

The Future of God and Organised Religion 1

Three speakers expressed their views on this subject at the Conference.

John Pearson spoke first and wrote this after hearing the other speakers.

The two elements of the title are inseparable to some, but I feel their chances of survival differ.

To talk firstly of God

Across my 30-something years in SOF I have always been rather shy of pitting my wits publicly against the ‘thinkers’ within the Network. Both my fellow speakers address the concept of God. They take the matter very seriously, thoughtful about the interpretations they put on him/her/it, almost as if they secretly worry about what the said God might think.

To me the God thing needs addressing because it presents a serious obstacle, preventing many people of whatever faith, or none, from ‘getting real’. The God Thing, for me, needs to be seen for what it really is – a kind of imaginary friend – something which, for an adult, can have no material effect upon their own real life, and which, in some cases, precludes it. Like Father Christmas, truth must one day out. God is not an elephant in the room – not some issue we really should address because it is has importance but, for me, a harmless ghost from the past which we should rightly learn to ignore. He/she/it does not matter, can have no effect, because he/she/it simply does not exist.

Past Colleagues were surprised that I attended Conference each year, to spend hours discussing something which I insisted did not exist. So, what is there to talk about? Religion perhaps? Religion is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the belief in a superhuman controlling power; especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience or worship’.

When Don Cupitt first went public all those years ago, the main thrust of his seminal work *The Sea of Faith*, both the TV series and the book, was that religion is a human creation and we, the Network, took that as our mantra. Cupitt took viewers and readers through the thinking of philosophical giants, illustrating how their insights had shaped public understanding and so on. Religious practices, all man made, were formulated as a result of advancing understanding of God and his/her/its true place in the cosmos. For me, as for some others, if religion is a human creation then it follows, necessarily, that its superhuman controlling powers entitled to obedience or worship are human creations too. So what’s with the obedience and worship?

Iain suggests that we think of God not as a thing, but as a word pointing to human values. Paul asks how the church will learn to change and adapt to a belief in God that is bespoke and fully inclusive. I mean Paul Vittle, my fellow speaker. As an aside, I am so steeped in Sunday Morning sermons that I confess I do a double take, perhaps some of you do too, at the expression *Paul asks, Paul tells us*, and so on. There’s my 60 something years in the pews coming out. No prophetic Iains in the bible as far as I know!

I clearly remember an incident many years ago. I was pontificating as usual about my non-belief in God, whereupon a certain Duncan Park, a fellow SOF Steering Group member at the time remarked, rather annoyingly to me, ‘But *which* God do you not believe in?’ I simply do not accept the words God or Gods in my vocabulary except as the name that some people give to ‘something out there’, whether that be an imaginary being, real to them, or a lifestyle determinant, or whatever. I deny God or Gods, past or present, as entities to *obey or worship*. This includes the single Christian God, the multiple mountain-living Gods of the ancient Greeks, or the Hindu Gods (there are some 24, including an elephant, a crocodile, a rather fetching monkey named Hanuman, and so on). The most powerful trigger for my own scepticism around God-based religion however was a family expedition to Gujarat, Eastern India. On our return I wrote of our experiences, as follows?

Did I come home believing in God? Of course not. Said I wouldn’t. We saw so much evidence of so many different faiths, from tribal religions still adhered to by some, to a seedbed of Christianity in a village meeting hall. Here the congregation all waved their arms (not waving but drowning perhaps?) – some fell in trances on the floor. Then there are the local mainstream religions of Hinduism and Islam. Where so many earnest people worship so many Gods how can there be just one? Can there be any?

Britain is of course multi cultural and thus multi-religion. So, many Gods here too – or none? Paul speaks of a bespoke belief in God, Iain suggests that we might use the word God as a representation of human values. I suggest that if the churches and their good works are to survive then the word God should

be played down and, ideally, phased out altogether, rather than, apologetically, dressed up in some *acceptable* form. My wife is an ordained minister, a wonderful carer for her community. Trouble is, she believes in God! Not all priests do, however. David Paterson, some time guru in the Network, used to tell how at an early interview for the priesthood, ‘*nobody actually asked me if I believed in God, so I didn’t say*’. For me, belief in God is binary. I feel a certainty that some are unhappy to accept. God, the one whom I feel most believers envisage, does not exist. So, should I go into the future worshipping a word?

Why is it so important what we think and say about God? I believe very much in honesty. More than ever, we live in a time of the increasing merciless media exposure of lies and half truths. Only the established religions seem to have avoided serious and large scale scrutiny of what is for me, the most fundamental lie of all. How do they get away with it? Perhaps because popular culture doesn’t have any interest in it – sees the whole enterprise as largely irrelevant. It’s not news – live and let die, so to speak. As Elaine Graham remarked during her talk at this Conference, the *Observer* shouted the headline, nearly 60 years ago: ‘Our Image of God Must Go’. But it’s still here, much the same?

As for Organised Religion?

Denise Cush suggests that the word religion has negative connotations although, as we have heard today, various organised religions provide valuable support to the community in many ways. As Iain observes, churches cater for human needs – often more immediately and more effectively, I feel, than government agencies do. Such work needs boots on the ground. A growing proportion of members of the established churches are over 70 years of age – 80, 90 even. I too shall be 70 all too soon, and still find myself one of the younger minority at deanery synods and the like. At the risk of sounding ageist I suggest we need younger boots out there. I am sure new people can be found to continue the good work. But personally I cannot see renewal and continuation where core organisations are still focused upon a God who/which in the 20th and 21st Centuries has surely been exposed as a totally imaginary concept?

No wonder so many young people have little or no time for it all. As I said in my piece in the March *Sofia*, for me the word God is an immense barrier to the understanding, survival and progress of what are, otherwise, deserving organisations. I am reluctant to use it because I want to be able to relate to people in a world in which it is of decreasing significance.

I think that for those positive aspects of what the Church has to offer to survive, recruiting future generations to its cause, it must be honest with the

young. Fairy stories about Jesus and God are useful vehicles for educating very young children in caring, sharing and helping, and so on. But if we seek to retain human beings beyond the age when they start to find out truths for themselves (made ever earlier nowadays by children’s access to the internet) we cannot continue to hide behind ancient myths and fantasies.

In my first written contribution to the SOF magazine, some thirty years ago, I addressed the vexed question (for me) of bringing up children within a Christian framework whilst I myself was shedding all the God stuff. A major honesty thing. How does one make the transition for them, with integrity, from childfriendly fairytales to acceptance that there is good in what Jesus once said per se, and that communities (Christian and others) should seek to do the work he wanted for altruistic rather than reward-seeking (heaven-seeking) reasons? Last year saw the birth of my first grandson, Joseph. His parents plan to have him christened, (just an excuse for a party to some) though I doubt they will put him through the same stringent attendance regime that I myself was subjected to between 5 and 18. I hope that, in time, he will discuss things with me. How do I break the news to him?

As Don Cupitt remarked during this Conference, for things to survive we have to hand over to the young, but I do fear for young adults of today – the 18 to 30 generation, those whom we might look to as future churchmen (and women), future foot soldiers to replace us. Many are either lost – *inside* Evangelical churches or *outside* the church generally. They look for certainty, we are told. And a very shallow, submissive certainty is readily available worshipping Jesus and God – which does not necessarily lead to caring for the wider world. Being saved is all. I have seen my own church turned from a strongly questioning one, (a place where I felt at home for 49 years) into a peddler of not just half truths but, to me, blatant falsehoods – false certainty. One past vicar there, Kit Widdows, as some of you will remember, was vice chair, no less, of the SOF Network. That’s how open minded *he* was.

The current incumbent, by comparison, is a born again, bible believing, bible bashing, literalist zealot who has a team around him of a dozen 20-30 somethings for whom personal salvation is everything. Everything in their hypnotic, simplistic gatherings is about this, little mention of getting out and actually *doing* Christ’s work. Evangelicals in this mould are good at talking the talk, less good, it seems to me, at walking the walk. I fear for the future, if my own church is the way things are going generally. There’ll be tens of thousands of young people feeling ‘saved’ but very few young boots on the ground. Is this the sort of religion we want?

I am more than happy to try and persuade students and young people to engage with the less fortunate in society (the poor, the homeless and so on) – happy to speak up for the community work being done by some local churches and the need for support and growth in this area – happy to encourage others to do their bit, as I try to myself, to combat the threat of climate change – happy to support the need for inclusivity in a world increasingly alive to LGBTQ and racial minorities.

Churches can be vehicles for this, and so should be valued.

It may seem that all I have to offer is the vision of semi-structured local community service, run by particularly caring volunteers. This reflects a past age in which the church was indeed central, a source of guidance and succour to the needy.

In medieval times, the church was pivotal. Then, dependency and lack of education facilitated a certain sort of obedience and blind faith in the face of the struggle to survive. We can no longer rely on these last to hold things together. The days of the unthinking, uneducated, unknowing peasant are largely over. Instead, I feel there is a lot of selfish indifference out there. However, we do all live media-drenched lives where the needs of the underdog here and in the wider world are more evident than ever. Surely this window on the sufferings of others can be used somehow as a spur to concern and for action by the up-and-coming generation? Perhaps as people have looked for new definitions of God we need a new definition of religion?

I seriously doubt whether the whole structure of the Church of England (for example) will collapse within the next 50 years, say, or even in Joseph's lifetime. Paul talks in terms of another 150 years for some sort of institution and that may be viable. But if it is to survive as more than a small force for good in a crumbling world, I feel strongly that we must rid it of the scaffolding of blind faith in godly intervention



Church of St Thomas, Newcastle upon Tyne, at sunset. Author photo

and support, replacing this with a sense of purpose and personal worth which will empower its members to do Christ's work, altruistically – not for any future reward but because it is the right thing to do. It must have a thoroughly honest and realistic face if it is to be taken seriously.

I have similar fears for the long-term survival of the Network, incidentally. Where are the young? As with the Churches, its adherents are an ageing and, sadly but inevitably, a dying breed. Reluctantly I allow the Established Church 150 years.. Sensibly, I can only give the SOF Network about 10. It deserves to survive, if its message can be anything like the hopeful elements of the above, as epitomised by Solarity perhaps? The Network can be a force for good, but who will be here to keep it going?

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