

Newsletter

Nontheist Friends Network
A Quaker Recognised Body



April 2022

Greetings Friends and welcome to our Spring 2022 Newsletter!

At the NFN AGM on 17 February, a couple of Friends suggested that perhaps it would be a good idea to continue the newsletter which could be emailed out to everyone on our wider mailing list and even printed and posted for the small number not on email. Printed copies could also be left at Meetings, Friends House and Woodbrooke etc. as a form of 'outreach'. I have in the past produced a local meeting newsletter on the meeting website with the option of a printed copy. As the proposed NFN working group(s) for a newsletter and beyond the group for the 'Creative Conversations' do not seem to have yet been implemented, I thought I would produce an occasional newsletter in the form of a post on our website - so here it is for spring.

Creative conversations

Our next MfW and Creative conversation is at 7pm on Thursday 7 April, 2022: [David Parlett](#), A Theist Cuckoo in the Nontheist Nest. For further details look on the website at:

<https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/news/david-parlett-a-theist-cuckoo-in-the-nontheist-nest/>

Details of further conversations will be emailed and posted when available.

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. If you have already registered you will automatically receive links to our Zooms approximately a week before each meeting. As ever we would love to hear from you!

Nontheist approaches to religious language

This course took place on 'zoom' and Woodbrooke's 'moodle' learning environment with Rhiannon Grant from 28th February to 27th March. About 20 Friends took part, possibly a majority might identify as nontheist Friends and a number of us from NFN were present, but a wide range of 'theist', 'humanist' and 'nontheist' viewpoints were represented. The discussions on the Moodle Forum for the course were most interesting. The course was oversubscribed and we are told it is likely to be offered again, perhaps this year - look out for it and I would thoroughly recommend it. By the end of the course I was thinking 'now we need a course on Nontheist approaches to God' - but see below.

Further courses at Woodbrooke

We have already publicised the above and two other courses coming up soon:

The three courses are given by [Rhiannon Grant](#). They are:

- [Nontheist Approaches to Religious Language](#) - we believe to be repeated,
- [Why Attend Meeting for Worship if you Don't Believe in God?](#) 12 April 2022 (one evening session), and
- [Are Quakers Christian?](#) 26 April 2022 (also one evening session).

(Please note that these courses are organised by Woodbrooke and designed by Rhiannon Grant. They are not produced by the Nontheist Friends Network.) To judge by the first, I believe these shorter further courses will also be well worth attending and several of us have signed up for them already. (Pay as led).

Pronouns

The following pronouns are used in this issue: **we/us/our** means those who 'manage' NFN business - Steering Group, Working groups, NFN members, website or newsletter contributors etc. **I/me** means Trevor Bending as website editor and producer of this issue. I hope that future issues will include your contributions: articles, quotes, images, jokes, comments, letters etc. (See the end of the newsletter/post to see how to contribute. You can also make comments/leave a reply on the website below and on most other pages). **Suggested deadline for submissions to a next issue (Summer 2022?) is mid-June - 21st if you like.** I'd also be happy to accept contributions or responses to this issue for supplementary publication before the next issue.

Quaker blogosphere and social media

Quakers across the world, including nontheist Friends, are very active on the internet. There is a well-established nontheist Friends Facebook group with American and British moderators (Helen Gilbert is the British moderator). The group is public, so anyone can view it and the very interesting discussions that take place there, but to comment you will have to sign up to Facebook and apply to join the group.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1631439757083868>

One American Friend who posts there regularly is [Chuck Fager](#) editor of *Quaker Theology* whose website/blog '[A Friendly Letter](#)' is worth a visit. Rhiannon Grant's blog '[Brigid, Fox and Buddha](#)' is definitely worth following along with 213 other followers. Speaking of followers, the NFN website is now followed by over 250 people. Other Quaker blogs include:

Ben Wood's '[The Armchair Theologian](#)' - although this doesn't seem to have been updated for 16 months. Craig Barnett, author, Woodbrooke tutor and co-founder of the City of Sanctuary movement who currently serves on the Book of Discipline Revision Committee has a blog called '[transitionquaker](#)' and you might begin with his post (from 2014!) on '[The Imaginary Theist](#)' - <https://transitionquaker.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-imaginary-theist.html>

Another Woodbrooke tutor, Mark Russ, has a blog at <https://jollyquaker.com/>

Another (professional) Quaker theologian, Rachel Muers, has a blog which she posts to somewhat intermittently, sometimes controversially. <https://rachelmuers.wordpress.com/>

[Quakerquaker](#) is an interesting blog/forum with multiple contributors expressing alternative views.

The senior editor of Friends Journal has a topical blog here: <https://www.quakerranter.org/>

Finally, for blogs today, Friends' House has an active blog with various contributors:

<https://www.quaker.org.uk/blog>

(Many of these blogs and quite a few more are listed here: https://blog.feedspot.com/quakers_blogs/)

There are also several [Quaker Universalist Facebook Groups](#) -

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/QuakerUniversalists/>, American and British, and the websites of the UK

[Quaker Universalist Group](#) - <https://qug.org.uk/>, the American [Quaker Universalists](#) -

<https://universalistfriends.org/> and our American [Nontheist Friends](#) - <https://nontheistfriends.org/> (to which

we also link on our website). Those American Friends also still maintain the [nontheist google group](#) -

<https://groups.google.com/g/nontheist-friends?hl=en> which is very lightly moderated and springs into life

from time to time!

Other current and forthcoming events

We have already mentioned David's talk this Thursday above, the courses at Woodbrooke, and the Quaker Universalist Group Conference on Health and Healing is taking place this weekend at Woodbrooke and online. Friends may also be interested in the upcoming conference (['Living Truth – A Rallying Call for Quakers'](https://quakertruth.org/calendar/) - <https://quakertruth.org/calendar/>) of the new Quaker Truth and Integrity Group (QTIG) which is taking place online from 25-30 April. Speakers include Rachel Muers, Ben Wood, Jane Dawson and Molly Scott-Cato. Attendance is free but requires booking now. The session on Saturday morning (30 April) **Drawing things together, agreeing an epistle, and framing next steps** hopes for all participants to contribute ideas towards 'helping Friends live out our Testimony to Truth in the power of love' out of a 'concern for the state of truth and integrity in public life across the UK and indeed more widely, (and) the Quaker Truth and Integrity Group seeks to discern what might be done to help redress the current situation.' QTIG has a steering group, the clerk is Gerald Hewitson assisted by Jan Arriens and I'm pleased to say we have been able to help Jan with developing their website using QMN (Quaker Meetings Network) software (<https://quaker.app/about/>) which is designed for [Quaker Meetings](https://quakermeeting.org/) - <https://quakermeeting.org/> and recognised groups to create, fairly easily, websites with no knowledge, or desire to have any, of HTML, style sheets and the like. Jan has managed to do this very well and the website now has some 11 pages. (By way of comparison the NFN website has evolved, over 10 years since Brian Wardrop first created it, to have some 45 pages, numerous additional articles, documents, sound files and images etc., 133 posts, over 400 comments and some 250 followers - more about this below).

Quaker Humanist

In the [last newsletter](#) produced by David Boulton, I drew attention to David's 1997 Quaker Universalist pamphlet, *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist*. A number of the participants in the 'NARLA' (Nontheist Approaches to Religious Language) course outlined above would probably identify as 'Quaker Humanists'. I'll put here an extract from that pamphlet - the section on 'Faith'. David wrote:

*Quakers will have no problem with the word "faith". Theirs is a religious tradition, and in religious traditions faith invariably occupies a central place. Friends have their own (regularly revised) book of "faith and practice". Humanists, on the other hand, generally avoid the word, precisely because of its religious connotations. This is a fairly recent preference. Nineteenth and early twentieth century humanists were often happy to write of their "faith", even of their "religion". As late as 1960 Julian Huxley gave one of his broadcasts the title *The Faith of a Humanist*. But today humanists usually prefer to see themselves as representing a "world view" rather than a "faith tradition".*

I have no quarrel with that. I am not going to challenge the convention that, when we talk of faith traditions, world faiths, inter-faith dialogue, we generally mean religious traditions, world religions and religious dialogue. We do not normally regard, say, socialism or existentialism or humanism as faiths in this sense. But few would deny that there is a strong element of faith in all these secular isms. Some of us would say it takes a lot of faith to remain a socialist these days! And perhaps in the light of the cumulative inhumanities of the twentieth century, it takes a lot of faith to be any kind of humanist.

So I am using "faith" not in its acquired sense as a body of religious beliefs but in its more basic sense of a kind of combination of trust and hope. Faith in this basic sense is not about belonging to a religious group, still less about believing dogma simply because that is required of us by some outside authority and tradition. Faith is the voluntary acceptance of certain uncertainties, and the willingness to trust and hope despite those uncertainties. I fall in love. I trust and hope that my beloved loves me as I love her. I cannot furnish myself with irrefutable, logical, scientific proof that she loves me and that our mutual love will last till death doth us part. Indeed, common experience offers plentiful evidence which might presuppose me to assume the contrary! My acceptance of her love, and my giving of my love to her, has to be an act of faith. I promise to be faithful. Our lives together are based on this trust and confidence – con-fidence, "with faith". And that faith has to be constantly renewed. From time to time it may fade, or be broken. But such faith has its own imperatives for survival and growth.

On a more mundane level, I fall ill. I call the doctor. There is no certainty that her medicine will cure me. I know only too well that medical science is inexact, imperfectly understood even by doctors. But I place my confidence in her. I have faith in her proposed remedies, albeit a rather sceptical kind of faith which is contingent on their working at least some of the time.

I live in a consumer society where the free market is god, where greed is exalted, where property rights take precedence over human rights, where there is said to be no such thing as society. I have lived through a massive dismantling of collective and cooperative enterprise and a triumphalist demolition of social values. If I remain a socialist, a communist or a liberal social democrat, I exemplify the triumph of faith over experience. Faith, to borrow Byron's image, is flying the flag of freedom (or whatever banner we may be carrying) against the wind. My point is that it takes faith to be a humanist or a Quaker. There is no certainty, no logic of history, no immutable grand design which guarantees that all will be well, and all manner of things will be well; that love will prevail over hatred, "that of God in everyone" over that of the devil, the "ocean of light" over "the ocean of darkness and death". If, before we try to live by them, we demand rational demonstration or proof that human values of love, compassion, sympathy and fellowship will prevail, we shall never get started. If we choose to try to live by these values, to build a society in which these values are exemplified, we had better recognise that we are unfurling our banners against the wind. We are choosing to live by faith.

So I am not proclaiming a new faith-tradition, a belief-system called Quaker Humanism! I am saying what is obvious: that we live by faith, whether we like it or not. And I am saying, which is perhaps less obvious, that there is much common ground between Quaker faith and humanist faith, which is what we are about to explore, first by unpacking the word ...

Quaker ... so David continues and we will consider whether to offer any further extracts in future newsletters. In the meantime you can read the whole pamphlet [here](https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/articles/the-faith-of-a-quaker-humanist/) - <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/articles/the-faith-of-a-quaker-humanist/>.

Continuing this theme, Tony Philpott, clerk to QUG, wrote a book in 2013 called 'From Christian to Quaker' that can be found here: <https://qug.org.uk/publications/books/from-christian-to-quaker/>
That would make useful preparation for the 'Are Quakers Christian' course mentioned above.

Similarly, Michael Wright, clerk to NFN from 2015 to 2018 (sadly, Michael died last year) wrote his account of Jesus in his book 'Jesus Today'. (<https://nontheistquakers.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/jesus-today-book.pdf> - link takes you to the pdf of the book on the website). and that too might be useful preparation for that course and for 'Why attend meeting for worship if you don't believe in God'..

The website

I have heard no further about a working group to consider our website (and use of social media) but will be happy to work with that if it happens. In the meantime please send any suggestions or contributions for the website to me (see below).

I will try to give some helpful tips for using the website.

The appearance varies significantly as between a laptop or desktop computer on the one hand and a phone or mobile device on the other and whether you use the latter in portrait or landscape mode (turn the phone sideways!) and on the size of the screen. On a mobile you can scroll to the very bottom and choose 'View full site', but you will then need to view it landscape.

On the full site the main menu is the 8 items across the top of the screen (below Nontheist Quakers)



which are: HOME NEWS ABOUT EVENTS FAQ ARTICLES CONTACT HOW TO?

These items are on every page and remain at the top of the page even when you scroll down. Home takes you to whatever is currently the home page (sometimes varies); NEWS is news (the latest and previous posts); About is about NFN and has a drop down menu of 5 items (6 pages including About). Events you can guess (past, present and future) with a drop down menu (varies). FAQ is Frequently Asked Questions and has one further item, also about Nontheism and a book, in the drop down menu. Articles has articles and newsletters (drop down with two items) going back to 2013. Contact takes you to a form to fill in to contact us via the website editor (I pass messages on or answer them myself as appropriate). How To? tells you what I'm telling you now but is much more complicated and somewhat out of date.

The left hand column (white on black) disappears if you reduce the size of the window (or on a small tablet) and is a site map which is not especially useful. Look instead in the right hand column which is mostly green on white and has more navigation options. It will only disappear if you make the window extremely narrow when it then appears right down the bottom above the white on black column which has also then located itself there. All this is perfectly standard practice for window navigation on the web.

That right hand column contains 'Search...' which is very useful for finding everything about say 'Jesus', 'Bible' or 'David Boulton' (5 pages in the latter case - try it, it's fun! I just tried 'Elephant' and it brings up one item). This search will NOT find items in Articles or documents (pdf, Word etc.) - scroll down the Articles page to see what is there.

In the case of a mobile phone or narrow tablet (unless viewing 'full site' - see above) it's quite different: You will then see a single column (the current home page) with Menu and Search at the top. (Turning it sideways - landscape - just makes it larger and easier to read). You can scroll to the very bottom for 'full site' as mentioned above (passing much of interest on the way???) but if you tap on Menu, you will get a drop down menu of the 8 main items and their sub-pages. You can also tap on Search and then enter your search term - on my phone you then have to tap 'go' to activate it but may vary depending on phone or tablet.

I think that's more than enough - have fun exploring the site (45 pages plus lots of interesting articles and documents) and don't forget to enter your email address to follow the site if you haven't already done so. Oh, and leave your 'replies' or comments anywhere indicated on the site - if your comment doesn't appear immediately, wait a day or so for it to be 'moderated' - and tick the check-boxes for 'Notify me of new comments by email' and 'Notify me of new posts by email'. **Any questions? Email me!**

The Newsletter is published three or four times a year. To keep up with NFN events visit our website www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk. For more information about the Network email clerk@nontheist-quakers.com. To contribute to the Newsletter or the website email trevor@humber.co.uk (remove spaces and replace at with @).