

Sea of Faith Network

"Exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation..."

About Sea of Faith

The Sea of Faith Network - Who we are

How we started

The Sea of Faith (SoF) Network takes its name from the 1984 TV series and book of the same name written and presented by Don Cupitt.

In this six-part series, the philosopher, theologian, Anglican priest and one-time Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge surveyed western thinking about religion and charted the transition from traditional realist religion to the twentieth-century view that religion is simply a human creation.

The name Sea of Faith is taken from Matthew Arnold's nostalgic 19th-century poem Dover Beach in which the poet expresses regret that belief in a supernatural world is slowly slipping away; the sea of faith is withdrawing like the ebbing tide.

Following the TV series a small group of radical Christian clergy and laity began meeting to explore how they might promote this new understanding of religious faith. Starting with a mailing list of 143 sympathisers they organised the first UK conference in 1988. A second conference was held in the following year shortly after which the SoF Network was officially launched. Annual national conferences have been a key event of the network ever since.

What we do

In addition to national conferences, a number of regional conferences and promotional events are held each year. There is an active network of local groups who meet regularly for discussion and exploration. In the UK a high-quality magazine is published bi-monthly, which has a circulation beyond its membership, and the network runs a web site (www.sofn.org.uk) and an on-line discussion group. Currently there are national networks in New Zealand and Australia with scattered membership in the USA, Northern Ireland, South Africa and France. The world-wide membership, as of 2004, stood at about 2,000. Each national network is run by a steering committee elected from its members.

What we believe

SoF has no official creed or statement of belief to which members are required to assent, seeing itself as a loose network rather than a formal religious movement or organisation. Its stated aim is to 'explore and promote religious faith as a human creation'. In this it spans a broad spectrum of faith positions from uncompromising non-realism at one end to critical realism at the other. Some members describe themselves as on the Liberal or Radical wing of conventional belief while others choose to call themselves Religious or

Christian Humanists.

SoF possesses no religious writings or ceremonies of its own; some members remain active in their own religion (mainly but not exclusively Christian) while others have no religious affiliation at all.

What we think

SoF is most closely associated with the non-realist approach to religion. This refers to the belief that God has no 'real', objective or empirical existence, independent of human language and culture; God is 'real' in the sense that he is a potent symbol, metaphor or projection, but He has no objective existence outside and beyond the practice of religion. Non-realism therefore entails a rejection of all supernaturalism - miracles, afterlife and the agency of spirits.

'God is the sum of our values, representing to us their ideal unity, their claims upon us and their creative power'. (Taking Leave of God, Don Cupitt, SCM, 1980)

Cupitt calls this 'a voluntarist interpretation of faith': 'a fully demythologized version of Christianity'. It entails the claim that even after we have given up the idea that religious beliefs can be grounded in anything beyond the human realm, religion can still be believed and practiced in new ways.

Don Cupitt's influence

Since he began writing in 1971 Cupitt has produced 36 books and during this time his views have continued to evolve and change. Thus, in his early books such as Taking Leave of God and The Sea of Faith Cupitt talks of God alone as non-real but by the end of the Eighties he has moved into all-out postmodernism, describing his position as empty radical humanism - there is nothing but our language, our world, and the meanings, truths and interpretations that we have generated. Everything is non-real - including God.

While Cupitt was the founding influence of SoF and is much respected for his work for the network it would not be true to say that he is regarded as a guru or leader of SoF. Members are free to dissent from his views and Cupitt himself has argued strongly that SoF should never be a fan club. Both Cupitt and the network emphasise the importance of autonomous critical thought and reject authoritarianism in all forms.

SoF books & websites

- UK website <http://www.sofn.org.uk>
- New Zealand website <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>
- Australian website <http://www.sof-in-australia.org>
- Taking Leave of God, Don Cupitt, SCM, 1980
- The Sea of Faith, Don Cupitt, SCM, 1984
- God in Our Hands, Graham Shaw, SCM, 1987
- God in Us, Anthony Freeman, SCM, 1993
- Faith in Doubt: Non-realism and Christian Belief, David Hart, Mowbrays, 1993
- A Reasonable Faith: Introducing SoF Network, David Boulton, SoF, 1996
- Agenda for Faith, Stephen Mitchell, SoF, 1997
- Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and Writings of Don Cupitt, Nigel Leaves, Polebridge Press, 2004

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