

Speaking for Myself

The Inessentials of Faith

Edward Nickell

I first joined the SOF Network back in 2018, when I was 26. I'm pretty sure I was and still am the youngest member. At our last conference on Zoom, I saw another relatively young face zooming in from Australia. I dropped him a private message to ask how he'd come across the Network. He had discovered the Network when researching for a dissertation on the history of philosophy including non-realism and was, basically, a Don Cupitt fan. It was great messaging him, but I couldn't help but feel a little disappointed as part of me had wondered if perhaps in Australia they had somehow found the recipe for getting younger people interested in the Network. As it turned out, his interest was as unusual amongst his peers as I find mine is. Of course, this isn't unique to members under-30. I've spoken to quite a few SOF Network members now and I have yet to meet a 'typical' member. I suspect no such member exists. Like my Australian friend and like all other members, I can't speak for my whole generation; all I can do here is 'speak for myself'.

Childhood and school

I don't remember when I became an atheist. In fact, I can't remember ever believing in God, which is funny, because I believed in Santa and the tooth fairy well beyond the acceptable age. But for them, I'd seen the physical proof! I grew up in Northern Ireland and in my childhood we went to a Presbyterian Church in the suburbs of Belfast. From an early age, I found the story of Noah's Ark implausible and stories like the plagues of Egypt deplorable. To this day, my main objection to belief in a real God is more ethical than metaphysical and I've never been convinced by any response offered to the problem of evil.

By secondary school, I was what you might call a 'militant atheist' or on the Dawkins end of the spectrum. There was a growing group of atheists at school but plenty of evangelical Christians left to argue with. My being the only

openly gay kid definitely added to the fervour on both sides of the arguments.

University, smells and bells

I escaped Northern Ireland and went to university in Oxford. I remember going to LGBT drinks for freshers. Being from Presbyterian stock I was not familiar with alcohol, I really knew nothing about spirits, mixers or quantities. So when I poured my first drink, it was a full half pint of neat gin. I was surprised to look up and see the College Chaplain was sat opposite me, smiling. He leant over and just said, 'You'd better finish that off'. I gagged on my first sip, but I did finish it!

I found out that night that not only was our Chaplain a bisexual, but there was a huge overlap of the Chapel crowd and LGBT scene. And they weren't the straight-acting, apologetic or celibate gays you sometimes meet in evangelical churches. Our Chapel was high church and high camp – smells and bells. While the gays loved Chapel worship, members of the Christian Union wouldn't set foot in it, and as the president of the student body I actually had a few run-ins with them. CU viewed the Chapel with suspicion, the incense and vestments were all a bit Catholic, these inessential fripperies distracted from what was important: the word of God, in the inerrant bible, and belief in God and the Trinity. I realised that I felt the opposite. For me the ritual was what mattered. When I was asked to give a title for this talk, I picked 'The Inessentials of Faith', a line out of a John Betjeman poem, 'Summoned by Bells'.

Meanwhile, back at home, the Presbyterian church in Ireland was circulating a petition to oppose the introduction of gay marriage in England. My parents were asked to sign and refused, and were then visited by the Church Elders, who were presumably concerned about my 'same-sex attractions'. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland went on to ban people in same



Christchurch Cathedral, Oxford
[Image: skipmoen.com](http://image.skipmoen.com)

-sex relationships from having full membership of the church, and banned the children of same-sex couples being baptised. They are now getting rid of women Ministers – though they needn't bother, as they haven't actually had a woman at the theological college for years. The Presbyterian Church saw its membership decline by 40% between 1975 and 2015. This decline has continued and on current trends, academics have said they are left with just 35 more years until the last Presbyterian switches the lights off.

Church decline – the moderates go first

When church attendance declines, it is moderates who leave at a greater rate – the people who maybe weren't sure about what was in the creeds, but were there out of tradition or community. Who does that leave behind? Increasingly, the hardliners – those more certain or ardent about their beliefs. The culture of the church changes, from a place with a mix of beliefs, to a place where most of the congregation is quite ardent. This cultural change makes the church even less

appealing to the rest of the public and so you find the Church caught in a spiral of hardening stances and falling attendance.

All the remaining young evangelical people tend to congregate in big churches like Holy Trinity Brompton rather than going to their local parishes. This creates the illusion of growth. The evangelical churches might be better at 'catching the fish' than local parishes, but they are all fishing in the same pond, and that pond is shrinking. Evangelicals point to this illusory growth and say that this shows they've got it right – God is rewarding their confidence and certainty with his blessings of more bums on seats. This is another form of the 'Prosperity Gospel' – the idea that your wealth and success is proof of your virtue.

It is quite depressing for people like me who are trying to keep a local parish alive. I'm parish secretary for a liberal, Anglo-Catholic parish in East London. And we are constantly being told that if only we were more 'certain', more 'confident', then we would see growth like the

evangelicals. Implicit in this is a suggestion that the lack of growth in progressive churches is evidence that they have got it wrong, because God isn't blessing them with bums on seats.

Prosperity Gospel

There has been a lot of talk, in progressive Christian circles, about the dangers of the 'Prosperity Gospel'. The prosperity gospel is the idea that financial success is a sign of God's favour, not a new idea but one that has had a new lease of life on social media. In the Church of England, flashy cars or big houses are replaced with 'bums on seats' as the currency of God's supposed blessing. But I don't want to be angry or depressed because the bit of the Church that I like is probably going to die out. The fact it is coming to an end does not mean there was something wrong with it.

First encounter with Sea of Faith

It was at Oxford, back in 2012, that I had my first encounter with the SOF Network. I had organised a discussion group for the Oxford Atheists society on the topic of 'religious experience'. My lasting memory from that event, and others, was my surprise at seeing a vicar – in dog collar – in the room and his description of his own religious experiences. If I recall correctly, these included an apparition of the Virgin Mary and a talking lizard. That vicar was the Rev David Paterson.

At university I did a module on philosophy of religion as part of my studies. My tutor for the course was a secular Jewish American, my course partner was a devout Roman Catholic Scotsman, and I was an atheist ex-Presbyterian Irishman. It sounds like the start of a joke and it sometimes was. My other philosophy tutors warned me the course would be a waste of time. 'That course', they said, 'asks only one question. And the answer is no.'

Religious Fictionalism

Non-realism made a passing appearance on the course, but actually it was an essay on religious fictionalism that had the biggest impression on me. Religious fictionalism is the idea that you can engage with religion the way you might with any other fictional work. We don't claim that the

stories we read in books aren't meaningful just because we know the characters don't really exist. When we read books, or perhaps even with film or TV, we set aside what is 'real' or not, and allow ourselves to be engrossed with our imaginative minds.

To pick a basic example, when we tell children the story of the boy who cried wolf, we aren't claiming that there is a real boy and a real wolf out there that the story is about. But yet we still learn something from the story, there is a real moral message, or a warning anyway. Whether we think that message is true or not isn't really dependent on whether we think a literal boy and wolf exist.

Why the interest in religion

Most of my friends are totally bemused by the fact I am still interested in religion. I am *never* asked to explain or justify my atheism, but I *am* frequently asked to explain why I am still engaged with religion at all. Why would an atheist bother with any of the religious practice or language? I answer them that it is because I find the music, language and ritual of religion useful in prompting a certain way of thinking, or evoking a certain mood or atmosphere. I find that religion is so deeply woven throughout humanity that it is very hard for other human creations to rival it. We have millennia of myth, thought and art, which all reference each other and can always be looked at from new angles and in new combinations.

I grew up surrounded by religion and, whether I believed it or not, I've always taken an interest and it has been part of my life. This simply isn't true for an increasing proportion of the UK population. If you don't grow up with that familiarity and background, or you don't acquire it out of interest at some point in your life, I'm not sure there *is* much to be gained from trying to steep yourself in a particular religion. You will probably be better off searching for the same interest elsewhere.

The Sea of Faith Network

The SOF Network 'explores and promotes religion as a valuable human creation' – and I think more people than ever would agree with the religion as a human creation bit of that – probably including the 22 million people in the

UK (40%) who ticked 'No religion' in the last census. It is the exploring and promoting part that is the struggle. There must be a lot of people who think religion is a human creation, but either aren't bothered to explore it, or aren't looking to explore it through the Network anyway! I apologise for butchering the metaphor in our namesake poem, 'Dover Beach', but what if the tide isn't just going out – to eventually return – what if the sea level is falling.

The Network and other religions

That's the pessimistic view, but perhaps there still are people out there interested in exploring religion as a human creation and it's just that those religions are no longer Christianity. Are there Muslims, Jews and others of a similar mind set to SOF Network members? With some basic internet searching, I haven't found anything that is a clear match. There are 'ex-Muslim' groups in the UK, notably Faith to Faithless which is now part of Humanists UK. Or there is the Movement for Reform Judaism in the UK. Perhaps there are activities we could do with other groups, but ultimately this is not something that will keep the SOF Network going, as I think these audiences will be better served by their own specific organisations. And looking at other religions still doesn't answer the question of all those people who ticked that they did not have a religion in the census.

I've wondered this about the wellbeing and mindfulness movement. There is no structure or organisation to it, but it does feel like there is a coherent increase in people's involvement in wellbeing activities. Imagine a new church in the UK attracting over a quarter of a million people in the morning each weekend, with over 140,000 volunteers – including one with us today. Ok it isn't a church, but I was describing Park Run!

Or how about the 'Harry Potter and the Sacred Text' group I am attending tomorrow? They have three groups in the UK, who read the Harry Potter books as though they were a sacred text. The local groups are inspired by a podcast, which each week takes a chapter of one of the Harry Potter books and reads it with a theme in mind, themes like friendship, anger, tradition. But if you didn't grow up

with the Harry Potter books, perhaps they wouldn't be meaningful to you at all. And that is exactly what I was saying about Christianity!

The importance of presence

Before I joined the Network I knew that as an atheist who was fascinated by religion I was already in a real niche. Certainly the exception amongst the religious, but also the exception amongst the non-religious. So really, to find that there was such a thing as the SOF Network at all was quite remarkable to me!

We might have to adapt ourselves to our more modest membership, but the mere existence of the Network and its legacy are themselves remarkable. We really are unique. We shouldn't hide our light under a bushel – and SOF's 40th year is a good opportunity for us to ensure our legacy is on the record. So even if I am the last one and I have to switch off the lights, I will have been happy to have had some company. And who knows, perhaps the tide will change?

Edward Nickell is Senior Content Development Manager for the NHS. He is SOF Network Secretary.

The Gentle Bush

There you are: lurking in plain sight
not even at the bottom of my garden;
the birds and squirrels know you and at night
the fox will seek your shelter, dodge the moon.
Shaggy, disregarded, a briar rose
climbs through you and little cabbage whites,
my brother once called fairies, flutter at your base;
beneath our walls the tangle of your roots
snakes and coils so slowly a century might pass.
Centuries have passed since this was last a field
where dancers circled, shadows in the grass,
whom only poachers saw and all that told
that they had been, their only residue
those dark rings under the morning dew.

Kathleen McPhilemy

The 'gentle bush' is the hawthorn. This poem is reprinted with permission from Kathleen McPhilemy's latest collection *Back Country* (Littoral Press, Lavenham 2022).