

# Radical Theology and the Media

Ronald Pearse offers a personal account of the trials and media reports of clergy who, following Don Cupitt's 1984 TV series *The Sea of Faith*, openly declared that God is imaginary.

This is personal in two different ways. The first part is personal but *ex officio* in recalling my direct involvements with the media as SOF Network (UK) secretary for many years— and of course as a parish priest. The second is personal in that it reports some results of my scouring the media as a private and long-since retired individual.

## Officially

It all started with Don Cupitt's BBC TV series of six episodes in 1984 entitled *The Sea of Faith* and the subsequent discussion programme about it in the series *Did You See?* I was one of a small group of priests in the Loughborough area who met for pub lunches to discuss the series and eventually wanted to call a national conference to follow it up. We sought and received Don's support. The group sent me to talk to him in Cambridge. I came back with a list of 143 names and addresses of people who had written to him in support of his theologically radical viewpoint in the programmes. This became our first mailing list to advertise such a conference. I think we then put a small advertisement in the *Guardian*.



Don Cupitt presenting his 1984 TV documentary series *The Sea of Faith*.

With much help from the extra-mural department of Loughborough University we eventually put on a well-supported conference for theologically radical people. It included lectures by the theologian Dennis Nineham, by Don and by Graham Shaw. It proved successful and a further such event was requested for the following year. Thus the Sea of Faith Conferences and Network came about.

One further thought about the word 'radical': With hindsight I assume we took it to involve scholarly, scientific examination of the historical soil in which the seeds of our faith were sown and of the cultural environments into which its roots were from time to time transplanted.

To return to 'the media', the public debate which Don's TV series aroused was shown in press correspondence. Later, he had occasional articles in the *Guardian*. But for most parish priests the immediate part of the media was the parish magazine, with the monthly drudge to compile it ready for the printer and for distribution by volunteers to subscribers of good will (not necessarily church attenders) in the parish. Usually we sent complimentary copies to the local newspapers, which sometimes picked up and republished items. I find it a sad sign of the Church's current withdrawal into itself in that the parish mag seems often to be replaced by weekly notices sheets, which probably travel no further than the pockets or handbags of those attending services.

Gradually I, with others, developed our parish magazine content to include our views on theological issues. Some of us also put our bishops on our magazine mailing lists. With one bishop this resulted in friendly discussions by post and in personal conversations. On one such occasion the bishop (a good man) said to me, 'Ronald, I think you ought to know that academically I am equipped to be more radical

about the New Testament, but ...' As I recall it, he did not continue. This comment did not shock me at the time, but it stuck in my memory.

One SOF member went further. In 1993 Anthony Freeman wrote a book entitled *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism*, for publication by SCM Press. Anthony, a former domestic chaplain to the bishop of Chichester, was then holding two part-time posts in his diocese – diocesan officer for ministerial education and priest-in-charge of a small village parish. (Authority to function in the second post was by bishop's licence, withdrawable at will.) Anthony gave his bishop a pre-publication script of the book. The result was immediate dismissal from the diocesan post and an order to withdraw the book from publication or face dismissal from his parish a year hence.

A newspaper got hold of this information and made it public, which resulted in vast media interest in Anthony – the first Church of England priest for fifty years to face dismissal because of his theological views. Anthony was featured or interviewed in two successive Sunday morning TV programmes by one channel. Another TV company invited me one Friday to nominate someone sympathetic to Anthony's theology to take part in a live discussion the following Sunday morning. By Saturday I had located two SOF members free, able and willing to take part. I chose Graham Shaw, who had easier geographical access to the studio concerned. The next morning I watched the broadcast with (to put it mildly) great interest. In it a diocesan bishop gave a weighty discourse against radical theology. This was followed immediately by the following dialogue.

*Graham (quietly):* 'I assume, sir, you have read Anthony's book?'  
*Bishop:* 'No.'

I relaxed. The year seemed to pass rapidly, with no resolution of Anthony's plight. With only two weeks to go before his threatened dismissal I resolved (rightly or wrongly) to try a last-minute attempt to prevent that outcome. I drafted a letter of protest and phoned around seeking signatures to it from other priests (SOF members and others). As a result I had verbal permission from 21 other priests to add their signature to mine. (One of the signatories, a university

theologian, said that he did not share Anthony's views, but that as a good liberal he felt he should support his right to hold them.) I sent it to the letters editor of *The Independent*, who replied that the subject was not interesting enough to publish – but I could possibly try the news editor. I did so and the letter was immediate front page news in that paper.

It achieved nothing but distress. Anthony's bishop went public in a newspaper article in which he said he was experiencing a fortnight of stress and, at the end of that time, some of Anthony's congregation felt stressed when, at his last service they wanted to say a quiet farewell to their greatly respected priest, they found their churchyard besieged by journalists and press photographers.

Later I gathered that the bishop had sent Anthony's book to two retired theologians in the diocese for their opinion and that this was negative. Later still I gathered that their criticism was not so much of the author's views but of his 'manipulation' of the Declaration of Assent (an oath required of all C of E priests before being admitted to any clerical office) to justify his holding them.

Anthony's dismissal resulted in his loss of home, employment and income. He and his wife were given help and support by well-wishers in various parts of the country. Wherever he went, bishops seemed to black-ball him by refusing him a PTO (permission to officiate). Eventually he obtained satisfying employment as editor of the publishing firm Imprint Academic in Exeter, until his retirement. In that post he published a UK edition of Lloyd Geering's autobiography *Wrestling with God*. After retiring, Anthony and Jacqueline returned to live in the diocese of Chichester, where a new bishop gave Anthony a PTO.

In another media encounter, in Loughborough, I took the first phone call from a researcher preparing for an episode in the 1990s of Joan Bakewell's BBC TV series *Heart of the Matter* – on the subject of Easter and the Resurrection. As I was due to go out immediately, I could not help but I passed her on to David Paterson who prepared a list of people in our area (including the then bishop of Leicester and SOFer Catherine Middleton, Minister of the



Anthony Freeman

Loughborough URC) who might be interviewed on the subject. It also included David himself and Stephen Mitchell (both then local priests and, unlike Anthony, as a vicar and a rector respectively, having security of tenure of their benefices). Their views on the subject did not find favour with their bishop who, after seeing them headlined on the front page of the *Loughborough Echo* ordered them not to speak further to the press. (Had he a legal right to give such an order??)

The matter dragged on and the bishop required them to sign a statement indicating their loyalty to the Church's teaching. Stephen felt that the wording was just about true to his position, but David held out for making and signing a statement entirely of his own devising and expressing exactly his own position. The bishop accepted *both* statements. Was this a face-saving move? He must have known that, in view of their Parson's Freehold, any attempt to relieve them of their posts would have involved a massive legal, and probably expensive, process.

Both continued in office until Stephen accepted a fresh benefice in Suffolk and an honorary canonry there, while David continued

in his parish until retirement, when he tactfully moved away from Loughborough for a while. Recently he returned to live there and a former senior journalist wrote for the *Loughborough Echo* a half-page appreciation of David, his past work in the town and his ongoing desire at the age of 82 still to 'change the world' in some way. A week or two later a similarly sized article appeared, written by David himself and explaining *inter alia* how he had offered himself for ordination long ago as a way in which to try to change the world, while having even then no belief in the objective existence of God.

In the 1990s Don, returning from a tour of Australasia, told the SOF committee that he had met Lloyd Geering there, and commended him to us as an excellent lecturer in matters of our interest. As a result I had, as secretary, the audacious duty of writing to invite Lloyd to lecture at our annual conference – without fee and without guarantee of having his airfare reimbursed. He came and gave two lectures, which later formed the basis of two chapters in his next book, *Tomorrow's God*. Lloyd went on to found the SOF Network in New Zealand in 1993.

In 1999 he accepted a further invitation to take part in our conference. This was the year in which *London Weekend Television* prepared for the coming 'millennium' by an ambitious twenty-episode series of programmes under the umbrella title of *Two Thousand Years* – one programme per century. All were presented by Melvyn Bragg and usually consisted of an historical introduction to that century, discussion of this by a very small group of academics and interviews with a larger group of people with varying perspectives on the subject. I advised the producers that Lloyd would be in the UK for part of 1999. He was invited onto the larger group for two or three programmes – including that on the 13<sup>th</sup> century with its subtitle of 'heresy and heretic hunters'. Lloyd was introduced, to Melvyn Bragg's apparent amazement, as one who had been tried for heresy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This had happened because a reporter happened to attend a university service in Wellington in which Lloyd preached on the *Book of Ecclesiastes* and used the sentence 'Man has no immortal soul'. This was reported in the media in NZ and, coming on top of previous

articles questioning biblical literalism and Jesus' bodily resurrection, produced such a furore that Lloyd was tried in 1967 for what was popularly called 'heresy' (actually doctrinal error and disturbing the peace of the church) by the general assembly of his (Presbyterian) Church. The trial lasted two whole days under the powerful lights of TV cameras in a very large, packed church. He was acquitted. It was said that in that mainly secular country the televised trial resulted in theology being discussed in every pub in the land!

He has continued to be in the public eye almost continuously since – contributing a weekly column on religion to the *Auckland Star* for 16 years and a column at intervals in the *NZ Listener* for four years. Last year a national newspaper sent a reporter to interview him (aged 98). Her published report (with a headline of 'Honest heretic') said that his brain was as keen as ever. Also, a photo was republished of Lloyd being knighted a few years earlier by the Governor General for services to religious studies as foundation professor in that subject at Victoria University, Wellington.

## Individually

I am much given to exploring the internet. I have learned that in NZ there is a monthly article in the *Otago Daily Times* on radical theological matters by a retired journalist (and SOF NZ life member), Ian Harris. I find these articles stimulating. He informs me that anyone can go on the mailing list to receive free emailed copies of them by contacting him on [ianharris@xtra.co.nz](mailto:ianharris@xtra.co.nz)

He has no objection to their being copied unchanged and without reference to him, so long as his authorship and their publication in the ODT are acknowledged. Otago is the southern-most province of the South Island of NZ and has a strong Scottish heritage.

Googling Lloyd's name showed that a number of churches scattered across the USA have had one or other of his books as a study theme for a Sunday. This may have been facilitated by Polebridge Press (the publication arm in that country of the Westar Institute and its Jesus Seminar) taking over the publication of his larger books. Incidentally, this has also made his books

easily available in the UK through online suppliers here.

In Canada the split opinion of a committee of the United Church of Canada that Gretta Vosper was not a fit person to hold office as a minister of that Church followed her publishing a book *With or Without God*, in which she spelt out her view that belief in God was optional for Christians. This has, of course, aroused much media attention in that country. I think/hope SOF (UK) has sent Gretta a letter of support. SOF (NZ) invited her to lecture at its 2016 conference. By the time of writing, the media had not reported any disciplinary action by the UCC following its committee's opinion.

The internet has shown me the work of Professor Izak Spangenberg of the University of South Africa in Pretoria. He writes mainly in Afrikaans but I found encouragement in one article published in English, *Yahwism, Judaism and Christianity: religions do evolve!*. And his Afrikaans article *The Greening of Christianity: Charles Darwin, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Lloyd Geering* has a helpful Abstract in English.

Recent years have seen the existence of two 'Progressive Christianity' organisations. One is a USA-based but internationally functioning charity, *ProgressiveChristianity.org*, which supplies weekly information about suitable material. This is free to anyone, anywhere, but it appeals for donations to keep it alive. It publishes 'Eight Points' outlining its policy, none mentioning the word 'God'. In the UK there is a separate and membership-based organisation, *Progressive Christianity Network Britain*, which has local groups and sympathetic churches. The first of its Eight Points starts with the words 'Seek God, however understood ...'

I end with a perhaps naïve question. Does the term 'progressive' indicate a degree less radical than 'radical' or is it a way of avoiding any unfortunate association in the mind with 'radicalisation' as used in connection with IS?

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Ronald Pearse was Rector of Asfordby, Leicestershire, for 25 years, and then of Thurcaston, Leicestershire, for a few years before retiring. He was a founder member of SOF Network and its Secretary for the first 20 years.