

Don Cupitt's
The Old Creed and The New,
and What is Missing

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Repetition and only slight alterations from one work to the next determine buying fewer of Don Cupitt's books than he produces, and there is a lot of repetition within - as in 'as I have been saying' (Cupitt, 2006, 68) and 'we need a short resume' (75). However, I read *The Old Creed and The New* (2006) through, enjoying its clarity even if it is so sweeping in its statements, and, unless stated in a previous and missed book, there are a number of new directions here in tracking Don Cupitt's running argument.

The most significant is that he has dropped non-realism. His critics "were right" (43), and now he states that Christianity relies upon the philosophical package in which it was delivered as a system (43-44). Once he had said there was a Christian non-realism available stripped of its packaging - but not any more as it is a philosophical doctrine (44). Most preachers get to non-realism by retiring age, he quips (hardly supported by evidence: really?) (23) but he's beyond retirement, and presumably they are wrong too.

Does this mean that Cupitt is no longer to be classed as a textual or "atheous" (Williams, 2000, xv) nihilist? Indeed, in the midst of pluralism, "ordinary language is surprisingly smart, up-to-date, and precise." (Cupitt, 2006, 113) and "I have insisted there is only one real world, the world that ordinary language gives us, which is the ordinary life-world, which is unbounded and outsideless." (113) There is the clue: it is not True (as in realism), it is still

outsideless; in other words, it just works the best and is "thoroughly tested out and stabilized in the market place." (113)

So what he is not, then, is a Christian non-realist, but he is a non-realist in general. A humanist one, for sure, and this begs the question about the religious programme that results, if there is one at all.

If there is one it is going to come from the New Creed, different from the Apostles' Creed, about true religion being: finding your own voice and owning your own life, and doing the solar affirmation of life down to its gratuitousness, contingency, transience and nothingness. Faith is then productive value-realizing action in the world (not saving faith), and it is about letting go, laughing at anxiety and floating free. (3)

If only it was so easy to laugh at anxiety. This new choose life creed guides the discussion all the way through. In fact, whilst choosing this optimistic life of every day language, Cupitt himself had a few experiences thrown at him, which he did not choose. I wish he had written a book on facing death, to grapple with this subject. Perhaps he will, as he does. He had a panic attack from a "trivial throat cancer scare" (102) and felt like someone possessed by a devil, but it was "not cognitive" (does it have to be?). He made some notes, to presumably make it cognitive, but lost them. About a year later in October 1992 he had a difficult brain surgery. He told me not so long after the time that he wanted to die during this experience. Here in the book he recalls something close to a Near Death Experience, except he was alive. Whilst in

intensive care he saw a shaft of light coming from the top right of a nearby window, and motes were dancing within it, and he was "transported with happiness" (102). The motes related to Brownian motion under a microscope and sunlight connected with existing religious experience (thus his Solar living has a more intense meaning than some readers might guess) (103). After this death would no longer frighten him (103).

This clearly needs following through, because this is religious experience without choice: one of panic and a devil inside, another of light and science that takes away the fear of death. Others may see a tunnel of light and a figure like Buddha or Mary at the end: Cupitt saw motes: so mote it be. And he calls this - very important - "Christian atheist mysticism" (103), which is "*not* new" (103), and relates to Japanese students seeing modern Western thought and the "similarity between God and Emptiness or Nothingness" (103).

So we have mystic atheism, the language of the everyday - one view and a simplicity of approach (a practical approach), being instead of complicated Christianity made non-realist. This is the point: he is against the round-the-houses, convoluted, heterological thinking which you do when going to a second hand set of religious statements to state something otherwise possible more simply and directly. He wants straight talk instead. He calls this autologous thinking:

when we are able to tackle the subject for ourselves, clearly, straightforwardly and head-on, without being compelled by fear,

embarrassment, or confusion to be indirect, or veiled, or circuitous, or ironically. (83)

Thus the Christian religious system, about which Cupitt was once non-realist, condemns the liberal and radical into using many of those roundabout "withouts" (note that in Cupitt's new position the liberal and radical must come to be alongside each other, not opposites as they were). The system demands heterological thinking upon them, and is why he rejects Christian non-realism.

This surely provides a problem for those who participate and even lead congregations in liturgies that demand circuitous thinking. Rather than providing solar thinking and living, heterological thinking sheds some lesser "moonlight" (85) on matters, but he wants to tackle things head on preferably, in order to engage with one's own fears (84).

So what about the religious process? Is there one derived from a programme of autologous thinking, in order to get out of the liturgical nonsense of limited moonlight and do something much more directly? Does it mean, for example, sitting cross legged and watching the sunlight through a higher window, clearing the mind in near Buddhist fashion and facing ones own demons? He does not say. Are those who properly abandon the nostalgia of roots and identity (12-13), who say not that they are Christian but only "I 'practise Christianity'" (12), condemned to dim moonlight at best? Why, with the New Creed available, practise Christianity at all? Indeed, even "'normal theology' can no longer be written with conviction" (12). He hopes to free himself from

the brush of theological realism (12) by rejecting the identity of the particular Christian brand, yet whilst also saying his critics were right about Christian non-realism. There is, therefore, both with Christian realism and non-realism done for, nowhere to go.

So there is no spiritual programme, within or about Christianity. There is surely no point in practising Christianity, or it is only of transitory use at best. He states that during the struggle to autologous thinking one can maintain links to the old religion (to which the reply would be to hurry up with the struggle) and there are still resources in the spirituality of Middle Way Buddhism, nihilistic philosophy and the darkest parts of writings from Latin Church mystics (140). So even Middle Way Buddhism is transitory, and Cupitt is going beyond that.

We need to escape this endgame, because a New Creed, a belief, needs some sort of forward moving praxis, a spiritual process, beyond thought alone. Thought, or even its removal (which Cupitt does not advocate), is not the be all and end all of a spiritual process. Surely optimism and seeing religion as "self-involved" and "practical" (whereas philosophy is "speculative" and "theoretical") (140-141) is inadequate as a process.

So here is my take on all this. We humans are symbolic beings, with language and wider language (as in music, painting and sculpture). We are essentially communicative. Symbolism to be rich is going to be indirect as well as direct. Simple talk, direct talk, does not take in the range of what it is to be human.

We are symbolic beings because we are social. This socialness needs other people around us, and involves binding and division. We know of the processes by which we bind with one another: we do it through economic exchange, through talk, through sex (as examples): we sacrifice acquired money in a strategy to receive greater utility, we speak and receive enriched conversation, we also give the physical material effort of sex and receive material and spiritual relationship. In religion, we come into a process of material giving (ourselves, time, money, not doing something else), enter a central ceremony (say a eucharist with its earthly and transformative references), and then we come away in hope of a spiritual gift.

This is my reinterpretation of Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) (1954), where he shows how gifts as a form of exchange carry social meaning and provide a moral bond between people (in society). Economics, talk and sex are all symbolic, meaningful activities. So much in society is an exchange: the gift is being calculated as a process of outward and back again. Here I am saying that the non-essential and yet holistic reflective-on-life religious process is less exchange and more pure gift, in and out. We offer faithfully, we process, and we leave hoping to have been transformed. We live in hope.

Now the richness of the symbolic life, and the process of coming in, doing and going out, requires heterological thinking. It is good to use music, even though an ascetic might reject it on purist spiritual grounds. Art is important. So are gestures. It is also good to use hidden messages. Something that is old,

ancient, comes from another time and place, is surely the best format to contain hidden messages - messages that might just appear to make connections in an involuntary way. Like Cupitt's window and the notes: things pop out and hit us unexpectedly as individuals (helped by being together). Otherness is important in worship, to project out a sacred canopy to do its job, to be transported elsewhere into the realm of gift beyond the obvious now, before coming back into the normal world of exchange.

This social anthropology of theology I suggest is a warmer approach: Cupitt's philosophical optimism is in the cold. It is the difference between the stonework and light through coloured windows (mine) and the whitewashed walls with sunlight through a clear window (his). Mine is done with others, his sounds lonely.

Now, I have practised where Puritanism casts its long shadow (Unitarianism) of white walls and clear windows, and where deemed useless words and lost methods have been chucked out (like washing the window). Minimalism comes along, then, for people like Unitarians with plenty to say. They say it is straight talk and still truthful; but what they say ends up in a thin mixture of continued religious realism: of a God who does little and of a forgotten Jesus that once was made into a liberal modernist of ethical teachings. And, furthermore, it is not straight talk - for all the religious words used are out of the same museum of religious sounds. There is not a new religious language, and this realist approach involves shrinkage and collapse - collapse, that is, until someone says, "Ought we not now to remythologise rather than

demythologise?" They must say, "Ought we to give up this religious delusion of loss: we've hardly any religious words left."

In other words, remythologising means raiding the museum in an active way, including the Old Creed (for a bit of language sourcing), understanding however the difference between a liturgical gift process and ordinary thought. It means the religious process is indeed heterological.

It does not mean doing a John Milbank: we do not set up Christendom (or any other -dom) in a postmodern bubble as a kind of new intolerant religious monarchy, by which say Sociology can be condemned as secular theology (Milbank, 1990). Rather, it keeps self-awareness of the process, the whole process of projection and remythologising.

It means identifying the religious process that produces those messages and give a redeeming (optimistic) message towards that world we ordinarily live within. Just as the ordinary life-world is tested in the normality of exchange, so the religious life-world exists in the arena of gift and hope. It is a world of the imagination, of the projection, though of course the work it does is "real" to personal and social well-being back in ordinary life. It is, in other words, a religion as therapy. When is religion not? Religion, say by trawling through the Bible, Qur'an or Gita, is not a provider of scientific information, or historical method, or psychological categories. It is not, and never was, a critical apparatus for understanding apparent facts and theories. These are myth books out of other times and cultures, a sacred era.

Of course the ordinary language is better tested for these critical knowledge requirements (113), but not for being religious. Leave the ancients and their canopy to their sacred era: we come after the modernists for our critical methods. But raid the ancients for doing therapeutic religion. They had no need to remythologise an already mythic apparatus, but if we are to do a religious job we have to actively remythologise as a task.

Yes, I constantly read theologies by liberals who are trying to extract knowledge of a detailed kind from the ancient world. Instead of trying to remythologise resurrection - live it; they try to demythologise resurrection to what can be said about it. Not a lot. As an example: reading Rowan Williams' (2000) *On Christian Theology*, and a chapter called 'Between the Cherubim' (183-196). I have to ask myself, when stuck within his density of words, whether Williams believes all of it as he teases out this detail and that through the fog and thicket. On this I am with Cupitt, given that we are often presented with lots of mirrors on poles, and ever more of them, in the declining world of critical realist theology. We never know now what we are looking at. Cupitt succeeds in being more communicative (of a plainer kind) and critical in method (Williams, 2000, xxii-xv).

So Cupitt's clearer expression (bought at a price of repetition, though the price is higher than need be) is welcomed in contrast: but this does not need to go the whole hog to autologous thinking as an exercise in linear purity. Rather, we need simply to be clear about what is going on. Heterological thinking is

part of the religious process, and should be understood for what it is, for out of heterological thoughts while practising Christianity come those little moments of involuntary revelatory impact that do allow, just about, the dynamic identity of “Christian” to be claimed for moving about in the ordinary life-world.

Bibliography

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