

Interview with Don Cupitt

John Shuck interviewed Don Cupitt in his *Religion for Life* programme – religionforlife.com – broadcast on KBOO Community Radio (Portland, OR, USA) on 15th August 2015.

John Shuck: Let's just go ahead and get started with this exciting book [*Creative Faith: Religion as a Way of Worldmaking*].* You write, on page 45: "The main purpose of this book is to introduce and, if possible, to promote a long overdue change in philosophical and religious thought." What is that change?

Don Cupitt: It means, basically, shifting away from the old European way of starting with metaphysics and then going on to ethics, and putting it the other way round: starting with dissatisfaction with existing reality and setting out to try to create a better world.

JS: You talk about how in early Christianity it went in two directions. There was a direction toward supernaturalism and then a direction towards the ethics of Jesus.

DC: Yes, let me put it this way. In your hymn book you've probably got a table somewhere near the beginning, classifying the subjects of hymns. They always begin with hymns of plain worship to God as Creator, and in those hymns the universe is pictured as like the state: God is the universal absolute monarch, everything's perfect, all things are bright and beautiful, everything as it should be. Now here existing reality is everything it should be, absolutely perfect. But, of course, if you start there, why is there evil? Why is human life so wretched in so many cases? You have an impossible puzzle with the problem of evil if you start your theology in the traditional place, so I am suggesting instead that we should start with dissatisfaction with existing reality, and longing for a better world.

JS: And how does that longing translate into a better world?

DC: For Jesus, it meant the coming of the Kingdom of God when we decide for it and move into it and start to live its life. But it's on this Earth. Remember the New Testament is not about an afterlife in heaven after death, and the teaching of Jesus is not about redemption from sin. It's about a new moral world on this Earth.

JS: You know, you wrote in your book with regard to Jesus, that his early critics weren't wrong to call him an atheist. Let us hear a little bit about your view of Jesus.

DC: Yes, that's because, of course, for ancient thought, God was, above all, King. The Jews called God King; still do. God was, above all, the giver of religious law, as in Islam to this day. But Jesus was very casual in his attitude to religious law and he doesn't introduce any fresh teaching about God at all. Instead all his emphasis is on the renewal of the human heart. We are to live, not by an external code of law, but by a love that flows straight out of our own hearts. So a kind of immediate ethic of love, for Jesus, replaces the old ethic of divine commandments and religious law. But by rejecting religious law Jesus was in effect rejecting an idea of God.

JS: And then, of course, it wasn't long after his teachings that they turned him into a supernatural figure.

DC: Yes, that is right. That's because of his terrible death and the difficulty of explaining how it could have happened. The oldest layer in the New Testament of explanations of why Jesus should have died such a terrible death was this: it was an example of innocent suffering nobly borne. You couldn't say more than that. Only gradually did they evolve a supernatural theology to explain Jesus' death, and in the process Jesus' teaching got forgotten. Instead came a whole cycle of supernatural doctrines about Jesus as a heavenly being, the Son of God incarnate, who died and was risen, and ascended, and sat at the right hand of God, and so on. The church came into being as a kind of night-watchman to cover the period before the kingdom came. The church

awaited the return of Jesus to establish on Earth the kingdom he had promised. So the church officially wants to see itself replaced by the Kingdom, but, if you remember your

Dostoevsky, when Jesus turns up in Rome the Vatican turns him away.

They don't want him because his arrival means the end of the power and glory of the church; the



Cicada

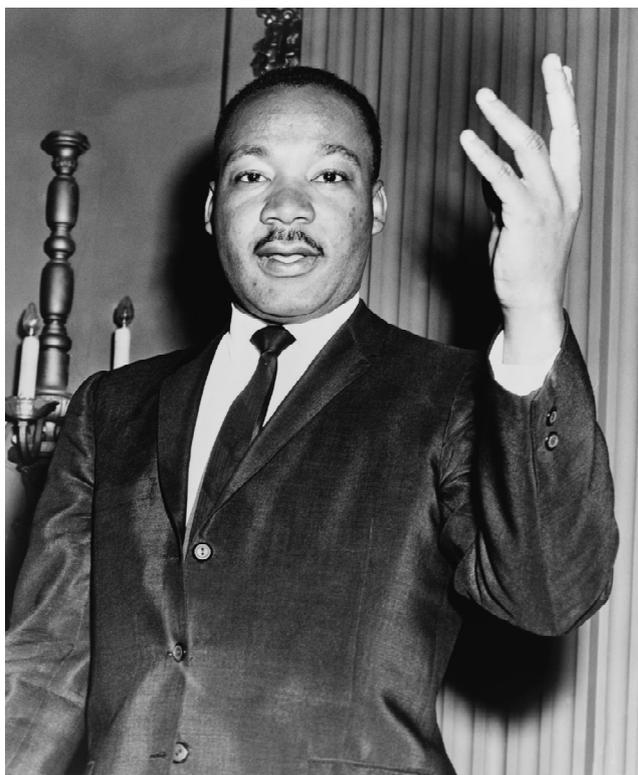
church's job is over.

JS: The church wants to cling to its work and so continues to put this promise off into some indefinite future.

DC: Well, yes, particularly Roman Catholic theology. The church became so big it became cosmic: the popes even had power in the world after death and people talked about the Church Expectant and the Church Triumphant. So, that's to say, the church grew so much in its own theology of itself that it forgot that it was waiting for the kingdom. And in the Creed the teaching of Jesus totally disappears: he is 'born of the Virgin Mary' *comma* 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. And that comma is all that remains of Jesus's own teaching in the Christian Creed. His original message was not about himself, it was about a new moral world, the kingdom of love that he wanted to see established on Earth. A world in which there would be no bitterness, or resentment or hatred; people would be completely open with each other and it would be a world in which people wouldn't be interested in saving their own souls, but simply in spending themselves, as the sun does.

JS: You use the phrase 'solar living'. What do you mean by that?

DC: To explain this it's best if I point out a fundamental contradiction in the Sermon on the Mount, which anybody who's listening can easily work out for himself. There are two different Jesuses talking in the Sermon on the Mount, they're quite different. One of them says: 'Act immediately, give yourself, shine like the sun, come out into the open, live by self-outing.' The other Jesus says: 'Be prudent and calculating, hide your religious actions, think all the time of the heavenly world above, act with a view to that.' The first Jesus is the 'solar' Jesus who lives the full life of the kingdom here and now, and that's what the original Jesus was like. The second Jesus has become more Catholic, he sees this life as only a preliminary stage on the way to our real life starting after death, and he represents the later Christian view that you can start following the teaching of Jesus only after your death. For now, you're living a prudent ethic of keeping yourself clean and scraping through this life without getting besmirched by it. By solar living, I simply mean living by self-outing. We should be completely available to others; we should be completely committed to life. And sometimes in that connection I quote Tolstoy. Tolstoy says towards the end of *War and Peace*: 'Life is God, and to love life is to love God.' We should love our own transient self-outpouring, our own passing away. We should be completely committed to life. That's the original Jesus.



Martin Luther King

JS: And you can also see that in nature. You mention the cicadas, where life itself just pours itself out.

DC: Yes, life's joy in itself. The idea that we can simply say 'yes' to life while we have it gradually emerges in modern times. Let me give another example of the changeover from the American experience. Take a hymn like *Sweet Chariot* as sung in the 19th Century. There the singer is longing for release, redemption, and it sounds as if it's 'over Jordan', in the next world, after death, but perhaps there's also a reference to longing for emancipation from slavery in this world. Go on now to Martin Luther King when he talks about his Dream. Is that other worldly? No, in Martin Luther King's speech it becomes entirely this-worldly; the dream is of an ethically good society here on this Earth, building the Kingdom of God in America. So, for King as for Jesus, it's up to us to make it all come true.

JS: You write in your book that church officials, theologians, bishops, clergy, even the pope, our new Pope Francis, have put the supernatural theological structure on the back-burner. They know the game is up and yet they won't come out and say it.

DC: That's right, yes. The last pope who was fully orthodox was John Paul II, but he had been brought up in the sheltered atmosphere of Poland which preserved traditional Catholic doctrine. But out in the West, since the 1960s, there has been a rapid decline of the traditional Roman Catholic philosophy

– Thomism, St Thomas Aquinas’s philosophy – and considerable confusion as a result. That’s why Benedict, when he was pope, called for a fresh examination of the question of faith and reason, and why Francis goes entirely for ethics and simply doesn’t discuss supernatural doctrine.

JS: And I think that’s the reason he’s one of the most popular popes now.

DC: Yes, for his own birthday he got 400 sleeping bags stamped with the papal arms and he sent the people in the Vatican out to give them free to the homeless sleeping under the bridges in the centre of Rome. Now that’s an example of a pope who simply imitates the ethics of Jesus and, of course, it’s a very popular gesture. This is a bit of Christianity that even an unbelieving world can still understand and that, indeed, the whole world admires. I argue in my recent books that the ethical teaching of Jesus has returned very strongly in recent decades, especially in the popular use of the word ‘humanitarian’. This is the ethics of Jesus affecting us through the United Nations, through the medical profession, through welfare, through modern society’s concern for the sick and the poor and so on. Now the triumph of humanitarian ethics is the beginning of the triumph of Jesus himself. Classical Christianity was rather cruel and had almost no social ethics at all. Modern Christianity consists almost entirely of social ethics and it was set going by the Quakers.

JS: And yet we still have the baggage of all the supernatural theology and the clergy, the bishops, don’t seem to want to admit that it has become redundant nowadays.

DC: I know. This is partly because there is always a small core of fundamentalists who cling onto official doctrine as a kind of a token of identity. There’s a lot of talk about identity nowadays, isn’t there? And ultra conservatives in doctrine in Islam, or in Judaism, or in Christianity are usually very strongly opposed to the liberals. They want to use religion as a badge of identity, and they want to emphasise the political solidarity of believers.

JS: Related to this, you talk about this need to let go of *ressentiment*, this ill-feeling or resentment towards life and others.

DC: Yes, a word from Nietzsche. It’s a French word that Nietzsche adopted to mean every kind of negative feeling, of grudge, or resentment or hatred or bitterness. To get war out of human affairs you have got to get away from the hostility towards the other that is so deep in human nature.

JS: And I wonder if religion, the supernatural structure of it, was a way to handle that: you’ve got all these ill-feelings so we’ll give you the Last Judgment where everybody is going to ‘get theirs’, and all that kind of thing. So how does one deal then with suffering, or disappointment, injustice, even, without *ressentiment*?

DC: Yes, the old doctrine of hell, the supernatural hell, was a way of venting you own ill-feeling. People used to say, ‘I hope he rots in hell,’ to express their hatred of somebody else. In the idea that other people are wicked and are going to be damned you see the triumph of *ressentiment* within Christianity. But, for example, really good and dedicated aid workers or medical professionals don’t think about their own feelings at all; they are completely given to the task in hand of serving the other person. Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek writer, says somewhere that there have been three great teachers of mankind: the Buddha, Jesus and Nietzsche. All of them wanted to live without *ressentiment* – without negative feeling – but they have slightly different recipes for doing it. The Buddha says your passions must be calm, you must not be reactive, you must not flare up, you must not give way to road rage and so on. You must be free from your own anger. Nietzsche says you should rise above any kind of resentment or anger at what other people say. If you’re an artist, like Picasso for example, you shouldn’t take any notice of people who ridicule your art. Picasso just gets on and does his thing, and you can’t imagine him bothering to make any remark about people who ridicule his work or his life. And Jesus says the greatest victory is that of love, loving your enemy. Actually, if you want to know what is distinctive in Jesus’ teaching, it is ‘love your enemy’, ‘pray for those who despitefully use you’, and so on. So all the great teachers want to live without *ressentiment*, but it’s hard to do. I am saying that ‘solar living’ is a way to do it. The sun simply outs itself generously and gloriously. It’s completely generous.

JS: What do you mean by religion as world-making?

DC: Well: I say religion is an ethical activity by which we project out our communal dream of a better world and try together to bring it into being. And, incidentally, notice that we tend to judge religions nowadays by the kind of world they’ve built up around themselves. For example, the Christian world is very different from the Muslim world. In the Christian world there are signs of the humanism of Christianity: In the Muslim world you see more of the transcendence of God and the submission of humans to God’s will. In the Christian world you’ll see more voluntary philanthropic institutions like hospitals, schools, almshouses – all those sort of

things, including museums, libraries and art galleries – in cities. Philanthropic institutions are much less common in great Muslim cities. So a religion tends nowadays to be judged by the kind of world it produces. That's an indication that people already think what I am trying to say: that we need a more ethical religion for the future.

JS: And religion has always been a human project of world-making, it just seems that we didn't know that, or forgot it.

DC: Yes, that's right. The Jews tend to say that God eternally had the Torah in his mind in Hebrew and Muslims tend to say that God's an Arabic speaker and that the whole Koran in Arabic subsists eternally in the mind of God. That means that for the Muslim Arabic is not a human language. On a famous occasion back in the 1950s, when an academic in Cairo published a book on the history of the Arabic language, it caused scandal. The very suggestion that Arabic was a human language was theologically unorthodox. Arabic was the language of God himself. That's rather interesting.

Notice there that for the traditional fundamentalist kind of believer religion doesn't really have a human history. People like to think of it as completely objective and unchanging – that's what I call 'realism'. Our modern realisation is that religion is human and has a human history.

JS: And of course there's a great deal of resistance to that, the whole notion of Revelation as a Truth that comes to us from the outside is certainly pre-modern.

DC: Yes, revealed truth. It used to be believed that we found ourselves in a ready-made world with everything working, all the laws of nature working and in order, and the world already completely known by the mind of God. All human beings had to do to acquire knowledge was to be obedient to God, then you participated in God's own knowledge of the world. Now, when modern thinking started about



Jan van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece, 1432

300–400 years ago, human beings began to think of themselves as the makers of knowledge, and the scientific method came into being as by far the most powerful method of creating knowledge that human beings have ever devised. And of course the modern world is completely dominated by science, which means that the old religious picture of the universe with God's feet resting on the blue dome of the sky vertically above our heads – that was bound to collapse. We now see the world in scientific terms. That means we've got to do this painful business of translating our religious faith out of the old religion-based vision of the universe to the new science-based one.

JS: Sometimes it seems that belief in God means wholeness or happiness. A person who no longer believes in God is someone to be pitied; they've lost faith. But you write that we should 'learn to see our belieflessness not as a state of being derelict and damned, but as a clean sheet and a challenge to be creative'. Can you talk more about that?

DC: Yes, that's right. In the book I also make an entirely new approach to the question of God when I contrast God concentrated and focused as the pure Holy, especially in the early books of the Bible, and God dispersed and scattered over the world as a kind of glory or brightness spread out over everything. Thus I make the contrast between things focused and things scattered: things concentrated and things in dispersal. It's very widespread in the Bible and it helps us to see how we might be able to work, as Jesus himself does, with a very dispersed image of God. In that case we've not quite become atheists; it's simply that we've given up the old burning white holiness that Moses confronted. That picture of God doesn't appear in the New Testament at all; there is no concentrated vision of God of that kind in the later books of the Bible and none in the New Testament. Instead the New Testament gives us only the human figure of Jesus. And, by the way, in the last great work of mediaeval

art Jan Van Eyck pictures God simply as the human being, Jesus. So the Bible and the whole Christian tradition are always already evolving towards humanism in Jesus, only people weren't noticing it happen.

JS: You talk about God no longer as Alpha but as Omega instead, God connected to our human aspirations.

DC: Yes that's right, God is a spiritual ideal. When we say that God is our Alpha and our Omega, the Alpha is the First Cause, the beginning in the pre-scientific vision of the world, but nowadays we have our theories of the Big Bang and so on, in which the beginnings are handed over to science. But we can keep the idea of God as an ideal of pure spiritual freedom and an idea of glory. For me, religious experience has always been associated with the sense of sight and in particular with sunshine, butterflies, flowers and whatnot. My mysticism is visual and always has been and so is that of Jesus, rather surprisingly. Think of 'Solomon in all his glory' not being arrayed like these flowers. So I keep an idea of God as a kind of dispersed glory in which we can, as it were, swim in the transient world – something fabulous and beautiful and consoling – and God as a spiritual ideal to be guided by. The God's eye view is the objective view; God as a kind of imaginary standpoint of eternity from which we can learn to see ourselves and judge ourselves. Do you see what I mean? I'm saying that the idea of God still has uses in our religious lives after we've given up the old first cause and Creator idea of God. As a matter of fact, I think that we ourselves are the only creators of the world because it is our own culture, our own thinking, that shapes our vision of the world as we look at it. Let me tell you a little story about the painter Henri Matisse. One day somebody asked him did he believe in God? Matisse replied: 'Yes, when I'm working.' That's to say, happily to be absorbed in creative work is a kind of religious experience; it's one of the best things we can do.

JS: You write near the end of the book that what we have left is the figure of Jesus and a 'still vigorous tradition of humanitarian ethics that derives ultimately from his teaching'. So, my question is: is that enough for a church? Is there any future possibility for an evolution of the church or is the philosophy of

creative faith a more individualistic philosophy?

DC: According to the New Testament after the church comes the Kingdom of God and the radicals at the time of the Reformation did, some of them, attempt to go beyond the church to a Society of Friends or the kingdom form of Christianity that would no longer mediate between this world and the next, but would be purely ethical and this-worldly. So that, of the existing Christian denominations, the Quakers,

particularly the English Quakers, are the closest to my views. In my view there will still be religious societies such as the Sea of Faith, which still exists as a worldwide organisation. Those are examples of a free religious society. Notice that the Quakers have virtually no disciplinary apparatus and Sea of Faith, of course, has none. Sea of Faith is simply a free society of people in which you can air any opinion, nobody has special authority. I always say when I

am at a Sea of Faith meeting: 'I am not the boss, this is not a fan club. Don't follow me, follow yourself, find out what you think and say that.' I want a church in which people can find themselves and express themselves, not a church which is a bunch of sheep all grazing and watched over by a shepherd.

JS: *Creative Faith* is your 50th book. Are you still writing?

DC: I am still writing a bit. My new book [*Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity*]* is mainly about climate change giving us the opportunity to renew our civilisation. If the existing cultural and economic order is getting close to collapse and may not last more than another hundred years because of climate change, we can start thinking how we can rebuild a better world. The imaginative writers, like Cormac McCarthy, who've tried to imagine the post-crisis world have always imagined just devastation, and no thought about rebuilding has yet been done at all. So I am trying to start it off.

This is a slightly abbreviated version of Don Cupitt's interview, transcribed by Oliver Essame. There is a link to the podcast of the interview on the website sofn.org.uk

*Don Cupitt's fiftieth book is *Creative Faith: Religion as a Way of Worldmaking* (Polebridge Press, Salem, OR, 2015). His fifty-first book, reviewed on page 20, is *Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity* (Polebridge Press, Salem OR, 2016).



Anemones. Lilies of the field?