

lurch from one crisis to another and that my standard of living will go steadily down as my earning power decreases. Altogether the economic effects of our peculiar inflation are strange. Usually inflation and full employment go together. Now we have inflation and mass unemployment at one and the same time. Another curiosity, the organised trade unionists have not only outstripped the well-to-do middle classes, they have become the principle exploiters of the poor and humble. Like all aristocrats they cling to their privileges at the expense of everyone else. I no longer feel the enthusiasm I once did for the lads. Not that that makes me any more admiring of the socially educated classes.

4 *Waiting on God*. R.K.P. 1951.

5 *New Blackfriars* December 1984, p. 507.

6 Thucydides, Jowett's translation.

7 *Burke Correspondence* 111, 125. See also Charles Parkin *The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought*, Cambridge, pp 90–96.

8 *Into the Whirlwind*, Collins and Harvill, 1967. p. 90.

9 Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* O.U.P. 1983, p. 155.

Cupitt's Context

Melvyn Matthews

One of the characteristics of western middle class men and women in the latter half of the twentieth century is a form of quiet cynicism. We do not wish to give credence to anyone else any longer. We have shut the door to those who would give us dreams of a better world, and are usually quite happy, even at times quite determined, to dig our own back gardens. We have, in fact, seen the rise and fall of too many heavenly cities for us to wish to build any more. Fanaticism of any kind is definitely a non-starter. One might have thought that this insularity was a particularly English disease brought about by loss of empire and the apparent failure of post-war social optimism, but it is also a disease of each western nation. It is often codified into political form by the new right or into religious form by the moral majority, but it derives, essentially, from a form of quiet, despairing self-protectionism, resignation; a belief, if it can be adorned with that word, that nothing very much more can be done. All that can be done now, it is felt, is that people should cultivate their own situation. Religion is therefore understood as that which reinforces the sense of the individual's importance in the face of social and cosmic collapse. The church is the last refuge for those suffering from anomie, and faith gives the individual hope in the face of darkness. Church study

groups, when asked what signs of hope there are in the world, answer that there are none, apart, perhaps, from the odd place like Iona or Taizé which the middle classes treat like tourist attractions rather than a places for renewal.

This might not be the whole picture by any means, but it is certainly an important interpretative aspect of it. It confirms at the pastoral level the picture painted by people like Lesslie Newbigin and Alasdair MacIntyre at the philosophical level of the collapse of the enlightenment project. But as we are all aware, at another level, cynicism solves very little. It may give short-term release, but it does not prevent conflict. A retreat before the collapse of the social and moral order into personal and moral individualism does nothing to reduce the risk of conflict, it actually heightens it. Personal preferences become increasingly important but there are no sure means of reconciling differences between these preferences when, in fact, they are nothing more than stated preferences. Conflict then becomes inevitable if people want to live together, which in reality they do. This risk of conflict is then extraordinarily heightened, intensified to an unbearable degree, by the growth of nuclear power and the use of high technology in communications and warfare. People's awareness of being on the brink of conflict in any case, derived, as we have said, from the loss of consensus over moral ends, is intensified to a terrifying level by their awareness of being on the brink of conflict in the nuclear age. The presence of the bomb, our knowledge that this would be the ultimate disaster, together with our knowledge that we are unable to solve even the smallest and most personal of conflicts very easily, is actually terrifying. Others have charted the course of this despair and terror. Our novelists and film makers are, in fact, far better at better of portraying the essence of our moral implosion than our theologians and philosophers, whose task, properly speaking, it ought to be. We are the hollow men, as T.S. Eliot said; and it was a very exact sense of understanding which inspired Francis Ford Coppola to portray Marlon Brando reading Eliot's poem of that name at the climax of his film about Vietnam, 'Apocalypse Now'.

Rowan Williams is one of the few theologians who has seen it as part of his theological task to trace the growth of political cynicism, also putting this down to our inability to choose the good. We run away from responsibility with heaviness of heart but with extraordinary rapidity. He says,

... the disowning of responsibility is undoubtedly the mark of a deep sickness of the spirit, struggling to keep pain, horror and destruction away from the sphere of my soul, my desires and hopes. And this sickness, while it appears to be a way of protecting ourselves, in fact prevents us

using our spiritual resources to confront and assimilate the pain we cannot bear.¹

He goes on to unravel an understanding of the causes of this sickness similar to that we have been outlining. He tells of a psychotherapist, who,

writing on 'the Bomb as an Instrument of Mass Suicide', has said that the process of 'deadening of feelings and fragmentation of the mind', of neurotic and hopeless flight from reality, is prompted partly by the pace and scale of catastrophe in this century ... We are losing the capacity to 'mourn' —to draw on reserves of compassion that help us to re-affirm values'.²

Moral cynicism compounded by terror has the effect of forcing the individual and the corporate state into a condition of paralysis and superficiality. There is too much loss and so mourning becomes an impossibility. The condition of dislocation, of separation from the possibilities of true choice and self-confidence, is compounded and reinforced by continual exposure to hopelessness and terror. We look after what we know but this is a false peace, a superficial living, an acceptance of the immediate as true because we are terrified by the monsters that lurk in the deep. Those sea monsters have to be kept locked away and we have to continue our voyage on the surface of the painted sea.

It cannot but be within this social and psychological context that ways of self-understanding are proposed. Ways which do not take this context into account are hardly being perceptive about the condition of humanity. Most people do not believe that religion really has anything to say to them in their present impasse. It is better to live with those very simple realities that one knows and recognises rather than launch into grand solutions. Most people suspect that the religious way is a form of opium or pixie dust and either embrace it warmly precisely because it is that, or, for the same reasons, would rather do without it or choose their own forms of private comfort.

It is against this background that the religious philosophy of Don Cupitt, arguably the most controversial theologian in Britain today, has become important. For Cupitt provides a religious, or at least apparently religious, way of coping with what is. People warm to what he is saying because he confirms their scepticism as being correct and places it within what he would call the mainstream of Christian spirituality. He has understood the anomie, the emptiness and darkness of the modern experience and is effectively saying to modern men and women, 'Yes, what you are experiencing is within the gift of God, it is really a form of dark night of the soul; what you have to do is be courageous and stay within it'. And he then points to a number of near contemporaries such as Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Albert

Schweizer and others, who had the courage to launch out alone and were, in the darkness, apostles of the new way. This vision is immensely compelling precisely because it understands the present interior condition of modern men and women and offers them, or encourages them to take courage and see, that where they are is ultimately of God. It rejects the metaphysical stories of the past as just one more set of tranquillisers offered to the people by the officials of religion. This rejection has its roots, as we shall see, in Cupitt's understanding of metaphysical truth, but it gains its appeal from its tacit acceptance of the marxist critique of religion—and all of us have taken a great deal more of that criticism on board than we will admit—and its appeal to the modern sense of isolation and inner scepticism. It is a serious contender, in fact, apart from the work of MacIntyre, Newbigin and the contemporary revivalists of Aristotelianism, the most serious contender for the position of defender of the faith for dislocated modern man. It is so precisely because it is a way of viewing things which accepts that modern men and women *are* dislocated beings. Cupitt's point is that this dislocation is not a terminal illness but, in fact, the beginnings of health. We have, he implies, been waiting for this moment for a long time, for what has caused man's illness is the imposition upon him of a supernatural metaphysic. Now he is at the point where he can begin to throw this off and stand on his own feet. This might well be a painful process but it is the only way. Man can now truly 'come of age'.

Cupitt's philosophy is also attractive because it incorporates the traditional 'religious' values of gentleness and consideration for others. Indeed, Cupitt insists that it is only when we have accepted our modern condition that truly disinterested love, what the New Testament calls *agape*, is possible. He sees his modern spirituality as a means, the only effective means in a modern climate, of being able to practise the traditional virtues of disinterested love of neighbour, self-denial and detachment for *their own sakes*. This, Cupitt claims, is the way of transcendence, for it is within the quest of the individual, facing the darkness of self, striving to live a life of virtue in a totally disinterested way, that the transcendence of traditional theism now resides. It cannot be doubted that there is more than just a tinge of Buddhism in this way and this Cupitt gladly accepts, openly bringing the virtues of that austere faith (or at least its more austere, Hinayana, form) into clear conjunction with the Christian understanding of charity. There is an interesting passage towards the end of one of Cupitt's books where all of these themes are brought together, in particular the emphasis, which is Buddhist as well as Christian, upon death and the necessity for modern man to accept death as the means towards a true religious consciousness.

It is the fear of death, the fear of our own abandonment, loss and dissolution that creates the false, fearful craving ego at the root of our unhappiness. Those who have died to death have attained the highest happiness and can fulfill the moral requirement.... Objectifying faith is no defence against death, for its objects do not, in fact, defend us. It will have to be lost *then*, and if it will have to be lost then, then for God's sake let us lose it now! So objectifying belief in God is no defence against death, but to have a divine consciousness is to have conquered the fear of death... And what is the best way of learning this divine consciousness? Strangely enough it is the discipline of autonomy, for autonomy is disinterestedness...³

There can be little doubt that Cupitt's form of faithfulness for those caught in the emptiness and dislocation of modern existence is exceptionally attractive. It is attractive spiritually because it accepts the spiritual condition within which western men and women find themselves, and it is attractive intellectually because it is based upon an analysis of the sources of our dislocation which would be widely accepted, even by Cupitt's detractors. Like MacIntyre and Newbigin, Cupitt accepts that the sources of our condition lie within the enlightenment experiment. He accepts that

some time around the year 1700—give or take a generation either way—a disastrous split took place. The leading edge of European spiritual development broke away from Christianity, and the gap has been slowly widening ever since.⁴

Cupitt's point is that this is not a disaster but actually something to be accepted and from which a new form of 'faith' can emerge. This he calls 'hyperborean faith'.

Hyperborean faith represents an attempt to live a free and truthful Christian life, without nostalgia, illusion or the traditional insatiable hunger for power over others, in the world as it now is.⁵

Later on he explicitly contrasts his own view with that of Alasdair MacIntyre put forward in his book *After Virtue*. He says that MacIntyre is unable to prove his point, implying that his exposition is a sort of whistling in the wind, hoping for the return of a moral universe when we are faced with daily evidence of its dissolution. Cupitt would ask that we allow ourselves to be swept on by the course of history and allow the dissolution of the structures to take place, for this is the only condition which also allows for or facilitates the uprooting of egoism. We have to pass through this fire.

It is at this point that one begins to wonder. Is there such a real and necessary contrast between egoism and a true religious faith? Does

faith actually lead to the total denial of the self? Is our twentieth century condition, with its moral indifference and terror, really such a seed bed for religious consciousness? Is there not also a sense in which we have reached a curiously negative and empty condition, a condition of moral implosion which is corrosive of any sort of faith, hyperborean or not? Certainly for most ordinary people moral or religious stances of any kind are extremely difficult, if not impossible. Culturally and politically speaking, therefore, the possibility of 'hyperborean' faith becoming a reality amongst the vast majority of people appears, at first sight at least, to be remote. People in western society are, in general, more puzzled and confused, caught in the regular processes of daily living, fearful of unemployment, death or penury. Our capacity to make individual moral choices has been seriously undermined by war and terror. Certainly our confidence has been seriously shattered, even if we still feel that the religious and moral guidelines are reasonably intact. Moreover, many would feel that individual courage to live without illusion is, in fact, an extremely expensive luxury, available within well-protected milieux, but in the end incomprehensible to those who face a daily struggle to avoid tragedy with some degree of cheerfulness. And so whereas Cupitt's approach to Christianity appears to accept the modern condition, it seriously underestimates its depth and the desperation with which most people live. To then say that in order to be religious you have to accept this desperation comes across as unreal and verges on being another tyranny, a form of cultured despising of the depth of tragedy and suffering men and women face.

This sort of criticism might give the impression of being easily made, but it does have a firm philosophical grounding.⁶ Don Cupitt is, of course, quite right to demand that God should be God, and that men and women should have faith because God is God and not because such faith provides them with some form of felt protection against evil, some insurance against destruction, or some confirmation that they are 'all right' when in fact they are supporting or conniving at a social fabric which causes destruction or oppression. This much we do know. But human beings need more than this, and although our need of a thing is by no means proof of the existence of that thing, if religion is always purely disinterested, what Cupitt calls 'an assertion of the naked will against what is the case', a number of different things will begin to happen which, when carefully examined, are undesirable. In the first place, such a quest for disinterestedness will dissociate the practice of religion from the human emotions and enthrone the will as central in the human psyche. This can be terribly misleading as a means to understanding how human beings act. Actions do not simply spring clear and fresh from the spring of the human will. Their source is far deeper and far more unclear. The fact

that Don Cupitt avowedly places the philosophy of voluntarism at the centre of his scheme of things already places him on one side of the human dilemma of dislocation. He has effectively decided, without a lot of argumentation to prove his case at this point, that modern man is unable to reach back into the deeper sources of human action and so, like it or not, has become a voluntarist. We must accept that this is the case and live with the dislocation that the twentieth century gives us. This is hardly credible, especially when we see around us the damage that has been done to people and societies by the obsessive desire to act and choose rather than to attend. Simone Weil makes the point when she says

We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will.⁷

Meanwhile, we do actually need the inspiration of beauty and goodness. We can only function as human beings when praise and gratitude, celebration, delight and desire are part of our religious practice. The English devotional writer who most clearly understands the importance of these human emotions in the religious life is Thomas Traherne. He, like Bernard of Clairvaux in an earlier, more monastic context, places desire at the centre of the human religious experience and urges us to capitalise on our sense of desire if we are to be led into the knowledge of God. Desire has actually been given to us by God in order for us to desire him who desires us. 'Wanting', as Traherne calls it, or longing for God, is not 'pixie dust' but essential to faith. It is pagans who do without it.

It is very strange; want itself is a treasure in Heaven: and so great an one that without it there could be no treasure. God did infinitely for us, when he made us want like Gods, that like Gods we might be satisfied. The heathen Deities wanted nothing, and were therefore unhappy, for they had no being. But the Lord God of Israel, the Living and True God, was from all eternity, and from all eternity wanted like a God. He wanted the communication of His divine essence, and persons to enjoy it...⁸

Traherne goes on to point out that the freedom of God, what Barth calls God's 'aseity'—so important to those who, like Cupitt, stand in a fiercely independent protestant position—is not affected by his 'wanting'. God's desiring does not diminish him, he embraces it freely. So, by correspondence, should we, if we are to discover our status as sons and daughters of the most high.

As we have seen, the risk of Traherne and those who favour a more 'realist' approach to religious practice and experience, is that God will become so real as to be oppressive, so 'objective' as to become tyrannical, so much 'the object of our wanting' that we cannot discover who we are to want him. This is, of course, the 'fault'

in religion so accurately pin-pointed by Karl Marx. 'Wanting' will, he says, inevitably lead to our own alienation and an alliance between the forces of oppression and religion. We must keep ourselves free. Marx's argument would be fatal if it could be shown that when religious people understand God in an 'objective' way this *always* led to some form of alienation. That it can and does should not be doubted. That it does so inevitably is not true. Nicholas Lash, in his study of the relationship between Christianity and Marxism, recognises very clearly that religion has in fact fuelled the flames of the marxist criticism, and calls for a purification of Christianity from twentieth century idealism; but he also points out that belief in God as an objective being is not necessarily alienating. Crucially for Don Cupitt, Lash argues,

Marx's assertion that 'A man who lives by the grace of another regards himself as a dependent being' assumes all 'dependence' to be alienatory, and thereby risks perpetuating the mistaken identification of 'objectification' with 'alienation'. Moreover, just as Marx's use of the concept of 'dependence' is (in contrast to his use of the concept of 'need') strangely undialectical, so also his use of the concept of 'grace' suffers from the same defect. If God is, and can only be, an 'alien power', then indeed his 'graciousness' ... can only perpetuate our alienation. But not all 'graciousness', human or divine, is thus corrupted...⁹

This is crucial because it brings us back to a form of religious practice which acknowledges a pressing need to purify itself of its alienating power (and who does not know something of that?), but refuses to accept that all dependent relationships, all acts of graciousness from one source of being, human or divine, to another, automatically and necessarily carry that seed of oppression within them. This is important because it forces us to affirm the possibility of a religious practice which is neither so full of oppressive objectification that it becomes the tool of an oppressive society, nor so pure that it cannot express the desire for and delight in the other that the human psychè needs for its own freedom. It is this possibility that Cupitt dodges. Delight in the other and human freedom are not so far apart from each other as either Marx or Cupitt would appear to suggest.

There is a further difficulty with Don Cupitt's proposals for a 'disinterested' religion. It risks exalting what he calls 'the purified individual consciousness' to a level which most religion, and indeed most human beings would find unacceptable. Cupitt emphasises the need to strive for a purified religious consciousness by means of renunciation and self-giving, non-attachment and acceptance of

death. There are no 'objective' religious goals outside of the self, all that is left is the absolute requirement to purify ourselves of all attachments. This call appears to strike a true religious chord until we look at it more closely. Several questions come to the surface. Is such a renunciation actually possible alone, first time round, as it were? If it is not—and it would appear very doubtful—and it has to be *learned* within a community or with the assistance of others along the same path, then does not this undermine the individualism which Cupitt claims to be so essential? Can it even be called an *individual* consciousness if it is only acquired within a community, or within a tradition, a narrative, of which the individual is but a part?

Then there are the questions about what is purity and how it may be defined. Certainly most individuals, even the very strongest—perhaps especially the strongest—find themselves face to face with the greatest moral conundrums at some time in their lives. They only solve them in such a way as to leave other problems, equally problematic, still to be faced. Moral purity of vision is, in reality, a very difficult virtue to put into practice even if one thinks one has achieved it. Its claimants would certainly have to meet the criticism that their purity of vision had clouded the purity of others. Whether such activity can be called the activity of a purified consciousness or simply sheer embattled doggedness, is extremely difficult to decide. Nor, as the previous objection begins to hint, does the use of the phrase 'purified individual consciousness' help us in deciding what is true and what is false in religion. Human beings do need to know how to distinguish good religion from bad, selfish religion from unselfish religion. If, however, as Don Cupitt suggests, there are no religious goals beyond the self, no objective metaphysical realities which we can yearn for or desire, how is it that the goal of a purified religious consciousness can be distinguished from simple religious narcissism and self-indulgence? As Rowan Williams says, we need to know how

'I want nothing but Jesus and to see him at peace in Jerusalem' (the prayer of Hilton's 'Pilgrim'), means something other than 'I want to be a fulfilled autonomous spiritual subject'.¹⁰

If there is no way of distinguishing between these two statements—and it is difficult to see how there could be without reference to an 'objective' metaphysical reality—then religion simply falls into disrepute as being nothing more than a means of personal fulfillment. Moreover, at this point, people will recognise that there are other, more evidently effective, means of acquiring fulfillment than those provided by the religious path, or at least the Christian religious path with its emphasis on sacrificial sanctity, and they will certainly pursue them.

Cupitt provides modern man with a religious way which is

tailored to modern man's situation. He accepts the voluntarist understanding of man which the eighteenth century has bequeathed to us, saying effectively that the individual will is the source of religious consciousness and that a purified consciousness is the goal of religious endeavour. He thus effectively separates the will from the act of love and desire, tacitly excluding these latter from the realm of religion. He also denies us any criteria by which any one purified religious consciousness may be judged morally or religiously more acceptable than another. 'God' then risks being subordinated to this purified consciousness, being no more than the name given to that factor (and remember that by Cupitt's own lights this cannot be an objective factor) which enables this purification to occur. This means that the 'contemplative' approach to religion and human nature, which seeks to unite will with love, intellect with wisdom, action with adoration, becomes reduced to the mere 'functional' approach to religion and human nature. In this approach what I do and say religiously is only useful if it serves my particular quest to become a purified or 'hyperborean' religious person. This shift from the contemplative to the functional is clear evidence that Cupitt has accepted the dislocation which western society exhibits and is only strenuously trying to show that it is a positive dislocation. This might explain something of the alacrity with which his proposals have been accepted by the western educated individual. This form of faith appears to provide the western individual with a religion when in actual fact it is only an affirmation of his already existing way of life using 'religious' terminology. It is a form of baptism of the intellectual western way of life. That the western way of life actually thrives upon a distinct dislocation between itself and the Third World, actually requires weapons of mass destruction for its maintenance and survival, and actually causes widespread harm to the poor within its own boundaries, is nowhere recognised as being *religiously* important. This is religious amoralism of the worst kind. It is also a reduction of religion to capitalism, turning Christianity, with all its traditions of prophetic protest, of opposition to materialism and individualism, its rich traditions of corporate devotion, into the ascetic affirmation of the solitary, purified, individual will. The function of this affirmation is to acquire a purified consciousness. But religion *is*, it cannot really be *for* anything except God; but once we deny the objective existence of God then we will be forced to define religion in functional terms, asking what it can do for us and so on. The irony is that this is precisely what Cupitt does not want to do. In such a perspective, capitalism, which itself defines everything in terms of its use or exchange value, has permeated even the religious consciousness.

Rowan Williams perceives how Don Cupitt accepts and reinforces the dislocation from which we all suffer, saying,

He is so eager to repudiate the notion that we can speak 'neutrally' of God, that God could be an object for investigation and intellection, that he leaves no room for any kind of unity between intellect and will, or knowledge and love, and so belittles the significance of vision and consent in both faith and morality.¹¹

If this is the case then our task becomes very urgent. We must find some way of being religious which does not divide us, which does not allow us to simply exist within the dislocations of modern society, which is not an expression of our dislocation, but is actually an expression of who we truly are.

- 1 Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God*, Fount, 1983, p. 23.
- 2 Ibid. p. 23.
- 3 Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, SCM, 1980, p. 161.
- 4 Ibid. p. 155.
- 5 Don Cupitt, *The World to Come*, SCM, 1982, p. 6.
- 6 I am greatly indebted, at this point in the argument, to an important article by Rowan Williams— 'On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt' — which appeared in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- 7 Cited by Williams.
- 8 Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, 1.41.
- 9 Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981, p. 182.
- 10 Williams, op. cit.
- 11 Ibid.

Response

Luis Bermejo SJ on Rome and reunion

The ecclesiology of Fr Bermejo SJ, as reported by Bede Griffiths in his article 'The Church of Rome and Reunion' in the September 1985 number of *New Blackfriars*, strikes me as wholly fanciful and as incompatible with any orthodox Catholic view of the nature of the Church. I am not a theologian, but as an historian by profession perhaps I might be permitted to allude to two considerations which go unremarked in the article. Perhaps Fr Bermejo discusses them in his book; I hope so, for they are crucial.

The fact is that the Fathers of the Church from St Clement of Rome and St Ignatius onwards (not to go back any earlier) regarded the Church as essentially One and Indivisible. Schisms which concerned disputed elections to the episcopate could be healed, but once a division became inveterate the schismatic body was held to be outside of the Church. This did not apply merely to groups which, like