

The Sea of Faith Network

Religion and Atheism Undivided

Clem Cook gives a personal account of the SOF Network.

Although the book *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide* defines 'realist' theists as religious, and 'non-realist' theists as non-religious atheists, there are 'atheist' or 'non-realist' religious humanists scattered throughout our churches, memberships and clergy – religious in attitude, practice and ethics – who do not necessarily believe in a metaphysical transcendent 'Other', yet are involved in the church, world and humanity.

A safe and stimulating place for them to meet is in the Sea of Faith Network (SOFN). It arose out of the response to Don Cupitt's book and BBC documentary series first broadcast in 1984, both entitled *Sea of Faith*. In the book and TV series, he surveyed western thinking about religion and charted a transition from traditional realist religion to the view that religion is simply a human creation.

The name Sea of Faith is taken from Matthew Arnold's nineteenth century poem 'Dover Beach', in which the poet expresses regret that belief in a supernatural world is slowly slipping away – the 'sea of faith' is withdrawing like the ebbing tide.

Wikipedia summarises:

Following the television series, a small group of radical Christian clergy and laity began meeting to explore how they might promote this new understanding of religious faith. Starting with a mailing list of 143 sympathisers, they organised the first UK conference in 1988. A second Conference was held in the following year, shortly after which the Sea of Faith Network was officially launched. The Sea of Faith Network holds national and regional conferences and promotional events each year.

There is an active network of local groups who meet regularly for discussion and exploration. The group's newsletter *Portholes* is published bi-monthly; its magazine *Sofia* is published quarterly in the United Kingdom.

Currently, there are national networks in the UK, New Zealand and Australia with scattered membership elsewhere.

Although SOFN originated in Cupitt's work and has been informed and inspired by his continuing

output, it has never been led by him. He has never been a board member, administrator or Trustee. Cupitt is far from being a lone guru; the network has spawned several writers, all with different styles and emphases, as evidenced in their books and publications.

Anglican clergymen Anthony Freeman (*God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism*) and Stephen Mitchell (*Agenda for Faith*) are both non-realist philosophically (there is no objective morality independent of humans) and theologically (there is no objective God). By explicitly saying 'I do believe in God, but one of the things I believe about God is that he does not exist', Freeman had his church Office removed by his local Bishop – despite re-defining God metaphorically as 'the sum of all my values and ideals in life' and using the term in his religious practice.

Mitchell defined the 'self' and 'God' differently. For Freeman the 'self' is personal, and 'God' is a metaphor for personal value. For Mitchell, the 'self' is social – a collection of experiences in relation to community. He sees himself not as an objective being but as someone found and known in relationship with family, friends, community and congregation. Similarly, he understands God – not as an objective being but as that experienced in relationship. Mitchell's subtler nuance enabled progression from Vicar to Rural Dean.

Another clergyman, Graham Shaw, can be categorised as a philosophical realist but theological non-realist. In *The Cost of Authority* he expresses a non-realist understanding of God. As a philosophical realist, he argues for the existence of permanent values that transcend those created by humans at this present time. He argues that 'God' is 'a word of the creative imagination' used to transcend the values that are current in the world.

Hugh Dawes, another clergyman, presented a 'rhetorically non-realist, theologically realist' view in his *Freeing the Faith*. Placing emphasis on 'religion is a human creation' leaves room for an affirmation of the reality of God. Dawes wants to 'save a God which matters' and he elucidates a more 'open, provisional and contemporary faith' than traditional Christianity. He therefore stands in the liberal church tradition

rather than adopting the radicalism of Cupitt. He represents a continuing strand within the SOFN.

It was no surprise, then, that thirteen years or so ago, Dawes, with the backing of Bishop John Spong, was involved in setting up the Progressive Christianity Network Britain, which operates within the Churches. PCN Britain is a similar network to SOFN but has rather more 'critical realists' when it comes to defining God. PCN is (like SOFN) open, questioning, inclusive and exploratory. A successful network, it quickly grew to double the size of SOFN, taking several SOFN members with it. Other SOFN members are happily members of both networks.

David Hart, another academic clergyman, is a philosophical and theological non-realist (a mini-Cupitt) who tried to push SOFN on from Cupitt's position by being less 'cerebral' and less Christian-based, engaging more with other major world religions. In *One Faith? Non-Realism and the World of Faiths* he suggests that engaging with other religions and encouraging them to see that their faiths have much human creation and non-realism in them, then exclusive truth-claims are minimised, and we can share each other's traditions.

Lloyd Geering, a New Zealand theologian, emphasises the frightening scenarios of thermonuclear holocaust and global warming and the potential social and economic chaos. The religion of the future must work towards minimising such threats. His global religious eco-humanism has widened the scope of the SOFN agenda and helped persuade Cupitt to have a less individualistic, larger-scale social vision.

Two clergymen have written more accessibly for a wider audience. A book of small chapters for church group discussions on topics of doctrine by Tony Windross, *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith*, has questions and clear explanations on each topic (including non-realist positions) in each chapter. Ray Vincent, a retired Baptist minister and university chaplain, has been quietly publishing books such as *Chasing an Elusive God: The Bible's Quest and Ours*.



Bridges not Walls. The bridge across the River Tyne, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
Photo brittanica.com

However, these theologians and clergymen have been heavily outnumbered by laity in membership numbers in all countries. (When SOFN UK membership numbered about one thousand, the maximum number of clergy was about fifty). The laity counter-balanced the above cerebral offerings with an emphasis on personal autobiographical story. Several books, including a women-only book, documented the individual life journeys of a spectrum of varied members, culminating in a book-length compilation, *This Life on Earth* (edited by Dinah Livingstone).

These personal journeys were followed by two autobiographical books, each devoted to the author's life-time development on the divide of Religion and Atheism: Ann Ashworth's poetry and prose work, *Not as the Crow Flies*, and Dominic Kirkham's *From Monk to Modernity: The Challenge of Modern Thinking*.

Trevor Greenfield's very accessible primer, *An Introduction to Radical Theology*, takes one from the death of God and liberal Christianity through to the radical theology of Don Cupitt and the SOFN. Greenfield's personal position is one of necessary agnosticism, not assertion of an outside-less post-modern world.

David Boulton, former editor of SOF Magazine, wrote a more popular book, *The Trouble with God: his own early autobiography, God's biography, the history of humanism, particularly religious humanism, and the development of SOFN. It advocates the*

adoption of a radical religious humanism. One University Professor and SOF member says, 'It showed me how to re-involve myself in my local church, having lost my metaphysical beliefs, in a non-realist but enriching religious way without compromising my honesty or my intellect'.

The most recent book by Dinah Livingstone, editor since 2004 of SOFN's official magazine *Sofia*, is *The Making of Humanity: Poetic Vision and Kindness*. This book is not concerned with philosophy but theology. Arguments about realism and non-realism have disappeared; post-modernism and post-structuralism don't raise their head. While she thinks the supernatural realm is created by the human imagination or poetic genius, her focus is not just on the *status* but the *content* of religious stories and ideas. The book explores three New Testament 'divine descents' – the reign of God, the Christ Epic and the beautiful city New Jerusalem – as powerful poetic visions of the coming on Earth of a kind society where everyone can thrive and humanity fulfil its potential.

So, apart from its literary output partly summarised above (including three decades' continual output of a magazine of the highest calibre), what of the Network itself and its current state?

There is no creed or doctrinal position for SOFN members. There is a spectrum of positions from atheistic humanists to evangelical Christians (few, admittedly, but I have attended SOF conferences in three countries and found at least one evangelical member in each), but the majority are religious humanists and non-theist Christians. There is a large minority who are regular church attenders/worshippers. But if anything, they are all fiercely independent thinkers who need to be persuaded to change or modify positions.

Let me illustrate with three examples:

- A speaker in a group discussion at the last Conference assumed that everyone in the group self-identified as a humanist. There was strong push-back against that assumption by at least one group member, a SOFN Trustee.
- David Boulton, when he edited the SOF magazine, printed a list of personal hypotheses in 2001 which produced a strong objecting article on adopting them by the Network: 'If it looks like a creed, it is a creed... Get your creedal tank off our lawns!'
- With its current editor Dinah Livingstone, *Sofia* has the following frontispiece statement:

Sofia does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be sought by humans at home on Earth, and is inseparable from human kindness.

Sofia regards religion as a human creation and, in rejecting the supernatural, is for this life and humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

Sofia is for diggers and seekers in its own native radical tradition and everywhere.

Recently, when she repeated her view that 'we know the supernatural realm is not real', a fellow SOFN Trustee interjected: 'You do not speak for me, Dinah!'

So, with the caveat that these are only my observations, let me continue. SOFN's original strapline was 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation'. Most members see the sea of faith as 'only' a human creation and many of them would be happy to be called radical religious humanists; but some see the sea of faith as 'not only' a human creation and leave room for 'Spirit', or the experience of transcendence, which they interpret as 'Other'. (The former group would interpret spirit as 'the wholly human spirit'). Probably, most members, theists and non-theist, realists and non-realists, would call themselves religious with a religious approach to life and the world.

Whatever, SOFN is a social manifestation of the religion/atheism divide bridged and synthesised in its local discussion groups, writings, conferences and an official magazine – a living social example of fruitful co-existence across the religion-atheism divide and beyond the divide. SOFN's brief original strapline was probably distilled from an expanded form found in the frontispiece of an early magazine (SOF Magazine no 15, October 1993).

'The Network:

- * Explores the implications of accepting religion as a human creation;
- * Promotes the validity of creative, human-centred religion;
- * Affirms the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as expressions of awe and wonder and celebrations of spiritual and social values.'

That historic strap-line 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation' begs the question: what is being promoted? Promoting the idea of the human origins of religion? Well, certainly in the early years, but a long-time SOF member, David Boulton, observed at the 2018 Annual General Meeting of the UK Network:

‘At the birth of the Network, promoting religious faith as a human creation was still necessary. But today the SOFN fails to attract young people because religious faith as a human creation is now a given for them. They no longer need to explore religious faith as a human creation or have the idea promoted to them.’

However, that is also a given for a lot of older people and a lot of SOF members. There has been a perceptible change to emphasising the idea of promoting the ‘value’ and ‘validity’ of religion, even though a human creation. This is evident in the current magazine, *Sofia*, where theology and biblical texts are mined for their poetic and metaphorical insights into the human condition and human ethical and social concerns.

There is less such emphasis on religious texts and theology by other members, usually those not from a church background. They may focus on Don Cupitt’s ‘solar living’ with little need to reference biblical material.

The Sunday Assembly’s emphasis on ‘Celebrating Life Together’ with its motto: ‘Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More’ could be the emphasis and motto of the network’s Solarity website, materials in support of out-of-school-hours religion and philosophy clubs.

In the internal divide as to whether SOFN should lobby for good causes as a group or not, the diversity of opinions on almost everything has left the Network answering ‘no’. Instead, as effectively a self-selecting self-help discussion group, it motivates and energises members for individual involvement in good causes.

Another divide in the Network is between growing the Network in a new membership drive, versus letting it expire naturally – ‘all things must pass’. Whatever the intent, the practical reality is that little external promotion of the network or its ideas takes place, despite the best will of the Trustees. A greying demographic in all three countries means a shrinking membership. However, within the Network, inward-looking to meet its own needs, the exploration continues through excellently organised conferences, an exceptional magazine, a lively newsletter and usually stimulating and thought-provoking local group discussions and activities.

In conclusion, the synthesis of humanism and religion into a still relevant radical religious humanism — as illustrated in the life-work of Don Cupitt and worked out in the SOF Networks — should be taken more seriously and broadcast more widely in the Religion and Atheism debate.

Since I drafted much of this ‘hypothetical missing chapter’ from their book *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide* the editors, Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman, have spoken at SOFN’s National Conference. Richard Norman in his introduction said:

‘Can there be hope without faith? Without faith in a divine providence, isn’t hope for the future just whistling in the dark? This is a tough question for atheists and humanists, and therefore a good topic for dialogue between atheists and religious believers. It is a good question also, I would think, for the Sea of Faith movement. The book which Tony Carroll and I co-edited, aimed at promoting better dialogue between religious and non-religious people, has the subtitle ‘Beyond the Divide’, and I would like to pay tribute to the way in which members of the SOF network have pioneered the attempt to go beyond that divide.’

Thank you, Professor Norman.

Postscript: On a personal note

Given that generalisations about SOFN individuals are dangerous, I can only speak for myself about the value of the Network to me. I’m happy to call myself a religious humanist. In some social situations, I call myself an atheist Christian to provoke discussion and stimulate interest. I’m a member of Humanists UK, Progressive Christianity Network Britain, and the Sea of Faith Network. I experience no cognitive dissonance in so doing; the aims, objectives and outlook of all three are complementary, not contradictory (even though many humanists see SOFN as too ‘religious’, and many progressive Christians see SOFN as too ‘atheistic’).



The frontispiece statement of *Sofia* magazine (see page 6) mirrors my own outlook, and, for me, the ten hypotheses of David Boulton (in SOF Magazine no. 48, July 2001, when he was editor) resonate, and I’d like to give them a second outing as an illustration of the understanding of probably most of the Network.

Ten Hypotheses

1. No set of statements about religious faith will ever tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. This naturally holds good for the hypotheses that follow.
2. All religions, faith systems and varieties of religious or spiritual faith and practice are human constructs: part of the wondrous complex of exper-

- ience, imagination, accumulated knowledge, creativity and reflective consciousness which we call culture. We may speak of the divine, the transcendent and the ultimate, but do so in the understanding that these are human concepts. Human communities created them. Human communities made it all up.
3. We live a natural life in a natural world, which is made intelligible to us through the signs and symbols of language. We may speak of the supernatural, but we do so in the understanding that this too is a human concept, the product of human imagination, story-telling and myth-making.
 4. As religion is the product of the creative impulse, so too are its gods and goddesses, angels and devils. They are human creations, made by human communities, reflecting our rich variety of histories, languages and cultures. 'All deities reside in the human breast' (Blake). This is no less true of the god of the great monotheist traditions, the god named God. The Creator God is our creation, the Father God our projection, the Saviour God our own solution to our own inadequacies and alienation. Heaven is the best we can imagine, hell the worst, and both are here and now.
 5. Sacred scriptures, stories and songs have provided sense, meaning and purpose, have helped us see visions and dream dreams; but they are fallible and subject to criticism and reinterpretation. To belittle them impoverishes our heritage, but to elevate them into expressions of eternal truth is dangerous.
 6. Our faith is 'religious' in the depth of its seriousness and the sincerity of its commitment: but it is also 'secular' in the literal sense of its being of this world and for this age. In a world where the supernatural is natural and the divine is human, the sacred and the secular are one. As we secularise our faith, so we also sacralise our lives. That is our commitment.
 7. We are believers. We choose to believe and have faith in the values of 'mercy, pity, peace and love', and things which are 'true, honest, just, lovely and of good report'. The worship of God as an inspiration and symbol affirms these values as expressions of the wholly human spirit.
 8. True religion is incomplete and delusory unless it is concerned with injustice and suffering, particularly among the powerless and hungry. False religion invokes a crude supernaturalism to validate authority, sanctify power, provoke fear and superstition, foster division and gull the gullible. It offers heaven as compensation for earthly woes or reward for obedience, and threatens hell for disobedience, making God a tyrant, and religion itself the instrument of tyranny.
 9. The life of faith is a life of change, growth, renewal: a life of exploration and experimentation, of making new discoveries and discarding them when they fail us. It is a life on the ocean wave, not one that seeks the seclusion of a safe harbour. It is for the seeker, not the finder; for those who would make meaning and purpose rather than buy them off the peg. It demands hope, charity, determination – and a sense of humour.
 10. We lay no claim to eternal truth. But we cherish the best in our heritage of faith, tradition and practice as we cherish the best in our heritage of music, poetry, the arts, the sciences, and everything that gives imaginative expression to the wholly human spirit. We made it, and because we made it we can refashion it to meet our changing needs, understandings and experience. To explore and promote religious faith as a human creation, a human recreation, a human responsibility, and as a source of delight to ourselves and an affirmation of our sense of responsibility for the welfare of our living world: this is our challenge and our adventure.

Finally, SOFN has been useful to me pastorally. If I may share again with you my final slightly adapted paragraph in a 'SOF Sift' article in 2010:

'I occasionally came across references to SOF in the 1990s, but it was the book *Time and Tide: Sea of Faith beyond the Millennium* that led me to google 'Sea of Faith', join it in late 2001, and start regularly attending its gatherings and events from 2002 on. The fellowship these meetings provide is a very comfortable community for me. SOF's demographic profile is a little older than my non-SOF communities but similar educationally. SOF's literature has been a good friend and is an essential part of my SOF experience: prose and poetry, books, pamphlets, magazines, newsletters, 'testimony' compilations, and website. This corpus (my Bible now?) affirms some ideas, informs others, challenges yet more, changes some, argues and dialogues with me, and lets me know I am not alone. In a sense and in hindsight, this self-selecting self-help group has become my new church for the last eighteen years. It can be a sometimes lonely and boring journey approaching and struggling against that long good night, the close of day and the dying of the light. I'm grateful for the company.'

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