

Religion and Atheism: Cupitt Bridges the Divide

Clem Cook asks why there was no Don Cupitt chapter in *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*, and suggests what might have been in it.

When *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*,¹ was launched at a public meeting at the London Review bookshop by the co-editors (Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman) and a selection of contributors in 2017, I thought: 'Will there be a chapter by Don Cupitt?'

The book defines religion as theistic, non-religion as atheistic. A religious person is a theist; a non-religious person is an atheist. It omits a serious examination of religious humanism and a recognition of a third way: religious people and groups within and without the church whose lives are characterised by religious attitudes, approaches and practices, yet are non-theist in belief.

The book is silent on them in content, bibliography and index, except for a chapter by atheist Julian Baggini on Karen Armstrong's *mythos/logos* distinction. He asserts that in his polls of church-goers and believers, most are literalists at least to some extent, and few hold the *mythos* view. Curiously, having been a speaker at a number of SOF Conferences, Baggini does not mention either the SOF Network (SOFN) or its dozens of local groups, its literature, its books or its conferences. He also ignores PCN Britain, a larger group of Christians, lay and clergy, operating within the churches. Elsewhere, a contributor dismisses those who define 'God' as the non-theist 'Ground of Being' as belonging in the atheist camp. If, by this narrower definition of religion, the religious are those who believe in a transcendent agency acting in the world, no wonder the likes of Spong, Geering and Cupitt are omitted.

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Although *Religion and Atheism* defines a religious person as a believer in a 'real' God and a non-religious person as a non-believer, Don Cupitt does not concede that meaning to the word. A word's meaning is never fixed absolutely without context, and in a Cupitt context, religion without God is possible as is a non-believing religious person. The Cupitt context has arisen out of a lifetime of

ministry, teaching and writing; out of his library of fifty theological and philosophical books produced at the rate of one a year resulting in ever evolving thought and insight.² Having travelled 'beyond the divide' of religion and atheism over fifty years, Cupitt's synthesis of humanism and religion into a post-Christian, post-atheism, radical religious humanism should be taken more seriously and broadcast more widely in the Atheism and Religion debate. Cupitt says: 'Religion is only human, but no culture survives for long without it. Life's meaningfulness and worthwhileness are not given but have to be made, and that making is religion.'

Nigel Leaves, who turned a Ph.D. thesis on Cupitt into two books, says: 'He sees the value of religion, properly understood, as a human creation capable of overcoming nihilism.' In his *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and Writings of Don Cupitt*³ Leaves takes us through seven stages of Cupitt's thought, as represented by his books from 1971 to 2003. In *Surfing on the Sea of Faith: The Ethics and Religion of Don Cupitt*³ he analyses five phases of Cupitt's ethics, and four stages of 'religion' definitions.

In analysing or reading Cupitt, one must ask, which Cupitt are we reading? His views and emphases have changed through the decades and, by dividing Cupitt into periods and phases, Leaves has done us all a favour in identifying which Cupitt we might be studying or talking about.

The *Odyssey* divides Cupitt's books into seven stages:

1. 1971-1979: The Negative Theology (9 books)
2. 1980-1985: Non-realism – 'Coming Out' (4 books)
3. 1986-1989: Postmodernism and Anti-realism (4 books)
4. 1990-1997: Expressionism (8 books)
5. 1998: The Turn to Being (2 books)
6. 1999-2000: Ordinary Language (3 books)
7. 2000-2003: The Religion of the Future (5 books)

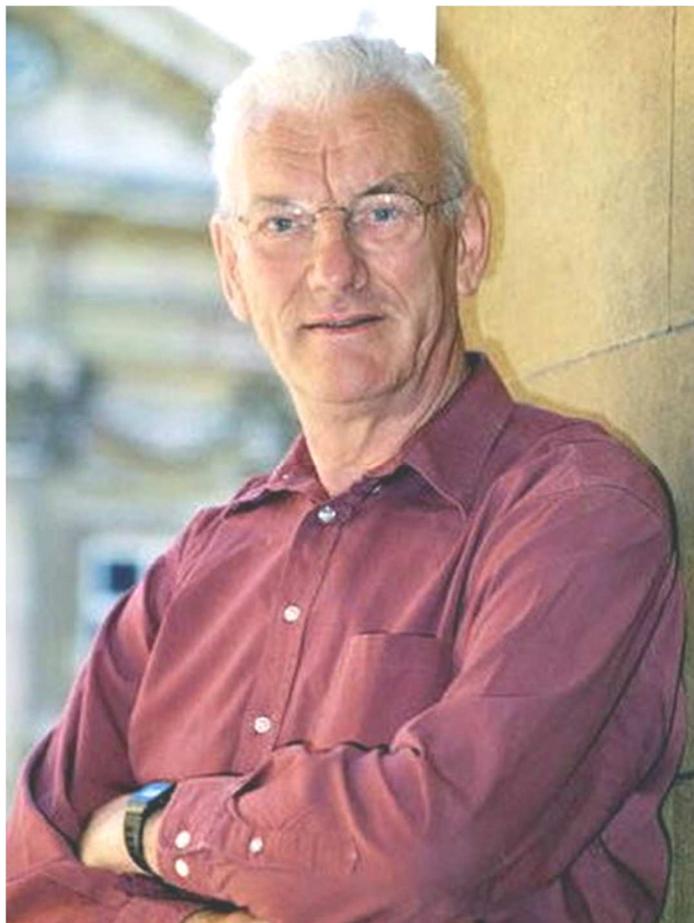
Cupitt has written fifteen more books since Leaves' analysis in the *Odyssey*. Were he still alive, Leaves might well have entitled the last stage:

8. 2005-2016. The Last Testaments.

Salient points in these stages are:

Non-realism – 'Coming Out'

This moved Cupitt into his best-known stage, particularly his book *Taking Leave of God*, culminating in his non-realist doctrine of God. We must give up the realist idea of an all-powerful God 'out-there' who sustains and creates the Universe. However, the word 'God' needn't be abandoned, for it was still a helpful fiction that could be profitably used. He proposed using the word 'God' to refer to a spiritual ideal; it was not the name of a metaphysical Being, but the concept could help people live 'religiously'. Further, Christian doctrines were not to be taken literally, but interpreted in terms of the way of life they recommended.



Ordinary Language

Wittgenstein asked, 'what does ordinary language, as it is now used, tell us about people's picture of the world and their beliefs?' This fascinated Cupitt who, in a trilogy of books, examined new idioms that had been established in common language. In the first, the word 'God' has been replaced by the word 'Life', taking on all the attributes of a Divine Being. God was now demythologised into the contingent passing of life.

In the second book in this group, Cupitt argued that everyday speech reveals that people think of themselves as surrounded by 'It All', which causes them to be apprehensive about life. He urged them to confront this fear and affirm their present lives.

In the third book, he proposed that Kingdom religion had replace Church religion. Some elements of the secular world better reflect the Kingdom that Jesus envisaged than does the Church. Global organisations like the United Nations were dismantling tribalism and affirming humanitarian values so that the Kingdom was being realised without any help from the Church.

The Religion of the Future

This series of books points to more democratic forms of religious belonging. The principal aim of religion should be therapeutic, helping people to overcome their reluctance to embrace this life and its transitoriness. Thus he looks to the Quakers and loose religious associations and networks that are creedless and Socratic as forerunners of 'the religion of the future'. They have no ideology to push but pose critical questions to those who claim to have ready answers. Religion is not about seeking meaning in a metaphysical entity outside this world, but affirming this life, a life of endless change and exchange – transient and lacking any guiding force from beyond. Accept this life and this world as the only ones.

In his second book, *Surfing on the Sea of Faith. The Ethics and Religion of Don Cupitt*, Nigel Leaves says:

Cupitt's thirty years of writing does not lead to despair and the abandonment of all values. ... After many years of finding fault with Christianity he has now turned his attention to reconstructing a viable contemporary faith that

is in harmony with both the postmodern world and the original message of Jesus. Moreover, there are many people in networks such as ‘the Sea of Faith Network’ who are similarly engaged in creating a faith for the future.

In *Surfing on the Sea of Faith* Leaves analyses five phases of Cupitt’s ethics, then he analyses four different ideas about ‘the essence of religion’. The five phases of Cupitt’s ethics are:

1. Moral asceticism
2. The New Christian Ethics
3. Transactional ethics
4. Solar ethics
5. Humanitarian social ethics

Solar ethics

This concept involves an analogy between the sun and the expressivist humanist ethical way of ‘being’ that Cupitt promotes from 1994 onwards: ‘We should live as the Sun does.... Simply expending itself gloriously, and in so doing, giving life to us all.’

The Sun is thus a moral example of how we should live – giving out warmth and love to others, neither anxiously nor cautiously, but burning brightly in reckless and extravagant self-expression. Solar ethics is about living beyond all distinctions and living-and-dying for others now, as we pour ourselves into the flux of existence.

Humanitarian social ethics

Critics attacked ‘solar ethics’ as extreme individualism. Cupitt responds by affirming ‘humanitarian social ethics’ in conjunction with ‘solar personal ethics’. In postmodernity, people help fellow humans in distress without moral judgement or discrimination, illustrated by the selfless professional, the aid worker, and the UN peace-keeper. In moving through these phases of ethics, Cupitt notes that, having been described as a ‘postmodern moralist who rejects talk of absolute values’, he is assumed to deny values altogether. However, while Cupitt’s anti-realism starts from the premise that we are responsible for inventing or creating ethics, we do not create out of nothing, because valuations already exist within the culture and are encoded in language. We never find ourselves in a moral void. We always stand within a moral tradition and are constantly debating how we might want to develop it.

In *Surfing* Leaves also lists Cupitt’s four different ideas about religion as:

1. The religious requirement
2. Religion requires a discipline of the void.
3. Religious humanism.
4. Kingdom Christianity or post-Christianity

Religious humanism

Cupitt’s third idea of religion (in the mid-1990s) is ‘religious humanism’. In a non-realist way, ‘God’ becomes ‘Man’ with the old transcendent sacred dispersed into humanity. The divine comes down into the human world. Theology becomes anthropology and the doctrine of Christ becomes the doctrine of us. Cupitt wants to keep much of the old theology but with humanistic interpretations.

Kingdom Christianity or post-Christianity

Kingdom Christianity is underpinned by ethics; thus religion becomes ‘here-and-now’; not an ecclesiastical theology – mediated, hierarchical, authoritarian and disciplinary – but immediate, non-hierarchical and egalitarian. It is Christianity without God. It is not living religiously ‘as if’ God does not exist. It’s living in the knowledge that God as an objective Being ‘does not’ exist. Cupitt says this post-Christianity is closer to the historical Jesus and his original message than the Church’s Christ.

There have been another fifteen books since. Cupitt suggests that if one comes late to his work, simply read his recent books in the order in which they were written – beginning with *Impossible Loves* (2007). A short crib to his ideas is provided by *Turns of Phrase* (2011.) There is no need to try to summarise Cupitt’s conclusions; he has already done so in two lists. The first list comes in *Above Us Only Sky* (2008). It is quite long and this article cannot reproduce it all, but here are three major points:

Life is God

Life is that in which ‘we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28), within which we are formed, and of whose past we will remain part. Both our ultimate Origin and our Last End are within life. Life is now as God to us.

To love life is to love God

Every bit of our life is final for us, and we should treat all life as a sacred gift and responsibility. We should see our relation to life as being like an immediate relation to God. We are moved and touched by the way all living things, and not just we ourselves, spontaneously love life, affirm it and cling to it.

Solar living

Life is a gift (with no giver) that is renewed every day, and true religion is expressive, solar living. By faith, and without any qualification or restriction, I should let life well up in me and pour itself out into symbolic expression through me. Thus I 'get myself together': we become ourselves by expressing ourselves.

The second list, dated January 2018, is found on Don Cupitt's official website. We reprint that here in full:

Recent Thinking

More recently, my thinking has come to be dominated by another and bigger problem. About 1790, in the French Revolution, Christianity as the religion of absolute monarchy and agricultural civilisation came to an end, becoming instead the faith and experience of individual believers in a progressive, science-based, industrial civilisation, with God dispersed into people. Politics and religion are both democratised, and the notion of 'religious experience' has become very important to many.

This protestant, rather Quakerish, outlook flourished in the nineteenth century. But today a big dark cloud looms. The development of our science and technology has accelerated to a frenzied pace, and it now seems more likely than not that it will crash in 25-50 years' time.

The symptoms include popular discontent and ungovernability; the failure of many states because we can no longer form a morally-coherent society; the mass extinction of species as both soil and sea become exhausted and polluted; mass starvation and migration; climate change and the flooding of coastal cities; and the increasing risk of a reduction of the human population to a very small fraction of our present numbers. We cannot guess how long it

may be before the surviving remnant of humanity will be able to revive settled life and farming, and begin to build a new civilisation.

Against this background I have tried to develop a new 'Kingdom Theology', a new philosophy and a new ethical theory. I have been trying to think at the end of the world, and make a fresh, and better, start. We can make the new start at any time and in any circumstances: its time is always Now.

A New Philosophy

This new philosophy is a democratic philosophy of human life. The old Western Philosophy was written for a tiny elite of the highly gifted, but I have to produce something that can be generally intelligible.

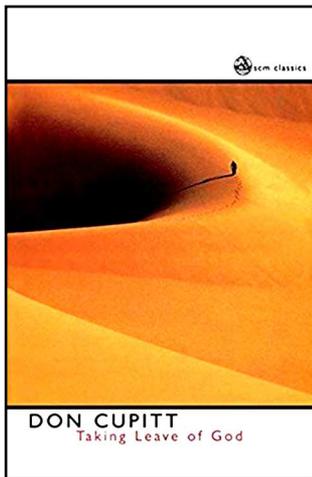
Secondly, the new outlook is plural. There is no ready-made reality, or truth, or meaning, or value out there. Hence my term anthropomorphism. We are in the void and we make the lot. The world is our own somewhat botched work of art, and it is inevitably plural. We must each find and project out our own truth in our own vocabulary.

Thirdly, the old centred, powerful God is fading out and being replaced by an array of totalising words which represent to us the whole of which we are part, and which we are 'up against'. They include Life, the Fountain, Being, It All, the Fire, It and Fate.

Fourthly, our outlook is close to nihilism because it is formed at the end of the world, where everything we used to lean on has passed away. There is only a continuous outpouring and passing-away of Empty, formless contingency. It's like what you see when your eyes are tightly shut.

Fifthly, you yourself are a microcosm of the whole, a miniature Fountain – but of signs. Your life pours out and projects language over the world, rather as we project the constellations over the night sky, or see pictures in the flames of a fire.

Sixthly, the lighting up of the world by language (*Lichtung*) I call Brightness, or 'The Transient Glory of the Real'. It is our life's chief consolation. It exists momentarily along the surface where language meets non-language. Then it flits away. The world-view thus briefly sketched is one that we can draw up if we are living at the End of the



World. Its best poets include the painter Claude Monet, and the poets Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson. I sometimes call it Empty Radical Humanism, or just 'The Mysticism of Secondariness'. To it corresponds my Solar Ethics, an emotivist ethic of pure love, without any resent-

ment or negative feeling of any kind. It happens to have been taught – or so it seems – by the early Jesus, whom I define as the source of the oldest stratum of the sayings-traditions preserved in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Whole is a great Fountain of be-ing: the self is a little Fountain of signs. Our self-expression completes the world. It is our fleeting Glory, our Brightness.

Thus historic Christianity is surrounded by, and fulfilled in, a much greater religious vision that was briefly glimpsed at its beginning, and is now coming into view again at its end.

Cupitt's final summary of all the above is found on his website's home-page (doncupitt.com/don-cupitt) in three short paragraphs which he writes in the third person:

Much of Cupitt's thinking clearly belongs to the philosophical tradition rather than to theology, and the best clues to his ideas can often be given by quoting the philosophers who have been important to him at different times. In his youth, he was most impressed by Hume and Kant. Then he became absorbed in Kierkegaard, in the movement from 'organised religion' to 'spirituality', and in the classics of Christian mysticism.

This early period culminated in *Taking Leave of God* (1980), Cupitt's last book in his Kant and Kierkegaard manner. In 1981 he became immersed in Nietzsche, and then in Richard Rorty and Mark C. Taylor. By the late Eighties he had assimilated the early Derrida and French postmodernism. During the Nineties the most obvious new development was a brief turn, around 1996/98, to Heidegger.

At the same time Cupitt also turned to ordinary language, and to this life. He rejects all ideas of gaining salvation by escaping from this world of ours. 'All this is all there is', he says and he now sees true religion in terms of joy in life and an active attempt to add value to the human lifeworld. 'Life' is all that there is and all we have, and must be accepted with its limits as a package deal. We must avoid all attempts to deny or escape the limits of life – traditionally time, chance and death.

And here is a final quote from Don:

Religion is primarily not about supernatural belief, but about hope. It is our communal way of generating dreams of how we and our life and our world might be made better. We prepare ourselves for the dream, and we start to think about how we might actually start to make it all come true. My suggestion ... has been that the so-called 'decline of religion' is people's abandonment *en masse* of the kind of ecclesiastical religion that promised comfort and reassurance in the face of death. Instead, we should see religious thought and practice as imaginative and utopian. Religion is a communal way of reimagining and remaking the self and the world. It is what we are to live BY and what we are to live FOR. At a time when political thought is very unadventurous, and when the world is becoming overwhelmingly dominated by technology, we need religion as much as ever. We need it as a human, value-creating activity.⁴

NOTES

- 1 *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*, ed. Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman (Routledge, London 2016).
- 2 A 2018 Bibliography of Don Cupitt's books was published in *Sofia* 129 (September 2018) and is on his website: doncupitt.com/books-by-Don-Cupitt
- 3 Nigel Leaves, *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and Writings of Don Cupitt* (2003) and *Surfing on the Sea of Faith. The Ethics and Religion of Don Cupitt* (2005: both published by Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa CA).
- 4 Don Cupitt, 'Christianity after the Church', p.11 in *The Fourth R*, 14 (Westar Institute, Santa Rosa CA, 2000).

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