



## Nontheist Friends Network

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

## Newsletter December 2017

NFN Conference 9-11 March 2018

### Quakers in 2032: What will our society look like?

An exploration in small groups stimulated by keynote speakers

*In 2005 Quaker Studies analysed the trends of falling membership of the Society of Friends as dwindling to zero by 2032, when British Quakerism would become history. We are more optimistic today. But what will our Society look like in 2032? How will it change socially, theologically, and influentially?"*

We look forward to your bookings (at a special price before 1st January) for your weekend away at beautiful Woodbrooke in the company of **Linda Murgatroyd, Harvey Gilman, David Boulton** and the rest of us to discuss this topic. Our aim, as always, is to explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys. This, the seventh conference organised by the Nontheist Friends Network, will include opportunities to share and learn about aspects of its work.

Rising prices at Woodbrooke mean that next year's conference should be charged at a cost of £220-250 per participant, but the Steering Group has decided to subsidise it from our reserves and make a charge of **£199 for payments received by 31st December 2017** and £220 thereafter, in order to encourage greater numbers. In view of the topic, Young Friends General Meeting will be invited to nominate at least four and not more than six young Friends, at a cost of £150 per head.

For enquiries, full details, and application forms please contact Hugh Rock:  
email: [hugh\\_rock\(at\)btconnect.com](mailto:hugh_rock(at)btconnect.com), tel. 07500 914440

The 2018 Conference booking form can be downloaded as a pdf from <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/> Please send the completed form to Hugh at the address quoted on it - **not** to Woodbrooke!)

*Note:* Conference ends on Sunday 11 March, but Friends **may** be able to book B&B accommodation direct with Woodbrooke for Sunday night if they wish.

#### Report

### Nontheism Among Friends: Its Place within our Religious Society

#### South-West England Regional Conference at Bristol Redland Meeting House

At the Nontheist Friends Network (NFN) annual conference at Woodbrooke earlier this year we took up the suggestion of regional meetings, as many interested Friends might welcome the opportunity to attend an NFN event nearer to home. So we hosted the first Regional NFN Conference at Redland Meeting House on Saturday 28 October. It was open to Friends of all religious persuasions and was well-attended. In addition to the two speakers, 49 Friends came: 35 from Bristol Area Meeting, of whom about half were from Redland and half from other meetings. Fourteen Friends came from further afield across the south-west and Wales.

The two speakers were David Boulton and Hugh Rock. David presented a pithy overview of how Quakers have always changed over the centuries, often quite radically. This set the context for current changes, which include increasing numbers of Friends who do not think of themselves as Christians and may, indeed, be humanists, atheists or agnostics.

Hugh Rock acted as chair, and shared some of his thinking in a brief talk based on his research. He suggested that rather than focus on concepts of God we should consider how we are in the world. He suggested that as a religious society we can devote our energies to making our lives meaningful, and that a key guiding principle for Friends is anarchism. By this he means not accepting or needing authority (unless by choice) — as, for example, in Quaker weddings. David updated us on the proposed revision of *Quaker Faith & Practice*. It was clear that (despite erroneous published statements to the contrary) nontheist Friends only ask that nontheism is acknowledged in any revision — certainly not that 'god-language' be removed. There was time for questions and lively discussion between Friends and with the speakers. And cake!

It was emphasised throughout that the NFN does not seek to impose its views on Friends, only to acknowledge that nontheism exists among them. To quote from its leaflet *Introducing Nontheist Friends Network*: 'Nontheism is recognised as one strand among many in our Society: one thread in the rich tapestry that is modern liberal Quakerism'.

Feedback from those attending has been very positive, with many Friends expressing appreciation of this opportunity to hear more about nontheism among Quakers. More information on nontheism can be found on the website [www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk](http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk) including details of the next NFN annual conference at Woodbrooke (9-11 March 2018).

**Book review by David Boulton**

## **God, Words and Us: Quakers in conversation about religious difference**

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**The work of the Theology Think Tank,  
edited by Helen Rowlands (Quaker Books, £8)**

This slim 100-page book could be the most important Quaker publication for many a year. It comes after a period of tension in some parts of the Society, arising from the growth of humanist, atheist and broadly 'nontheist' views within Britain Yearly Meeting. Some local and area meetings have responded by embracing the change as part of our commitment to inclusivity and 'unity in diversity'. Others have found the issue difficult, divisive and a threat to a common understanding of essential Quaker identity.

Tensions became more acute when the question of revising *Quaker faith and practice* arose. Would those who self-identified as nontheists seek to expunge 'God language' from our book of discipline? Would those for whom belief in a transcendent God was fundamental to Quaker faith and practice seek to deny nontheists any acknowledgment in the revised version? A Meeting for Sufferings consultation of area meetings in 2013 showed that the 'theism and nontheism question' topped the list of issues thought to require more discussion before a decision on revising the Red Book could be made.

### **A wise question**

In the autumn of 2014 Sufferings set up a Revision Preparation Group (RPG) to explore the issue further. It posed the question:

*Is it possible to reframe the differing perspectives of British Quakers, which have often been characterised by the shorthand “theism/nontheism”, so as to be less polarised?*

It was a wise question. Not ‘Who is right and who is wrong?’, not ‘Is nontheism compatible with membership of a religious society?’ but, in essence, can we find ways of discussing our different perspectives without falling into the trap of seeing them as polarised opposites? Implicit in the question is acceptance that there are nontheist as well as ‘non-nontheist’ perspectives within the Society, and the key to finding unity in diversity is to discern a Friendly way of framing them.

The RPG set up what they called a ‘think tank’ to work on the question, inviting ‘a number of Friends with backgrounds in academic theology, Quaker studies and related subjects’, plus ‘some Friends who were known to have particular personal positions’ – 28 in all. Michael Wright and I were among them, in our personal capacities rather than as representatives of the NFN. To begin with, we shared views by email, then met together at Woodbrooke for a weekend of ‘threshing’, ably led by the RPG secretary Helen Rowlands.

### **“Beautifully balanced”**

*God, Words and Us* is the result: a beautifully balanced account of the discussions, a summary of agreed conclusions, a glossary of terms, a sample group session plan for local meetings and a list of resources for further exploration (including a generous selection of books on Quaker nontheism). The ‘think tank’ concluded that:

- *The Quaker community needs to engage in open dialogue on a continual basis – it is important to share experience and beliefs, and when this is done well we can be enriched by our diversity.*
- *The kind of language we use is also important. Words can be used to divide and to hurt, and they can create false oppositions. We should try to avoid destructive aspects of difference.*
- *It is unhelpful to refer to these issues using polarised shorthand descriptions such as ‘theism/nontheism’. If labels are needed to describe people’s beliefs, they should be self-chosen and not imposed on others.*
- *The real pattern of conviction or belief in Britain Yearly Meeting is much more nuanced and kaleidoscopic, and we need a variety of models to describe it.*
- *We welcome and embrace the diversity that enriches our community; we unite in our worship and witness.*

So what new models are we encouraged to use instead of one that appears to picture something called ‘theism’ at one end and something called ‘nontheism’ at the other, with more nuanced and unlabelled positions ignored? Are there models, for instance, which take into account the request of some who are not nontheists that they should not be labelled as theists (which is why I have referred above, only slightly tongue in cheek, to ‘non-nontheists’?) The ‘think tank’ produced a range of such models which are developed in the book, some of which are mentioned in Michael’s useful synopsis.

### **To be widely distributed**

The importance of this book, however, is that **it is being distributed to every meeting in the country**, with suggestions on how to explore the issues in a Friendly way, without fear or hurt. The NFN has played a part in bringing to the fore questions like ‘When we talk about God, what do we mean?’, ‘How should we understand religious language and

stories?', 'How do we relate to wider contemporary theological movements?' and 'What are the implications of all this for our unity, diversity and work in the world?'

Now our meetings throughout the country are being invited by Meeting for Sufferings to join in the conversation we started. How that conversation goes is likely to have a decisive influence on whether BYM proceeds with a revision of *Quaker faith and practice* that reflects our Society as it is rather than as it was. As Helen Rowlands writes in her Introduction, 'Contemporary Friends' reflection on the nature of God takes place in our own social and theological setting, just as Quaker origins were rooted in a particular time and society. What can we say in our own time?'

### More on our website...

David's review and Michael Wright's synopsis of *God, Words and Us* can be found on our website at <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2017/11/30/god-words-and-us/>, where you will also find a link to Rhiannon Grant's review (and other goodies) at <https://brigidfoxandbuddha.wordpress.com/>

*"If I could believe the Quakers banned music because church music is so damn bad I should view them with approval." - Ezra Pound*

**Nontheist Friends Network** - The aim of the Network is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation.

**Steering Group** - Trevor Bending, David Boulton, Gisela Creed (Clerk), Jo Jaffray, David Parlett, Deepa Parry-Gupta, Tim Regan, Hugh Rock, Keith Rycroft, Sarah Siddle, Michael Wright.

**Our Newsletter** appears irregularly several times a year. Contributions, please, to the editor: David Parlett, 1 Churchmore Road, London SW16 5UY, Tel 020 8764 0950, [quakers@parlett.eu](mailto:quakers@parlett.eu)