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# NONTHEISM AMONG FRIENDS: ITS EMERGENCE AND MEANING

DAVID BOULTON

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is in three sections. The first focuses on the emergence of nontheist viewpoints within the Religious Society of Friends in the USA and Britain, the second reflects on the controversies that have followed this development, and the third comments briefly on the theology (or atheology) of this position. Written from a Quaker nontheist perspective, it offers a personal view and does not claim to speak for other Friends who identify as nontheists.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset, it may be useful to note that the word ‘nontheism’ is not a Quaker invention. It seems to have been coined by the founder of the British secularist movement, George Jacob Holyoake, as early as 1852. Responding to a query as to why he avoided the term ‘atheist’ he wrote: ‘Atheist is a worn-out word. Both the ancients and the moderns have understood by it *one without God, and also without morality...* that is, the word carries with it associations of immorality, which have been repudiated by the Atheist as seriously as by the Christian. Non-theism is a term less open to the same misunderstanding, as it implies the simple non-acceptance of the Theist’s explanation of the origin and government of the world’.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. ‘IN THE BEGINNING...’ THE EMERGENCE OF QUAKER NONTHEISM

The (US) Friends General Conference annual Gathering held at Ithaca NY in 1976 included a variety of workshops on Quaker topics. But one was new and controversial. We know of it only because of the survival of the ‘Report of the Workshop for Non-Theistic Friends’ written by the 15 to 20 who attended, led by Robert Morgan. It began: ‘There are non-theistic Friends. There are Friends who might be called agnostics, atheists, skeptics, but who would, nevertheless,

describe themselves as reverent seekers.’ It ended: ‘We believe Quakerism can accommodate this minority, and find part of its vital creativity in the process.’<sup>3</sup>

This was probably the first occasion on which the term ‘non-theist’ was used in a Quaker context, more than a hundred years after its coinage by Holyoake. But the underlying sense of a fading or abandoned belief in a personal, interventionist, metaphysical God, a disembodied Intelligence, is to be found as a thin thread woven unobtrusively throughout the rich and varied tapestry of Quaker history. Quakerism began in the ‘overturning, overturning’ religious turmoil of the mid 17th century when, within the radical milieu to which Friends belonged, expressions of popular atheism were not uncommon. So-called Ranters declared that ‘all had come by nature’. Jacob Bauthumley (1613-1692), anticipating Spinoza, wrote that ‘God is in all creatures, Man and Beast, Fish and Fowle, and every green thing, from the highest Cedar to the Ivy on the wall’. Gerrard Winstanley preferred the word Reason to God, since God had become ‘a bugbear’ to him. Many Ranters became Quakers, and Bauthumley and Winstanley both joined Friends after the Restoration, perhaps modifying their views to attune with George Fox’s only slightly less radical understanding of God as more inner light than outer superman—a view which, we should remember, was denounced as ‘atheism’ by religious traditionalists.

The Age of Enlightenment cut deep into Quakerism, as it did into all religious traditions open to freedom of thought and honest reflection on experience. American Friend Os Cresson has collected some of the more arresting sayings, public and private, of 18th and 19th century ‘Quaker skeptics’.<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nontheistfriends.org> One of the great religious dissenters of the 19th century was Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), Quaker and a founding member of the Free Religious Society. She described herself as ‘a worshipper after the way called heresy, a believer after the manner many deem infidel’, holding that ‘skepticism is a religious duty. Men should question their theology and doubt more in order that they might believe more’. Jesse Herman Holmes (1863-1942), clerk of the Progressive Friends Meeting at Longwood, argued that science rather than religion established truth. ‘Meaningless phrases and irrational theologies have been moulded into rigid, authoritarian institutions’ presided over by ‘a despotic, unjust and irrational deity of the medieval king type, who must be worshipped by flattery and blind obedience’. Two proto-nontheist voices in American Quakerism.

In Britain, David Duncan (c.1825-1871) was a social radical and republican who joined Friends in 1852, but began to doubt Quaker views about God and the Bible, and associated the Light Within with intellectual freedom. After prolonged controversy he was disowned by Manchester Friends, but died almost immediately of smallpox (whereupon his chief adversary, the evangelical Friend William Bevan Braithwaite, wrote in his diary ‘How wonderful are the ways of providence’!) For a few months some 30 or 40 Friends who shared Duncan’s scepticism continued to meet as Free Friends of Manchester, publishing a monthly paper *The Manchester Friend* till the group and the paper faded from view at the end of 1873.<sup>5</sup> But their challenge to the prevalent Quaker evangelical orthodoxy was taken up by a new generation of young Friends including Joseph Rowntree, Francis Firth, William Pollard, William E Turner, William and Margaret Littleboy and George Cadbury: the team behind the Manchester Conference of 1895 which inaugurated a new, liberal Quakerism with Woodbrooke as its powerhouse in Britain. None of these ‘young Turks’ would have described themselves as nontheist, but their free thinking and adventurous questioning laid the foundations for the theologically diverse nature of 20th century unprogrammed Quakerism in which a radical re-evaluation of religious language could take root and flower.

Generating these changes within the numerically small Society of Friends was the legacy of the Enlightenment: the growth of Unitarianism and its slow evolution into a religious and then a secular humanism, reason-based Biblical criticism, David Friedrich Strauss’s deconstructionist *Life of Jesus* and Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* with its redefining of God as a human construct; and, not least, the growth of scientific knowledge, of *knowing experimentally*, with Darwin’s demonstration of evolution by natural selection changing no less than everything. Friends could not long remain immune from the effects of such upheavals. The walls that some tried to build to keep out innovation and protect what they understood to be revealed Truth began to crumble as a new generation took seriously the injunction to be open to new light wherever it might be found.

Os Cresson’s catalogue inevitably concentrates on those who went public with their controversial views, but there is ample evidence that many Friends preferred to keep such ideas in the closet lest they disturb the peace of their beloved Society. Henry Joel Cadbury was one such. A scion of the branch of the chocolate family who had

settled in America, he was a founder of the American Friends Service Committee and, as an internationally famous Biblical scholar, the only Quaker on the team chosen to produce the new American Revised Standard Version of the New Testament. A public Friend indeed, but in his private papers he wrote ‘I can describe myself as no ardent theist or atheist’, and again, ‘Philosophical studies... left me without assurance for or against God or immortality’. A closet agnostic – and one of many such among active, committed Friends, then and now.<sup>6</sup>

The Nontheist Workshop at the 1976 FGC annual Gathering was not repeated for 20 years, until Robin and Bowen Alpern and Glenn Mallison were granted permission to lead another in 1996. Thereafter, at least one nontheist event featured every year but one up to the present. Meanwhile, nontheism began to feature in British Quakerism. Here, the long debate over Bonhoeffer’s ‘religionless Christianity’, the ‘Death of God’ theologies of the 1960s and John Robinson’s best-selling *Honest to God* began to change the religious landscape, inevitably infiltrating even a Religious Society that prided itself on its indifference to theological speculation, routinely dismissed as mere ‘notions’. In the wake of radical theologian Don Cupitt’s books *Taking Leave of God* (1979) and *The Sea of Faith* (1984), a Sea of Faith Network was founded in 1987 to ‘explore and promote religious faith as a human creation’. Quakers quickly emerged as the largest group in the Network after the Anglicans. I was privileged to edit the Network’s journal, *Sea of Faith*, from 1994-2004 and published *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist*, followed by my study of religious humanism, *The Trouble with God*, in which God was re-envisioned as a wholly human construct, no more, but gloriously no less, than a projection of the human mind and imagination. Invited to address the 300 Friends who came together in 1995 to celebrate the centenary of the 1895 Manchester Conference, I suggested that ‘all religious faith—Catholic and Moony, Hindu and Native American, Rastafarian and Quaker, conservative and liberal – is created in human culture and celebrated in human language and human community’.<sup>7</sup> Hardly original, but new to many Friends.

The emergence of Quaker Universalists in both Britain and the USA had already pointed the way. John Linton founded the Quaker Universalist Group in Britain in 1977. ‘It seems to me,’ he wrote, ‘that the Society would be greatly strengthened by the influx of people who claim to be agnostic rather than Christian and yet who sincerely share the fundamental aspirations of Quakers’. Agnostics should not

be treated as ‘a fringe element of “second-class members”, which is what they are now’, and the Society should ‘give up its claim to be a specifically Christian organization’, since ‘no faith can claim to be a unique revelation or to have a monopoly of the truth’. American Friends organised their own Quaker Universalist Fellowship in 1983, with Kingdon Swayne (who became clerk of Philadelphia YM the following year) as a prominent member. Swayne disliked the word ‘agnostic’ and at first described himself as ‘post-Christian’, but in 1986 he wrote: ‘I am a lifelong Friend who was encouraged by his Quaker upbringing to construct his own edifice of religious meaning. My edifice is non-theistic’.<sup>8</sup>

How widespread were such ideas among Friends? Quaker sociologist Ben Pink Dandelion organised a survey of British Friends in 1989. In a sample of 692 he found that 26% answered the question ‘Do you believe in God?’ with a ‘no’ or a ‘not sure’. A repeat survey in 2003 produced an almost identical result (26.5%). In 2002 552 Friends in Philadelphia YM were asked if they believed in ‘a God to whom one can pray in the expectation of receiving an answer’, and no fewer than 56% answered ‘no’ or ‘no definite belief’. Clearly nontheists or ‘nonrealists’ were no longer an insignificant fringe element in unprogrammed Quakerism. Indeed, some observers noted that there appeared to be a higher proportion of unbelievers in unprogrammed Quakerism than in British and American society at large!<sup>9</sup>

In 2002 the *Woodbrooke Journal* published a further survey by American Friend David Rush, this time of 199 British and American Friends self-identifying as nontheists. It demonstrated that the spectrum of nontheist views was hardly less wide than the spectrum of theist belief. But perhaps most surprising was the revelation that the great majority of respondents had been members of the Society for more than twenty years, many having served as clerks of their local, area, and (in America) even yearly meetings. These were seasoned Friends, not opportunistic entryists or Dawkins’ disciples.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. ON BEING ‘GODLESS FOR GOD’S SAKE’

2003 saw the beginnings of an organised nontheist presence within liberal Quakerism.<sup>11</sup> The first website and email forum of that year were followed by new workshops at Woodbrooke in 2004 and Pendle Hill in 2005. A website and email listserve were reorganised and

expanded in 2005 under the stewardship of a planning committee, and plans were laid for a book of essays on nontheism in contemporary Quakerism. Over the next few months 27 Friends from 13 Yearly Meetings in four countries—USA, Britain, Australia and New Zealand – worked at their contributions to the book, telling (in the words of the back-cover blurb) ‘how they combine committed membership of the Religious Society of Friends with rejection of traditional belief in a transcendent, personal and supernatural God’. They were ‘a varied group whose search for an authentic 21st century understanding of religion and spirituality had led them to declare themselves *Godless for God’s Sake*’—the book’s title, after the 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart who wrote that ‘Man’s last and highest parting occurs when, for God’s sake, he takes leave of God’.<sup>12</sup>

The book immediately attracted much comment in the Quaker press, both caustically critical and cautiously friendly. The American monthly *Friends Journal* led the critical assault with a review by Martha Paxson Grundy of Cleveland (Ohio) meeting. ‘It is peculiar’, she wrote, ‘that a group of nontheist individuals should insist on grafting their theology onto another (Quaker) theology. None of these writers speak of inner struggle, of transformation, or even of joy. Sin, and therefore forgiveness and grace, are banished. They are defiantly or wistfully lonely but proud that they are superior to those of us deluded by superstition and “lies” perpetrated by religion.’ But the fault, she declared, lay with the Society. ‘Have we unprogrammed Friends been so sloppy in our membership procedures that, for many years, we have taken no care to assure that we are, in fact, a community of like minds? Have we been so overeager for numbers and so needy to feel ourselves tolerant that we gather in anyone who can find no home elsewhere, and then invite them to redefine us in their own image?’<sup>13</sup>

A more positive view was expressed by Chuck Fager, the firmly theistic editor of the online *Quaker Theology* journal: ‘What have we come to in Friends religious thought’, he asked, ‘when the most exciting book of Quaker theology I’ve read in years is produced by a bunch of Quaker non-theists?’ Fager accused the *Friends Journal* reviewer of ‘blatantly distorting and falsifying the book, wrongly accusing its writers with mindless scientism, epistemological narrowness, existential joylessness—just about everything but halitosis, all in the face of plentiful evidence to the contrary... Nontheist Friends have as much claim to a legitimate place in contemporary Quakerism as many who feel they are defending the last true redoubt against the

invading forces of unbelief. The proper response to the testimonies in these pages is not scorn or witchhunts, but an invitation to further conversation.’<sup>14</sup>

Reaction in Britain was less polarised. *The Friend*, with a readership long acquainted with Friendly theist/nontheist knock-about, gave the book a cautious welcome. In both the London and Philadelphia Quaker bookshops it was an immediate best-seller in its class, requiring two more print runs before settling into print-on-demand mode. Quaker nontheism had made its mark. When Britain YM’s central Quaker Life committee drafted a statement of Quaker belief for its website in 2010 it acknowledged nontheism for the first time as part of the broad spectrum of British Quakerism:

‘Quakers do not share a fixed set of beliefs. 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 non-theists and describe their experiences in ways that avoid the use of the word God entirely. Quaker faith is built on experience and Quakers would generally hold that it is the spiritual experience which is central to Quaker worship, and not the use of a particular form of words (whether that be “God” or anything else).’<sup>15</sup>

In 2011 nontheist Miriam Yagud and I organised a nontheist Friends’ gathering at Woodbrooke which led to the formation of a Nontheist Friends Network within Britain YM. Describing itself as ‘an informal group within the Quaker movement’, it aims to ‘provide a supportive framework for Friends with an agnostic, humanist, atheist or related world view’, and to ‘join with all Friends who are interested in exploring varieties of nontheism as a recognised strand’ within Quakerism. In its introductory leaflet it describes nontheism as ‘an umbrella term for ‘those who see God as a human concept and religion as a human creation’, and continues:

‘Whether we describe ourselves as humanists, agnostics or atheists, and whether we understand God as the symbol and imagined embodiment of our highest human values or avoid the word altogether, nontheist Friends know that we don’t know

it all. Our various ways of being nontheist are simply various ways of being Quaker, and we celebrate the radical diversity of Quakerism, nontheist and theist. We do not see ourselves as on the Quaker fringe but as part of the broad mainstream, with something to give and much to learn from the ongoing Quaker tradition. We too are Friends and seekers.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. ON THE (A)THEOLOGY OF QUAKER NONTHEISM

Clearly, Quaker nontheism follows no single, distinctive theological pattern (in which respect it is no different from traditional Quaker theism). There is as wide a range of diversity among Quaker nontheists as among Quakers in general. I have tried to encapsulate my own understanding of ‘the divine’ or ‘the Spirit’ by describing ‘God’ as

*‘our incarnation of mercy, pity, peace and love, as the sum of our values embodied as a being with whom we can have a relationship – a God who tosses away his crown and joins us in the messiness and absurdities of our human lives. Nor is this some domesticated caricature of a God in heaven who would be of no earthly use to anyone. This is the God who plants his footstep in the sea and rides upon the storm, the ancient of days, no less: the most powerful of all the symbols ever created by the symbol-making species called humans.’<sup>17</sup>*

Although some nontheist Friends are averse to God-language – ‘that of God’, ‘leadings of the Spirit’, ‘the divine’ and so on – and choose to avoid such terms altogether, most (in my experience) sit fairly easily with the traditional language, the vocabulary of our Quaker sub-culture, understanding and using it expressively, metaphorically and poetically, rather than literally. The poet who invokes her Muse does not assume that one of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus will literally descend from Mount Olympus and inspire her art. Similarly, the nontheist Friend in meeting for worship does not assume that the creator of the universe is a literal presence, either in body or in Spirit. Few Friends today believe that Satan actually exists as an objective being. We have all come to understand the Devil as an imagined personification of evil: we are all, if you like, non-devilist. Nontheist Friends, if and when they use the words God and Spirit, understand these names too as imagined or projected personifications of what we have come to think of as our highest human values. As

William Blake put it, ‘all deities reside in the human breast’, and ‘mercy, pity, peace and love *is* God’ in action. We do not need to invoke a supernaturalist world-view to make sense of what Wittgenstein would call the ‘language game’ of our Quaker faith. Theology, which literally means ‘god-talk’, is a potent poetry which ceases to make sense in our contemporary world if we insist on interpreting it prosaically and literally. The fathers and mothers of this strand of nontheist theology are the pioneering Friends I quoted earlier, followed by Blake, Strauss, Feuerbach, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Robinson, Spong, Cupitt and their like. None of these believed they were abandoning Christianity: rather, they were experiencing it in a radically new light.

But those of us who are glad to call ourselves nontheist Friends do not proclaim our particular (a)theological understanding as ‘the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth’. We see no necessity for any supernatural or metaphysical underpinning of the Quaker way: that is our *experience*, the fruit of our *experimental* living and free thought. But we are well aware that ours is only one of many strands of experience that are interwoven within the multi-coloured texture of contemporary liberal Quakerism, and we delight in this dynamic diversity. We claim no superior understanding, and trust that those whose experience takes them to a different theology will themselves make no such claim. We expect Friends to be true to their experience, and we hope to be true to ours.

Nor should nontheist Friends be viewed as a lobby working to turn the Religious Society of Friends into a secular social-action lobby or an adjunct of the Humanist associations. If some of us are just a little evangelical, what we hope to see before long is the day when Quaker nontheists are automatically and enthusiastically welcomed as mainstream committed Friends at the heart of the liberal Quaker community: when we can rejoice in our (a)theological diversity and differences of opinion, and celebrate our unity as Friends together in conviction and in action. A previous generation won this recognition for non-Christian Universalists. Now, we suggest, it’s the turn of nontheist Friends.

## ENDNOTES

1. My first draft of this paper, as circulated to the Friends who had been invited to respond to it at the QTDG meeting at San Francisco in November 2011, included references to my own work which I subsequently removed from the version of the paper to be read at the meeting. However, my responders persuaded me to leaven the lump of academic objectivity with the personal for the printed version, and I have taken their advice.
2. Cited on *en-wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularism*
3. A fuller version may be read on the Nontheist Friends website [www.nontheistfriends.org](http://www.nontheistfriends.org) under *Roots and Flowers of Quaker Nontheism* by Os Cresson.
4. See Os Cresson, *Roots and Flowers* as 3 above.
5. See Roger C Wilson, *Manchester, Manchester and Manchester Again*, Friends Historical Society, London, 1990; and David Boulton and Os Cresson, 'The Making of a Quaker Nontheist Tradition' in *Godless for God's Sake*, ed. David Boulton, Dales Historical Monographs, UK, 2006.
6. See Os Cresson, *Roots and Flowers* as 3 above. There is no suggestion here that Cadbury was anything other than a committed Christian Quaker, but I think his privately expressed thoughts as quoted here (and published by the Quaker Universalist Fellowship in 2001) justify a view of him as agnostic on the ontological status of God.
7. *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist*, Quaker Universalist Group, London, 1997; *The Trouble with God: Building the Republic of Heaven*, O-Books, Winchester and New York, 2005; 'Friends and the New Millenium: the Continuing Quest for a Reasonable Faith' in *Real Like the Daisies or Real Like I Love You?*, Dales Historical Monographs, UK, 2002.
8. For John Linton and Kingdon Swayne see Os Cresson, *Roots and Flowers* as 3 above.
9. Summarised by David Rush, 'Facts and Figures' in *Godless for God's Sake* as 5 above.
10. David Rush, 'They Too are Quakers: a Survey of 199 Nontheist Friends' in *Woodbrooke Journal*, Winter 2002/3 # 11.
11. By 'liberal Quakerism' I mean, broadly, those unprogrammed Yearly Meetings which, with London YM (now Britain YM) refused to endorse the Richmond Declaration of 1887. This includes US meetings now affiliated to Friends General Conference. But I do not mean to imply that FUM and other Quaker connections are necessarily illiberal. Three of the 27 nontheist contributors to *Godless for God's Sake* were from non-FGC YMs, including one from Iowa Conservative YM.
12. See 5 above.
13. *Friends Journal*, November 2006.
14. *Quaker Theology* # 13, Winter 2007. See also Chuck Fager's affectionate but critical review of my *The Trouble with God* in # 14.
15. [www.quaker.org.uk/quaker-belief](http://www.quaker.org.uk/quaker-belief)—official website of Britain YM
16. David Boulton, *Introducing the Nontheist Friends Network*, 2011
17. *The Trouble with God*, p.220. See 7 above.