

Newsletter

Nontheist Friends Network
A Quaker Recognised Body



August 2022

Greetings Friends and welcome to our Autumn 2022 Newsletter!

Although a deadline of 25th June was originally suggested for articles and news for a July newsletter, this short newsletter for August consists of material received upto 30th July. Any further material received subsequently can be posted to the website. Items in the April Newsletter are still relevant so have a look there too: <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2022/04/02/nfn-newsletter-issue-april-2022/>

This issue has news about our **Creative Conversations**; a testimony to the life of **Michael Yates**; articles from **Chris Thomas** on the future of Quakerism and nontheism and from **Catherine Carr** on spirituality and personal experience; news from the Steering Group on future **Conferences** (or not?); relevant courses at **Woodbrooke**; a talk from QUG by **John Carvosso** on 17th August; the website Working Group and an article by Chris Thomas **for your response** on website accessibility. We hope you enjoy it.

Creative conversations

Kiera writes: The Quaker Meeting and Creative Conversation Working Group rotated the kaleidoscope in May with a new format to encourage tantalizing explorations, experimentation, and hopefully, wider contributions from varied participants. Our Meetings are serendipitous exchanges, in moments of passing time, experienced together. On average, seventy-five participants on Zoom from across the UK and continental Europe, America, Canada, South Africa and Kenya continue to share in our monthly Quaker Meeting and Creative Conversations. For many, our Meetings function as an affirming presence and expression of non-theism. For others, we are their 'Local Meeting', as they are solitary Friends, either without a Meeting in their region or they do not feel welcomed in their local Meeting. We are honoured so many are seeking and finding NFN; we hope to continue to connect across the distance whilst exploring human beings' questioning search for meaning.

We hope you will join us when we resume on the **1st of September** to listen to a short talk and engage in a subsequent discussion on **"New Ways of Believing and Belonging"**.

The Working Group is interested in receiving suggestions for Queries, short readings, and/or thoughtful concerns to be raised surrounding nontheism for future Creative Conversations this coming Winter. We welcome your thoughts and would love to hear from you, please email us at clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk

Kiera Faber on behalf of the QM+CC Working Group, which is comprised of William Purser, Kiera Faber, Gisela Creed, and John Senior.

Future conferences

In early May, Trevor posted on the website about this topic:

Why the concern for the website (which seems to be working fine? - **BUT see below!**) and so little for a future Conference when the latter, whether at Woodbrooke, elsewhere or online, has been one of the annual highlights for Nontheist Quaker activity, support and the AGM?

Am I to take it that NFN members and past or potential future Conference attenders have no further interest in such an event whether in person or online? I do hope very much that this isn't the case as I have always very much enjoyed NFN Conferences of which I have attended at least 6 at Woodbrooke and one online (2021 in lieu of 2020 cancelled through 'covid').

(<https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2022/05/06/no-more-nfn-conferences-and-other-matters/>)

The Steering Group have considered the problem and write:

At the NFN AGM held in February the idea of establishing a specific Working Group (WG) charged with organising a conference was mooted. However, only 2 of our members volunteered to join this group and this is not sufficient to provide the support required for such a large undertaking. The Steering Group (SG) considered this and thought it best to wait until there was a critical mass of members volunteering to help to organise a conference before committing to holding one. We are aware that many of our members and attenders are disappointed, and hopefully some of this disappointment will transform itself into active involvement when there are next calls to join a Conference Organisation WG. The SG will keep this matter under review.

Tim Regan, NFN Clerk

Further courses at Woodbrooke

Forthcoming courses, some of which have bearing on the articles from Chris and Catherine below or on nontheism:

https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/our-courses/?_sft_product_cat=history-theology

https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/our-courses/?_sft_product_cat=exploring-quakerism

https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/our-courses/?_sft_product_cat=spirituality-retreats

Other current and forthcoming events

MfW + Creative conversation 1st September and every first Thursday of the month - see above.

Quaker Universalist Group provides a similar? offering, August 17th John Carvosso's talk will be entitled [A Christian Universalist](#). (and future events on every third Wednesday of the month).

The website

At the time of the April newsletter I had heard no further about a working group to consider our website (and use of social media) but this was quickly up and running and began work on 18th April. This group has consisted of Chris Thomas, Ella Dorfman, Trevor Bending and Tim Regan, joined by Laura Molloy from 19th July. Unfortunately from my (Trevor's) point of view, the focus of concern has been with appearance, technical issues, accessibility and responses to the website. A survey and interviews are currently on-going to find out how the website is seen. What I had hoped for was a group that would contribute to the content of the website and this has not happened so still please send any suggestions or contributions for the website to me (see below).

However, Chris Thomas has contributed two articles for this newsletter and I recommend the following article by Chris on website accessibility which I hope will receive your careful consideration and please do let us have your responses to the email address given. (Chris's other article is about the future of Quakerism, and

nontheist Quakers, and is further below after an article by Catherine Carr on aspects of religion and spirituality.)

In the [April newsletter](#), I gave some helpful tips for using the website which are still relevant so please see them there.

Chris writes re: accessibility:

From time to time, we review the way this web site is working. Currently, we are focussing on accessibility, so if you are a site visitor who might need something easier to use than we currently offer, please tell us your experiences and what you would like to have available on this site. We are a tiny but enthusiastic team, and we want to hit a really high standard of accessibility. We need your help to do that please - without hearing from you, we are guessing - and that is not good!

Looking at our web site with an open mind, we find several encouraging things. Firstly, there is very little use of colour, which makes for high contrast for readers. Secondly, we don't use images much, so almost all content should be accessible with a screen reader, for example. We don't use animations or videos, which removes another possible set of problems. All our pages have the same top line navigation and 'breadcrumb' links, and the left-hand side is a pretty good site map, which again is all going to help.

However, we don't and can't know how well our site works with your choice of screen reader software, or other aids you might use. We use a mixture of keyboard and mouse to move around the site - where are the awkward bits for anyone who doesn't use a mouse?

If you have any experiences that would help us to make this site more accessible, we would love you to email Clerk@nontheist-quakers.org.uk please. Confidentiality will, of course, be fully respected.

We also want to write a formal accessibility policy for this site - not one copied from the web, but tailored to this site and our readership as much as possible, so if you have experience with such things we would love to hear from you.

Thank you.

Chris Thomas on behalf of the website working group.

Aspects of Quakerism – two personal views:

1). Steering Group member Catherine Carr writes:

I am clearing up my papers

I am currently clearing out many old papers in my study and, as you might imagine, am throwing out many of them without a thought. However, within this process, I occasionally find gems that remind me of important matters or prompt me to think about something in more depth.

I found amongst some work papers a handout from a teaching event – long forgotten – on spirituality in later life (I worked as a clinical psychologist specialising in older people), but applicable to all ages. Some of the points made within the handout stimulated me to consider my own perspective and values, perhaps particularly important, as I am a non-theist. This is the result, presented to stimulate discussion and debate. The paper considered spirituality having **two** components – (organised) religion and philosophy. I was interested in considering what individuals looked for with Quakers and so took spirituality within Quakerism as the broader aspect and within these identified **three** components that contribute to what each of us take from it – the import of an organised religion, philosophical aspects and lived (mystical/revelatory) experiences. There are numerous definitions of spirituality; this one might allow some consensus – ***a search for, or actualisation of, existential meaning within life experience, that enables one to transcend present reality.***

I take an **organised religion** to be a particular pattern of faith and worship, interpreting, codifying and ritualising the particular belief system. We tend in this country to assume that what religion people belong to is a question of personal choice. However, in the past and in many parts of the world still at present this is not seen to be an individual decision: people are fixed within the religion of their birth, culture and society and risk ostracism or even death if they step outside this.

Religion is still very much part of an individual's core identity and linked to a sense of belonging, being part of a 'tribe'. I was struck, whilst traveling around Australia by the number of churches – even very small towns seemed to have an inordinate number – but this makes sense when thinking about immigrants establishing their own familiar base within a strange land.

Mystical experience, I see as essentially that, – the lived experience for the individual (although it could be within a group) – that may be seen as revelatory. Examples of strong experiences are - Paul on the road to Damascus or from individual Quakers (George Fox QF&P 26.02, Howard Collier QF&P 26.08); or a much quieter and gradual process as in Geoffrey Hubbard (QF&P 26.12). In addition, at times this may show as a more purely emotional reaction such as displayed in Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem 'Glory be to God for Dappled Things'.

Philosophical I interpret as the more "cognitive" or intellectual aspect – exploring existential meaning to make sense of one's lived experience in terms of choices and dilemmas. Many religions have set texts or formal creeds that have been laid down in the past and are seen to provide this, notwithstanding that there may be significantly different interpretations of this and ongoing debate and discussion. Quakers have the Red Book (Quaker Faith & Practice) providing a rather different form of guidance in the form of writings from different people, both Quakers and non-Quakers recent and more historical. Another important distinction is that QF&P is revised and rewritten on a regular basis and it has been suggested that both Christianity and Islam would be better if they moved away from reliance on ancient scripts and re-wrote their Holy Scriptures. So how would I describe myself within these three elements?

Well, firstly I am very much a Quaker and see this as my home, having been an Attender for nearly thirty years. Albeit I am not a theist and have always made this explicit. So what draws me and keeps me involved? Reading the Red book, The Friend and Friend's Quarterly is important to me as helping me think beyond my own narrow world and experience. I like the ritual of regular attendance, a familiar walk to the Meeting House most weeks (but including Zoom). I like the minimal ritual within the Meeting – the greetings on arrival and the handshakes at the end. Whilst I am not active very much outside of my local meeting, having national and international elements, both current and historical, provide me with a sense of being part of something solid and enduring.

However to be fully honest, it is the social and interpersonal aspect that is key for me; it is largely being part of something where others share my principles and worldview, where I can communicate more easily with likeminded people, even if we disagree about particular matters.

The philosophical aspect I have realised in the last few years is particularly important to me, partly from the articles by Jonathan Wilding in The Friend (4th December 2020, 19th February, 9th April and 24th September 2021). Within these, he resurrects a metaphysical tradition within Quakerism – referring to Iris Murdoch's philosophical writings that focus on making coherent sense of a (Quaker) post-theist religion.

My personal view on this is that Quakers do not value and emphasis this as much as is needed to help draw people to it. In particular the Testimonies are not a living and active part of the faith component but they **could** provide a framework for an ethical life within the complexities of our modern world. The original Ten Commandments are just that – a list of behaviours that are presented as, in very simple terms, either good (Honour thy father and thy mother) or bad (Though shalt not kill). Recent writings are less prescriptive - Richard Templar's The Rules of Life, (2012 Pearson, Harlow) or Karen Armstrong's Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life (Bodley Head, London 2011) set out areas to be worked on but seem to assume that this leads to a clear and settled outcome. The Quaker testimonies (Peace, Equality, Simplicity, Truth and Sustainability) are guiding principles in key areas of spiritual life but they require the individual to explore and

work out for themselves, or within a group at times, what might be the right direction and solution at a particular point of time – a much more nuanced and principled approach. They require the individual to use on-going discernment to make decisions about how to live.

The experiential aspect - the idea of mystical experience - I have difficulties with. I gain a lot from attending a Quaker Meeting, I practice regular meditation and am part of two such groups, I very much appreciate being part of nature. However, I am by background and training a clinical psychologist so I take a cautious and sceptical stance on this matter, partly as I have met patients with major mental health problems based on apparently distorted perceptions. I do not see it as a crucial element for myself. It is a wonderful and uplifting experience but I have not experienced it as changing me in itself.

When I started this process, I think I would have said that the three elements were equal in my life. However, as I complete this, it is clear that spiritual experience is less valued by me, and my interest is more certainly, at the moment, with being part of a Quaker meeting and exploring the philosophical aspects of Quakerism. Perhaps this is just short term and in a few years' time the balance would shift again.

What do others think?

Is thinking about the three elements of a spiritual life – being part of an organised group, having a clear philosophy to guide one, having experiences that are powerful and emotive, useful?

How would others see the balance of these within their lives?

And how has that changed over the years?

Catherine Carr

June 2022

2). Chris Thomas, NFN Web working group, writes:

Decline, or transition?

Quakerism in the UK is changing - that much is clear to anyone who has an interest. But where are we at the moment, and what is the future likely to be?

Judging by the main UK Quaker website, Quakerism in the UK has moved from being a society that is one part of the Christian faith community, to being a society that has its origins in Christianity but now sees itself much more broadly based – “[Quakerism] grew out of Christianity and today we also find meaning and value in other faiths and traditions” - This wording can be found prominently on the main UK Quaker website – not tucked away, no ambiguity). (<https://quaker.org.uk/about-quakers/our-faith>).

In a recent conversation with a clerk from a different meeting, I was told, very clearly, that “Quakerism is firmly Christian through and through.” While this was obviously true from his standpoint, it suggests to me that a shift away from identifying as a Christian organisation will still take quite a while to be as fully embedded in the membership as it is at Friends House and reflected in recent publications. It may be worth saying that I personally have no wish to reject or disappoint those who built our current Quaker legacy, and I understand many Christian Quakers may find current trends uncomfortable. I hope that any discomfort eases for them as time goes on.

One particular comment made during this year's NFN AGM really sticks in my memory – “non theism is the future of Quakers”. I didn't catch that contributor's name, but I completely agree with the insight, particularly given the sad spectacle of our local Church of England vicar rotating her services between four local parishes.

It seems to me that, if there is in reality such a thing as a Quaker UK leadership, we are quite rightly being led to evolve as a society. If, on the other hand, the Quakers serving the membership in various ways are not leading so much as accurately reflecting membership views and articulating current membership trends by

way of Quakers.UK.org and BYM publications, then we have an unstoppable groundswell of evolution underpinning the society. I suspect the reality is that Light is getting through at all levels.

So where does this state of change (which looks to me to be like a butterfly half way out of its chrysalis) lead us? Time and time again I am reminded of the Rex Ambler quote "faiths divide us, values unite us".

If this society of friends no longer exclusively honours any single faith or religion, then what does it become? A purely values-based society in my view. Perhaps a philosophical society of friends, in both senses of 'philosophical'? To me, that would mean both being devoted to understanding the very most basic workings of the universe at a practical and spiritual level, and also remaining calm and resilient in the face of events in our lives. Alternatively, will Quakerism become primarily an ethical society of friends? This would seem to me to mean personally exemplifying Quaker values while resisting activities or organizations that do harm to people or the environment.

There may be a danger that since our Quaker Values align us with a subset of the most healthy and instinctive human values worldwide, Quakerism simply might not stand out amongst the crowds of similarly minded groups. This is absolutely understandable, since, Quoting the main UK Quaker website again, "We recognise that there's something transcendent and precious in every person. Different Quakers use different words to describe this, but we all believe we can be in contact with it and encounter something beyond our individual selves." As Quakers, we have no monopoly over our values, and we wouldn't want that to be the case. "

Sadly, the words "religion" and "worship" may have served us well, but I can't see those words as part of a Quaker future, and Quakerism may well reach and benefit more people without those words being part of Quaker language, except as historical references.

What will be the point of difference between Quakers and other value-based movements in the future? Given our strong history of campaigning against injustices, it seems to me that despite strong concerns in some quarters around falling membership numbers, now is the opportunity for Quakers to come to new prominence and to gain increased public awareness by taking a distinct role in society, gathering a whole new generation of members in the way that the CND or Greenpeace did at one time in the UK. The lessons of history seem clear to me – Quakerism needs to become a colourful, articulate and bold society, or risks fading to grey against a grey background.

Chris Thomas

July 2022

You can read about the history of NFN on the website but one of the early founders was Michael Yates. (see <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2017/03/22/five-years-on/>)

Michael died in 2020 almost two years ago. I considered writing a short obituary but decided it was better to reproduce the testimony from his AM (Craven & Keighley) which was offered at Yearly Meeting a couple of months ago (slightly edited for punctuation and typing errors):

Michael Yates

5 December 1939 – 4 September 2020

It has proved unexpectedly difficult to testify to the grace of God as shown in the life of Michael Yates. Not for lack of evidence, but from the phraseology. How does one write such a testimony to the life of an avowed non- theist? Not that the use of 'God language' was important to Michael – what was important to him was the way in which life was lived, whatever the inspiration.

It was of course not always thus. In his younger life he took holy orders and was for a period a loved and respected vicar. But a team Ministry environment proved to be less than satisfactory, and he and Chris made the fateful move north, partly for family reasons but also at a suitable time for the education of their children. Shortly before they moved, he was appointed as party agent, representing the Liberal party in the Ripon constituency. Sadly, this did not prosper – with the defeat of the Liberal candidate in the October 1974 election, he became jobless. Not for long – for a short time he had no less than five part-time jobs, ranging from petrol pump attendant at Whitefriars to Sunday ministry at Rylstone. Such a schedule was unsustainable, so he satisfied his determination to serve by taking a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course at Lancaster and becoming a teacher.

As his detachment from the Church of England grew, he was moved, in the mid-1980s, to “give up Anglicanism for Lent” and almost never went back, having found his own spiritual home, with Chris, in the quiet of a Quaker meeting. All good vicars, when starting a sermon, take a text for inspiration: his was Advice 28 – especially “Attend to what love requires of you...”. So he did. The call to serve was insistent and he also took a variety of roles supporting Settle Meeting, most prominently as clerk of the Development Committee as the meeting house was being improved and modernised. This included carrying out some of their decisions with a pick and shovel!

In a wider field he served on the Glenthorne management committee for many years, during a period of severe economic stress, devising new attractions for a much-loved facility in order to maintain its viability.

On a lighter note, he and his son founded and developed Leeds Spiders Wheelchair Basketball Club, where his granddaughters were wont to play. Their inspiration must have been sound – the Club, now part of the Leeds Rhinos Rugby League Foundation, continues to prosper. And he became a skilled and enthusiastic, if unexpected, embroiderer.

However, the greatest expression of the grace of God as shown in his life was his quiet ministry to individuals. Yes, he was an elder, charged with the spiritual welfare of the meeting, a role he fulfilled to a nicety for many years, but the tributes we have received almost all came from individuals he had counselled quietly and unobtrusively. The skill with which this was done may have been enhanced by his early theological training. He exuded a solidity and competence in spiritual matters – being able to provoke and challenge without offence, inviting discussion and new patterns of behaviour without the least taint of preaching. This gift was priceless and will be, like himself, greatly missed. We should give thanks for his rejection of holy orders and perhaps attend to what love requires of us.

Signed on behalf of Craven & Keighley Area Meeting Held on 13 March 2021, Chris Skidmore, Clerk

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 @).