

SOF Sift

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

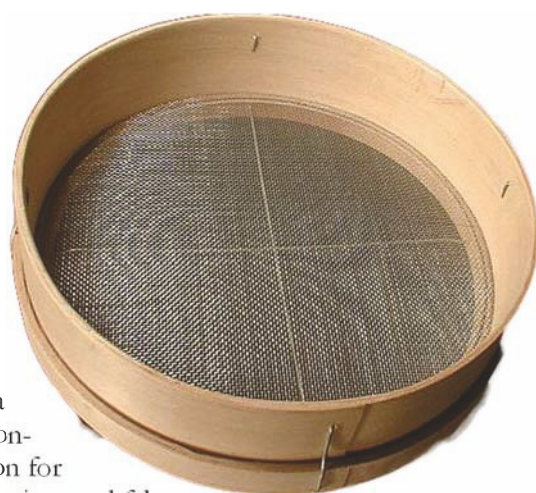
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During my suburban upbringing in the North-East of England, I attended a conventional Anglican church on Sundays and sang traditional hymns from *Songs of Praise* at school on weekdays. Later, as an undergraduate, I undertook Confirmation; yet a little over a year later I had reasoned myself out of belief. After two years of studying philosophy, I thought with a young man's over-confidence that I knew the lot. Everything could be explained in terms of material causes, and nothing could be allowed to interfere with this explanatory model. Needless to say, no hint of Postmodernist theories of negotiable meaning had yet risen above my horizon; this was the late 1970s. Ironically, the main spur to my new stance was Simone Weil, to whom my radical college chaplain had introduced me.

I told myself I had decisively escaped from my superstitious origins. Such a turn was perhaps a necessary stage in growing up. Yet the bedrock of identity remained beneath the surface. I don't think I regretted belonging formally and permanently to the Church of England, a membership as inalienable as a university degree. I was stirred by traditional forms of ritual (as opposed to the 'happy-clappy' sort), admiring the Church's role as a focal point for national life and those clergy who, like David Jenkins, exhibited a liberal tolerance or whom Christianity appeared to confirm in radicalism.

In my late twenties, I swung back to an agnostic halfway house; maybe hoping, like Betjeman or Hardy, that Christianity might be true and worrying lest, if it was true and I missed the boat, I might never find happiness – on Earth, that is, for I no longer considered the possibility of life after death. Eliot's line about 'the third who always walks beside you' often came to mind; the idea that there might be a higher power that (or who) was personally interested in me was a good story to tell myself, at a time when I was often lonely.

Then I was 'summoned by bells'. Anyone who has lived within the precincts of an Oxbridge college will know the subtle attachment engendered by the regular sound of the chapel bell. One winter evening at the age of 30, giving way to an insistent inner voice, I



joined a small congregation for Communion, and felt

I had come home. Yet still I withheld literal inward commitment to a supernaturalist creed, and so the anxiety remained unresolved: wasn't it vital to jump one way or the other? 'Look if you like, but you will have to leap.' I defined my condition as a search; in reality, was it a desperate longing for certainty, a reason to commit or reject once for all?

I seem to have become aware of the SOF Network in the early 2000s, when Cupitt's *Taking of Leave of God* proved liberating; I wished I had discovered it years before. Occasional attendance at Conference, the articles in this wonderful magazine, and a range of books from the SOF stable (such as Stephen Mitchell's *Agenda for Faith*) all gradually allayed my remaining anxiety. The coping-stone was set by David Boulton's *The Trouble with God*, which persuaded me that I did not need to decide whether or not supernatural propositions are true. It was enough to acknowledge that traditional worship did me a power of good. Indeed, I used to say to other SOFers that we should be seeking a new kind of ritual, otherwise our shared insight – that religion is a human artefact – might not lead anywhere useful. Hilary Campbell's electrifying recitation about 'Truth and Story' at one SOF conference (reprinted in *Sofia* 101) seemed a perfect example of what non-realist ritual might offer.

Nowadays, I occasionally attend weekday Communion at a middle-of-the-road church famed for its music and the intelligence of its preachers. Worship centres my spirit, giving a time for self-review, re-commitment to ideals, and thankfulness for many blessings including the achievements of my students. The minister at the church, when we discussed this, said he did not understand how people could live without 'spiritual exercise'. Yet I find that many people will readily assent when it is put to them that, even if religion is not 'true', religious language is good to hear.

I sum up my position as 'non-realist, anti-Dawkins, it's the Story that matters'; and perhaps the greatest of these three is the last.