

HOLDING FAST TO GOD, A REPLY TO DON CUPITT by Keith Ward.
SPCK, 1982, London. pp x + 166 p/b £4.95

Keith Ward's latest book is a refutation of Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God*, (London, 1980); and a defence of one version of Christian orthodoxy. Cupitt, who used to stress God's transcendence, now denies his objective existence; Ward, who used to deny that theistic belief explains the world, nowadays argues that it does. (Paradoxically, Cupitt now cites Ward's previous position in his own support: cf. *Taking Leave of God*, p 1968.)

Cupitt's book, written as ever in a stimulating and engaging style, rejects all realist accounts of religious language, represents God as a necessary myth and (in the Kantian sense) a regulative ideal, defends an expressivist account of prayer and worship, and advocates a religion of autonomous commitment to the pursuit of disinterestedness and individual salvation – a religion which he characterises as 'Christian Buddhism', and which neither needs nor can be given any justification beyond its own intrinsic value. (In his more recent *The World to Come*, in which salvation receives a more social interpretation, Cupitt acknowledges that the main theses of his earlier book were "wittily foreseen and demolished in Nietzsche's notebooks", but he would adhere still to at least the negative conclusions of *Taking Leave of God*.) Cupitt draws on a wide range of works of post-war theology and philosophy of religion, and even some of the positive theses which he seems not to have discarded are too cogently presented for the discerning reader to take leave of them without reflection.

Cupitt is thus worth replying to, but Ward's reply sometimes underestimates him. Cupitt is frequently accused of positivism, and his realism and anti-relativism over science, contrasting oddly as they do with his relativistic approach to morality and religion, lend this charge some justification. But he is also charged with Logical Positivism, both by Ward (p 17) and by Sir Norman Anderson in the Foreword, whereas Cupitt in fact rejects the Verification Principle (p 150), and contends not that talk of an objective God is meaning-

less but that the arguments are too weak to support a religion based on their conclusions, conclusions which he also considers to be religiously irrelevant. Again, he is said to take leave of an objective God because he misses the supreme value of love, and "cannot see that God is love, and love leaves us free"; yet Cupitt is well aware that this is what the orthodox believe, but finds it incredible because of the facts of suffering and premature death. Indeed Ward's exasperation with Cupitt's text is rather too emphatic, at least in the earlier chapters; later, where he is developing a positive case, his tone becomes much more imaginative, tolerant and rewarding. Even so, the final claim that Cupitt's religious proposals are "too Scholastic, too neat and tidy and too restrictive of human knowledge and possibilities", and that this is what is fundamentally wrong with them (p 166), is unconvincing; for Ward's real objections are much more basic, and Cupitt's text soars out of reach of this stricture.

Nevertheless Ward's philosophical response to Cupitt's various positions is largely convincing and often devastating. It is not just that the arguments for God's existence have a proper and effective role in supporting belief in an objective God. Ward also ably expounds the difference which metaphysical and historical facts reasonably make in matters both of religion and of morality, and shows how a realist religion is capable of rational justification, whereas one based on nothing but commitment is not. Those with such a commitment cannot expect their values to be recognised as such by others, unless they inconsistently subscribe to intuitionism, with all its difficulties, as well. There again, the value of autonomy in no way implies that autonomous humans can create values; and disinterestedness, to the extent that it is a virtue, is in no way undermined by Christian ethics or eschatology. Moreover, despite Cupitt's claim to be interpreting current religious language, he is in fact proposing a new religion, which is considerably at odds with Christian ethics, and is unlikely, on

logical and psychological grounds, to be capable of sustained adoption.

In places Ward supplements the themes of his recent book *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*. Over the problem of evil he further develops an Irenaean theodicy which is at times moving and helpful; but it may be wondered whether it is satisfactory to conclude, as he candidly does, that "our world, the one we live in, is one of the very worst worlds (sc. which a good) God could have created" (p 109) or that "*In general*, then, we can say that this world is one ... in which the many evils are either necessary conditions or consequences of the existence of those (sc. distinctive) goods" (p 115, my italics). For if a good God could have created another world containing as many free creatures as ours but fewer or lesser evils, or if some of the evils in our world are unnecessary for the occurrence of greater goods, and could have been prevented without losses to the exercise of freedom, then he is not as good as Ward claims, though not as tyrannical as Cupitt would imply. There is also an intriguing chapter in defence of belief in life after death, which argues that some even less imaginable eventualities are perfectly coherent, and, more dubiously, that the very nature of spirit with its inbuilt teleology is a ground for seeing immortality as a possibility (p 134). In fact, though, Ward's basic ground for belief in life after death for people in general is the resurrection of Jesus, by which at one point (pp 115f.) it is actually said to be entailed.!

Despite Ward's conclusive refutation of the claim that much religious language is nothing but an expression of attitude or commitment, doubts must remain in some matters. Thus some expressivist account is surely required of the ascension; and I shall not be alone in jibbing at Ward's account of how prayer can change the course of events independently of the attitudes of the person praying, although he is surely right in maintaining that those who pray presuppose that there is a God who listens to their prayers, and that if they ceased to believe this they would cease to pray. Then again, does Cupitt's account of belief in the resurrection in terms of faith and of

being inspired by Jesus' example really "imply nothing about resurrection at all" (p 76)? As Cupitt and Ward both recognise, the resurrection appearances were to believers only; and although traditional Christianity has doubtless adopted an objectivist interpretation of Jesus' resurrection, at least some of the faith of the first believers can be shared by those unable to accept the kind of account of the resurrection in terms of a spiritualised body adopted by Ward at p 125.

Ward's chapter on salvation is well-written and impressive, supplying in particular a salutary corrective of *Taking Leave of God* by stressing the social aspect. Believers in the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity may well find reassurance from this chapter; by the same token people like myself who share Cupitt's well-publicised difficulties about these doctrines will only be able to go along with some of the strands. Even so, Unitarians such as myself can accept God's facilitation of love within the believer, where an expressivist (or a Christian Buddhist) would lack the necessary presuppositions.

Ward's likely readership presumably divides into non-readers of Cupitt, seeking confirmation of their orthodoxy, and readers of Cupitt who are interested in the other side of the issues which engage him. Fortunately the first group will be challenged (if they read far enough) by remarks such as "when religion becomes a matter of imposing a set of allegedly correct doctrinal statements on others, it becomes repressive and spiritually sterile" (p 136), by the claim that Christianity has undergone almost unrecognisable changes and will undergo more (pp 160f.), by the imaginative restatements of doctrine in the later chapters, and by the qualified openness to non-Christian religions shown in the final one. They will not, however, be stimulated to further reading by a book lacking both a bibliography and an index. Nor will they receive a sufficiently balanced impression of Cupitt's case, a deficiency likely to be made good by nothing short of a perusal of *Taking Leave of God*.

The intended readership must comprise rather the second group, those already be-

mused or bewildered by Cupitt's pages: at any rate this is suggested by the numerous page-references thereto. These readers, however, may be deterred by passages which are either tetchy (e.g. p 52) or patronising (e.g. p 32), or by the cover design of a hand emerging from a heavenly cloud (or surplice?) which may seem to present the book as for ecclesiastical insiders only.

This would be a pity, as the book has much of positive value, and, despite the need for fairly frequent qualification, offers much sound argument and much robust good sense. If such readers are seeking a reasoned case for the tenability of belief in the modern intellectual milieu, they may well find it here.

ROBIN ATTFIELD

DIVORCE AND SECOND MARRIAGE – FACING THE CHALLENGE

by Kevin T. Kelly. Collins pp 111 p/b £2.00.

This is a book to be welcomed as a courageous response to the dilemma facing the Church with the realisation that, according to the University of Surrey survey, as many as one in five marriages involving Catholics are canonically invalid, most because one or both partners are divorced. Kevin Kelly recognises the reality of widespread marriage breakdown which is as sadly prevalent among practising Christians as others, and takes this as his starting point. The book falls into two distinct sections; in Chapters 1 and 2 he looks at the theology of marriage and examines how the modern insights into marriage as a "relationship of life-giving love" can enrich and deepen the traditional understanding of indissolubility, and in Chapters 3 and 4, he considers the theological basis for readmitting divorced-remarried Catholics to the sacraments, and tries to reconcile current rigid teaching with more compassionate pastoral practice.

As Kevin Kelly makes clear in his introduction, he is far more confident that the views expressed in the second half of the book will find wide acceptance than he is about the reactions to the first half. This is understandable, as he introduces the concept of "achieved indissolubility" as a development of the commitment to lifelong fidelity promised at the marriage ceremony. The idea that the initial commitment, although essential to Christian marriage, is only a beginning and that a couple, by living in love, gradually grow towards indissolubility as a reality is one to which most married people, as a result of personal experience, would I think, subscribe. The difficulty comes with the notion that

a couple can ever recognise that they have "achieved" indissolubility. Who is to judge? When marriages do break down, it frequently becomes obvious that one partner's conception of what the relationship has been differs widely from the other's. Since Kevin Kelly suggests this "achieved indissolubility" as a criterion to determine whether or not a divorced person might be permitted to remarry in the Church, it would seem that the Church would be required to make judgments about the quality of a particular marriage, and who was responsible for its failure; and we would be back with the impossibility of legislating for personal relationships, which has caused so many anomalies and so much scandal in the Church up to now.

This, it seems to me, leads to another area of difficulty. Kevin Kelly acknowledges his debt to Dr Jack Dominian, and indeed asks for this book to be seen as 'a kind of appendix to Dr Dominian's most recent work, *Marriage, Faith and Love*' (D.L.T., 1981) [p 16], so perhaps it is not surprising that, although he writes in the context of Western Christian culture, and recognises that "human and Christian values never exist in a non-cultural form" (p 14), he nowhere suggests that prevailing cultural norms might actually operate against truly Christian marriage. By this, I do not mean such scapegoats as the permissive society, but our culture's pattern of marriage, which has been validated and upheld by the Church itself. A "relationship of life-giving love" can surely only develop so far within the overall context of oppression – economic, social and theological – in which women find themselves, however committed to one another