

# A Secular Christian

Don Cupitt gave this talk to the London SOF Conference in September 2013.

I am a secular Christian, a person committed to the critical way of thinking and a person therefore for whom there is only one world, and it is *this* world; only one life, and it is *this* life. Our language developed in order to serve the purposes of our life in this, the everyday world; and we cannot usefully pretend to be able to jump clear of the life-world and talk sense about a supposed eternal or supernatural World above. Since the rise of the novel to be our most popular literary form, we seem to have taken secular humanism for granted. Jane Austen's characters are all of them Anglicans; but the world they inhabit has already become completely secular.

If so, you may well think that Christianity is the hardest religion of all to modernise, because it is much more committed than any other faith to an elaborate system of beliefs about the supernatural world, from which we first came, with which we interact daily, and into which we will at last return: the world of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; of St Michael and all the nine orders of angels; of the Blessed Virgin and all the several thousand saints: a world in which people believe in many sorts of supernatural Assistance such as healings, gifts of divine Grace, and supernatural knowledge imparted to us by revelation, illumination, and inspiration. All this apparatus was deployed in relating Christianity's great myth of cosmic Creation, Fall and Redemption; a story that begins with God in eternity, with his first creation of the angels, and with the rebellion of Lucifer and his cohorts, and ends with the sealing of Hell and the final triumph of the blessed in Heaven.

The whole of this mighty supernatural theology was still in place when Charles II came to the restored English throne in 1660. The Bible was still the principal source for cosmology and for prehistory. In the Book of Common Prayer and in the major writings of John Milton and John Bunyan the old religion-based civilisation still seemed more or less intact. Milton knew all about modern science, but he must have thought that his Protestant version of the old faith had a future, or he would not have invested his own reputation in the writing of *Paradise Lost*.

Then in 1679 Isaac Newton published his great book, which in due course was to make mathematical physics the new Queen of the Sciences, as the traditional god-given knowledge purveyed by theologians was displaced by the new, man-made, and critically-tested kind of knowledge. The changeover

took a long time, partly because Newton's cosmology wasn't historical: it did not include a story of how the Universe and the solar system had first come into being and had reached their present form. But then in 1755 Kant and Laplace put forward jointly a decent theory of the formation of the solar system, and after that the sciences of geology and biology took a further great step towards creating a scientific Grand Narrative: a history and a theory of Everything that was far, far better evidenced than the old Christian story had been.

However, the traditional supernaturalism lingered on, until two great events happened in Germany. In 1781 Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the result of a decade's work by a major genius, made the best attempt to show how the finite human mind is capable of objective scientific knowledge. In the process Kant conclusively criticised the old belief that we can reason our way to an eternal, supernatural order of being beyond the world of experience. In effect, Kant ended the belief that God's existence could be proved, and since 1800 no major philosopher has been a fully orthodox believer in the old God of the philosophers.

Next came the crisis of biblical criticism. In the German universities of the late eighteenth century scholars began to apply the new and rigorous methods of critical history to the study of the Bible. The story is too long to tell here, but the biggest early event in it was the publication of David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835-6), which showed how a first-century Jewish prophet and teacher was gradually mythicised in the minds of his followers. The old naive belief that 'the Bible is the Word of God' — or, in the standard Roman Catholic phrase, 'has God for its author' — became untenable.

Since then, we have gradually come to realise that the whole system of Christian doctrine is a somewhat haphazard human construct with an all-too-human history, and that the Bible, when read closely, does not actually teach or even *support* orthodox doctrine. For example, only *one* New Testament writer portrays Jesus as the incarnation of a pre-existent heavenly being in human form, namely John. But even in John's Gospel the Incarnate Lord is not *coequally* God of God. In fact, no New Testament book teaches the fully-orthodox doctrines of either the Trinity or the Incarnation. Those doctrines were not revealed by God in the Bible, but are the outcome of human debates and power-struggles in later times.

How have the churches reacted to all this? The conservatives have decided to reject critical reason and go into the counter-culture. They put huge emphasis on authority and on faith, which for them has become (as a wag has said) a supernatural gift of believing stuff that you know is not true. The liberals claim to be fully critical whilst yet clinging cautiously to the official faith of the church. Dr Rowan Williams is the best-known exponent of this view, and the best illustration of its difficulties. A little further left are a third group, those who say that it's all a great humanly-evolved myth, but it carries precious religious insights and values, and is still the best myth to live by. Such a view is taken by very large numbers of priests and lay-people and is explicitly held by those SOF non-realists who remain in the churches.

All three of these Christian responses to modernity are strained and ironical. They all bear witness to a *dissonance* between the world of religious belief and the world of modern knowledge, which none of them can fully resolve. Our

received traditional religion is rapidly dying because it is too much at odds with what we now know to be true. Either we must abandon it altogether and become Buddhists, or we may invent a new secular religion, or we may perhaps be able to attempt a metamorphosis of Christianity into a form of secular religious humanism.

I have been an Anglican priest for over 50 years, and have gradually developed a system of this last type. I sometimes call it 'Kingdom-theology', pointing out that Jesus originally preached the arrival of the Last World, the promised age of human fulfilment in the Kingdom of God *on Earth*. What we got instead was the Church, which grew out of the power-struggles between the first clergymen, Peter, James and Paul, around the year 50, and their attempts to

explain the catastrophe of Jesus' ugly death. They claimed that God had exalted Jesus to the supernatural world, which meant that the old world was after all going to be allowed a period of extra time during which the church (ruled by the clergy) could recruit a multi-ethnic army of believers who would purify themselves and look up expectantly for the return to earth of Jesus in glory to set up the Last World, the Messianic Kingdom on Earth. Jesus had said: 'The Kingdom starts now!' The Church said, 'No: it's been postponed. You'll be living under discipline for a long time yet.'



Fra Angelico fresco *The Sermon on the Mount* (1436 - 1443), San Marco convent, Florence

This new ecclesiastical Christianity was thus from the first completely preoccupied with the supernatural world, which was at once the World Above and the World to Come: and it was so preoccupied with self-purification that almost all its leading figures were celibates for the first 1500 years. Jesus immediately became very heavily mythicised into the Divine

Christ, a heavenly being, the eternal Son of God, and in the Creeds the actual life of Jesus and his message were reduced to the mere comma that separates 'born of the Virgin Mary' from 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. Christianity was so other-worldly that it saw this world and this life as utterly worthless. Even as late as the 1662 Prayer Book – which still has many admirers – the mourners at a funeral thanked God for delivering the dead person 'out of the miseries of this sinful world'.

Today, everything has changed, because we have only recently lost the last remains of belief in a Better World to come. Today's funerals give to life ritual closure. They celebrate the dead person's life, because we no longer believe in the Last Judgement and life after death for the individual. At the same time, we

have also given up all forms of liberal and socialist hope for a Better World in the historical future. The liberal belief in the 'perfectibility of man' and the socialist belief in a future communist society are dead. We now realise that we are already living in the Last World we'll ever know. This language I speak, this world about me, and this life I live together comprise what in my jargon I call 'It All'. It is all there is for me: and I am 79 years old. Soon I'll be no more.

This realisation I call 'the alarm clock', and it instantly makes Church Christianity seem as deluded as the suicide bombers who think they are going to Heaven. Like Andrew Marvell, I feel 'time's winged chariot hurrying near'; Death is breathing down my neck. How shall we live, we who now know that we are close to the very end of our world? As I see it, the original Jesus announced the arrival of the Last World, and taught the appropriate ethic. We haven't got time for negative feelings of anxiety, or envy, or hatred, nor for the harbouring of grudges. There is no time for any kind of law-ethic. We should live life intensely, and above all generously, expending ourselves in love like there is no tomorrow – because there *isn't*.

The moral teaching of the original Jesus, critically reconstructed, was entirely concerned with human relationships and human self-expression, or, as we'd now call it, 'self-outing'. He seems to be surprisingly secular, a point hard to explain until we remember that in the Last World there is 'no Temple', as the Revelation of John says, no religious system, and no centralised or 'focussed' divinity. In the Kingdom, God is dispersed into a universal 'brightness', a luminous intelligibility in which there is no darkness and everything is plain to view. It's a purely human world in which everyone is equal, and every heart is open. There is no Beyond and therefore no ulteriority and no deception or duplicity, because we can try to deceive people only if we can envisage a future in which we may profit from our deception. We are not immortal souls, with a very long-term future: we are nothing but our own living of our own brief lives. We shouldn't be hoarders, because we cannot do it successfully. Instead we should pour ourselves out into life unreservedly. As the popular saying has it: 'Use it or lose it'. Don't hide, come out like the sun. Pour yourself out. Burn! Don't make comparisons, don't claim your rights. Just put on a good show. Burn!

I have tried to indicate very briefly how the reconstructed teaching of the original Jesus, correctly analysed, might inspire a new humanitarian religion of ordinary life by liberating us from our modern anxiety about transience and death. Hitherto, it has often been claimed that Jesus' ethic is impractical, at least until 'Kingdom come'. But on the contrary, I have tried to suggest that it is necessary. Our greatest single need is to be reconciled to our own transience and to each

other, and the remedy is what I call 'solarity': all-out generosity and love of life.

What about the argument that, just as the quest for the Holy Grail was too high for Arthur's knights and led to the destruction of the Round Table, so the ethic of the original Jesus is too high for normal human beings? On the contrary, Jesus' argument is precisely that unless we can learn to be super-generous we can never hope to build peace amongst humans on Earth. Human justice is not nearly enough. For a modern example, in Northern Ireland many ordinary people know that there will not be full reconciliation unless people can meet in the street, or share a table, with their former bitter enemies. Many of them are already doing it, because it is a moral necessity.

Do not make the usual error of supposing that Jesus taught a just and reciprocated love for the neighbour. Wrong: that's not Jesus, it's Moses; and Jesus insists that it is not good enough. He taught love for your enemy, love not reciprocal but reckless, excessive. He was a rebel, and it is not surprising that at the Council of Trent the church censured his doctrine of 'Pure Love'. The church was from the first based on the rejection of the original secular Jesus. Throughout the ecclesiastical period it was argued that because of Original Sin human beings cannot live the ethic of Jesus in this life. Instead they must live under the discipline of a strictly-applied civil and religious law. But Jesus said we can and should go way beyond ordinary human ideas of law and justice – and today we do. Consider, for example, the free donation to strangers of blood and other organs. People are already capable of living out the Sermon on the Mount: they do it.

A final point. In a short book called *Solar Ethics* (1995), I put forward a *philosophical* defence of ethical emotivism and expressivism, so that it can stand independently of Jesus. I don't need him as an authority; I just point him out as the first teacher who happened to get it right. But I am not going back to making religion logically dependent upon any dubious historical claims. Nagarjuna (ca. 150-250 BCE) made a similar move about the Buddha's teaching.

In summary, Jesus had preached the arrival of Kingdom. It was time to start living the life of the Last World, as if you were standing at the very end of Time. And that is the position I find myself in, a secular Christian at the end of my world. At times I have called my religion 'Emptiness and Brightness', 'Empty radical humanism', 'the religion of life', and 'Kingdom theology'. It's nothing very special; it's where we post-Christian Westerners now are. And I rather like it: I'm not complaining.

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\* Later editions published by SCM Press

† Also available in Chinese translation.

Don Cupitt is a Life Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. His BBC TV series and book *The Sea of Faith* (1984) inspired the creation of SOF Network. A letter from him is published on page 19.