

# SOF Sift

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

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From the time we came to England in 1937, my mother was determined that we should grow up in the religion of the land. So we attended church regularly and read the Bible, practices which were reinforced at my schools. At university, I flirted briefly with Roman Catholicism, but, when Archbishop Roberts SJ told my best friend that he must love the Church of England better before converting, I stayed with the familiar.

With my wife, my religion was Eucharist-based until the change in order required an amount of standing that she could not manage and the boys required ferrying to cycling on a Sunday morning. After she died 20 years ago, I went back to regular church attendance, mostly early Communion and once a week said Evensong. I also started my continuing learning of the Alexander Technique. The release of my body tension released my mind to ask questions about the religion that I had accepted in the traditional way. The first question was the need for abject Confession at the start of every service: there wasn't time to sin so much between Sunday and Wednesday! Learning Non-Violent Communication taught me the importance of not judging and being kind to oneself.

The real bombshell was a footnote in one of Karen Armstrong's books: 'Of course, God is a construct of the human imagination'. I struggled with this for a long time. It is one thing to read about the word 'God' as just a symbol for the sum of our sacred aspirations and another to accept that there is nothing 'out there', especially when some people have such a vivid experience of the reality of God.

It was easier to understand that Jesus was a man. He did say some strange things about sheep and goats and everlasting fire, and his emphasis on forgiveness reflected the domination structure of the society of recent millennia. Moreover, I came to see that the main focus of our attention should be now, the present moment. So I wrote a new version of the Lord's Prayer to reflect my understanding. This, with



the reasoning behind it, was printed in *Progressive Voices*, issue 2 (Sept 2012).

This version worked quite well for a time. I was not happy addressing 'our heavenly Father', and friends objected to the retention of the petitionary form. But I thought that both could be accepted as metaphorical, as Marcus Borg suggests. I went on reading and listening. I was very struck by Gretta Vosper's determination to use language that reflects our contemporary world view. The result was sadly uninspiring: lots of words, and no connection with the familiar liturgy. Cranmer was a genius with words, as the new Prayer Book shows.

However, I was really shaken by the reaction of my youngest son to the Midnight Service two Christmases ago. He appeared suddenly at my side and afterwards said that he had felt he had been visiting a foreign land. I realised that Gretta was right. It is not good enough to say that the meaning can be taught: it needs to make immediate sense to any incomer.

So I cast about for a word that could be used as the symbol for the sum of our sacred aspirations. The word that came to me was 'Love', a short word that would fit wherever we say 'God' or 'Lord'. I am not saying 'God is Love', but that love is the human drive that makes us want to make life more wonderful for others as for ourselves. I have accepted the volitional 'May we...', though it has old associations with asking permission at school. The new version, which makes clear our responsibility for making heaven on earth, reads:

*All embracing Love, we bless you within and without and around us. May we work for justice and harmony in this world. May we have today sufficient bread to nourish body and soul. When we stray from your way, may we remember you and turn back, and love our neighbour as ourselves. May we not be tested, but kept safe from harm. Amen.*