

# Newsletter

**Nontheist Friends Network**  
A Quaker Recognised Body



## November 2021

**GREETINGS, FRIENDS, and welcome to our Winter 2021 Newsletter!**

As the days get shorter and the nights longer, and as Christmas and the New Year beckon, put another log on the fire, pour your favourite tippie and read on...

In this edition our clerk, Tim Regan, reports on our 2021 conference; Kiera Faber tells you what is coming up on our Quaker Meeting and Creative Conversation zooms; our webmaster Trevor Bending unearths an ancient document; and I ponder on what prayer might (or might not) mean to a nontheist Friend.

*David Boulton*

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**TIM REGAN on 'That's the spirit!'**

Every year a highlight for our network has been the weekend conference at Woodbrooke. For 2020 we planned to switch venue (down to Friends House) and we had pulled together a slate of fascinating speakers about 'the spirit'. But, of course, the pandemic put an end to our plans ... or did it? Many of us have been taken by surprise by the success of Zoom based Quaker meetings, and a great example is our own monthly Creative Conversations, which Kiera reports on in this newsletter. Hence, we decided to resurrect our 2020 conference, and to move it online as a themed series of Zoom presentations and associated discussion.

We kicked off with Andrew Copson, the Chief Executive of Humanists UK. For me Andrew's talk was a wonderful affirmation: he found the right words to describe much of my own nontheist understanding of spirituality. Spirituality for a humanist will never be something beyond our material condition, and that may lead us to reject the word 'spirituality', but Andrew preferred to repurpose concepts and keep the resonant usage of the word. He described four main aspects of spirituality that remain poignant for humanists: a spiritual feeling is powerful, positive, and fleeting, it is personal, it is not intellectual, and it takes you outside of yourself in order to connect with something else.

Our second talk was by Gill Pennington, former Spirituality Tutor at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre. This was the most challenging talk, and I think we failed to rise to the challenge. Gill spoke about 'keeping our channel open'. For Gill our spirituality was bound up with our openness to change. Her talk wove around the children's story 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' (and several George Fox quotes). Gill's talk was about inward focus and inward change, and how, like a Möbius strip, our inner lives and our outer lives flow into each other as one co-created movement. There was, I think, a reluctance to engage with Gill's ideas; she was explicitly theist (though she would not choose that label) and some attendees had difficulty moving beyond rejection of the theism behind some of her ideas towards translation or empathetic understanding. It reminded me of how our network meets the multifarious needs of nontheist Friends. Some of us feel very comfortable in our nontheist Quakerism, and the network gives us a forum to explore and deepen our understanding of our Quaker 'faith'. For others our network provides a place where their nontheism will not be seen as antagonistic towards Quakerism. I remember back in our first conferences how many came to the network because their local meetings rejected them. For those it is important to stake out our nontheist experiences of Quakerism.

We wrapped up with Dinah Livingstone, the editor of Sofia, the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network. Dinah took two Christian starting points, the reign of kindness and the social body of Christ (fellowship / communion) as leading to the natural outcome of Christianity: humanism. She took us through this 'descent', or coming down to earth & embodiment, as a series of poetic creations or milestones in the progress to humanism.

We have not yet discussed what form our next conference should take, nor when or where it should be. Hopefully that will be something we can touch on at our AGM (watch this space).

If you missed the conference (or want to revisit the talks) the recordings of the presentations are available on our website [here](#).

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## **KIERA FABER looks back and forward to our QM+CCs**

The breadth of our NFN Quaker Meeting and Creative Conversations mirrors the Quaker kaleidoscope ‘...confirming our testimony that truth cannot be confined within a creed’ (QFP, p12). In a time of great division and angst, we hope our QM+CC offers an opportunity to be still in silence, listen with openness and appreciation to another’s ideas, and speak from a place of personal truth. Through connectivity and compassion, across the distance, we hope to explore the human search for meaning, together.

We began the Autumn season of the QM+CC with Martin Barker sharing his presentation, ‘Does prayer work? Evidence from science and the human experience’. Martin’s talk ruminated on the Quaker experience by posing more questions than giving answers. He surprised and challenged us to reflect and think inwardly. At our most recent QM+CC on the 7th of October Howard Grace shared his presentation, ‘The heart of our shared humanity’, with 75 attendees from across the UK, America, Canada, Portugal, Romania, South Africa, and Kenya. A wide variety of Friends from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives participated in a robust open discussion inspired by queries posed by Howard.

Future QM+CC presentation topics include Tom Kunesh’s ‘When non-theism isn’t enough: a marxian moral imperative’ (Thursday November 4th); Kiera Faber’s ‘Drawing Silence in Art’; Piers Maddox’s ‘Path of rightness in time of civilizational change’; John Richter’s ‘On the Edge of Quakers’; and David Boulton’s ‘Friends and the secular world’. All our presenters, past and future, are Friends from within the Network, highlighting the diversity of beliefs, talents, and intellectual curiosities of

our friends and members. Please see the NFN website for dates and details of forthcoming presentations and recordings of past Creative Conversations.

If you are interested in sharing your Creative Conversation with the Working Group, or would like to join us, email [clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk](mailto:clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk). If you have already registered you will automatically receive links to our Zooms approximately a week before each meeting. We would love to hear from you!

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## **TREVOR BENDING brushes the dust off an ancient document**

Laurie Burrow, who maintains the Quaker Universalist Group website, tells us that, after nearly a quarter of a century, David Boulton's 1997 booklet *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist* is still the most downloaded item from the QUG website. I think that should tell us something. Maybe people find the title interesting and read a little of the text before downloading it - but I suspect it is the intriguing idea of parallels between nontheist Quakerism and Humanism that attracts people.

It was followed a few years later by *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in contemporary Quakerism*, continuing the exploration of a nontheist/humanist/universalist Quakerism which David had begun with his 1997 pamphlet. In his introduction to the 2017 reprint (and later Kindle edition) of *Godless* David quoted Chuck Fager, editor of the American journal *Quaker Theology* (and an unapologetic theist) who had asked: 'What have we come to in Friends' religious thought when the most exciting book of Quaker theology I've read in recent years is produced by a bunch of Quaker nontheists? The proper response to the testimonies in these pages is not scorn or witchhunts but an invitation to further conversation'.

I had wondered whether it might be time to re-issue or reprint *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist* but it would require some editing, which I think David would not now want to undertake. It said so much that is every bit as relevant today as when it was written, and is likely to be of great interest to nontheist and Universalist Friends alike. The QUG on-line version is not easy to read or navigate, so with

David's and QUG's consent I have placed the original text on our NFN website. You can find it here:

[www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk/articles/the-faith-of-a-quaker-humanist/](http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk/articles/the-faith-of-a-quaker-humanist/)

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## DAVID BOULTON on 'Prayer, or whatever you call it...'

In our September creative conversation following Martin Barker's wonderful presentation 'Does Prayer Work?' I found myself wondering aloud whether we were doing ourselves a service by stretching the meaning of the word prayer to fit our nontheist viewpoint. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles defines prayer as 'a solemn and humble request to God, or to an object of worship; a supplication, petition or thanksgiving'. That is broadly how theists understand the word. But what can a nontheist make of it, unless we steal it from them and give it a quite different meaning to suit our own purpose? Is that fair to theists? Or to language?

Tim Regan picked me up on this in an exchange of emails after the presentation. He wrote: 'I find David's point about not stretching the word prayer fascinating, and it left me feeling a contradiction! On the one hand I agree that stretching the word is disrespectful of those who use it precisely to communicate with God. But on the other hand I am one of those nontheists who like to use and understand religious language in a poetic way. Does poetry stretch language? Of course it does. Or does it? Poets, like software engineers, have an aesthetic sense rooted in parsimony. So perhaps stretching is not what they are doing'.

I understand Tim's sense of contradiction. I share it! I love the poetry of religious language – or, rather, I love religious language precisely because it is poetry (and if poetry doesn't stretch language it isn't poetry). The Quaker poet William Greenleaf Whittier wrote:

'To worship rightly is to love each other,  
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.'

That seems OK from a poet writing poetry, but it feels like equivocation if I go on to assure my fellow-Quakers that I do believe in worship and prayer, when what I really mean by these words is love, smiles and kindly deeds.

Perhaps what distinguishes the religious humanist from the secular humanist is this: the religious humanist holds on to religious language, where worship may mean loving each other, a hymn may mean a smile, and prayer may mean a kindly deed. The secular humanist will say that worship is one thing and love is another, a hymn one thing and a smile another, prayer one thing and a kindly deed another. And theists will agree with the secular humanist!

Despite our nontheist viewpoint we have chosen to join or identify ourselves with the Religious Society of Friends, a society with Christian roots and a Christian vocabulary. If we feel we must translate the language in order to appropriate it, or take it on board as poetic tropes, we need to be clear and open about what we are doing. We owe that to those for whom worship is worship, a hymn a hymn, and prayer 'a solemn and humble request to God'.

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The Newsletter is published three or four times a year. To keep up with NFN events visit our website [www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk](http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk). For more information about the Network email [clerk@nontheist-quakers.com](mailto:clerk@nontheist-quakers.com). To contribute to the Newsletter email [dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com)