

**A
REASONABLE FAITH**

**Introducing the
Sea of Faith Network**



By David Boulton

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Taking the Plunge

Most of us think of ourselves as seekers: seekers after knowledge, seekers after truth. If our lives have purpose, we would like to find it. If life itself has meaning, we would love to know what it is. Life is commonly seen as a journey, a pilgrimage, and we travel more securely if we think we know where we are going.

Religion sometimes offers clear-cut answers, promises to reveal Truth, unveils mysteries, and shows us the road mapped out for us in the Great Cosmic Plan. In an uncertain world, it claims to offer certainties, safety and salvation.

If you are looking for clear-cut answers, absolute truths, moral and spiritual certainties, then read no further. Sea of Faith offers none of these. Life just isn't that simple!

Instead, we must make our own meaning, create our own purpose, find ways of working out our own salvation. Not alone, as isolated individuals, but together, in community. That's a tall order, a challenge, an adventure.

If the adventure appeals, you may find that the Sea of Faith Network has something to offer you, and that you have something to offer the Sea of Faith Network. If you don't want to settle for take-away truths, ready-made, written in the Book, you may like to take a dip with us and start making waves. The Sea of Faith Network has no orthodoxy of its own, no line to push, no official formulation of truth. We call ourselves a "network", rather than something more formal and institutional, precisely because we see ourselves as autonomous individuals, each with our own stories, traditions, insights, disciplines.

So it follows that my way of introducing the Sea of Faith Network is bound to be different from someone else's. It is one member's view: nothing more. It inevitably reflects my own background - which happens to be Quaker and Humanist. An Anglican, Jewish or Buddhist member of the Network would no doubt write differently - though always from the shared viewpoint which sees all religious faith as a human creation. That is why this booklet, like all Network publications, carries the necessary health warning that opinions expressed herein are those of the author and must not be assumed to be shared in every detail by all members. Nor does anything I say express "official" Network policy, since we are not that kind of organisation.

This applies even when I venture, as I occasionally do, to write "we" rather than "I". "I" is a tedious pronoun; and in any case, even a Network of individuals is not so atomised as to lead us to proclaim that there is no such word as "we". Thus, for instance, we do not believe that every individual man, woman and child, in isolation from each other, creates her or his own religion, his or her own god. Human societies, human collectives, have shaped our wholly human religious traditions. So of course I can say "We in the Network...". But remember that the "we" is my we: my view of what the Network, or most of its members, might agree on.

I have called this booklet *A Reasonable Faith* for two reasons. One has to do with historical resonances. A booklet with this title was published in 1884 and proved an important factor in the transformation of the Society of Friends (my own tradition) from a conservative and unreasoning sect into a liberal body ready to embrace modern thought. But there is a more important reason. I want to emphasise, simply and without compromise, that our "faith", our philosophy, our world-view, must be reasonable and rational if it is to have any value. The alternative - an unreasonable, irrational faith - is not only pointless but immeasurably dangerous.

But of course I do not mean to imply that Sea of Faith alone offers a reasonable and rational faith. Nor do I want to suggest that Reason has some existence of its own, some god-given status which puts it beyond human culture. I urge a reasonable faith: but I understand very well that human reason has its limits.

If, after reading further, you find yourself broadly in sympathy with our view of religious faith as a human creation, something which despite all its distortions and bigotries retains its ancient capacity to enlighten and inspire, then you may wish to join us. And if you do take the plunge, you will find that we value imagination no less than reason, heart no less than head.

Here, then, are some of the questions I am most frequently asked about the Network, with some (provisional) answers.

"We see that religion is wholly of this world, wholly human, wholly our own responsibility, and that it has become ethically active and militant. It is religion that has raised us out of the dark, chaotic unconsciousness of Nature and has made us human; for religion just is our values, expressed in our social institutions and practices... The historic task of religion, of embodying our values, witnessing to them, conserving them, setting them forth in symbols and securing their realisation in human life, remains unchanged. It will be performed all the better after the painted veil of illusion that has hitherto hidden its workings has finally dropped away."

Don Cupitt, The Sea of Faith (1984).

What is the Sea of Faith Network?

Many people have heard of Sea of Faith but are not very clear what it is, what it does and what it stands for. The Network has had more than its share of media publicity, some of which has suggested that it is an organization - of "Godless vicars" or "atheist priests", or a special-interest lobby within the churches, or a plot to infiltrate religion with humanism, or the start of a new sect. It is none of these things.

Sea of Faith is an informal network of men and women, some attached to places of worship, some not, who accept the modern view that all the religious faith traditions are wholly human creations, not the product of "revelation" from some extra-human source. What this means, and its implications for what we mean by God, prayer and "faith" itself is the subject of this booklet. I simply want to emphasise here that this view of religion as a human creation is the common denominator which brings together an otherwise very diverse group of people: radical Christians and "post-Christians", humanists, and liberals in some of the many faith traditions which are now firmly established in Britain.

Within this informal network, in local groups or by personal contact, in national conferences, magazines and newsletters, mailings and through the Internet, members support each other, share their experiences, and explore the implications of their shared view of religion as a human creation.

Some are clergy: men and women from most of the mainstream Christian denominations and other traditions, including the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and the nonconformist churches. Some are determined to stay within their chosen or inherited tradition, refusing to abandon it to the fundamentalists or those who cling to pre-modern supernaturalist notions. Some only hang in there by their fingernails. Some have broken with organised religion altogether, or have never been involved with it, but want to maintain dialogue with those who see humanity's religious quest as one way, along with poetry and music, all the arts and all the sciences, of making sense of the human condition and giving imaginative expression to the human spirit.

So the Sea of Faith Network is not an exclusively Christian organisation. While it includes many churchpeople, it is equally open to members of all faiths and of none.

Sea of Faith is not a sect. It has no hierarchy, and no leader. Nor does it have even a minimal creed. Even its stated objects, "to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation", are intentionally ambiguous and provisional. If that gives the Network a tendency to anarchy, it is an anarchy tempered by care and concern for each other. No doubt is too shocking, no idea too challenging, to be expressed within the Network. Sea of Faith is a network of friends and acquaintances on a shared, open-minded quest for a rational and creative framework for the one life we have to live.

How did the Network start?

In the 1960s Bishop John Robinson published *Honest to God*, arguing that it had become anachronistic in the modern world to think of God as a Being or Super-Person "out there". God was better understood as "within" rather than outside. Although this idea had a long history, especially in the mystical and religious humanist traditions and the Society of Friends (Quakers), it caused quite a stir in church circles - not least because it was expressed in clear, simple language which the man and woman in the pew could understand, and published in a cheap paperback edition which everyone could afford!

Then in 1980 the Rev. Don Cupitt, Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, published *Taking Leave of God*, described as "a resumption of the discussion about the nature of God begun by John Robinson and shelved for too long". Taking his title from a sermon by the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, who said that "Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God", Cupitt argued that "an objective metaphysical God is no longer either intellectually secure nor even morally satisfactory as a basis for spiritual life". Instead, "faith in God must be understood as expressing an autonomous decision to pursue the religious ideal for its own sake". Theological realism belief in an objectively "real" God, somehow outside and independent of human consciousness - had to be replaced by a free, agnostic faith with no certainties and no guarantees.

Taking Leave of God was denounced by some churchmen as "atheist" and welcomed by others as a modern expression of Christian or religious humanism. As the debate raged, Cupitt was invited by the BBC to make a six-part television series charting the transition from traditional "realist" religion to "the twentieth century view that religion is simply human": a view he called "nonrealism" (which is not to be confused with unrealistic!). The series, and the book which accompanied it, was called *The Sea of Faith*.

In the wake of the broad debate provoked by the series, small groups of radical clergy and church members began meeting to discuss ways of exploring and promoting this renewed understanding of what religion was about. Starting with a mailing list of 143 potential sympathisers, they organised a national "exploratory conference for radical Christians" in 1988, followed by another twelve months later. Three months after the second conference, in October 1989, the decision was made to set up a Sea of Faith Network "to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation". The words "radical", "Christian", "non-realist" and "church" were deliberately omitted from the minutes of the meeting, to broaden the range of membership to embrace humanists, others with no formal religious allegiance, and those who identified with a religious faith-tradition other than Christian.

The founding members set up a Steering Committee, membership grew, the conference became an annual event, a quarterly *Sea of Faith* magazine was published and some twenty local groups were established. The media discovered Sea of Faith, and some of those who had been thrust into the front line, found themselves interrogated by reporters seeking to expose this new breed of godless men of God (and it was mainly men in those days!). Membership applications began to come in from Europe, America and South Africa, and a flourishing Sea of Faith Network was formed in New Zealand, building on the pioneering work begun there by Professor Lloyd Geering in the 1960s.

In 1994 the Bishop of Chichester sacked the priest in charge at Staplefield, the Rev. Anthony Freeman, for publishing a book (subversive things, books!) called *God in Us* expressing Sea of Faith views in simple, direct language. Freeman was the first Anglican clergyman this century to be dismissed for publishing theological opinions unacceptable to his bishop. The resultant publicity produced a big boost in Network membership. Meanwhile, radical or non-realist theology began to be taken seriously in academic circles, and started making waves in groups as stylistically different as the Anglican church and the Society of Friends.

At its 1994 AGM, after five years of growth, the Network adopted a formal but "minimalist" constitution designed to safeguard it against the development of hierarchical and patriarchal structures and to ensure that control remains with its members. A Steering Committee is elected annually to serve the membership, organise annual conferences, and generally further the work of the Network. The constitution, like the Network's statement of objectives, is open to change and renewal, for Sea of Faith stands for a law written not on tablets of stone but in human hearts.

The Network currently (1997) has a membership approaching a thousand in Britain, with several hundred in its sister network in New Zealand. Local groups often attract a wider circle of "attenders" who sample what is on offer in their area before deciding whether to join the national Network. I shall return later to the subject of what the Network actually does.

"Just as certain world religions say that people who do not believe in a personal God outside themselves are atheists, we say that a person who does not believe in himself is an atheist. Not believing in the splendour of one's own soul is what we call atheism"

Swami Vivekenanda

Why "Sea of Faith"?

Sea of Faith may seem a strange name. It derives, of course, from the title of Don Cupitt's television series and book. But where did he get it from, what does it mean — and, in particular, what is meant here by "faith"?

In 1867 Matthew Arnold published his poem *Dover Beach* in which he pictures himself beneath the famous white cliffs, on a moonlit night, listening to:

*"...the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
...and bring
The eternal note of sadness in".*

The sound of the receding tide brings to his mind another receding sea, the "Sea of Faith", an image of declining religion. He hears:

*"Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."*

As Cupitt puts it, the poem "expressed the sense, common in his time, that the ancient supernatural world of gods and spirits which had surrounded mankind since the first dawn of consciousness was at last inexorably slipping away".

So Cupitt lifted "Sea of Faith" for his own title. But for him the decline of traditional religion and its superstructures was not, as it was for Arnold, a sad and melancholy business, but an opportunity to create something new for the modern or post-modern age: a human idealism, religious in its deep seriousness of purpose and commitment, but freed from the authoritarianism and supernaturalism of the old "gods and spirits" which had sometimes inspired but often terrorised humankind.

As W.B. Yeats was to write in response to Arnold (in *The Nineteenth Century and After*),

*"Though the great song return no more
There's keen delight in what we have:
The rattle of pebbles on the shore
Under the receding wave."*

***"Cupitt lifted 'Sea of Faith' for his own title.
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"How can a Humanist be religious? Is not religion necessarily concerned with supernatural powers. The answer is 'No'. Religion of some sort seems always to have been a feature of man's life: but some religions are not concerned with God, and some not with any supernatural beings at all. Religions are of many kinds, good and bad, primitive and advanced: but they all have one thing in common - they help man to cope with the problem of his place and role in the strange universe in which he lives. Religion...aims at helping people to transcend their petty or selfish or guilty selves."

Sir Julian Huxley

The Faith of a Humanist, 1960

The sea provides other useful images. It is ceaselessly changing, never standing still, never fixed, always in motion, having no permanent form or shape. Try pinning the sea down! Traditional metaphysical religion was fixed, unchangeable, firm. It was rock, where contemporary faith must ride the wave, the swell, embracing perpetual motion.

But why speak of "faith" at all? Not because we see any merit in "having faith" in unprovable religious dogmas and doctrines. We do not set up "faith" against reason, as metaphysical religion tended to do, nor do we use it as a synonym for blind belief. Faith for us is the trust that it is possible to give value and meaning to life: we can't prove it, but we choose to live by that faith, to trust to it, much as we choose to have faith in our friends and lovers. In this sense every world-view which offers value, purpose and meaning is a "faith", whether "religious" or not.

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Explain what you mean when you say religion is a "human creation". Does that apply to God too?

People have always believed that other people's religion was man-made, but have often assumed that their own was revealed by God. This produced difficulties for thinking people. Why should God reveal the Truth only to Jews, or Christians, or Moslems? One answer was that God revealed his Truth to all peoples, but only one group (invariably the one to which we happen to belong) interpreted him correctly. Another answer was that God planted some knowledge of himself in all human hearts but different cultures then codified this implanted knowledge into different religious systems. This might make sense if all religions witnessed to the same truths and lived in mutually supportive peaceful co-existence, but they notoriously do not. The unhappy history of religion is one of mutual intolerance, persecution and holy war. Some major religions, and particularly Christianity, have insisted that they alone have God's Truth: "No man cometh unto the Father but by me". So to admit that other faiths are also divinely inspired seems to be a denial of a central teaching of one's own tradition.

The assumption that one religion our religion - is the true one and all others are merely human and false is understandable when there is more or less complete ignorance of the beliefs and practices of the others, as used to be the case when east was east and west west and ne'er the twain met. But the twentieth century shrinking of the world has changed all that. Not only do we read about other cultures in our newspapers and see them on television, but in increasing numbers we invade them for our holidays or on business. Most important of all, here in our own country we have been transformed in the last half-century into a multicultural, multi-faith society.

So we have come to learn that all faith traditions have developed gradually, shaped by human processes, human history, human culture and human language. Religion is no different in this respect from music, poetry, painting. It is, as they are, an expression of human creativity, an outpouring of the human spirit. This, then, is what we mean when we acknowledge that all religious faith is a "human creation" - and not necessarily any the worse for that!

Where, then, does that leave God? First, not all faith traditions have an identical God-concept, and some have no God-concept at all. Buddhism, for example, is non-theistic, and Hinduism has divinity expressed in a huge variety of forms. But the creator-God has been, and remains, central to the three major monotheist traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Have they all made a big mistake in believing that their one God created the world, and humankind in his own image?

I suggest that there has been a growing understanding within all three traditions, but particularly within liberal Christianity and Judaism, that the God traditionally worshipped as the source of our being cannot be wholly divorced from humanity. God, as William Blake put it two hundred years ago, "resides in the human breast". God is love, and love is human. To quote Blake again, "Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love is God"; but Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love is also "Man..."

For Mercy has a *human* heart,
Pity a *human* face,
And Love the *human* form divine,
And Peace the *human* dress."

So yes, we are saying with Bishop John Robinson that God is not a metaphysical entity "out there". Such a God is too small. "He" is no longer credible. God is, and always was, a metaphor for the values which, though we understand them to be generated by human culture, we have come to think of as "ultimate" and "eternal": Blake's mercy, pity, peace and love, but also justice, compassion, truth, integrity, beauty.

After all, most educated "believers", with the exception of fundamentalists (those who still believe in the literal truth of the bible, from Adam and Eve, through Jonah and the "whale", to the virgin birth of Jesus) have gradually abandoned the idea that angels and demons, including the devil himself, are "real" objective beings. Instead, they are seen as figurative and allegorical, human projections of good and evil. A "real", objective God is for many modern believers the sole survivor of this ancient belief-system. But Sea of Faith suggests it is time to "take leave" of a "real" God "out there", to recognise that "he" too is figurative and allegorical. This is not to deny the reality of the experience which is sometimes described as "experience of God", but it is to understand the experience and its reality in a different way.

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Isn't this just atheistic humanism dressed up as "radical religion"?

It is humanism, certainly, but "atheistic" demands definition. If an atheist is defined as one who does not believe in a "real" metaphysical God, a God who exists independently of human consciousness, then Sea of Faith may be called atheist - but you will then have to apply the term to many Christians, particularly in the mystical tradition, who have always understood God as metaphor and symbol. You will also have to label as atheist many eastern religious traditions, including Buddhism and those strains of Hinduism which interpret their gods allegorically. If the term "atheist" is to retain a distinctive meaning, as it should, it must surely describe the belief that all concepts of God and gods are meaningless, mere delusions. This may be the position of some members of Sea of Faith, who would argue that the word "God" has become so debased by "his" professed followers that it is best dropped altogether. But others within the Network are reluctant to leave God to the literalists. For them the God of the old God-stories, interpreted as metaphor and symbol, remains a living experience. That's not atheism as it is generally understood!

But I readily accept that it is a form of humanism. Humanism is a dirty word in some circles because some humanist organisations have seemed more concerned to attack each and every form of religion than to concentrate on the positive promotion of human values and human autonomy. But that is changing. There is a growing tendency among humanists to acknowledge that humanism has many expressions, including the celebration of human values and the human spirit in religious language and practice; and this is paralleled by a growing awareness within the churches that values, whether they are labeled "religious" or "secular", are essentially human. So Sea of Faith has become a place where humanism and radical religion meet and overlap, and "humanist" has taken its place alongside "radical", "post-Christian", "non-literalist" and "non-realist" as alternative descriptions we have come to use of ourselves within the Network.

This does not mean that we worship Humanity, setting it up as a new god. We have no illusions about the perfectibility of man- or woman-kind. Our species is capable of great good, and of unimaginable evil - and it is one species among many, differentiated from others by its consciousness and self-consciousness, which we are only just beginning to understand. That gives us unique responsibility: responsibility we cannot transfer to some celestial being imagined as wholly independent of human history, language and culture.

But if there are no absolute standards of right and wrong, doesn't this lead to moral anarchy: a "me first", "every man for himself" attitude? Isn't this individualism run riot?

We all acknowledge that the laws of the land are made by our representatives in Parliament: all too human beings. But we don't say that, because our laws are human-made rather than God-given, we can pick and choose which laws we are going to obey, or write our own statute book. We acknowledge that laws evolve by human consensus and their authority is dependent on that consensus. As times and conditions change, so we change our laws too. Laws, then, are relative, though for centuries they were perceived as absolute.

It is the same with the moral law. This action is "right" and that action "wrong", not because an external God says so but because we human beings, together, in community, have so decided. Some actions — murder, rape, theft, but also dishonesty, betrayal, selfishness — have such an overwhelming weight of consensus against them that we have come to think of them as "absolutely" wrong. But there are many issues, such as the use of force for just ends, or the complexities of sexual relationships, on which there is no consensus and opinions differ.

Nor do we escape the human responsibility of distinguishing right from wrong if we choose to look to an ultimate and absolute authority to decide for us — for we still have to interpret the word of that ultimate authority, whether it be God, the bible or the church, and interpretation is necessarily and unavoidably human, culturally conditioned, provisional — and fallible.

While we all have a responsibility to our own individual conscience, the business of making moral judgements devolves largely on our human community. It is in community, in society with others, through common experience and culture, that we generate our ideas of right and wrong. This is the opposite of moral anarchy or rampant individualism.

How can a Sea of Faith priest or minister recite creeds he or she doesn't believe, or lead the church in prayer?

This is one of the most frequently asked questions. It puzzles literal-minded believers and nonbelievers alike.

Many Sea of Faith members do not belong to creed-based churches or religious organisations, so for them there is no problem. Some who have been brought up in a creed-based church have left it rather than participate in a recitation of propositions they no longer find meaningful. But others happily repeat creeds and, for that matter, sing hymns containing statements they do not believe literally. So what do they - whether priests or congregation - think they are doing?

First, we should recognise that in the case of the Church of England the ancient creeds are officially described as "formularies", attempts by earlier generations of Christians to express their beliefs in words. But neither priests nor lay-people are required by the church to interpret these formularies literally or regard them as timeless, unchanging expressions of "truth". To recite the creed (or sing a hymn) is to reaffirm the tradition, to connect with the past, to glory in the poetry. But it does not imply assent to, or a literal understanding of, every proposition formulated by church fathers centuries ago, often after bitter debate and compromise. If it did, many a bishop would feel conscience-bound to leave the church! This applies no less to Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other liturgical traditions than it does to the Church of England.

Again, use of prayer books, set prayers, and even extempore prayers need not necessarily imply a belief that "someone" "out there" is "hearing" what is said and "answering" it, all by some supernatural process. The psychological utility of prayer is widely recognised, as is the fact that collective prayer can motivate collective action. A heartfelt desire for peace may find expression in prayer, which may then energise practical efforts at peacemaking. Prayer-as-action rather than prayer-as-petition remains potent for many. As the old Quaker poem puts it, "Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer".

I might add that there is a rising interest in what theologians call the apophatic tradition, with its emphasis on silence, contemplation, and a concept of God as being beyond anything we can possibly say about "him". Many people find this tradition of

*"O how may I ever express that secret word?
O how can I say that He is not like this, and He is like that?
If I say that He is within me, the universe is ashamed:
If I say that He is without me, it is a falsehood.
He makes the inner and the outer worlds to be indivisibly one:
The conscious and the unconscious are both his footstools.
He is neither manifest nor hidden, He is neither revealed nor unrevealed:
There are no words to tell that which He is."*

Kabir, Songs 1 104

(Hindu/Muslim, 15th century)

“prayer” or “worship” has more to offer them than the highly structured “service”, with its verbal liturgies and litanies. The Sea of Faith Steering Committee, and some local groups, make a practice of starting every meeting with a short period of silence, rather in the style of a Quaker “meeting for worship”. Whether individual members think of this as a time for prayer, meditation, contemplation or getting themselves in the right state of mind is of little consequence. What is real is the silence, and its role in preparing minds for the business that follows.

So there are in SoF those who happily recite creeds as a badge of belonging to their tradition, in an expressive rather than a propositional way, and those whose traditions simply lack (or have discarded) the badge. Again, some in the Network think it important to work within their tradition as a valid vehicle for human spirituality or values, helping to adapt and refine it to meet the needs and insights of contemporary life, while others prefer to cut loose and make a fresh start. Each respects the other — not least because many of us can never quite make up our minds to which of the two groups we really belong!

I would add that, as a Quaker and a Humanist, I personally do not recite creeds or formularies. But I do sing in a secular choir which from time to time will tackle the classic settings of the Mass by the great composers. I do not refuse to open my mouth when we get to “Credo in unum Deum”. For me, as for the rest of the choir and musicians, and the audience (and probably the composer, for that matter), the music and words together express the heights and depths of the human spirit. It would be absurdly literalist to refuse to sing just because I don't believe that a real Son is really sitting at the real right hand of a real Father. So I understand that creeds may be said and sung in church with exactly the same expressive intent. Indeed, I suspect that is how most worshippers in most traditions use religious language.

What about life after death?

A Sea of Faith view would have it that concepts of "eternal life", "life after death", "Heaven" and "Hell" are necessarily human constructs. Just as Heaven and Hell are now widely understood as states of mind in this life, so traditional doctrines of eternal life are ways of expressing the profound conviction, common in all cultures (and confirmed, of course, by modern biological science), that we are part of a process which began long before our birth and will continue long after our death. Indeed, it is precisely because every individual life makes its own unique contribution to the drama of the living universe that it is seen as having "eternal" significance. And it is precisely because our one life in this world is all that we have that we must make the most of it. To see life "here below" as a mere preparation for joys above (or horrors in outer darkness) — that is to diminish it, to trivialise it. We reject such reductionism.

*This is beginning to sound very
rationalist. Is Sea of Faith all head
and no heart?*

Hardly! We do think it is important to fashion a rational and reasonable faith, since, as I suggested at the beginning, the alternative is an irrational and unreasonable one. But no faith is fully human if it excludes the emotions, imagination and the creative spirit. A faith which fails to recognise anything beyond reason and logic will never change the world for the better, just as a faith based solely on intuition, instinct and emotion, lumped together as "spirituality", may change it for the worse.

We need head and heart together: reason and imagination, history and mystery. The human spirit finds expression in poetry as well as philosophy, the arts as well as the sciences, deeds as well as words, contemplation as well as action. Gerrard Winstanley in the seventeenth century said "God is Reason". William Blake a century later said "God is Imagination". I would enrol them both as honorary founder-members of the Sea of Faith Network.

What does the Network actually do?

We are still quite a small group. If we all met together we would barely fill a provincial town hall or theatre. So we can't claim that we are changing the world. But we are not just a talking shop.

The Network's central event is the three-day annual conference, usually held in July on a university campus. "Conference" is an inadequate description of the heady mix of lectures, discussions, practical workshops and creative activities on offer. Among those who have accepted invitations to speak are Don Cupitt, Bishop John Spong, Nicholas Walter and Mary Warnock. Art, poetry and creative writing workshops are regular features, and the implications of "religious faith as a human creation" - theological and philosophical, liturgical, political, ethical, ecological and creative are regular themes. Humanism or "non-realism" can be a lonely business in your local church or community, but the SoF conference brings together like minds ("like" in a common openness, if not necessarily common opinions) in mutual support and growth.

The Network also produces a quarterly Sea of Faith magazine, *Sofia*, distributed free to all members, on sale to non-members, and open to contributions from all quarters. The magazine is a forum for the continuing exploration and promotion of Sea of Faith views, and a vital link between members. It is backed by a growing series of booklets, and occasional newsletters keep members informed of activities and events of interest.

Then there are the local Sea of Faith groups spread throughout the country. These are autonomous bodies, some meeting monthly, some quarterly, some preferring open, unstructured discussion, others organising lectures, workshops and one-day events. For many members who cannot get to the Network annual conference, the local groups offer opportunities to get together for mutual support, constructive debate and shared experiences.

The Network has also been active in supporting members whose views have got them into trouble with church or other authorities.

"A person who is religiously enlightened appears to me to be one who has, to the best of his ability, liberated himself from the fetters of his selfish desires and is preoccupied with thoughts, feelings and aspirations to which he clings because of their super-personal value. It seems to me that what is important is the force of this super-personal content and the depth of conviction concerning its overpowering meaningfulness, regardless of whether any attempt is made to unite this content with a divine Being."

*Albert Einstein
Science and Religion, 1941*

When the Rev. Anthony Freeman was sacked by his bishop for arguing that religious faith was wholly human, members of the Network organised letters and articles in the press, and arranged interviews on radio and television, to ensure that the action was fully publicised and widely debated. Anglican members of the Network, appropriately enough, were particularly active in organising support far beyond Sea of Faith's own ranks, and this has encouraged other members to work together within their own denomination or institution to win either toleration or active support for religious humanism as a valid expression of faith.

The Network is also beginning to develop informal special-interest groups. Women members have published their own anthology of women's writing, priests and committed churchpeople are meeting to discuss common interests, and members with a concern for encouraging radical new approaches to religious education in schools are beginning to work together, seeking allies among other religious radicals and humanist groups. And of course you will find Sea of Faith members active in a huge variety of humanitarian causes, from Amnesty International to radical social action and green activism. In these and many other practical ways, the Network makes its own contribution to the historic task of religious and social radicalism: comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, putting down the mighty from their seats and exalting the humble and meek.

So how do I join?

By dropping a line to:

The Membership Secretary,
28 Frederick Road,
Birmingham, B15 1JN

He will send you a membership form with current subscription rates, and details of your nearest local group.

You can also do this on our website:

<http://www.sofn.org.uk/pages/join.html>

If you want to stay in touch with the Network without actually joining, you may choose to subscribe to *Sofia*, the Sea of Faith magazine at a reduced rate. Again, the Membership Secretary will be pleased to send you details.

You can also do this on our website:

<http://www.sofn.org.uk/sofia/index.html>

If you share our view of religious faith as a human creation, or think it worth exploring further, we'll be delighted to welcome you. The Network should have something to offer - and no doubt you will have something to offer the Network.

For further information visit our website at:

<http://www.sofn.org.uk/>

A Reasonable Faith aims to give the general reader an introduction to the ideas and activities of Sea of Faith, a non-denominational, inter-faith network which explores and promotes religious faith as a human creation. Here, an imaginative humanism and a rational, non-supernatural view of religious experience meet to generate a fresh understanding of human meaning and purpose in an age which is said to have seen the "death of God".

David Boulton is a Quaker attender and a humanist. The author of several books and a documentary film-maker who won the Royal Television Society's award "for creative services to television", he has been editor of *Sea of Faith* magazine.