

# SOF Sift

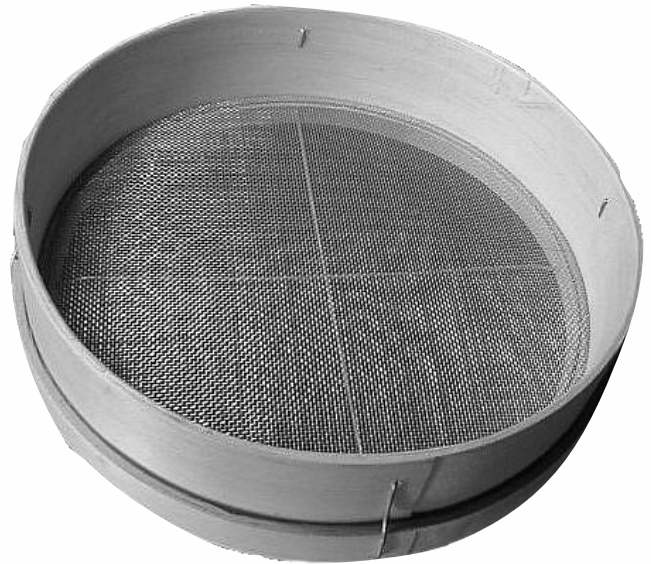
A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

## From Jerry Peyton (Edinburgh)

As far as I can gather the Sea of Faith (SOF) emerged in the 1980s out of liberal Anglicanism, and a high proportion of members has always been mainstream churchgoers. I do not have quite the same narrative – rather a sort of chain of memberships/ crises/ counselling/ surprises. Finding myself doing an Open University arts degree led me here. On this slow journey (1991-04) to a BA honours, I came to focus solely on the fine range of courses on offer in Religious Studies (the eventual title of my degree) and Cupitt's name beckoned. *Sea of Faith* (the book) gradually stuck as one of my many unofficial texts. I attended the local SOF group, plus 3 Annual Conferences. I have now read much SOF material – books and *Sofia* – and SOF ideas begin to move out into the world in letters I write to magazines or papers.

SOF and I have carried over beyond formal study into self-led learning via connections and frontiers and consolidations of reading and writing and thinking. Let's think of texts – not just a printed sheet or passage of writing but any pivotal item of culture or consciousness, personal or collective. Literature like *A Child's Garden of Verses* by RLS or *The Wind in the Willows* were childhood texts. The first great text of my growing up was Bob Dylan's titanic pop record *Like A Rolling Stone*. When I became church-religious in my 20s liturgical fragments resonated. In the 1980s (now in the Quakers) I became a poet and one particular human encounter was a text – 'all real life is meeting' – as Buber famously says. *The Searchers*, the great John Ford western, spoke volumes. I also discovered US poet William Stafford, and a little-known book by John Berger. At decade intervals counselling passages acted as texts. In these recent years of OU/ SOF, the little Anthony Freeman book *God in Us* is added, plus *Rumour of Angels* by Peter Berger, US sociologist. *I and Thou* is the latest.

There is more. But the point is not the complete list but the way such very various texts as these spell out the code which both holds and unlocks our life-values in a holy-gram of experience. Most Christian writers still take 'religious experience' to mean the specific message from or about another world. I feel gratefully free of this in SOF as unnecessary. Berger (P), it is true, speaks unignorably of 'signals of transcendence'; but Freeman



says equally unignorably 'there is no way ... it would be possible to tell the difference' (to decide whether a revelation was supernatural or not). 'It also is a way to pray,' says Elizabeth Jennings of poetry itself – 'by which I mean it's ceremonious thought/ spoken through you. You must not let it stray.'

So the poetry Dinah has brought to *Sofia* is welcome. We hear of 'emergent properties' and I wish to work (and play) with each idea SOF explores as we grow in this non-institutional faith path. I did not start out on it from church membership but from the 'year zero' of the simple question: 'What is religion? No universal definition is available so we have to do our own work on it, as in *After God* by Don Cupitt. If I 'become religious' or have the 'authentic life', which Buber says is 'encounter' or experience a 'signal of transcendence' or enter a 'way to pray' in my latest poem ... how am I and how are we in SOF to understand this? A text never ceases speaking. It is permanent lifelong evidence.

Grateful as I am for the necessary intellectual exertions typical of SOF I would like to see more of a straightforward personal sharing of our unique texts – not sentimentally but sacramentally, even dangerously as part of our middle way. I have mentioned a few examples of my own 'life-texts'. Each one calls for its own beautiful unpacking. May other readers do so with theirs and start the ball rolling?

---

Jerry Peyton is a poet and works in a charity shop. He can be contacted by email at [jeremypeyton@btinternet.com](mailto:jeremypeyton@btinternet.com)

---

Please submit your contributions to the SOF Sift column (approx 750 words), to [editor@sofn.org.uk](mailto:editor@sofn.org.uk) or by post to the Editor at 10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR. Please include your postal address and email if you have one.