

SOF Sift

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

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I think my journey with Sea of Faith is not typical. I didn't join on the way out of church, but on the way in. In working life I was an academic psychologist. My Head of Department must have sensed my discomfort with the discipline, for one day she said to me: 'You ought to join Sea of Faith'. She was not a member herself, and I don't think she ever has been (Professor Margaret Christie – anyone remember meeting her?). Incidentally, she 'discovered' the Post-Lunch Dip that many will know – so, many will wonder how she 'discovered' it. Well, she gave it a name, and, importantly, measured it to a standard of scientific evidence. Nothing wrong with that in itself, but it brings me to my wider discomfort with scientific psychology.

I felt then, and still do, that the scientific approach to people, while admirable within limits, has impoverishing, even dangerous side-effects. A contempt for ideas that cannot be quantified has arisen within the discipline, and leads some psychologists to dismiss out of hand just those things about human existence that are important to most people. The words of what is now called 'folk psychology' – love, unhappiness, grief, will, beauty, guilt, have become embarrassing and replaced by technical-sounding terms – attachment, depression/anxiety, bereavement, motivation, aesthetics. (Interestingly, I don't think guilt has acquired a separate technical term yet.) There are good reasons for this. Terms must be defined before scientific study can proceed, but then the link to common experience gets lost, and also it becomes difficult to communicate the results of research to an interested public. Surely there was something wrong here, a sort of existential shudder in psychologists when asked to look at life as non-psychologists do.

This revulsion from common understandings of life was one problem I felt in scientific psychology. The other was the extension of this attitude into an instrumentalising of people, and especially of animals. Measuring is something that we mostly do to inanimate objects, and we do it in order to cut those things to size and get control of them. Of course, we also measure people for dress, diet and health, yet we also

see the dark side of this in the media where the valuing of people, often by physical appearance alone, can lead to unhealthy and obsessive attitudes. Measuring people leads so readily to treating them as objects rather than persons. Objectifying people (and animals) removes empathy and respect toward them, gives a sense of control over them, and ultimately can lead to callous treatment of them.

I was having these thoughts when my Head of Department said I should join SOF, and I decided to explore her suggestion. Why did she say this? I did not then belong to any church. Perhaps she thought that SOF was animated by a kind of scepticism about the fuzzy and unmeasurable that would be good for me. (Around the same time she gave me a pay rise unasked, so I'm sure she had my welfare in mind.) So I joined SOF, found the discussion endlessly fascinating, and have stayed for many years.

The church journey has been different, but started at roughly the same time. As for many people, my first adult contact with church came through a funeral. I was so impressed by the care taken over this by the minister that I thought 'Of course! This organisation has 2000 years' experience in valuing and caring for people, they really know how to do it. I must find out more.' So I joined the Church of England. For comparison, I also joined Quakers and the Metropolitan Community Church (founded by and for gay people, and of course for everyone). Eventually I decided for Quakers, who don't require assent to any specific beliefs.

Even so, my commitment to SOF has proved stronger. Apart from the fact that I am my local group's convenor, which in itself creates commitment, there are two other reasons. One is that my local group, at least, has not been so threatened by the splits and hostilities that always seem to surface in interest groups (not least church groups). The other reason is that religion, and what it means and could mean for us, is endlessly fascinating and stimulating to me. I hope one day to understand it.

