

The Weight of Archaeology in Theology's Strange Return

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In *Jesus and Philosophy* (2009), Don Cupitt was telling us what Jesus actually said (to the best we can know) in terms of primitive sayings over and above the later narratives of the gospels. As such he was dealing in history, even being practical and having common sense, and thus more than simply language and text: there was at least some claim to truth, some correspondence. Page 100 endorsed the nineteenth-century idea that the historical Jesus, when rediscovered, may even become the basis of the reform and renewal of Christianity. (Cupitt, 2009, 100) I welcomed this. After all, he was reporting on the Jesus Seminar, and they are historians trying to discover something in the past, according to secondary documents. The Jesus he discovered was transient and secular, a sort of postmodernist well before his time, and I thought this does not ring true, because essential must be the motivation of a highly supernaturalist last days Jesus. Don was looking in a mirror, like many a predecessor in the Jesus business.

Unfortunately, in *Theology's Strange Return* (2010), the author is back on complete non-realist territory, and this book has its parallels in *The Meaning of the West* (2008).

Gradually we have come to understand that the bright, beautiful, ordered world that we see, and are ourselves part of, is our own construct. (Cupitt, 2010, 9).

Cupitt's chance for a strange return starting from 2009 has thus been lost. And so he tells us that Newton's laws do not exist, but are a perspective, and using the assumptions, they deliver results as far as it goes. Such laws are now within a bigger theory. And there is much that Darwin did not know, and indeed Darwin - "He did not make a discovery" - realised the gaps in his own approach (2010, 9-10).

It's as if we are free agents to construct, but unfortunately we are not. Let's take Darwin. With Darwin, heredity, mathematics, cell biology and biochemistry, tectonic plates, and scattered constituents of organic life in the universe (aspects mentioned by Cupitt) have largely gone on to confirm evolution, and have made the theory incredibly robust. For example, we know from genetic switches seen in primitive eyes and in all other eyes that the eye has evolved once, into various stages; we now have a few (and it's all it needs) transitory fossils to show evolution of functioning parts of the body, and we see new species emerging. Thanks to the data, Darwin is stronger than ever.

But if we take astrophysics, the fact that the universe is expanding at an increasing rate suggests dark energy or something, and that fact that the visible matter is one tenth of what should be for gravity to work suggests dark matter or something, shows that astrophysics is either about to discover some fantastic things to make the current perspective work, or the construction is about to fall apart. It is a great time to be an astrophysicist, for necessary discoveries or a new paradigm is needed: and Professor Brian Cox cannot stop smiling.

Now the reason these sciences are different at present are because of data. You set up the rules, of course, but then out you go and collect some data. The data if it falsifies creates problems, and the construction comes to a problem. The Large Hadron Collider is not a study skills approach to essay writing, but a means to discover or fail to discover.

Don Cupitt is a sensible chap in many ways, and abides by the current humanistic grand narratives, like those in biology and indeed astrophysics. Secular humanism is

"inescapable" though he is back with 'empty radical humanism' (2010, 79) to indicate a passing away to a poetic language for a religious vision of life (82). Understood: but he could, on his own account, become a Radical Orthodox, that is do a postmodern reconstruction of Christianity, on roughly socially progressive Anglican Catholic lines that demands that the world fits in with it. It is Platonism in a postmodern bubble. He has rejected such an approach, but wouldn't it make life easier?

I am no Radical Orthodox and this is why. It promotes the freedom of theology and brings back theology as the key discipline: thus sociology is nothing more than hegemonic secular theology; they are equal, theology and sociology, in their constructions. Cupitt might agree at least with this. However, sociology is one up on such forced equality, because it does research. Social science research might not be as robust as science, but it does have rules of regularity for mass observation and validity for close observation. Of course, these are imposed rules, but sociology is not the equivalent of writing a novel or constructing a night sky of angels and houses of astrological forces. And when sociology returns data on the sociology of knowledge - even with big claims of ongoing change and transience - it does so in a way that fanciful Radical Orthodoxy cannot match. Radical Orthodoxy has no explanatory power: it tells us nothing about the world, whereas sociology like social anthropology can, with all the caveats about constructing the research findings, provides explanation with aspects of evidence.

When a Rowan Williams uses his intellectual power to discuss the details of part of the biblical narrative or aspect of Church tradition, I frequently wonder "What is he talking about?" other than rules to apply to his Church or Communion bureaucracy. His efforts no

longer tell us anything in general, only about a tradition in and of itself. There is no explanatory power.

Clearly, in the arts and in religion, the scope for creativity and non-realism is all the greater because they do not, in and of themselves, draw upon evidence, but once they drift into other territory, they do, and then they become more restricted.

So why do we think like we do? My sociology of knowledge answer is because of machines. Our ever smaller and flashier machines predict and attempt to solve, and sometimes solve, problems. So our whole language now (and it is language, of course, but language that does 'work') and our symbolic setting (that is the complete broader language of interactions) is focused around solving problems ourselves and by our machines. That's why when a volcano blows up in Iceland, and stops aeroplanes from flying, no one but some end-time Christian-Zionist satellite channels asks what God is doing to slow down our movements in the air. Such God speech tells us nothing, whereas our machines predict, do and (as can and if necessary) find solutions. It is not that theoretically we have become humanists, but that we are practical and that has made us humanists.

Now Cupitt speaks of *Theology's Strange Return*, and one of these is a return of the grand narrative. The grand narrative might be our present condition of generalised humanism. Such is not Cupitt's: his is the story of how we got here, with the running non-realist joke of being grateful to the God that never actually existed for getting us here (Cupitt, 2010, 17).

Now what is the point of this story told before our arrival? Cupitt continues to advise towards autological thinking, like in direct meaning and causality, over and against

heterological thinking, like in those worn out explanationless creeds of Christianity. The story of how we got here is a religious (and philosophical) archaeology (2010, 14), to give us our place. But I wonder, how is this weight of retelling different from heterological thinking? Do we need to rehearse how we got here over and over again, as in Cupitt's books and apology (xvii), by ever referring to the history of thought that substitutes for God our Maker (29-34)? We are here: let's just get on with it.

How do we get on with it? I suggest that we conduct research, in a manner of speaking, even if we don't do it formally. We go out and have conversations, and test each other through the dialogues we have. We keep our senses open, and occasionally review the situation.

I want to be positive, because I can bet that Don Cupitt and I are in such broad agreement. Our conversation meets: I do understand his perspective, though he says many do not (xi, xvii). So let's see:

...religion celebrates transience, scattering and passing away, as universal cosmic process [careful Don - sounds realist!] and, moralized, as self-decentring and ecstatic love. At a cosmic level, the symbol for this is God; and at the human level, Christ. Christ is not a metaphysical being, but a process of self-giving, for in Christianity the Sacred has migrated above all into the field of human personal relationships, philadelphia. So again, the Eucharist enacts the affirmations of transience and of self-giving which in the Christian view are the basis of a good society. [39]

Don has reported giving up on celebrating (see Worsfold, 2009) and even being a consumer of the Eucharist. I have too, because participation is a confusing sign to others and suggests I go along, at least on some level, with the words of the extended thanksgiving. I don't join in with Anglicans because Christ died, but he isn't risen and he's not coming back. After all, the Eucharist for most people is the affirmation of such risen

presence, after the self-giving, and of the Kingdom of power and order under way before the final hope. It's wrong to confuse people when in good company. So I prefer sitting at the back, exercising silence, and having remaining social relationships, and building on thoughts of the possibility of transcendence in the sense of complete overall transience - for which any human being is but a drop in the ocean. Alternatively, I'll happily design contemporary liturgies for practising in Unitarian settings.

Why overall transience? Not because of postmodernism and language, but because the data (and dependent theory) predicts that the earth has had it in five billion years, with humanity gone in a few hundred thousand at very best, and absolutely the universe will become dark and distant to itself, and long before any of that I will be extinct like I never existed (at least from my perspective). So religion has to be about transience, or it is about little else. What does it celebrate? It celebrates the fantasticness of being conscious about consciousness (and the pain of knowing), and the sheer mystery of being human, joining with others through culture and recorded talk (we make libraries for future people), seeing ourselves connected to the tree of life, and having a biology supporting system that is fruitful and decays.

What does Cupitt have as well? God is bright (Cupitt's own long-standing religious experience - and against his revisionism it does not need 'language' but hits one with the punch he received) (22-28); and God is the judge: such is critical thinking (41-48), and we are left as God's legacy in a thoroughly decentred sense (see 94). The cosmic Christ is now anthropocentric after Jesus told people to be autonomous in ethics (particularly 51-52), with God and man decentred (see 88 - Cupitt seems to have abandoned non-sexist and female priority terms - surely decisive when only language exists!); there is a Bible

narrative of the death of God, putting the autological ascent of man and heterological God communicating to man together (66-69). Western civilised history is crumbling, ending the march to a better world (Cupitt has, otherwise, been remarkably pro-Western, as in 2008) (70-75); and the proper history of mankind is not to worry that too much has been lost, as much returns as once Christian ethics into the secular and Christian feeling too; we are humanitarians viewing the remains of a once great civilisation and such is the case with the other religions too. What seems longer lasting is music, as it remains religious in feeling (55) and Cupitt hints at the *Windows 95* operating system extending the meaning of the icon (57), with more icons in advertising, in the sense of returning the sacred; but beauty is decentred away from the human mind's vanity (61).

In the end, Don Cupitt again goes over his life's thought. He is a religious philosopher and his philosophy tries to be thorough in this story. But the world is not thorough. It really is messy: another feature of God is that God will not allow scientists or philosophers to find the perfect explanation, even one where we make it all up - because of data biting one in the backside. And I wonder if the philosophical movement of the West is the best way to describe this arrival at a radical Western Buddhist-style ethical humanism. I prefer a bit more sociology, and sociologised theology. We do actually live in the present.

I don't care too much about how we got here from whatever those in the past thought. Redundancy is something that happens when you tell someone to leave: the task is quick and brutal. Goodbye means go and not the endless retelling of what is indeed redundant. I like to start with what is relevant, so if I begin with James Martineau on the road to my *religious* postmodernism, that's because he remains relevant in the make up of the

liberalism practised, a combination of collective liturgy, individualism and the two as creatively unstable.

Let us be like we think and become practical. What do we do? Cupitt once wrote *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (1989), the nearest to him saying what we do. Horatius Bonar advised us (to sing):

O live each day and live it well -
All else is life but flung away:
Who lives a life of love can tell
Of true things truly done each day.

(Bonar, 1985)

We do lots of specific reciprocal things. We talk, and yet get conversation; we have sex, and yet make love; we pay money, and get utility. It is about trading the symbols that have specific meaning - an effort with a greater return. There is a benefit in what we do, and sometimes a loss, and here is an exchange based political economy of exercising our self-conscious symbolic (including the language that labels) beings. Occasionally, we stop and pause, some more than others. Some are too busy to stop and others have lots of general questions. So instead of doing something specific, with a return, we just look at the whole, and perhaps mix with others to do this reflection, because we do mix when we do specific things and the I reflects upon us. We can meditate, pray, sing, be silent, listen and speak.

Bruce Findlow has Unitarians sing:

Who dares stop to tell another
When it's wrong to fall behind?
Who can halt the rush of progress
When the blind drive on the blind?

Inward peace and inward living
Must be given rightful place,
Even though we live in cities,
Even as we run the race.

(Findlow, 1985).

It might take some material effort to participate, and hopefully may come with a spiritual gift. The language we use can be ambivalent: flexibility keeps the options open. Perhaps the effort to pause makes us more fluid, tolerant, reflective, welcoming, more empathetic to human and creature. Anything learnt can be reinvested into our specific activities on return to busyness. So religion is a practice, and although it may even be language free (like the bright light through a window) it is always symbolic, because that is what makes us collectively and individually human and capable of being aware.

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