



Nontheist
Friends Network

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2020

AGM by Zoom on 9 December 2020 at 7pm

THIS IS FIRST NOTICE OF OUR FORTHCOMING AGM, WHICH WAS POSTPONED IN MARCH 2020 BECAUSE WE WERE OVERTAKEN BY COVID-19 LOCKDOWN.

As currently paid-for membership was suspended until the next AGM due to Covid restrictions, all past and recent members and friends who have expressed an interest are warmly invited to this AGM. An agenda and any motions will be sent 30 days in advance, so please let us know if you do not wish to have further correspondence about this by emailing nontheistfriend@gmail.com.

WE NEED YOUR ACTIVE SUPPORT TO THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE NETWORK IT'S FOCUS AND OUR PLACE WITHIN THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

In this issue... Curt asks, what do we worship? Is it necessary to replace the word, or redefine it? Several people say something of their experiences, which perhaps goes some way to answer his questions. But it would be good to share our thoughts on the issue further. So If you have something to share on the topic (or on other matters) please send it to nontheistfriend@gmail.com **for the next issue.** Proposed deadline: 23 November.

We see the same stars, the sky is shared by all, the same world surrounds us. What does it matter what wisdom a person uses to seek the truth? [Symmachus]

The practising of love and charity, rather than assenting to orthodox doctrines, is the sign of true religion. [Spinoza]

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What do you worship?

Do Quaker nontheists worship or do they sit and think? If worship means addressing a god or Jesus in 'god language' then probably not. If it is time spent reflecting on something else then perhaps yes. But are reflections the same as worship? It may be necessary to replace the word or redefine it. When I asked a nontheist what they did in Meeting for Worship, the reply was 'I do what I have always done'. (But I received nothing further.)

Up to 2012 my times of silent nondiscursive attendances on God resulted in strong feelings of peace which I attributed to God. They were similar to the experiences of Brother Lawrence the Carmelite. In a letter to *the Friend* in 2012 I came to the conclusion that the loss of these feelings was probably due to my ageing brain. Later, it dawned on me that perhaps there is no God and never has been. This posed the questions: what caused those feelings in others during the history of Christendom as well as of other religions, and also in me?

Perhaps any positive feelings had been the workings of the brain stimulated by my activities which had therefore resulted in a condition of the mind. (This can also be inferred by the first part of Psalm 139: You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... you are familiar with all my ways.) Because I valued the experiences of a deep sense of peace, I would like continue with them.

It's a bit like a bereavement. I've lost that which was a wonderful companion for many years, bringing a warmth, interest, joy and especially fulfilment, and meaning. How can I recover what I have lost? I am not looking for an emotional or a superstitious crutch.

I look on the issue of a devotional activity as a practical matter and not intellectual speculation. Because we're all different, the answers to that search will vary with each person. Do Quaker nontheists have answers? What do you do in Meeting for worship? Is the activity intellectual or spiritual; is it Buddhist meditation? Is there a library of advice or helpful writings? Is the subject important enough to examine further? *Curt Gardner*

My journey so far

I was brought up in a well-grounded Protestant household in Germany during and after World War Two. We lived with my grandfather, who was the local minister, in a lively extended family; traditional Christian values, especially compassion, discipline and honesty, were fundamental parts of my life. I had great respect for my loving and generous family, it was a good and secure childhood, even though my father died in the war and postwar conditions were harsh for the adults.

Questions of faith arose as I grew up. I remember during confirmation classes, doubting whether this mysterious 'God' existed, feeling that religious language, communion, reciting the creed seemed empty and irrelevant. But I loved being part of this community and the church music, the serene liturgy and especially liked the organist, and I was impressed by

the churches' emerging work around outreach to refugees, peace and reconciliation. So, I was persuaded to be confirmed into the Lutheran church.

The world started to open up, when in my late teens I became interested in politics and philosophy and took part in international work camps. This opened my eyes to some of the great needs in the post-war world as well as the existence of racial, social, cultural and religious differences and made me think about where I could find my place.

Idealism took hold, wanting to change and improve the world! Based on my upbringing, it seemed to me then that this was 'God' calling me, now I would describe it in Quaker language as 'stirrings of love truth deep in my heart'. I also marvelled at great art and nature and would have described this then as something to do with the 'Divine'. Over the years I am still stirred by the same things, but now I would describe it as real, here and now, and wonderfully human feelings which motivate me to act.

I married into a lovely Quaker family and eventually became a member appreciating the values expressed in the testimonies, with its emphasis on action, listening and learning and the non-creedal freedom to express one's self.

If asked now, I'd describe myself first as a Quaker member of a loving community, and secondly as a nontheist. Taking part in Quaker Meeting for me involves trying to get rid of ego, to be still, to listen, to 'embrace' people I know and don't know yet, and grapple with some of my and the world's problems. I also try and make time for thankfulness and reflection. A helpful shorthand for me is ACTS: Awe (wonder), Compassion, Thankfulness and Self-Examination (adopted from a talk given by Michael Wright).

Quaker Meeting for me is like a collaborative, creative experiment...sometimes it moves me, often it raises questions, makes me think of new ways and possibilities, and encourages me to appreciate the attributes of 'God' as the human values of love, justice, wisdom, beauty, integrity and compassion. When God is mentioned, I am often able for myself to 'translate' this into metaphors which are creating concepts for a meaningful, moral framework for human lives.

I'm proud that Quakers are such an inclusive society where questions and uncertainty are welcomed. We are fortunate with our sound Quaker structures and discipline which unite us in the way we do things.

Quaker Faith and Practice 20.06 sums it up: Please be patient, those of you who have found a rock to stand on, with those of us who haven't and with those of us who are *not even looking for one*. We live on the wave's edge, where sea, sand and sky are all mixed up together; we are tossed head over heels in the surf, catching only occasional glimpses of any fixed horizon. Some of us stay there from choice because it is exciting, and it *feels like the right place to be*. *Gisela Creed*

God and worship

Audrey Regan, one of our longstanding network members, passed away on the 12th of June after a fall and a stroke. For Audrey the phrase 'religion is a human creation' was key to her experience of Quakerism. Here is a talk she wrote about her Quaker nontheism for her local meeting's Quaker Quest back in 2018.

My late husband and I met at, married and worked in Congregational Churches in Thundersley and Basildon, where we met many kind, wonderful people and liked the democratic nature of the Church. However, there reached a time when we were, increasingly, finding hymns and sermons contained words and sentiments we could not agree with. Simultaneously, Dan was investigating the Quakers and going to Quaker Meetings whenever he was away for the weekend. Moving from Basildon to Benfleet seemed the ideal moment to go to a Quaker Meeting. This was on Canvey and we soon applied for membership. When visited, I expressed some concern that I would no longer be going to Communion but that I wanted to go with my husband on this. Once in, I took to Quakerism like a duck to water. Quakers have no creed to repeat or subscribe to, but what seemed to be the bedrock of Quaker values was the words attributed to George Fox who founded the Quaker movement 'Walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.'

Many Quakers would be happy to take that statement 'that of God' at face value, my own interpretation is that there is something of intrinsic value in every human being. I specially love the part that says 'Walk cheerfully' for that suggests we should have a predisposition to think the best of everyone and listen to their story regardless of creed, colour, sexual orientation, fat or thin, rich or poor.....etc. (the neighbours/West Indian meter reader) Looking back, it is extraordinary to think how far I have travelled from conventional Christian beliefs to now having no belief in God and considering all religion a human construct. But this last conviction put me in a sad dilemma as I was very unhappy at the thought of leaving Leigh Meeting. On the point of resigning, I met a Friend at Britain Yearly Meeting (Frank Bonner) who showed me his card authorising him to be a Celebrant of Humanist Weddings. It was a huge relief to know I was not alone. Soon after, my elder Son pointed out a Conference at Woodbrooke Quaker College specifically for Q's who had no belief in God. There we met some Friends who had had rather bruising encounters with their Local Meetings when they first spoke of their nontheism. However, Friends throughout Britain were content for a nontheist network to be set up within Quakerism. We, in turn were most keen for our fellow Quakers to understand that we were not a lot of 'Johnny-come-latelys' who wanted to change the S of F's into a branch of the Humanist Society. Rather, most of us were Friends who had been in the Society for a long time (50 years in my case) and had served the Society in various capacities. I have been very fortunate to be a member of a Quaker Meeting that is happy for our Society to be an inclusive one, not an exclusive one – so they accept even me! There is infinite variety within Friends. We have Buddhist Quakers, C of E Quakers, Christo-centric ones, nontheist Quakers, all of which was very well explained on the Quaker website for some time:

There is a great diversity within the Quakers on conceptions of God and we use different kinds of language to describe religious experience. Some Quakers have a conception of God which is similar to that of orthodox Christians, and would use similar language. Others are happy to use God-centred language, but would conceive of God in very different terms to the traditional Christian trinity. Some describe themselves as agnostics or humanists or nontheist and describe their experience in ways that avoid the use of the word God entirely.

So what is such a 'motley crew' doing when we gather for Meeting-for-Worship? We sit in silence on Sunday morning, the silence occasionally broken by a Friend standing to speak briefly of something they think right to share. This form of Worship is unusual, odd some may say and it requires a sense of trust each with the other and a willingness to sit quietly and enter into the creative peace we achieve together. At the first Nontheist Conference that I spoke of, there was much discussion about Meeting for Worship and, 'to a man' we all expressed how much it meant to us to be able to go to Meeting on a Sunday morning. We compiled a list of some reasons why this should be so:

to find a space behind/below myself, my ego / to have a piece of the action, to be a part of the whole / to be part of a community of shared values / to get in touch with the teacher within / to try to discern what love requires / *to preserve an empty space for selfless thought / to centre thoughts on each Friend present

I suspect if you could look into each Friend's head of whatever persuasion, you would find Meeting meant something slightly different. For my own part I have various ways of giving myself up to the silence. One comes from something I witnessed at the small Meeting on Canvey Island. One of two little boys who came with their parents had an empty chair beside him. Onto this he quietly put, one by one, the contents of his pocket, much what you might imagine, string, a stone from the seafront, penknife and so on. So if I come to Meeting with my mind in a whirl, worried about a member of my family, concerned to do the right thing by a friend, cross with myself for doing something I regret – whatever is praying on my mind at the time, I sit and, one by one, lift out of my mind and thinking each of these concerns so that I can truly settle into the silence and be calmed and be refreshed thereby.

Another way is to do one of the things on the Conference list and centre thoughts on each Friend present. And Debbie was right in what she said about Meeting last week, that it is something you get better at and find you can 'centre down' more quickly and easily with time. So, some Friends in Meeting for Worship will be praying or opening themselves to the word of God. Others like myself will be finding a quiet and creative peacefulness. The important thing is that, whatever our differences, everyone will find something special about sharing in that time that we set aside and in being with others in an inclusive, loving, non-judgemental acceptance of our differences and receiving strength to go out and 'walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.' **Audrey Regan**

The spirit can be intoxicating - in a good way

I don't regard the concept of spirit as specifically religious. I see 'spirit' as a product of our collective humanity. We can be inspired, moved, amazed, stirred into action, experience transcendence, and so on. Although some of these things may not be easily explained, I don't see them as 'supernatural', but rather as 'spiritual'. Humans have always inclined toward deifying the unknown, with various consequences, some good, some bad. Being active within the Interfaith community has enabled me to view the spiritual experiences of others as a positive point of human interaction and honest discussion.

When working in an Interfaith context you need to be clear on what basis you are participating. The forum I am part of has a constitution that defines 'faith and belief' as both theistic and nontheistic. We see our role as helping to expand emotional and spiritual development within a context of community cohesion...no mean feat. We do this largely by presenting differing faith/beliefs/world views in schools. Our hope is to celebrate 'difference' and differences within our communities. We also hope to demonstrate our own acceptance of diversity within the forum by way of our collaborative working during an event. The Interfaith Community I belong to is made up of theistic faiths (Bahai's, Christians, Muslims, Sikh's, Jews, Quakers) but also nontheistic beliefs/world views, for example humanists, buddhists, nontheistic Quakers and nontheistic Unitarian Universalists. We see 'belief' as encompassing a philosophy or world view, whether theist or nontheist. We recognise the desire to express positive human values, values arising from the human condition, but which can also be described as God inspired. We also recognise that not all members describe their belief as supernatural. Our hope is that some emotional/spiritual learning can arise from the sharing of understanding and our demonstration of diversity. By engaging children and adults with the challenge of diversity and positive values, we believe that this might help to diminish prejudiced and negative views within our communities and increase understanding of 'difference' at a religious, cultural and human level.

Here's a poignant example. A Jewish member of the forum, sadly now deceased, was acquainting schoolchildren with aspects of the Holocaust. Some children had some familiarity with this topic, others didn't. This particular school was situated in an area containing a number of Traveller families. The school was attempting to create better relations within the area, partly the reason we were asked to carry out an Interfaith event – our school events go under the title of Harmony Project. Generally the children were attentive yet somewhat fidgety and giggly; they were after all quite young. When Brina (the presenter), who at the time was a choir leader at her synagogue, began to sing the Kaddish (a Jewish prayer for the dead), she had a beautiful voice, you could hear a pin drop...young mouths dropped open, giggles and fidgeting ceased, and we all 'had a Moment'. We all were somehow sharing in the depth of feeling and emotion of that prayer. It brought the event alive and sparked some real interaction with the children.

Here's an example of a community event. We organised a walk for Peace and Unity with the help of the local authority. The local Mayor offered some words of encouragement at

the start of the walk. The event was successful in gathering people from faith groups and those with no religious faith to walk with us in the cause of Peace and Unity. It was fascinating to see the various banners: Muslims for Peace, Christians for Peace, Bahai's for Peace, Buddhists for Peace, Humanists for Peace, Jews for Peace, Quakers for Peace, etc. This demonstrated for us the value of collaborative working in community events.

Theists and nontheists and others can work well together in 'community'. We can discuss and argue about theology until the cows come home. In the words of some bard or other 'Just Do It' and enjoy the journey. **Keith Rycroft**

God in silence

Gathered silence generates a holy communion of sorts in our meetings. Plain language in all matters Quaker is important in my mind so I will attempt to explore my meaning of both holy and communion in the context of meeting for worship.

Imagine, in the midst of silence, a Friend or attender speaks. What prompts the speaker? What am I to make of the communication? My experience of Quaker meeting has generated these questions and I have found the answer through my understanding of God in silence.

God, holy and communion are now weighting my ideas, perhaps, towards a religious theme. However, for me, God is substance, a pantheist belief, whereby God is everything and everything is in God. In this view, male, female, indeed human existence, is a mode of substance and a mouthpiece of godness.

Meeting for worship, in gathered silence, is wholly inclusive in my understanding. My worth and yours, the nature and nurture of our shared communications, are substance in the silence and prompted by God. Need, struggle and conflict in common generate a dynamic process between us that distils the spirit of worship and captures the essence of what most needs to be seen and heard. In this spirit a Friend may speak.

Quakers are led by such prompting in silence. They discern, think and decide. This spirit generates love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This abundance must bear also, however, our fears and hatred. Messy feelings, actions and appetites are the business of the community within as much as they are the subject of concern in society more widely. Our ethics and testimonies to truth, equality and simplicity draw the lines and make solid our presence in God and God in us.

Friends are accountable to themselves and one another. They are responsible and dependent on one another to gather meaning in the silence and this, in my mind, sustains a community and practice that I value. In action, and in plain language, our acceptance of imprisoning, enslaving and abandoning ways and our refusal to practice them is the essence of God in silence. Thus in action, and plain speaking, our wholly interdependent communal worship, is perhaps, our body of Christ and holy communion by another name. **Amanda Cuthbert**

Take heed, dear friends...

(Excerpts from a talk given to Young Friends in August 2020)

Nontheists, like the Religious Society of Friends itself, are a motley crew, each with a different background of faith and non-faith, without any common doctrinal position.

When I was eleven, I was sent to a Quaker boarding school, Leighton Park in Reading. In terms of religion, the regime was very relaxed. As boarders we were expected to attend Reading Quaker Meeting on alternate Sundays: on our 'free' Sundays we could either stay in bed until lunchtime or attend other places of worship in Reading.

I found I loved Quaker Meeting – I loved the whole nonauthoritarian style and manner of Quakers, and their regular use of *Advices and Queries* – it was quite unlike Chapel! At every Meeting, if there had been no ministry by 1120h, one of the Elders would read, and speak to, an item from *Advices and Queries*... Above all, as a serious boy, I liked the seriousness of Quaker culture and practice – it suited me well.

When I entered the Sixth Form, our whole cohort was plunged into turmoil by the need to confront the reality of *conscription*. We all had to confront the powerful Quaker teaching on pacifism, and whether to seek exemption from military service on grounds of conscience. The issue tore our world apart. Although I found Quaker style and culture compelling, I was no pacifist – and my father was outraged that I was being encouraged by the school (*as he saw it*) to take a stand as a Conscientious Objector – he realised that it would threaten any high-flying English career I might otherwise have. I kept my head down – I secured my place at Cambridge, to study French and German. I was then required to do my military service straight away because I was not planning to study the Sciences or other priority subject. I went into the Royal Navy, studied Russian, and served for a year in radio espionage.

At 21, I went to Cambridge. I took no steps to establish any Quaker links. My sense was that the Society was for 'real Pacifists' and that my Naval service would make me unwelcome. I joined the Cambridge Humanist Society, whose Chair was the famous novelist E. M. Forster. I remember his words on tolerance: 'Tolerance is what is left behind – when love has gone'.

I married in 1966. My wife described herself as atheist and when she died in 1983 she left instructions for a Humanist funeral. We had two children. When they were of school age, we moved back to Wales, as we both favoured a Welsh upbringing for them. Family habits die hard. I soon found myself taking both children to a local Congregational chapel every Sunday.

After five years of conventional chapel-going, there came a severe rift between the Chapel and myself, when a preacher preached a deeply anti-Semitic sermon. I felt I had no alternative but to break my links with the Chapel, and I returned to the Quakers, at Swansea Meeting. After five or six years (c.1990) I applied for membership of the Society of Friends. I explained my hazy theism and non-pacifist position to the Visitors who interviewed me, but they nevertheless recommended my admission.

I came across the Nontheist Friends Network by a chance Google search in 2017, when I was 81! Earlier, in view of my love for *Advices and Queries* I had decided, as a personal

exercise, to see if I could re-state its admirable values and perceptions without relying on any supernatural authority. The result was *Take Heed, dear Friends...* to which I spoke at the 2017 Conference (available from me at roger@warrenevans.net). It demonstrated (at least to me!) the intellectual cogency of a nontheist position.

To those who wonder how does nontheism fit within Quakerism, I quote 'Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way' (A&Q Para 2) and 'Remember that our Quakerism, grounded in Christianity, is not a matter of doctrine, but a way of living and behaving. It is by our deeds that we are known' (THDF Para 5).

What kind of nontheist am I? I see three broad categories of nontheist thought: (1) Humanist, (2) Personal Definitionist (that each person has the freedom to ascribe personal meanings to the words 'God', 'prayer' or 'worship'), and (3) Evolutionary nontheism...that mankind has evolved into a dangerous creature and now threatens the survival of most life on earth. We must use all our powers of reason to prevent that happening.

At Cambridge, I was a Humanist. At Chapel and at Swansea Meeting I was a Definitionist, satisfied with private reservations. I am now an Evolutionary nontheist, committed to the ability of the species, by taking thought, with its large brain and unparalleled reasoning ability, to solve the problems it has created for this planet. I think I have always been a nontheist. [Roger Warren Evans](#)

Can I say?

Can I say that the bible sets about love
Can I say that suckle-stroked babes love wholly
Can I say that love grown on plunges-in full filling again
Can I say that our cross to bear is hard holding
Can I say that piercing nails and binds fail love itself
Can I say that that love began before conceiving, lying and bleeding
Can I say that love dreams and that love loves hate
Can I say that love swallows fear to break with fate
New every morning is the love that billows like the sea at night
Can I say that love loves light
Can I say that love's spirit sets about our hates and fears
And that love begins again in the set of our years [Amanda Cuthbert](#)

Free Quakers

Free Quakers choose to exercise their free right to follow their conscience in all things. They arose in Philadelphia when some Friends chose to support the war against Britain. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin contributed to the building a Free Friends Meeting which opened in 1784 with 200 attending. They later reunited with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and now only hold an annual meeting to commemorate their founding.

The term 'Independent' Quaker is sometimes used to describe Quakers who have no opportunity to attend a Sunday Meeting. Free and Independent Quakers share the view that building meeting houses is a waste of resources (so the building of a meeting house in 1784 was an oddity). Emily Dickenson best expressed Free Friends' sentiment when she wrote: 'Some keep the Sabbath by going to church; I keep it by staying home'.

Free Quaker faith-based orientations span the same range as Friends generally: theocentric (focus on God of the Universe), christocentric (focus on Jesus the personal comforter), anthropocentric (focus on humankind as the source of all answers) and cosmocentric (focus on ethical naturalism, a concern for the earth and the universe, and the evolutionary process itself).

There are five principles. (1) The inner light of self-understanding is the central guiding principle. (2) Simplicity in manner of life ...to be an example to the world of how to live responsibly, meaningfully, and accountably in a world of limits which must be shared with all. (3) Peace and nonviolence ...freedom to choose whether to participate in the use of force to resolve conflict, but still affirm the testimony of peace, that the avoidance and resolution of conflict must be the primary agenda. (4) Human rights and social justice ...Love, worthy of the name, when applied to the world means social justice and unrelenting effort to provide basic human rights to all. (5) Stewardship....to be a Friend in the world is to be a caretaker of the world.

And there are five freedoms: Freedom from creeds, freedom from public worship, freedom from programmed gatherings, freedom from clergy, freedom from evangelization.

The queries of the Free Quakers are simple. Do I seek for peace? Do I nurture brotherhood? Do I work for justice? Do I exemplify simplicity? Do I embrace stewardship? Each Friend poses these questions to himself, but not to others, and each Friend determines how one exemplifies one's answers in one's daily life.

These are excerpts from a 2012 article on Free Quakers by John H Morgan. jsri.ro/ojs/index.php/jsri/article/view/624/555. See also freequakers.org/ **Piers Maddox**

Limerick

There was a young Friend from Devizes
Whose legs were of different sizes.
The left was quite tall,
The right much too small.

Diversity springs such surprises! **David Boulton**