

A Vision to Offer

David Paterson looks back on the history of SOF Network and thinks about the future.

The world has changed a lot since 1987. That was the year when some Anglican clergy in the Leicester Diocese had been meeting together to share their dissatisfaction about the Church. Many Christian clergy – priests, vicars, ministers – though they had learned about the new light thrown on text, doctrine and ritual by modern scholarship, were failing to pass this on to their congregations. Church authorities were still trying to prop up ideas of faith which were no longer viable. Bishops who knew better wouldn't challenge their clergy, vicars were afraid of their bishops and reluctant to shake the faith of the laity, and sceptical people in the congregations didn't dare tell the clergy about their doubts, and many either conformed to or left a Church still deep in denial and collusion.

I had joined this little radical group. Unlike the others I hadn't ever been an Evangelical in any conventional sense, having already rejected the concept of God's existence before I applied for ordination. My motive – half-formed, but deeply felt – was to give my life to the service of truth, justice and compassion. 'God' was just a word you could use to encapsulate these ideals.

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But for some the idea that God was a creation of the human imagination was like a bereavement. We took on the task of providing a route from beliefs which were no longer tenable to something which could really be believed in the light of modern thought (later this was to be termed *A Reasonable Faith*). Loughborough University were to hold their annual Summer Conference, so we decided to run a workshop at it.

Honest to God had long since made waves, and now Don Cupitt had published *Taking Leave of God* and done the TV series *The Sea of Faith*. Two of our group held livings in the gift of Emmanuel College Cambridge, so knew Don as the Warden. We shared our ideas with him, and he gave us the mailing list of those who had responded to the TV series. It was

long, and we soon had too many people wanting to come to our little workshop, so instead it became a conference in its own right. It was very successful, so we did it again the next year. We did not see ourselves as starting a movement, or forming a society or an organisation, but aimed simply to link together people with similar concerns and needs. We called what was emerging a Network, free to develop in its own way, with ourselves and a few others as a Steering Committee to hold it together.

The original purpose of the Network was, then, to reassure people in the Christian Churches that they need not be afraid of their doubts, but should value them. The context was a world in which Christendom was losing its credibility and its influence. To find God we must 'take leave of God'; religion is a human creation, and it is entirely our responsibility. There is no god 'out there', nothing supernatural. It is all contained in human experience and expressed in human language.

Much has changed since then. Christianity – contrary to widespread predictions for over a century – didn't die. It lost its power over British society, perhaps, but in the world as a whole the religions have moved centre-stage. Don was right as he explored the Christian tradition in the light of modern Western philosophy, but there were other things going on. And the form of religion which has become more powerful is fundamentalism. This has been particularly so in two economically and culturally important communities – Christianity in the United States and Islam in the oil-rich nations of the Middle East – but it can be seen in Judaism and Hinduism as well. When threatened, the instinct is to barricade yourself in and fight tooth-and-nail. Religion is a source of power. Rival truth-claims by religions have always been a seed of conflict, and now they have become a major danger.

In this changing world, the Sea of Faith Network – in my opinion – failed to move with the times. It is true that support for radical thinkers within the Churches remains necessary. That's a battle that will not go away. But the world as a whole has much bigger problems to face. Religion as a force for good – a source of insight and compassion, a prophetic critique of power struggles and greed, a vehicle of respect, co-operation and peace-making – has been lost in truth-claims, dogmas and pontificating about ethics. Most of what flourishes is bad religion. Does the Network have a vision of good religion to offer?

There's an energetic dialogue going on now. Anti-religious atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and others usually get mentioned) are news. And surely we should be out there too in that debate. There are many things we might be saying. That the Church should listen to its critics. That theist religion must plead guilty to the charges against it. We might acknowledge the harm ethical

monotheism has done. And we might suggest that the atheists listen to what Hindu, Pagan, Buddhist and many other faiths have been saying and living for centuries, very different from the stereotype of 'religion' (= dogmatic ethical monotheism) which they rightly oppose. And we might seek to demonstrate how much of human thought, emotion and behaviour is not rational. Our minds do lots more than think. So although the scientific method is a marvellous tool for explaining things, making models, finding new understanding, inventing ever-growing new techniques, that's not all that we humans do with our lives. Wonder, love and hope are perhaps more central. Science **can** – I don't doubt – **explain** these, and the explanation may well be very important; but people also **live** them, they gossip about them, write stories, paint pictures, play music and take part in rituals about them. The world is an inspiring place for us. Explaining it all can make it even more exciting, but we mustn't let explanation replace or destroy our experience of this treasury of delights.

In itself, the cosmos is meaningless. Meaning is a human creation, a human concept, a human need which we must provide. This need has evolved in our huge brains. Science, the arts and the religions have also evolved – they weren't created – and they are still evolving. In biological evolution a large gene pool is vital for healthy flourishing and development. It's the same with religion. In embracing new ways of celebrating the cosmos, there's no need to throw away the old ones. You never know when an ancient insight from the other side of the world may come in useful. There is no final answer, and all human systems of understanding have deep flaws, contradictions and



'Mercy and Truth have met together, Justice and Peace have kissed each other.' – EVELYN DE MORGAN. c. 1900

inadequacies in them, often unseen without a historical perspective. We need to be able to stand outside the ideas of our own place and time, our culture, assumptions and obsessions. The 'search for truth' is always contingent, provisional and plural.

The Sea of Faith Network – in my view – has ways of addressing the issues which should place it at the heart of these debates. Its specific contribution is to provide a basis – namely, that all religions, including one's own, are human creations – that might enable atheists, humanists, secularists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Sikhs, Pagans and many others to listen to one another's insights, value them, challenge them, learn from them and be constantly developing new insights from the encounter. The Network is nowhere near that yet; but, in my view, that should be our aim.

I don't think any religion need be ashamed of its origins. The same applies to the Sea of Faith Network. It was originally formed to support new thinking in the Anglican Church (though for me at any rate a wider understanding of world religions was always important). Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, from which our name comes (via Don's TV series) is beautiful and sad. It doesn't argue anything, but observes and reflects on the human plight, responds emotionally and purposefully. The Network over the years has evolved many totally different ways of using the metaphor – sailing on the Sea of Faith, exploring its vastness, risking its dangers, plumbing its depths, surfing its waves, and many more. It would be a pity to lose such a rich source of metaphor. It still calls itself a Network. I don't think anyone has used that as a metaphor for catching fish (probably just as well!), but

rather for linking together very diverse people and movements who share a concern for the future evolution of human ideas; and that remains apposite. If we decide to change our name, it should – if possible – be to one with a similar emphasis on immensity, variety, uncertainty and depth.

On the other hand, maybe we should drop ‘faith’ because it’s a concept compromised by its common usage to mean truth-claims and dependence on irrational methods of thought. But maybe our message requires that we redeem the word, insisting on other meanings which celebrate the complexity of the cosmos. Sea of Faith is an awkward name, but I wouldn’t like to change it until we agree on something more rather than less evocative.

But, to conclude: It would be easy to say that the Sea of Faith Network no longer has a rôle; to accept that its time has past and it should die. But I see a continually-evolving rôle for it. We should be asserting our ideas in the public debate, concentrating perhaps on university students, helping to shape the terms of the discussion. We should be finding common ground with those who are exploring issues of philosophy and religion; seeking to influence the way R.E. is taught in schools (there are lots of opportunities there); getting involved in interfaith dialogue, exploring with all faiths the implications of understanding faith as a human creation; promoting, as essential to democracy, a secularism which would value the insights of all faiths, while allowing none to dominate or become powerful. We should insist that humanist values (or, better, the values of respect for **all** life) should be the test of validity for any religion.

I would like to see us as deeply involved as we can be in our own religions, and in atheist, humanist and secular societies, specially among students through AHS (the nationwide Association of Atheist, Humanist and Secular student societies) and the Student Christian Movement. We should be using the electronic communication systems – our own web and blog sites, the e-newsletters of many organisations, Twitter, Facebook *et al.* In fact, any modern ways of networking.

We should be confident that we have a great deal to offer in helping to shape the future of humanity, and in that confidence we should be listening to all that is going on in human understanding – scientific, philosophical and religious.

David Paterson is a founder member and former Chair of SOF. At present he runs the Oxford SOF Group and sits on SOF Board of Trustees.



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