

# BEYOND A RADICAL THEOLOGY

[A response to Don Cupitt's lecture "Is a Radical Theology Possible?" (delivered in St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> June 1981)]

In a year in which St. Paul's Cathedral has confirmed its role as the fundamental symbol of hope for the nation, Don Cupitt was invited by the Dean and Chapter to give a lecture exploring the possibilities of the radical frontier of faith. For an institution bearing the freight of national dependency, any challenge to the foundations of its own construct sends seismic shock waves surging through its superstructure. "The Myth of God Incarnate", Don Cupitt's "Taking Leave of God" and other writings have appeared to call in question the validity of the ground on which St. Paul's, as symbol, depends. If the symbol of national hope be insecure, then the very fabric of the nation's life is threatened. The Cathedral staff therefore faced an agenda which could have been handled simply by dismissing the radical wing of theology out of hand and sustaining a disinterested separateness from the issues involved. Courageously, the attempt was made to grapple with the material in public lecture, discussion and debate. Inevitably at a covert level the task was so to deal with the threat of radical theology that its impact could be minimised and the defences upon which St. Paul's depends maintained. The hope was that in the wake of the event it could be said, "We have examined the material and found it wanting - nothing has changed, the traditional symbols and values of the Christian faith are unshakeable and stand secure at the heart of our country".

So in trepidation, Cupitt risked putting his head into the lion's mouth. He emerged alive, without getting his head bitten off, and yet I suspect that the exercise was so structured that what he actually said was not heard, what he really wanted to say could not in fact be articulated, and that the most important agenda of all remained so fundamentally unconscious that its saying could not even be contemplated. Within the constraints of institutional conservatism, Cupitt addressed the issue of the possibility of a radical theology. This paper seeks to press beyond that possibility. It listens to the gaps, the cracks, the unwritten agenda in an attempt to raise to consciousness that which is still repressed into the unconscious of the Christian church, raising today the questions of tomorrow, taking the currently unthinkable position of a radical theology, not as a future with questionable tenability, but as a past foundation from which to press forward. Cupitt ended his lecture with the question: "Can a radical theology still be genuinely Christian?". This paper begins with the question: "Can an authentically human being still be religious?"

## **Background**

In the beginning, Cupitt introduces material from the current research frontiers of astrophysics. He widens our horizons to the limits of the known universe, then takes us into the minutiae of fundamental particle physics. He leads on into a summary of the philosophy of science, in the words :

"Present theory suggests that all events that can be observed in this immense ocean of phenomena are governed by a very small number of basic physical forces, and involve a

somewhat larger number of fundamental particles. Yet out of these relatively simple constituents extremely complex objects have evolved during the course of the universe's long history."

Principles applied to the physical universe are equally applied to the emergence of life on earth, and its evolution and complexification to the range of phenomena known today. In addition to the physical and biological sciences, Cupitt adds the dimension of socio-historical analysis leading to the development of "the modern secular and naturalistic understanding of human history and human social life".

"All human cultural products - language, political authority, religions, ideologies, moralities, systems of knowledge - used to be seen as coming down from heaven and as validated from above by supernatural authority; but now they have instead come to be seen as having evolved from below through human social interaction."

If Darwin's work on the Origin of Species sent shock waves through the religious world of the last century, then current work on the origin of social institutions will trigger a massive earthquake beneath the fragile superstructure of today's ecclesiastical construct. As Cupitt comments, "We are living through the greatest cultural upheaval in human history".

It would appear that man feels intolerably insecure unless he has some satisfactory way of understanding his place in the world. That understanding was provided by religion. As a way of understanding it is rapidly being superseded by a naturalistic world view.

"...the only sound way we have of explaining any phenomenon in nature is to show how it is linked in a regular or lawlike way with other phenomena in nature, a principle that is as true of human affairs as it is in physics."

In expounding this naturalistic world view, Cupitt describes two fundamental foci or poles.

"Starting from the objective pole, we see the Universe as continuous natural process, possibly deterministic, out of which we have evolved into consciousness and knowledge of our situation in a way that is probably in principle fully explicable in natural terms. Subjectively, and starting from ourselves, we are social beings for whom all meanings, all truths, all knowledge systems are generated by social agreement in the course of our continual struggle to achieve a common and effective understanding and control of the world about us."

In the two-dimensional flat-earth of that position lies Cupitt's most massive lacuna. For Cupitt, the secular world view is based partly on advances in physical sciences, that deal essentially with the non-human, and partly with advances in the social sciences, treating phenomena of inter-personal transactions. He has omitted that fundamental breakthrough of 20th century thought, namely the realm of psychological analysis, dealing with the world of the intra-personal. There may well be room for radical theology in Cupitt's two dimensional universe, representing the projection of the third dimension into flat-land.

Within the three dimensional universe of physics, sociology and psychology, even radical theology may be seen through as myth. The most radical challenges to a religious world view have arisen not from the world of science, nor from the world of sociology, but from the field of psychoanalysis. Religion is interpreted as wish-fulfilment and its symbols and myths as projection of common unconscious material, reified, systematised, and institutionalised into a construct which provides a common social defence against the anxieties of being. Here

lies the agenda which, under Cupitt's experienced constraints, was rendered inarticulate and repressed.

## Reaction

In response to the cultural upheaval, Cupitt detects three emergent positions which he designates as "**optimistic**", "**disinterested**" and "**pessimistic**". The optimists see man as "**reborn as he emerges from the shadows of mythology into a clearer self-consciousness and awareness of his place in the world**". The disinterested ones are simply "**absorbed in the work of advancing knowledge**" without raising the underlying philosophical or religious agenda. The third group, the pessimists, he characterises as:

"...seeing Man as a drifting speck in a vast unmeaning Universe that begot him by a string of chances and will in the end annihilate him. Among these pessimists are those traditional religious believers who perceive the new scientific world-view as a mortal enemy."

Religion is traditionally utilised as a defence against precisely that pessimistic despair of meaninglessness and insignificance. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that grappling with the reality of man's *Setz im Leben* poses threats to the very existence and life of traditional religion. Religious reaction to emergent consciousness is therefore inevitably a regressive and defensive attempt at denial, repression or pseudo-adaptation involving the path of least change.

Cupitt takes the conservative attitude towards the Book of Common Prayer as evidence of this defensive regression in Britain. He points out that the Prayer Book's language and symbolism are still rooted in the ancient pictures of the universe and yet so many still feel that that world view is appropriate for Christians in the late 20th century. After an extensive exposition of the faith of the Prayer Book, Cupitt returns to this question as to why its outmoded world view is clung to with such tenacity.

"How does it come about that so many people today wish to maintain the Prayer Book's outlook intact? ... I suspect that many of them are people for whom religious faith is almost the same thing as a sense of the past and who fear that if we wholly lose touch with that ancient world-view we will lose our cultural and religious identity. The modern scientific outlook is felt to be deeply threatening, and the Prayer Book represents our own childhood, a way back to the lost sacred."

The insecurities are so deep, that even the minor modernisation of world view involved in the Alternative Service Book of 1980 is bitterly attacked. Disturbing data raises anxiety, heightens insecurity and calls for change in social perceptions of self and environment. Rather than incorporate the data and adapt perception accordingly, man commonly reacts to reduce the felt anxiety. The disturbing data is repressed, old perceptions are reinforced, regression is the order of the day. Defences against anxiety mobilise a compulsive return to the safety of the known world even at the expense of dissociation from reality. So the innocence of childhood becomes the paradigm of wisdom. Under increased threat regression pushes further back into the safety of 'the lost sacred' - the womb-world of the spirit.

Cupitt goes on to outline three main responses of the Christian community faced with this disturbance of its world view. The conservative response seeks to reaffirm the traditional

position, while denying disturbing data and developments. It seeks **"to maintain the traditional faith intact if necessary by resorting to evermore authoritarian arguments"**.

The second response, that of liberal theology, **"largely gives up traditional supernaturalism and instead typically sees the whole evolving cosmic and historical process as God's self-expression"**. The vision of the universe evolving onwards and upwards towards **"ever greater complexity and perfection"** coincides with Victorian idealism, reinforcing faith in man's ultimate progress towards some **"future consummation, the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God on Earth"**. Marxism, overtly atheist, is nevertheless a liberal ideology, as illusory as the American dream.

Under the scrutiny of sociological analysis no such evolutionary pattern of benign emergence can be seen. After two world wars, and 35 years lived in the shadow of nuclear retaliation, man's illusions of grandeur have crumpled. In that process the ground of liberal theology has been exposed as wish-fulfilment.

Cupitt turns to the third alternative, radical theology, which he sees as an attempted solution to the problem, **"How is it possible to be a Christian at all today in the world we have now come to?"**.

Now I submit that that is not a radical question. Its interrogative is the word **"how?"**. Cupitt is concerned with the manner in which a person is able to be Christian in today's world. That is a conservative question, a reactionary agenda. It is not radical at all. The radical agenda omits the word "how" and faces fairly and squarely the shattering issue, **"Is it possible to be a Christian today, in the world we have come to know?"**. Maybe it is intolerable for a priest to ask such a question, but it must, nevertheless, be faced. Cupitt's fundamental conservatism emerges in his exposition of the "radical" position.

"Radicals accept that there has taken place a great and irreversible change in the human situation, and they believe that the old faith will have to undergo not just minor revisions, but a major transformation. The inner spirit of religion must be preserved but it can only be preserved at the price of a very considerable change in our ways of thinking."

Here lie assumptions which may not be questioned, questions which may not be asked. The categorical imperative of radical theology demands the preservation of the inner spirit of religion however radically its superstructure may be transformed.

The origin, energy and function of this imperative are not difficult to discern. They do, however, lie beyond the two-dimensional framework employed by Don Cupitt. The field of understanding must be widened to include not only the physical and sociological sciences, but also the whole area of psychological process in the evolution of human behaviour and its associated constructs. Then even that need which gives rise to the religious imperative comes within those criteria which Cupitt already seeks to apply to the rest of life, namely "the only sound way we have of explaining any phenomenon in nature is to show how it is linked in a regular or lawlike way with other phenomena in nature, a principle that is as true of human affairs as it is in physics". Cupitt's limitation of "human affairs" to the sociological as distinct from the psychological represents the major fault or gap within which the gods of the radical are preserved.

Such a massive critique is not established merely by mouthing platitudes or affirming sweeping generalisations. A detailed and searching exposition of the psychology of religion is required both in its intrapersonal and in its social aspects. Such a critique would have to take into account the historical evolution of religious constructs, as well as the parallel development of the major world faiths. A paper of this brevity can, however, only provide pointers, indicators of a line of approach, crying out for development in depth elsewhere.

## **The Faith of the Prayer Book**

If we return to Cupitt's summary of the Prayer Book's language and symbolism and include within our critique not only physical and sociological but also psychological criteria, then we begin to glimpse reasons for the irrational imperatives which still hold the religious field in place.

The world view of the Prayer Book sees the Universe as a **"hierarchically ordered, Earth-centred cosmos with three main zones. Above in the heavens God reigns over all with his angels and the blessed dead. Below in the infernal regions Satan rules. In the intermediate zone of Earth all significant natural events are seen as directly caused by God"**. This world-view is essentially pre-scientific, or rather represents a reflection of the science of the time of its origin. Within that framework, however, is presented the psychological process of splitting, or idealisation, by which man polarises his world into good and bad, light and dark, heaven and hell, supportively benign and persecutory malign. This primitive psychological defence is utilised because of man's difficulty in tolerating the differences, ambiguities and contradictions in the reversal of dependency experienced within the real world. Freud traced this splitting back to the conflict between the life instinct and death instinct. Klein perceived the defences as innate. The more modern field of primal analysis understands the splitting of the universe as a defensive reaction, triggered in the foetal consciousness by threatening disturbances of the womb-world and in particular by the traumatic disruption, crushing and eviction of the birth process itself. It is the contents of these deeply repressed memories held in pre-verbal and symbolic form which irrupt into consciousness and inform the religious process.

"As the result of a primal sin committed by our first parents soon after the Creation of the visible world some five-and-a-half thousand years ago, all human beings are conceived and born in sin and are subject to continual temptation by Satan and his servants."

On a macro scale, man's understanding of his origin is projected into the dawn of conscious social history. This mirrors the individual's memory of his or her own emergence in the primal intrauterine field with its crushing fall and eviction, splitting the world into good and bad. Eden (the womb-world) evicts its contents out of the holding environment of effortless dependency, through the painful process of parturition and into the world of work. The dim memories of the good world and its fall into the bad world are preserved and symbolised into heaven and hell. Religion is the process by which man seeks to manage the potentially psychotic disruption triggered by recall of his primal experience.

"Though Satan's powers are merely psychological they are sufficient to threaten us with eternal damnation, for human nature is radically corrupt and man has no power of himself to help himself."

It is interesting to note in passing that Cupitt's only reference to psychology is limited to the activity of Satan! The myth of man's impotence represents a regression to that condition of ultimate dependency in which the innocent babe becomes the victim of undeserved environmental violence and interprets the attack in terms of retaliation for primal guilt. The experience is split off and reified into the world of darkness, peopled by Satan and his servants. It is characterised by eternal suffering, representing that traumatised still-point of horror in the process of parturition which was essentially hell realised. Religion is called into being as a defence against the resurgence into consciousness of that fixated material with all its psychotic terror, its fear of death, and its sense of eternal crushing, destruction, fall, and loss.

"To limit the destructive potential of evil, absolute monarchy is the appropriate form of government at the national as well as at the cosmic level, and in domestic life men must correspondingly rule women and parents rule children. Indeed, the divinely-ordained authority of superiors over inferiors is the key organizing principle of the whole Universe, and it extends into human psychology..."

If religious constructs are called into being to symbolise primal material, political structures reflect, within the social construct, similar defensive processes of common control. If repression (in contrast to cathartic integration) is the chosen method of dealing with the material at an intra-personal level, then the management of social disruption will also be by means of social repression. This mirroring of intra-personal defensive behaviour into the inter-personal, social controls, represents the energy which drives the processes of political systems at every level of the world construct and throughout history. The intra-personal defences are mirrored ultimately onto the cosmic tapestry and perceived as theocentric. The projection is denied, and man re-introjects the [now objectified] projections of his own inner structure in the form of absolutised prescriptions for his social behaviour. In this way man justifies generating social systems which match, and collude with, his internal psychological make-up.

Cupitt notes that these ,same processes are applied to the inner life.

"... the sober, quiet and peaceable life which represents the Prayer Book ideal is only to be achieved by a continual crucifying of one's lower carnal nature. In an unstable, violent and evil world the maintenance of tight discipline in the self and society is seen as essential for survival."

If the lower carnal nature of man represents that mourning, guilt-ridden, retaliatory, terror-dominated, traumatised, primal position, then it is precisely only in so far as that part of man is denied, crucified, cut-off, put to death, externalised, alienated and repressed, that man can live with the myth of his "**inner peace**". The effective maintenance of these defences against the irruption of psychotic anxiety is deemed "**essential for survival**", whether of the individual or of the social system. Here lies the heart of the categorical imperative of the spiritual life, which Cupitt makes the foundation of radical theology. He gives no ground for his bald statement that "**the inner spirit of religion must be preserved**" but once religion is perceived as the reification of social defences against psychotic anxiety, then the reasons for its retention become clear. If the defences are undermined the fear is that individuals and social systems will be overwhelmed by irruptive psychosis and man in his mature adulthood exposed to primitive levels of terror, loss, paranoia, splitting, scapegoating, guilt, retaliation and regression, over which he will have no control. This scenario is a myth, but it is

understandable in view of the intensity of the repressed material held in place by those defences reified in the religious process.

The unresolved, unconscious distress of the neonate, powerfully present in adult life is projected into the environment, distorting world view, disrupting social relationships, and forming the matrix of theology. In religious myth and ritual, man acts out and deals in displacement with his primal unconscious material. Traumatic though birth might have been, each living person has in fact survived. In that awareness religion plays out the battle between life and death, between good and evil, and in the drama evil is overcome, death is defeated, darkness is dispelled and hope is reborn.

"Deeply pessimistic though the Prayer Book is, man is not without hope. In the earliest times God chose his ancient people, the Jews, to be a light to the nations and revealed his will to them through many spokesmen."

The historic task of prophecy is the refinement of the religious construct at those points of stress or faulting through which the repressed material threatens to burst. Thus over time religion evolves as a construct capable of sustaining the anxiety defences through an ever widening repertoire of ethical, historical, personal, political and social crises. The preservation of social hope in the face of the fear of death is a dominant agenda underlying the historic refinement of Judaism and its transformation into Christianity.

"Of this people and in fulfilment of old prophecies was born in due time the Messiah of Israel, the promised Redeemer, God's Son incarnate. He freely bore the punishment for our sins in his death, and raises believers to new life through his resurrection."

Crucifixion and Incarnation are one and the same. For Mary, the terrified teenager, finding herself pregnant and facing the social penalty for her adulterous indulgence, death by stoning represented the ultimate trauma, in flight from which was born the myth of Christmas. Tragically, such displacements are not effective. Mary herself may have escaped social retaliation for the breach of social norms, but only at the expense of her punishment being meted out to her son, the carrier of the defence construct. So the crucifixion [which should have been stoning under Jewish law] becomes the enactment on the son of social punishment for the sins of the mother.

If the crucifixion was a displacement of the stoning of Mary, then the resurrection is a displacement of the myth of incarnation. Just as the Annunciation was Mary's defence against acknowledging the reality of adultery, so the resurrection is the defence of the disciple group who could not tolerate the death of the Messiah. In both cases, the myth is the carrier of defensive denial of the reality of death under the impingement of the stoning mob.

What Mary dreaded as an individual, and the disciples faced as a group, the Jewish people encountered as a nation. With the Promised Land invaded and occupied, the corporate consciousness of the people was acutely aware of the persecutory, malign, environment breaking through defences to the very heart of being. The ancient religious construct, stressed to breaking point, was no longer able to sustain social hope in the face of the foreign invasion. As the defences cracked there were various prophetic and compensatory developments. Following on from the Maccabean saga, we see the emergence of the regressive community at Masada, the movement of renewal under the Baptist, and the attempt at revolutionary activity headed by Bar Cochba. New developments in the religious

construct were essential to carry social anxiety through a period of threatened implosion and annihilation. The Christian myth presents a double construct of the denial of death, preserving not only those defences normally in place within a religious frame, repressing psychotic or primal irruption, but also capable of sustaining those defences in the face of imminent impingement and death. The New Way provides a carrier for social hope that can transcend death, whether individual or corporate. It therefore proved a more effective defence than the other contemporary constructs available. In such a crucible, and in such a manner, is a more universal religion conceived and brought to birth.

Through the process of common projection the defences which served Mary and the disciple group become institutionalised as a common collusional construct within which the "faithful believer" is sustained undisturbed by primal psychotic irruption, even in the face of death. Only transgression or apostasy, the breaking of the collusional system, can raise the spectre of primal impingement and threaten the erring person with the pains of hell. The existence of people, groups, or nations, holding different belief systems poses a fundamental threat to the construct and calls its defensive efficacy in question. Universal evangelism is required to preserve the boundaries of the myth from erosion and so to under-gird the defensive structures involved. Provided those boundaries are preserved intact, man is maintained at peace within the nurture of Mother Church.

"Through faithful and obedient membership of the Church that he founded men may hope to gain eternal blessedness. ...it behoves believers to live quietly within the existing social and ecclesiastical order, sustained by a confident and tranquil hope of their eternal reward."

The only hope for the position of foetal distress in flight from birth trauma lies in the deeply sustained regression of the intrauterine position. Here, cradled supportively in the benign environment of the womb-world, the believer is once more at peace. God is the reified ground of that idealised good world in which man primally lived and moved and had his being. Salvation is deliverance from birth, and its associated fear of death. Worship is the acting out, in the displaced field of the religious construct, of regression to the idealised womb-world. The repetitive process of regression and egression serves to strengthen the fundamental defences, deepens the repression of psychotic angst and heightens the illusion of inner at-onement, peace and love. Tragically, the more this kind of displacement is engaged, the more deeply is the denied antithesis acted out socially. The most intensely religious communities can be the most intensely cruel, persecutory and paranoid.

Religion is the construct of sustained, intrauterine, foetal regression. It is a common, collusional flight from engagement with the realities of the suffering of birth. Provided life within the womb of Mother Church is sustained, peaceably and resourcefully, the boundaries of society are secure. If anyone transgresses the boundaries of the Church, he raises at that point and for every-man, reverberation of primal terror. Retaliation against the religious transgressor is total.

"This life is brief and this world is evil. Judgement is near, and indeed the whole of world-history will soon be terminated by God. Christ will return to complete his conquest of evil, Satan will be sealed for ever in hell with the souls of the damned, and the faithful will enter their everlasting rest."

News for the foetally regressed that the only way into the Kingdom is by being "born again" reverberates primal terror. It is only good news if the birth to be re-experienced is suffered vicariously by another (the crucified) and administered personally in the displacement of



sacramental rite. For the religious the hope is that deliverance from this fixated world will not be by birth, with all its traumatic crushing of realised hell, but by salvation. The faithful worshipper will be delivered painlessly into the world beyond [mythical reflection of life after birth, interpreted by the adult as life after death, for in the adult world death represents that boundary which, to the foetal regressed position, is marked by birth).

The anxiety defences vested in religious systems and perceived as essential for sustaining the sanity and stability of man's being in the world, inform, validate and support, every element of social culture. The defences of the Christian construct have been adequate to sustain cultural processes for close on 2,000 years. Today, however, the threatened impingements faced by man are of a different order to those pertaining at the birth of the church. We no longer face simply the potential implosion of one group and its overwhelming by a master race. Today we face the threatened extinction of the species in the nuclear holocaust. Under these conditions the defences prove inadequate to sustain repression of primal impingement and loss. Extra pressure on the social defences comes after a period of erosion of those defences under the impact of the scientific revolution and the continual weakening of absolute constructs, faced with ever more effective communication. As absolute faces differing absolute, relativity gains ground.

It is little wonder, therefore, that when religious systems are threatened with dissolution, the so-called "radical" comes to the rescue, reaffirming the imperative of retaining religious functions in society, however drastic the reordering of the construct may have to be, in a vain attempt to preserve the intellectual integrity of man in his universe.

## **The Radical Alternative**

Don Cupitt recognises that conservative theology was rendered obsolete by the rise of natural science, and that liberal theology was rendered obsolete by the rise of sociology. By his denial of the field of psychology, he leaves himself a gap, an option, an alternative, by which he may still preserve religion and its function in society. This last hiding place of the gods can only be retained by perseveration of darkness and ignorance within the intra-personal world.

"To radicals, then, religious meaning can no longer be convincingly located either in a supernatural world above, or in the natural process of this world. Instead, it must now be sought within the human subject, who in modern times has come to a new kind of consciousness and sense of his place in the world."

If conservative theology corresponds to the Age of the Father whose "**demand upon men was experienced as an externally-imposed and eternally-binding Law**", then liberal theology may be likened to the Age of the Son in which "**the religious demand required membership in and allegiance to a supernatural Body of Christ, a divine society established in history**". The era of radical theology is, however, likened by Cupitt to "**the Age of the Spirit**" in which "**God is poured out within each human heart**". The position reverberates with that of Nietzsche or his predecessor, Feuerbach, and suffers from the same fundamental flaw. Cupitt writes:

"Man can become fully liberated and self-possessed, for God is precisely the principle in us that requires of us the highest fulfilment of our potential for consciousness, freedom, and creative, loving self-expression."

Superman rules by internalising and claiming as essentially himself that which had previously been externalised, projected, and reified as God. Cupitt repeats Feuerbach's mistake in identifying one pole of the idealised defence against anxiety as the heart, or essence, of the being of man himself. In no way is God a reflection of man. God is precisely a defence against what man fears. He is sustained in existence, whether objective or subjective, by the energy vested in unresolved traumata. God is one pole of the split with which man reacted to his primal impingement and loss. The God of the radical is an internalised defence against psychotic anxiety energised by the same imperative that reified those identical defences into the objective religious constructs of yesterday.

In a limp passage, Cupitt rephrases the process of three-fold development.

"In the Age of the Father, the religious demand makes man a servant, whose whole reason for existence is that he should do the will of Another. In the Age of the Son the religious demand is partly internalized, with the effect of producing a divided self locked in the continual (and admittedly, often very creative) inner conflict between flesh and spirit that St. Paul first described. In the Age of the Spirit man at last achieves fully unified and liberated selfhood, as the religious demand upon us no longer divides the self, but precisely coincides with the self's struggle for spiritual individuation."

In analytic terms, we may liken the Age of the Father to that of psychotic hallucination; the Age of the Son reflects the ambivalent tension of the psyche-soma split; while the Age of the Spirit [the arena of the radical theologian] represents a further stage of integration. The splitting between mind and body is now annealed, but the fundamental split between good and bad, accompanied by denial or annihilation of the bad field, is still in place. Idealisation, projection and denial are the fundamental paranoid-schizoid defences preserved in the heart of radical religion. The position can only be sustained here by denial of the evil, retaliatory, destructive, death-wish, which is also part and parcel of man's inner psyche. Cupitt's "**fully unified and liberated man**" is (by definition) no longer divided, for the position he describes as the essence of human wholeness is already one side of the fundamental split, the other side of which is denied, so preserving the myth of integration, while reinforcing the dynamics of defence.

Inevitably, and in spite of himself, at this point in the lecture, Cupitt articulates the defensive agenda, and unveils his own collusional participation within its process.

"A modern spirituality must teach us to accept and make the most of our new sense of ourselves and our place in nature. The pessimists whom we mentioned earlier are right when they say that the modern picture of our place in the universe is deeply alarming. Having lost the old sustaining and guiding framework that formerly gave meaning to our lives we feel that we are in a void, with no idea of what to make of ourselves. We shudder at the thought of our transience and our aloneness."

It is as if the reassuring security of the womb-walls of man's unconscious being have fallen away. The distress is fundamental. It is described by words like "**deeply alarming**", "**lost**", "**meaningless**", "**in a void**", "**shudder**", "**transience**", "**aloneness**". Rather than stand alone in his transient world, facing reality in all its depth and living with his loneliness, man in terror trembles and takes refuge in radical spirituality.

"At this point, when religion as surrounding protective doctrinal framework has passed away, we find that religion as spirituality is more than ever relevant."

Opium is still required for the sedation of the masses, albeit in a somewhat more refined form.

## The appeal to tradition

Just as psychoanalysts seek to prove their orthodoxy when introducing some innovation, by affirming that they are only saying what Freud himself really meant to say, so the radical theologian seeks to pass the test of orthodoxy by interpretative appeal to the teaching of Jesus.

"... from the point of view I am now describing, Jesus himself can be seen in a new way. He spoke at a time when many people thought the end of the world was near. The old religious order seemed to be doomed. It trembled, and no longer felt secure. ... Jesus' teaching heightened this sense of insecurity, and sought to show people the urgent necessity of choosing to assess one's life by an absolute standard that does not pass away, the standard that he called The Kingdom of God."

Jesus, like the radicals of today, focussed on the insecurities of his time but reified his own defences to provide some absolute answer, some more effective way of sustaining the fundamental defences in the face of potentially overwhelming threat. So deeply is the defence absolutised that its social construct can survive even death, without being questioned. As today's defences tremble and crumble, the radical falls back to the most deeply defended position of the construct, in the attempt to escape from the angst of relativity into the security of the absolute.

"Most people live by merely relative standards, comparing themselves with their neighbours, worrying about who has more prestige, more money, more business; but such a worldly life is futile and anxiety-ridden. Of the world, it passes away with the world. The only way to salvation is a decision to live one's life by an absolute standard that requires of us singleness of mind, inner integrity and disinterested love."

Buried in these last few sentences, is Cupitt's definition of salvation. It represents deliverance from the futility and anxiety-ridden state of worldly relativities. Salvation is a way of managing otherwise unmanageable anxiety, it is a decision to absolutise certain relativities and render them axiomatic, unquestionable. It is a way of simplifying complexity in order to manage confusion. It is fundamentally defensive in intention and effect. To be sure, as Cupitt remarks, Jesus can "**be seen as the basis of a Christian spirituality for today**" but that assertion is not a radical position, it is a conservative reaction in the face of cultural upheaval. As a radical position it does not penetrate below ground level. Real roots lie deeper.

Continuing his exposition of the radical alternative, Cupitt describes Jesus as:

"a prophet of religious awakening who challenges us to live our lives by an absolute standard". God is that standard, which calls us to live the Christian life, which guides us in it, and is its goal, a standard which we must choose for ourselves. So God is the guiding

principle of the religious life. I understand the meaning of the word God in purely religious terms: what God is is given by the part God plays in the religious life and that is all."

The decision to designate the teachings of Jesus as absolute has no ground. The act of absolutising a relative is precisely the process of idolatry, over against which the radical takes his stand, and yet in collusion with which the radical anchors his faith. God emerges in the radical position as that subjective, inner driving force, which absolutises the standards of Jesus. Once we identify God as the good idealised pole of that fundamental split in the human psyche, utilised as defence against the anxieties generated by primal impingement, then we find that the radical foundation is in no sense absolute. The position is perceived as the perseveration of inauthentic defensive being, in flight from reality.

## Conclusion

Cupitt tackled the question of the possibility of a radical theology. This paper has sought to indicate that such a position is indeed possible, but only at the cost of the denial of psychological insight into those dynamic processes which energise religion itself. It is clear that a radical theology is more nearly and deeply integrated than that of its liberal predecessor, just as the liberal represented a process of recovery from the hallucinations of conservative orthodoxy. Inevitably, defensive reaction dominates response to the radical theologian.

"Most people seem to doubt whether a radical theology is possible. They prefer a kind of dualism which maintains orthodox supernaturalism in the midst of modern secular culture. They know that this involves a kind of mental split, and many of us priests and theologians find that living day by day with that mental split eventually becomes unbearable."

The process of recovery from religion is precisely that of the integration and annealing of mental splits. Advance towards a realistic world view becomes possible when the position perceived as absolute and central is itself seen through as one side of a split. Beyond the position of radical theology lies integration of those fundamental defences of splitting, idealisation, denial and projection which energise the religious field itself.

The gaps of understanding inhabited by the gods are shrinking to a zero. For Cupitt to admit the demise of God in the objective spaces of physical science, or the inter-personal spaces of socio-historical analysis is deemed blasphemous by defenders of traditional orthodoxy. His God is limited to the [for him] remaining gaps of the human psyche. Alas, however hard the radical theologian seeks to deny it in order to retain his religious defences, these gaps also are no more. There is no longer room for religion in the real universe in which man finds himself. The myth of god has been seen through. Man's terror of facing his transitory aloneness is no ground for the construction of a Theology of Spirit, radical or otherwise.

D. Wasdell

1<sup>st</sup> January 1982

Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE

Hosted by: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN)

(Charity Registration No: 284542)

Web-site: [www.meridian.org.uk](http://www.meridian.org.uk)