

# SOF Sift

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

*Martin Spence, Penge*

All my adult life I've identified as a humanist and a socialist, and for most of it, as an atheist. I've never belonged to a church, and have never since childhood attended a church service in order to participate in an act of worship.

But: like all of us who are getting older, every so often a relative or friend passes away and I find myself at a funeral. Sometimes they are humanist funerals, sometimes not. The two most recent occasions were traditional Christian affairs, with hymns and requests for everyone to join in the Lord's Prayer. Ten years ago I would have demurred, respectful (I hope) but tight-lipped: joining in would have seemed a betrayal of principle. But on these recent occasions I found myself taking part – not just in the hymns but also in the Lord's Prayer (in which I discovered myself to be word-perfect). And because it didn't feel like a betrayal of principle, I had to ask myself: What's going on?

What's going on is a process of working through the decoupling of my (continuing) humanism from my (now abandoned) atheism. I wrote a piece on 'Post-atheist humanism' in *Sofia* a while ago and don't want to repeat myself. I'll just say this: technically, 'atheism' simply means an absence of belief in God, but in practice in Britain today it is inseparable from naturalism: the belief that physical nature is all that exists, and that scientific knowledge of physical nature is as close to truth as we can get. I don't accept this, and consequently don't accept the atheism which comes with it. Or to put it another way: my rejection of atheism doesn't mean that I now believe in God; it means that I don't accept the currently dominant rationale for *not* believing in God.

And having rejected it, I find that (unlike many atheists) I'm not all that interested in God anyway. I find instead that my attention is re-focused on the central question of humanism: the paradox of being human. But it is re-focused without the crippling assumption that a humanist answer must by definition be anti- or non- religious. And this has led me to a



new discovery of Christianity, and a discovery of currents within it which are probably not new to many members of SOF, but which are new to me.

For instance: in *Honest to God*, John Robinson argued that mainstream, popular Christianity operates with a docetic conception of Christ, where Christ 'appears' to be human but is 'really' divine. Insofar as I considered the matter at all during my long years of atheism, this was my own understanding of Christian belief. But now I find that it is far more subtle and challenging than this; that Christians agonised for centuries about Christ's humanity, and divinity, and the relation between the two; that the Definition of Chalcedon insisted that Christ was both 'truly God and truly man'. And I find that this notion of Christ as inseparably human-and-divine has repeatedly been understood to ennoble humanity as a whole, lifting us up, granting us some form of transcendence.

What is this if not a humanist vision? It's not the only humanist vision: I'm sure we could find equivalent resonances in other religious traditions, and I know we can find them in the secular traditions of socialism. But this Christian conception of the transcendent potential of the human, as represented in the defeated and triumphant figure of Christ, has a power and pathos all its own.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote a paper some years ago entitled 'What is it like to be a bat?'. To cut his long and learned argument short: he concluded that we simply cannot know. To know what it's like to be a bat, you have to be born a bat, and live as a bat, with a bat's body and wings and sonar.

We, however, are born human, with human bodies and human faculties of language and culture and meaning. We are doomed to our humanity. But when all is said and done it is a glorious doom, and I'm grateful to be learning, admittedly rather late in life, just how much religion has to contribute to our appreciation of it. And that, I think, is why I joined in with the Lord's Prayer.