

## What's a nontheist doing here?

In response to a request for 'Your Views' on the NFN website

<https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2020/09/22/your-views/#comments>

**Curt Gardener**, (the author of 'God just is: Approaches to silent worship' available from amazon: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/God-Just-Approaches-Silent-Worship/dp/1907123245/> or from the Quaker bookshop also with ebook in epub or mobi formats:

<https://bookshop.quaker.org.uk/search?q=God+just+is> ) **wrote** that he didn't understand how nontheists can 'worship' (adoration, intercession, etc.) when there is 'nothing there'. 'The term 'Meeting for Worship' becomes a nonsense'. Curt continued "Onto what can one focus the mind during a devotional period?"

Well, what **are** nontheists doing in a Quaker Meeting for Worship? What's being worshipped? Early Friends spoke of 'Christ being in them' and their 'being in Christ'. Some see God ('or whatever you call it') in every nook and cranny and under every stone. I've heard one person say that he didn't believe in the existence of God, but that he believed in the presence of God. I've heard it said 'I feel there's something out there, I don't know what exactly but something', or 'I can feel the power of the Lord in the meeting'. I haven't felt these things although I've sometimes felt a sense of what I imagine a 'gathered' meeting might feel like.

Perhaps we should try to be clearer about what we mean by words like Light or Spirit. But is the 'clarification of words' exactly what is not possible in this context? If you create a definition, you can end up worrying about the definition (or the word) rather than the 'thing in itself'. Consider this idea as expressed by Isaac Penington '*And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things, beyond what words can utter.*'

<http://www.qhpress.org/texts/penington/letter53.html> and

<https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/27-27/>

Friends who have been Friends for many many years may have arrived at a nontheist position and feel comfortable with this, and sometimes not.

One Friend who was an Anglican vicar for more than 30 years arrived at that position and resigned from his post as vicar and then came to the Quakers. He later was a key speaker at one of our NFN conferences and then became our Clerk for three years. You might be interested to read some articles by him (Michael Wright) here on the website: You can find 8 articles by Michael under Articles <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/articles/> and see especially his *Prayer beyond belief* and *Disagreeing about God*. Michael has also written a personal account of Jesus in a book '*Jesus Today*' which you can find on the website here: <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2019/07/23/jesus-today-book/> (where you can download a copy, read on the website or see where to buy) – or by searching for 'Jesus' in the search box on the website which also brings up some other interesting posts and a review of Michael's book.

“Why does (a nontheist) want a devotional time? What is the driving force?” Perhaps ‘for the peace that comes’, and in many other ways. Let's say that nontheist Quakers do not find Meeting for Worship to be nonsense, although they might wonder ‘what is it we are worshipping?’ and might find that Michael Wright (see above) ‘speaks to their condition’. See especially *Prayer beyond belief p8-14 et seq*,

<https://nontheistquakers.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/prayer-beyond-belief.pdf> where, on p.14, and in 2013, Michael commends Curt's book!

‘Onto what can one focus the mind during a devotional period?’ sounds to me like a question about ‘meditation’ or something similar. If so, the answer might be, if not God, then what Hindus, and Buddhists and Sikhs in some places, call ‘your Isvara’, (Sanskrit: ईश्वर) defining Isvara from a "personal god" to "special self" to "anything that has spiritual significance to the individual" and ‘can be interpreted both as theistic or non-theistic’ - see e.g..

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishvara#In\\_Yoga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishvara#In_Yoga) - a fascinating page to consider for a complex understanding of ‘nontheism’! (But, I suppose I am aware that a Puritan or some modern day American evangelical Christians might want me executed for blasphemy!, in which case see ‘Baby dinosaurs on Noah's Ark’: <https://www.canadianatheist.com/2020/09/baby-dinosaurs-on-noahs-ark/> )

TB.