

Taking Leave of Transcendence: ‘Embodied Spirituality’ in the Theology of Don Cupitt

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Introduction

In this paper, we want to evaluate the contemporary relevance for practical theology of the work of the theologian and philosopher of religion Don Cupitt (1934-). Cupitt is one of the most important Christian theologians of the second half of the twentieth century and his work has had a significant influence on both academic theology and popular religious belief throughout the world. Yet Cupitt has proved both influential and controversial, as we will indicate. In rejecting forms of religious faith grounded in metaphysics or propositional doctrine, he favours a this-worldly, embodied spirituality which bears fruit in ethical and practical living. We believe that in this ‘turn to practice’, Cupitt comes close to similar trends in practical theology which similarly emphasise the performative nature of theology; but the question is whether practical theologians necessarily share Cupitt’s commitment to ‘taking leave of God’ and a non-realist theological framework.

Our paper is the product of ongoing work at Gladstone’s Library, Hawarden. Cupitt has donated his personal papers to the library and they reside in the Sea of Faith archive. We have been working on a project exploring Cupitt’s life and work for three years, spending the last year paying regular visits to the archive and reading Cupitt’s papers and correspondence. We are developing a website which contains further details of the project.

Cupitt can be introduced by highlighting three aspects of his work. First he was in many ways a ‘prophet without honour’ in his twin spheres of ecclesial and academic life. Second he was a public intellectual, often writing and broadcasting for a popular audience. And third, while he was a controversialist he was also a theological pioneer. We shall describe these aspects of his life and work before then exploring two of his main ideas (i) his theological non-realism and (ii) his ethical expressivism. Finally we shall examine the implications of these ideas for the ‘ontotheological’ content -- in other words the assumptions about the nature and existence of God -- of practical theology.

(i) ‘Prophet without honour’

Cupitt began his career in the early 1950s, reading natural sciences at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, before switching to a theology degree for his final year of undergraduate study. He then trained for ordained ministry in the Church of England at Westcott House, Cambridge, was ordained deacon in 1959 and served a brief curacy at St Philip’s Church, Salford. In 1962 he returned to Westcott House as Vice-Principal, which suggests that he was already earmarked for preferment within the Church hierarchy. However in 1965, only three years later, he moved to become Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, an academic post he was to retain for the rest of his career. He never became an Archdeacon or Bishop and was never appointed a Reader or Professor at the university. Cupitt himself believes the causes of this ecclesial and academic exile were to be found in his controversial ideas and popular notoriety, something that was unpalatable to the authorities who controlled Church and university life. While this is difficult to verify, one thing we can discern from his work is that for much of his career Cupitt was, despite the controversies, thinking and writing as an

ecclesiastical insider and had the public credibility and contemporary relevance of Christianity as his primary motivation.

(ii) 'Public Intellectual'

Cupitt often wrote for a popular audience and much of the work which made him famous was as a TV and radio broadcaster. He developed a partnership with the BBC producer and presenter Peter Armstrong and in 1977 they co-presented the programme *Who was Jesus?* But Cupitt is most famous for the six-part BBC2 TV series *The Sea of Faith* broadcast in 1984 with Armstrong as the producer. The series was a theological sensation and at its peak Cupitt was receiving 60 letters a day from fans and critics alike. Four years after the series, a Sea of Faith Network was established in the UK, with organisations also forming in New Zealand and Australia. In this respect, Cupitt is noteworthy as an academic theologian whose ideas have profoundly shaped the faith journey of ordinary people.

(iii) Controversialist and Pioneer

Cupitt did not shy away from controversy. He was a contributor to John Hick's famous collection of essays, *The Myth of God Incarnate* in the late 1970s. Cupitt's book *Taking Leave of God*, published in 1980, is the most coherent and developed explanation of his Christian non-realism. It provoked a number of serious academic responses, both positive and negative. Then in 1984 came *The Sea of Faith*, with an accompanying BBC book, to massive public reaction. But even as people were reading and absorbing Cupitt's non-realism, he continued to break new ground. He was the first British theologian to engage seriously with continental post-structuralist thought, through the work of thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Derrida and Mark C. Taylor.

Cupitt's arguments often shocked and offended people but he was never a controversialist for controversy's sake. He was a populariser of serious philosophical ideas but he also had a missionary agenda. He took seriously the intellectual and cultural ideas of contemporary society, asking what would a reasonable and credible Christianity look like in such a milieu. His answers inevitably meant significant challenges for the Church but their purpose was to protect it from irrelevance and obscurity. His questions, and answers, found a wide-ranging sympathetic audience. We shall now go on to discuss two of these main ideas.

Cupitt and Non-Realism as a Critique of Religion

The *Sea of Faith* TV series was probably the first exposure many people had to modern Western traditions of religious scepticism, such as Spinoza, Marx, Freud and Wittgenstein and to the beginning[GS] of Cupitt's articulation of theological non-realism. But Cupitt had been working towards a non-realist conception for a number of years prior to this.

As early as the 1970s, in works such as *Christ and the Hiddenness of God* (1971), Cupitt was arguing that Christianity needed to move beyond a 'realist' notion of God as objective, supernatural Being intervening in the world. He gradually moved towards a fully non-realist understanding of God which does not depend on the objective existence of 'an actually-existing independent individual being' (*Taking Leave of God*, p. 15). Rather than being the foundation of existence, we should regard God as our highest ideal, the horizon towards which we orientate ourselves: 'God as a personification, or a symbol, of love, of perfection, of a kind of timeless bliss that we do occasionally glimpse.' (Cupitt, 2010, p. 197) The journey of faith should be conceived as belief in or commitment to a regulating ideal, grounded in a religious imagination, which embodies our highest moral and spiritual values.

One of Cupitt's objections to traditional theism, with its emphasis on an ineffable, supernatural God who exists in a different ontological plane from embodied, mortal humanity, separate from the material and natural world, is that it inevitably leads to a dualistic world-view. The privileging of the spiritual over the material sanctions hierarchies of body-soul, humanity-God, physical-spiritual. Instead, Cupitt looks to embrace a more holistic and embodied spirituality, arguing that 'It is through the body that we are selves, woven into the fabric of the empirical world, so that whatever may be wrong with the world at large must be wrong also with the body in particular.' (Cupitt, 1992, p. 67)

He argues that Western culture needs to reclaim the language of the body as the expression and extension of the self. If personal identity is socially constituted, then our 'real selves' are externalisations of our bodies – as linguistic, performative, relational people. True selfhood comes not by retreating inwards (or upwards) but by finding identity in communication, relationship, life, vitality and self-giving (Cupitt, 1992, p. 31). Here, of course, Cupitt's critique aligns with many forms of political and liberation theologies, which have similarly pointed to the ways in which certain conceptions of the nature of the divine have sanctioned particular understandin[GS] of human identity, not least its material, temporal and embodied qualities.

Expressivism and the Turn to Practice

The Time Being, published in 1982, signals this affirmation of human embodied action and moral agency as an outworking of his non-realist theology and his non-foundationalist anthropology. It is also part of a series of books in which he expounds his notion of 'expressivism' in religion more fully. By this, Cupitt contends that the meaning of life comes from what can be told about how one has lived in practice (1982, p. 145). If our lives are performances and we are embodied actors, then we must also be agents, seizing opportunities and harnessing the energy of creativity in moral self-actualisation (pp. 148-150). 10

Cupitt's expressivist philosophy takes on two key metaphors by the mid-1990s: those of 'solar ethics' and 'the fountain'. It is no accident that these are drawn from the natural world in which the materialism and immanence of moral action and religious belief is affirmed.

In *Solar Ethics* (1995), Cupitt argues that we should abandon utopian hopes or promises of other-worldly salvation. Rather, we should become like the Sun, whose intense burning is both a sign of its vitality and eventual death. The Sun 'expend itself gloriously; it lives not by thriftily saving itself but by recklessly giving itself away' (Cupitt, 1995, p. 230). There is no inward or objective moral sensibility or transcendent reality beyond this material, temporal existence to confer moral value on our lives; all that matters is 'that we should love life and pour out our hearts' (1995, p.9).

Similarly, Cupitt likens a truly authentic life to a Fountain, constantly outpouring and renewing in a cycle of beginnings and endings, with no origins, Creators or foundations. The Fountain enables us to reconnect with the life-force that inhabits the very heart of Nature; and rather than turning inwards to find redemption or wisdom, we look to immerse ourselves in the onrushing stream of life. True religion lies in 'selflessly loving the transient' and immersing ourselves in the 'ecstatic immanence' that is life. Instead of regarding this life as a journey through a vale of tears towards a future, happier existence in a world of immortal souls, we should seek to live intensely and fiercely until that energy is spent.

I think you can probably see how this serves to inform a thoroughly this-worldly ethic in which what matters most is the embodied enactment of our deepest values – ideals which only truly exist as they are lived out in human creativity and action. Cupitt says this:

'By a beliefless Christianity, I mean a Christianity which is a *practice* that reconciles us to this life and enables us to realise happiness and value and a good society and a contented existence below in this world.' (Glasgow, 1993, p. 30), our emphasis. This represents a preference for belief *in* over belief *that*: to allegiance, belonging and authentic living, rather than dogma or propositions.

Implications

What are the implications of Cupitt's thought for theology? Firstly, he follows other 'radical' theologians in arguing that the critique of idolatry and the end of God is the beginning of human freedom. The death or self-emptying of God in creation and in Christ frees humanity from a dependency on an other-worldly authority and liberates us to live fully in the here and now. '[T]he God-above-us had to die in order to become the God-with-us.' (Peterson, 2014, p. 6)

Secondly, religion is redefined as an essentially human endeavour; God is better conceived as 'an imaginative and poetic construction rather than a philosophical one.' (Greenfield, 2006, p. 184) Even when any notion of objective theism is abandoned, nevertheless religion as a human construct can still enrich our lives as a celebration of creativity and meaning-making. It can be a way of expressing what we value and (as Cupitt puts it), how our inner worlds and imaginations are reflected and realised in the worlds we build around us – 'and the constitution of both is ultimately ethical' (Cupitt, 1984, p. 269).

Thirdly, we find a celebration of practice over belief, and an understanding of faith and theology as essentially ‘performative’ or pragmatic. What endures after the death of God and of traditional belief is, paradoxically, the immediacy of religious practice. The translation of God from supernatural Being into an immanent, incarnational presence prompts an embrace of the secular, the emptying out of divine energy into the search for justice and human flourishing. Spirituality is not a departure from the material immanent world but conceived as a form of ethical action, bearing fruits in the virtues of creativity, renewal and transformation.

So what might practical theologians make of Cupitt’s more radical critique of the very nature and Being of the divine?

Cupitt’s work prompts us to address the relative silence within practical theology that as a discipline has tended to ‘bracket out’ fundamental questions to do with the existence and nature of God. For a generation now, practical theologians have resisted the terminology of ‘applied’ theology precisely because it implies that we are simply concerned with the outworking of already established and agreed doctrine. Instead, practical theologians argue that practice and everyday experience have the capacity both to prompt and even revise our very fundamental truth-claims. But while practical theologians have become very adept at studying, analysing and theorising forms of religious practice we have perhaps neglected the ontotheological questions – asking ‘what kind of God?’ -- that underpin those activities.

There are already some strands of thinking in practical theology which parallel Cupitt’s emphasis on the moral and practical nature of belief. This is the view that understands the truth-claims of talk about God as embedded in religious practices, such that the primary medium of theological discourse is not doctrinal but performative. In her book *Transforming Practice* Elaine Graham characterises theological statements as secondary to performative praxis. Doctrine and codified belief are ‘provisional – yet binding - *strategies* of normative action ... Ethics and politics ... become processes and practices, rather than applications of metaphysical ideas.’ (*Transforming Practice*, 1996, p. 6) This is perhaps the closest practical theology has come to incorporating post-modern, non-realist or non-foundational perspectives which challenge the notion of a metaphysical, pre-existent reality independent of our experience. Yet it is not necessary to conceive of a kind of metaphysical foundation or supernatural being to posit this kind of ‘practical divinity’ (Atherton, 2001) as a viable ‘inhabited action-guiding world-view’ (Pattison, 2007, p. 7),

We have been arguing that in his rejection of the metaphysics of a transcendent God Cupitt’s work is essentially an exploration of the implications of an alternative theology that is fully embodied and immanent. Time and space prevents us from developing this much further. But two questions emerge from this initial engagement between Cupitt’s thought and some practical theological voices. Firstly, in seeking to respond to modern scientific thinking and a rejection of institutional, credal religion in favour of the practical and this-worldly dimensions of the religious life, does Cupitt’s thought have the potential to speak to new generations of those seeking a credible and practical spirituality? Secondly, there is the neglected issue of what philosophers would term ‘onto-theology’ or the existence and nature of God. There is a direct connection between Cupitt’s non-realism and his strong stance on ethical living at the heart of the religious life. We would argue that Cupitt’s thought prompts practical theologians to think more deeply and seriously about first principles, namely the very models of God underpinning their work and the extent to which they inform our understandings of the theological truth-claims at the heart of our discipline.

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