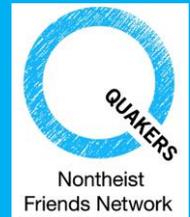


Newsletter

Nontheist Friends Network
A Quaker Recognised Body



June 2021

Welcome, Friends, to our June 2021 Newsletter

This issue includes a preview of our July Zoom conference, and a postview of our latest innovation combining monthly meetings for worship with 'creative conversation'. Read on, and don't be left behind.

That's the spirit!

First conceived for our 2020 conference, cancelled by Covid, our adventurous exploration of spiritual diversity from the holy spirit to the wholly human spirit will rise again on three successive nights next month. With presentations by our keynote speakers we'll be asking old questions and looking for new answers. What is spirit, spirituality, spiritual experience? What do we think we mean by these words? Is there spirituality without religion? Does religion have a monopoly on spiritual experience? When we talk of being 'led by the Spirit', who, which or what is doing the leading? Is the Spirit simply a euphemism for God? Or can we find a bigger, better, brighter vision, a spirituality anchored to this world rather than the next?

We kick off at 7.30pm on Wednesday **July 7** with **Andrew Copson**, the Executive Director of Humanists UK. He is followed on Wednesday **July 14** by **Gill Pennington**, former Spirituality Tutor at Woodbrooke. Our third speaker, on **July 21**, is **Dinah Livingstone**, poet and Editor of *Sofia*, the Sea of Faith magazine. A humanist, a Quaker, a poet, each sharing with us their own take on 'That's the spirit!' and opening up a creative conversation. All are welcome – Friends and friends, theists, nontheists and anyone touched by the spirit of exploration and enquiry.

As we go to press (or laptop) in the last week of May well over half the 100 places currently available have already been taken.

To register please email clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk. Do it now! There is no charge. (If you are already registered for our monthly MfWs you will need to register separately for 'That's the spirit!')

Meet our keynote speakers:



ANDREW COPSON has been Executive Director of Humanists UK (formerly the British Humanists Association) since 2010, and he is also President of Humanists International (which, among other things, campaigns for 'freedom for religion and freedom from religion'). He has written several books, including *The Little Book of Humanism* with Alice Roberts. He has represented Humanists UK on television in *Newsnight*, *The Daily Politics*, *Sunday Morning Live* and *The Big Questions*, and on radio in *Today*, *You and Yours*, *The World at One* and *Beyond Belief*. He quotes the following definition of Humanism as agreed by more than 40 countries:

'Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the **spirit of reason** and free enquiry. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.'



GILL PENNINGTON describes herself as 'a Quaker who has a deep love of the natural world'. She worships at Worcester Quaker Meeting and at her village Anglican church in Colwall, Herefordshire. A former primary and secondary school teacher, she was appointed director of the Beaulieu Development Centre in the New Forest, facilitating groups exploring team development, leadership and communication skills. Until her retirement in 2019 she was Spirituality Tutor and co-ordinator of the Equipping for Ministry Programme at Woodbrooke. Gill runs Spiritual Accompaniment sessions where she says 'I aim to create a sacred, safe space in which a person of any faith or none is gently nurtured and encouraged to explore their connection with the Divine, and to become open to **deeper possibilities of Spirit**. She enjoys 'good food and wine' and motor-homing with her partner to beautiful parts of the UK.



DINAH LIVINGSTONE is the author of ten books of poetry and three of prose, published by Katabase which specialises in 'down to earth and utopian poetry and prose'. She has won three Arts Council Writers Awards and was described in the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'an original and accomplished poet'. *Spare Rib* wrote of her: 'This poet has **the strength of spirit** to speak the unspeakable about our alienation without despairing'. Her book *The Poetry of Earth* is an essay on poetry, language and theology, and *Poetic Tales* offers 'a way into poetry for the prosaic and a way into theology for atheists'. Dinah is an expert on Liberation Theology and has translated several works by Nicaraguan and other South American liberation theologians, as well as reports for Amnesty International. In 2004 she took over the editorship of the *Sea of Faith Journal*, changed its name to *Sofia*, and widened its readership to include all who share Sea of Faith's mission 'to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation'.

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Looking through our Kaleidoscope

Tim Regan writes:

In our last newsletter we mentioned our new initiative 'Worship and Creative Conversation'. These Zoom events on the first Thursday of each month started in March and the first three were real treats, each with nearly a hundred participants. The format varies slightly month to month, especially in the speaker's choice of break-out rooms or full-group discussion, but roughly speaking each one starts with some mingling before the twenty minute Quaker Meeting, then the presentation, then a discussion before closing with a few minutes silence. I have loved each one.

We started with John Senior talking on 'Seeking the Light – is Fox still Relevant?', followed by William Purser on 'Fox to Opium via Marx?', and most recently Philip Gross on 'The language of Poetry and the Creative Uses of the word "God"'. Each presentation has been very different, both in style and content, and that has been one of the things I love about the series, it really does shine a light on Quaker diversity. Another aspect that lends the evening such a special feeling is the grass-roots nature of the presentations: each speaker volunteered from within the Network or from coming to previous sessions.

One of the discussions at our AGM back in December focused on the way we did business as a Network, away from the Steering Group taking responsibility towards more agile working groups. These Creative Conversations, for me, show what a good idea that was.

The next instalment, on Thursday June 3rd, features David Parlett talking on 'A Theist Cuckoo in the Nontheist Nest' [see more on David below]. In the past, David's insights have always resonated with me, so I am looking forward to this enormously. After that we are taking a break in July, to make way for our on-line conference 'That's the spirit!', and in August for Britain Yearly Meeting. Then we have evenings lined up for September to January. Details on our website.

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June's Creative Conversation

Due to unforeseen circumstances, David Parlett will not be able to share his Creative Conversation presentation for the 3rd of June. The QM+CC Working group has prepared a Meditation reading written by Harvey Gillman to share with you and invites you to participate in a contemplative conversation with your fellow Friends.

If you haven't yet registered for our Worship and Creative Conversation sessions and don't want to miss the conversation, do so now by emailing clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk

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'Something Understood: Spirituality without God'

It's not just us. The BBC has given godless spirituality an airing in its Sunday morning series *Something Understood*. Presented by Mark Tully from his home in New Delhi, the May 23

edition was sub-titled *Spirituality without God*. It began with a short excerpt from Mahler's second symphony, the *Resurrection*, illustrating what Tully called his great spiritual struggle (but one from which Mahler emerges triumphant in the glorious finale). This was followed by a reading from *Wind in the Willows*, the famous bit where Mole feels the transcendental spiritual possibilities of music and nature as he encounters a mysterious piper playing at sunrise.

The spirituality of music is a dominant theme in the broadcast. We hear *Helplessness Blues*, a chart-topping number from the Seattle-based folk band Fleet Foxes; then Eva Cassidy's controversial version of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*, and Hamilton Harty's setting of John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*. Tully then talks to John Rutter, a prolific composer of contemporary church music who speaks of the joy he feels in composing works like his deeply Christian *Cantata Domino* despite his atheism.

Tully introduces a reading from Salmon Rushdie, reflecting on art as 'a replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith'; and he talks to the biographer of Iris Murdoch, Peter Conradi, who sees her as a spiritual atheist. It's an eclectic mix, and there is so much more that could have been included in a longer programme. (How could they leave out John Lennon's *Imagine*, or the Credo from unbelieving Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*?). But worth going to BBC Sounds for it, or just google 'Something Understood' and scroll down to 'Spirituality without God'. Thanks to Catherine Carr for bringing it to our attention.

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A Government view on spirituality

Way back in 1988 the Education Reform Act required schools to 'promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils'. This triggered a debate in the British Humanist Association, some rejecting any notion of spirituality and others looking to find a definition they could live with. What emerged was a BHA Briefing supporting 'the inclusive concept of spirituality that encompasses both theistic and non-theistic positions'. It continued: 'Christians and Humanists, theists on the one hand, agnostics and atheists on the other, agree on **the importance of spirituality**, but they interpret it differently... However, all can agree that the "spiritual" dimension comes from our deepest humanity. It finds its expression in aspirations, moral sensibility, creativity, love and friendship, response to natural and human beauty, scientific and artistic endeavour, appreciation and wonder at the natural world, intellectual achievement and physical activity, surmounting suffering and persecution, selfless love, the quest for meaning and for values by which to live.'

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Surprise yourself

When did you last take a look at our website, nontheist-quakers.org.uk? It's full of information, not just news of what we are doing now but articles from our archives, past Newsletters, book lists and more. And it's not all top-down communication. Our webmaster

Trevor Bending invites you to comment on what's already there or set a new thread going. Why not pick up the **spirituality** theme and share your own experiences? Or recommend a book that has inspired you? It's your website. Make use of it as you wish.

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Outreach

Taunton meeting held a Zoom 'Meeting for Learning' on May 11th with guest speaker David Boulton on 'Nontheism among Friends'. David also spoke on 'The Faith of a Quaker Humanist' at an online meeting of Southampton Humanists on May 16th.

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Miriam

We have received the sad news of the death in May of Miriam Bransom. A founder-member of the Network, she was a regular participant in our annual conferences, a gentle presence, quietly spoken but always thoughtful and thought-provoking whenever she spoke. The Society of Friends and the Network will miss her.

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And finally, who wrote this?

'Many liberal religious people have given up crude supernaturalism, but cling on to the idea of an attenuated, **gaseous spiritual realm** alongside our common public world. Such people are still clinging to a reduced version of the old contrast between the visible and the invisible worlds of Earth and Heaven. We should give up that idea.'

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Nontheist Friends Network

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Worship and Creative Conversation working group: Kiera Faber, Gisela Creed, William Purser, John Senior

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