David Boulton

QQQQQQQQQQ

If you have a book you would like to recommend or review we'd like to hear from you. Contact dboultondent@btinternet.com . These Newsletters will be issued roughly every quarter. Between times, keep up with what's going on by visiting our website, www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk