

SOF Sift

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

Margaret Driver
London

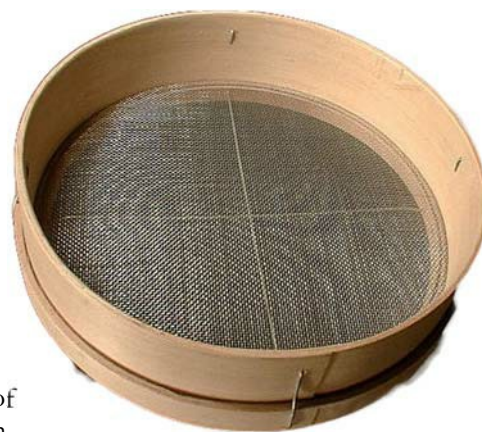
I have never quite understood why my journey from a solid Christian upbringing ended in a mid-life loss of faith for no particular reason.

It started in India where I lived until I was 12 with a railway engineer father and a doctor mother. Both came from staunch Congregational backgrounds. My school in Kodaikanal, 7000 feet up in the Palni Hills in the far South of India, was founded for the children of American missionaries, largely Lutheran and Baptist. Sunday services were straight up and down nonconformist 'hymn sandwiches' and I sometimes used to play for the hymns. My most vivid memory is of roaming the hills to search for the wild, sweet-smelling Madonna lilies to decorate the school hall at Easter. And often I would be woken in the dark on Easter Day by the haunting sound of 'Jesus Christ is risen today' echoing round the higher hills as the school staff wound their way along the four mile circuit of Kodai Lake.

When we returned to England I attended a rather more restrictive school for the daughters of non-conformist missionaries. In spite of plenty of chances to think and discuss religious beliefs, both at home and school, I had few doubts; I still just accepted that there was a loving God who would look after me, provided I was suitably penitent and accepted forgiveness. So I joined the Presbyterian church at 16.

Oxford University, the home of high Anglicanism, was a sudden shock of alien culture with to me unbelievable doctrines and weird rituals. I took refuge in what seemed the sane and rational environment of the Student Christian Movement, then very active. But most of all there was an introduction to the large Bach choir. Singing the Bach B minor Mass for the first time in the Sheldonian theatre I had to stand on a chair at the back of the altos and nearly fell off with excitement in the dramatic silence between '*et sepultus est*' and '*et resurrexit*'.

My husband Christopher came from an even more firmly grounded Congregational background. We joined the then Presbyterian church in Highgate, now the United Reformed Church. There George Corfield, an inspirational Scottish minister of great integrity, expressed in his sermons the many doubts we were suspecting in ourselves but not yet voicing. So the



bombshell of Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* didn't exactly blow belief apart but made me realise that my so-called faith was only an empty shell (rather like the contents of an egg that had been neatly sucked out through a pinprick-sized hole with no sign of damage, by a mongoose in our garden hedge in Madras). Then I found my local SOF group and the *Sofia* magazine that provided me with like-minded friends and the intellectual stimulation I needed.

Through all these wanderings my mother remained a strong influence. She had a scientific mind but was deeply religious. She taught me to believe that human nature needed something stronger than itself to change its faulty behaviour and she was saddened when I could no longer believe in this help. I wished I could, because I have been left with a large gap, not just how to cope with non-belief, but how to worship when conventional church services seem impossible.

Working to help those less fortunate is one way and I suppose that is what I chose as a social worker and can still continue by doing bereavement counselling. Meditation is another and has been a new discovery: I am very much a beginner with the help of a meditation group led by a wise woman in the URC. As Laurence Freeman says, what concentrates our attention in a selfless way, whether it be walking, music or art, can be a form of prayer. The fruit of all prayer is a calmer mind and a more open and compassionate heart. I find the aim to live in the present moment very difficult except when I am involved with music.

The marvels of choral music, much of it written for the Church, have rejoiced me ever since that first B minor Mass. In the company of the London Philharmonic choir and a smaller choir, the English Chamber Choir, I have sung Masses, Requiems, *Magnificats* and more from Bach and Byzantine to Brahms, Monteverdi and Mahler to Macmillan, under the direction of amazing conductors. It was Christopher who introduced me to my other love, chamber music, first just to listen and then to play my viola with friends. This is my way to praise and give thanks for life.