

SOF Sift

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

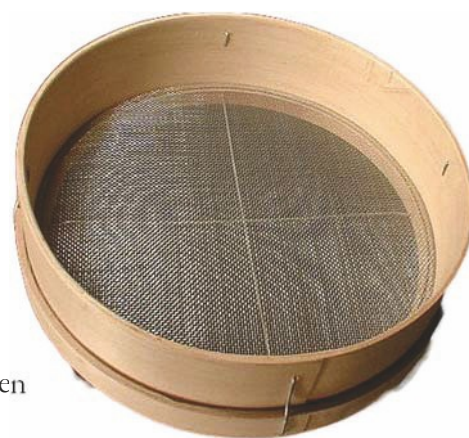
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Let go! Let go! You'll hardly notice the drop!

At the end of *Middlemarch* George Eliot said: 'Every limit is a beginning as a well as ending.' This suggests that our own limited lives might contain the possibility of acquiring further wisdom. For philosopher Ronald Dworkin, we first come to an understanding of objective values and then compare our ideas about god(s) with a divine being we seek to worship as an extension of those ideas. He echoes philosophers, such as Daniel C. Dennett, who consider that religion is a human phenomenon, a construct of the human mind which has developed with humanity's social evolution. Dworkin concludes that, if there is any 'religious' basis at the foundation of human ethics, then that basis is a 'religion without God' – a religion without creed, chapels, worship or salvation/redemption. Ronald Dworkin is sceptical of a Christianity that simply casts off the belief in a cosmic or personal God but retains allegiance to the institutions and infrastructures, rituals and administrative practices deriving from such a belief. An institutional, but 'godless', form of Christianity is a religious 'false consciousness', or, to use Sartre's term, 'bad faith'.

Some within the SOF movement seem quite accepting of and comfortable with the language, liturgy, music, worship, architecture and 'religious spaces' of the Christian church – 'keeping the rumour of God alive'. Is the SOF movement an existential wrestle without a final outcome; an ending looking for a new beginning; a new beginning that is unsure where to proceed; or just an end in itself? Does the movement possess a melancholy for what has been left behind, or an apprehension about the new wisdom it may acquire?

Perhaps Richard Dawkins is correct: '...we can retain a sentimental loyalty to the cultural and literary traditions of, say, Judaism, Anglicanism, or



Islam, and even participate in religious rituals such as marriages and funerals, without buying into the supernatural beliefs that historically went along with those traditions. We can give up belief whilst not losing touch with a treasured heritage.' (*The God Delusion*, 2006, p.344)

The faithful of the Christian church presuppose a God who is 'real'. It is counter-intuitive and contradictory to suggest that, after nearly two thousand years of Christian history and church tradition, the devotees of this faith can universally adopt a philosophical position that could be described as 'Christian atheism'. Further, it is 'revisionism *in extremis*' to suggest, in support of the above position, that Jesus was simply an apocalyptic teacher of an ethical system that needed to be practised in the 'new age' that was imminent. The Jesus of history is more complicated than this. Jesus possessed a closely identifiable belief in the God of Judaism; he was schooled in Jewish pedagogy and conversant with the Jewish prophets – the pre-cursors of the apocalyptic vision he preached. So too, Paulinist theology is riddled with 'other-worldly' ideas of existence, divine figures, and ideas and events beyond human understanding.

Within the SOF movement there is an idea that the Christian church can be rescued from the God-believers and become something other. But the whole enterprise of 'rescuing' the Christian Church from its historical and theistic custodians is surely an attempt to put 'new wine into old wineskins'. Why bother? As Dan Dennett quipped: 'O religious folk who fear to break the taboo: Let go! Let go! You'll hardly notice the drop!'

Robert Culbard is a retired secondary school teacher, who was formerly a Baptist minister working in the inner cities of Australia. He came to England in 1991 and he has been a member of SOF network for several years.