

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

January 2017

**Are you coming? - to
Our open conference
March 24 – 27 2017**

**By January 17th – we have to notify Woodbrooke
of any rooms we have booked which will not be
needed by us for this conference.**

**It will still be possible to book rooms after that
date, but it will depend on whether rooms are
still available, as Woodbrooke naturally want to
try and find other occupants for any rooms we
don't need.**

**If you haven't booked yet – you are likely to still
be certain of a place up to January 17th, but after
that there will be less certainty.**

**This conference will be a stimulating
opportunity to explore many aspects of an
approach to belief and practice as Quakers that
either do not need God or leave open the
question “Is there anybody there?”**

**Please have a careful look at what is on offer and
decide whether you wish to join us.**

The conference title is:

- **"God - or whatever you call it"**
- &
- **"Jesus - whoever he may be"**

An exploration in small groups stimulated by our keynote speakers - **Rhiannon Grant** and **John Lampen**.

God – or whatever you call it

Rhiannon Grant, a staff member at Woodbrooke, has run a number of Quaker workshops exploring this quotation from Rex Ambler – “*God – or whatever you call it*”. There are many ways of articulating what Friends mean by “the Light”, “the Spirit”, “the Divine” or “God”.

Meeting for Sufferings last year established a Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group (RPG) who in turn invited 25 Quakers from a broad range of views to explore whether we can make the issue “less polarized”. Rhiannon Grant is gifted at helping Friends to do just that.

Our aim as a Network is to “explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys.” We want to ensure that the Religious Society of Friends is an “inclusive rather than an exclusive Society”, and we are seeking in this conference to take this exploration forward.

Rex Ambler writes: *There are many ways of thinking and feeling about God...the variety is vast and bewildering. I am thinking of a very fundamental meaning of the word which we should all be able to recognize and accept. It is the sense of God as the ultimate reality of our life, whatever that might happen to be. We are not referring to a particular being that we could imagine or describe, but to whatever reality it might be that lies behind or beneath all the particular realities we know of....It is not so much a sense of God as that word is commonly understood, as a sense of ‘a God-shaped hole’. I have no idea what it is – it may even be a huge void or an absence – but I may have a very clear sense that without it, and without a positive relationship to it, my life is incomplete and unsatisfactory.*

From *The Quaker Way – a rediscovery* page 31.

Jesus – whoever he may be

John Lampen's Pendle Hill new booklet “***Making a Portrait of Jesus***” is now available, and we plan to have copies on sale at our conference. He takes an unusual in-depth look at the man Jesus – his personality, teaching and behaviour – in a way which shows how singular, gifted, different, challenging, and encouraging is the Jesus of the gospels.

He writes of Jesus: *An extraordinary man..He could be passionately angry. His humour is unmistakeable..He was a story-teller of genius; his parables are like good poems...his sayings are sharp and memorable..his moral teaching is found as much in his deeds as his words...He was sensitive to the way men discriminate against women..Jesus championed children in words and action...told his followers not to use violence, but his advice has been misunderstood.*

I rejoice that the stories of Jesus have inspired countless people to live good lives and minister to those around them. At the same time, I am aghast at the failure of institutional Christianity to embody the teaching.

As Advices and Queries Number 4 states: "The Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teaching of Jesus." It goes on to ask how we interpret our Quaker trust in the light of this heritage, and how "does Jesus speak to you today?"

In recent years, much new light has been shed on our understanding of the portrait of Jesus in the gospels, how the gospels came to be written and for what purpose. Two books in particular help us catch up with current thinking:

Who on EARTH was JESUS? by David Boulton
Biblical Literalism – a Gentile heresy by John Shelby Spong

Work in groups

This conference will provide plenty of opportunity for participants to share with and learn from others taking part. The first evening will give a brief introduction to some current initiatives by members of the Network – followed by time in groups to share news and discuss those initiatives.

There will be further group sessions after each of the two keynote speakers, and a relaxing Saturday evening enjoying *Quaking with Laughter*.

On Sunday morning, there will be a short session for the AGM of the Network, followed by a group session before our gathering for Meeting for Worship to end the conference.

I have put the conference programme at the end of this Newsletter.

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Sharing some of our perspectives on the Quaker Way

I am gathering collections of quotations which share some of our perspectives on the Quaker way, for possible publication later this year, which may be helpful for Friends seeking to follow the Quaker way but without bothering God. With the December Newsletter I attached a file containing a collection by one of our members. **With this Newsletter I am attaching a file with another set from a different member.** You might like to look at this (and the December file attachment) to see if it prompts you to suggest others to be part of the collection from which we will choose when the time comes.

I am now gathering further contributions. If you have one or more to send for inclusion in the group of quotations to be considered for this publication, **please do let me have them.**

BOOKS

The Daily Stoic – 366 meditations on wisdom, perserverance, and the art of living (*featuring new translations of Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius*) by Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman.

Somewhere recently I read a reference to the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, which prompted me to get that on my Kindle. I also saw a reference to this new book of daily readings from Stoic philosophers.

I bought a printed copy of this, and am reading the short daily sessions each day. It prompts me to a number of valuable reflections on my life, relationships, attitudes and behaviour. It is a helpful supplement to my Quaker spiritual practices.

The Great Spiritual Migration – how the world's largest religion is seeking a better way to be Christian – by Brian D. McLaren.

It is interesting to see the way things are moving in the world of evangelical Christianity. I recently heard Brian McLaren speak in Newcastle on his tour of Britain sponsored by Progressive Christianity Network. The blurb on the cover of this book highlights what it is about. It says this prominent American evangelical pastor with a global ministry – **which naturally will have influence among many of the Friends in America and elsewhere of the programmed meetings tradition** - explores three profound shifts that define the “powerful new understandings that are reshaping the church”. These are:

SPIRITUAL – *Growing numbers of Christians are moving away from defining themselves by lists of beliefs and towards a way of life defined by love.*

THEOLOGICAL – *Believers are increasingly rejecting the image of God as a violent Supreme Being and embracing the image of God as the renewing Spirit at work in our world for the common good.*

MISSIONAL – *The faithful are identifying less with organised religion and more with organising religion – spiritual activists dedicated to healing the planet, building peace, overcoming poverty and injustice and collaborating with other faiths to ensure a better future for all of us.*

How very Quakerly they are becoming! I am introducing this book to a monthly Book Club I lead at Great Ayton Friends Meeting this month.

A Little History of Religion – by Richard Holloway.

Did you read David Boulton's review of this book in the Christmas edition of *The Friend*?

In December I introduced it to the Book Club mentioned above (we are doing a programme in which I am introducing six books between September and February, after which we as an ecumenical group will decide which of them, if any, we want to read and discuss in much greater detail).

I found the opening two chapters particularly helpful. In the first he is responding to the question *If religion's most important belief is the existence of a reality beyond this world that we call God, what prompted the belief and when did it start?* He notes that from the beginning, as well as a positive and ethical aspect to religious belief, there was a ruthless side to religion that had little regard for the lives of individuals, and was focused on preparing people for another phase of existence after death.

Then he points out there was an important group of individuals who didn't guess at the existence of a world beyond - they told us they had visited it or been visited by it! Whether some of these people existed or not, it is beyond dispute that stories about them still carry meaning for billions of people today.

In the second chapter he says there are three different ways of thinking about religious experience:

- 1) In an event of this kind, the door between subconscious and the conscious mind opens. What follows is like a dream. Prophets believe it is coming from outside them – but it is their own voice coming from inside their own mind.
- 2) It could be that two doors are open in a prophetic experience. The dreaming mind may have access to the supernatural world beyond, which these prophets encounter, and they tell the world what it has told them.
- 3) The middle position between these two theories, is that we cannot be certain about what the prophets claim to have seen and heard.

One way, he says, to think about religion is as a projection of the fears and longings of our subconscious mind onto the screen of life. So you can be a non-believer, a true believer, or a critical believer – and you may find yourself switching from one position to another over the years, and you may even decide not to decide, a position known as *agnosticism*. His book is a brief introduction to some of the varied answers the different religions gave to the big questions humanity has been asking itself since the beginning.

It is a book which gives the briefest of introductions to the Hindu traditions, to Buddhism, Jainism, the Hebrew religion, Zoroastrianism and the teachings of Confucius, the Taoists, Shinto, the Greeks, then Jesus and the Christian traditions, Islam, Sikhism, the Protestant Reformation, a chapter to ourselves on Friends, before he moves on to Mormons, Christian Science, Bahai, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Scientology.

It is clearly a book for people who are dabbling, for after mentioning Humanism, he ends with: *As we have already observed, religion is an anvil that has worn out many hammers. It may outlive secular humanism. Though it is in decline in many places today, it is still the biggest show on earth, and it's running a place of worship near you. But it's entirely up to you whether you buy a ticket.*

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End pieces

Britain Yearly Gathering

Are you coming to Britain Yearly Gathering at Warwick University, Coventry, July 29 – August 5 2017. This too will be a chance for Network members to meet one another. Do let us know if you are planning to come so we can provide a contact for one another.

Prayer beyond belief

If any group or meeting is interested in exploring the possibility of a day or a shorter session on the topic of Prayer beyond belief – please let me know.

I provided a weekend retreat at Glenthorne in May on this topic, have spoken and written about it elsewhere.

I am due to speak on this topic at an evening meeting for the Newcastle upon Tyne Progressive Christianity Group in April, and am leading a day on this for Milton Keynes Local Meeting in September.

Annual Conference programme

Nontheist Friends Network annual conference at Woodbrook – the programme is below on the final page of this Newsletter.

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Conference programme

March 24 - 27. 2017. £210.

Enquiries and Booking Forms - contact: Hugh Rock: email:
hugh_rock@btconnect.com. 07500 914440

***The Booking Form is a separate attachment with this Newsletter for
Members of our Network.***

Friday evening

7.30 – Welcome. NFN Initiatives – including

- Think Tank – next steps
- Our concern about Quaker outreach leaflets
- Book of Quotations
- David Boulton’s response to Derek Guiton
- David Boulton’s tour of four universities – *Quakers & Humanism*

Time in small groups

9.30 Woodbrooke’s Epilogue

Saturday

7.30 – 9 Breakfast

8.30 – 9 Woodbrooke’s Meeting for Worship

9.30 – ***God – or whatever you call it*** Rhiannon Grant

10.45 – Coffee

11.15 – 12.45 Groups – responding to Rhiannon’s theme

12.45 – 3.p.m. Lunch and relaxation break

3.p.m. ***Jesus – whoever he may be*** John Lampen

4.15 Tea

4.45 – 6.15 Groups – responding to John’s theme

6.15 Supper

7.30 Quaking with Laughter

9.30. Woodbrooke’s Epilogue

Sunday

8-9 Breakfast followed by clearing our rooms

9.30 AGM

10.30 Coffee

11- 11.40 Groups

11.45 – 12.30 Meeting for Worship & Farewells

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