**Don Cupitt: Prophet, Public Intellectual and Pioneer**

1. **Prophet without Honour: the Marginalisation of Don Cupitt**

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**Abstract**

This article is the first of three which will evaluate the work and legacy of the Cambridge non-realist theologian and philosopher of religion, Don Cupitt. We begin by suggesting that Cupitt might be depicted as a ‘prophet without honour’ in both his ecclesiastical home of the Church of England and at the University of Cambridge, where he spent most of his professional life. This is based on the observation that after a promising early career, Cupitt never received the ecclesiastical preferment or academic promotion that many argued he deserved. This arguably represents a missed opportunity for both Church and academy, because Cupitt is more accurately understood not as an enemy of religion but as essentially an ecclesiastical insider whose chief motivation was to uphold the contemporary relevance and credibility of Christianity.

**Keywords**

Don Cupitt, non-realism, radical theology, Church of England, *Sea of Faith*, future of Christianity.

Don Cupitt (1934-) is arguably one of the most important Christian theologians of the second half of the twenti­eth century. His work has had a significant influence on both academic theology and popular religious belief throughout the world. Yet Cupitt has proved both influential and controversial, and this series aims to revisit his reputation and evaluate his enduring impact on the academic study of religion, popular spirituality and the institutional churches.

In this first article, we consider the extent to which Cupitt might be considered a ‘prophet without honour’ in both his ecclesiastical home, the Church of England, and the University of Cambridge, where he worked for over thirty years.[[1]](#footnote-1) After an auspicious early career, Cupitt never received the ecclesiastical preferment or academic promotion that many argued he deserved. We will suggest that this was a missed opportunity for both Church and academy alike because Cupitt was always thinking and writing as an ecclesiastical insider who had the public credibility and contemporary relevance of Christianity as his primary motivation.

To portray Cupitt as a marginalised or under-rated figure, however, is not to suggest that his ideas were entirely neglected or ignored. He was one of the few British theologians of his generation who could genuinely be considered a ‘public intellectual’.[[2]](#footnote-2) His ideas were broadcast in a popular BBC TV series, *The Sea of Faith* (1984) and widely discussed, albeit sometimes with a view to their refutation, in numerous books and articles by academic colleagues.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even so, our argument is that Cupitt’s renown was deliberately framed by others as a form of controversial notoriety, and his perspective misleadingly represented as that of an atheist hostile to the future of the Church and the theological academy. This then raises broader questions about the ability of the Church to embrace controversial ideas, as well as its willingness to entertain intellectual pluralism.

In this article we will explore two possible explanations for the lack of recognition of Cupitt’s work on the part of his academic and ecclesiastical peers. One option might be that Cupitt did not receive Church preferment because his ideas were too radical. The main advocate of this argument is Cupitt himself, although, as we shall see, in some places he seems to suggest that he made a deliberate choice to pursue an academic rather than Church career. The second possibility is that Cupitt was perceived as too popular a writer, and by implication therefore lacking in substance, to achieve academic promotion. It could be argued that Cupitt was in part responsible for this reputation, first because of the efforts he made to establish a media profile and second because he did not undertake a higher degree or write what is sometimes called a ‘big book’. Yet in making these judgements both Church and academy misunderstood Cupitt’s work. While much maligned, Cupitt should instead be thought of as a servant of the Church whose intention was to serve its mission by seeking to reform Christianity so that it made sense to wider society.

One further introductory point needs to be made. It is probably the case that we shall never know the actual reasons why Cupitt did not receive ecclesiastical preferment or academic promotion. His appointment as Vice-Principal of Westcott House at the age of 28 only three years after serving his title in a curacy in Salford suggested someone on an ecclesial fast-track to high office.[[4]](#footnote-4) His move three years later to be Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, together with a subsequent appointment to a formal lectureship in philosophy of religion in 1968, appeared to confirm this upward trajectory. Yet the fact that he remained in Cambridge until his retirement in 1996 begs the question of why he never achieved further advancement from an initially promising early career. Does the answer lie in his later characterisation as a controversial ‘atheist priest’, whose criticisms of the institutional Church as intellectually and morally redundant, and his rejection of traditional metaphysics, rendered him *persona non grata*?

Too Radical for the Church?

The argument that it was the unacceptable radicalism of Cupitt’s theological ideas that prevented his ecclesial preferment has been made repeatedly by Don Cupitt himself. In his ‘Foreword’ to Nigel Leaves’ book *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and Writings of Don Cupitt*, Cupitt notes ironically that one path to academic and ecclesial success for his contemporaries was ‘a book or article saying what’s wrong with Cupitt and why you need not trouble to actually read him’ (2004: viii). He continues, stating that, ‘the upper echelons of both the Church and Academy are packed with people who used to know me, but now know me no more’ (2004: viii). He notes later on that in the UK he is judged to be ‘a wrong ‘un – a suspect horse’ and that in Britain he has ‘been in deep trouble for twenty-five years’ (2004: viii). Cupitt identifies the publication of *Taking Leave of God* in particular as signalling the demise of his ecclesiastical and academic fortunes, saying:

My book was instantly seen as “atheism” and denounced as such by the *Church Times* and the then Archbishop of Canterbury. The leading theological journals did not send it out for review, and it was clear to all that I had permanently fallen from grace. My ecclesiastical career and my academic career were over. As the example of John Robinson showed, I would never get any preferment in either sphere. (Cupitt, 2005: 86)

There is independent support for Cupitt’s sense that both Church and academy closed ranks against him. In a review of a critical study of Cupitt’s life and work by Stephen Ross White, David L. Edwards identifies the publication of *Taking Leave of God* as a watershed in Cupitt’s work and reputation, while noting that this dramatic break with traditional theism has never been explained in ‘appropriate depth’ (1994: 12). Prior to 1979, according to Edwards, Cupitt’s work was that of a ‘Christian theologian’ who ‘wrestled with the mystery of God, was fascinated by the challenges of the Gospels, was a pastorally and loving priest.’ After the publication of *Taking Leave of God*, and in subsequent books, argues Edwards, Cupitt ‘passionately denounced any belief that God is real, recast Jesus (when mentioned) into the role of an atheist summoning his fellow-men to remember the void, and systematically insisted that we cannot be authentically either religious or moral if we do not create our own values without reference to any reality beyond ourselves, choosing virtue for its sake.’ (1994: 12) Edwards notes the vehemence with which Cupitt dismisses this earlier position, and therefore the core beliefs of much of the Church, even though ‘this position is not calmly argued for, any more than the Christian alternative is argued against. It is asserted polemically’ (Edwards, 1994: 12). Edwards is baffled by Cupitt’s abrupt abandonment of what he regards as Christian orthodoxy for a position Cupitt seems unable to justify rationally, ending with the plea, ‘When one thinks about his [Cupitt’s] integrity, ability and power to communicate, one asks the question…why, why why?’

It is possible, however, that far from being the spurned outsider, Cupitt intentionally rejected preferment. In his *Preface* to a collection of essays published by the Sea of Faith Movement (2001a: 18-21), Cupitt reflects on his experience during National Service in the early 1950s in which he perceived a clear distinction between a group of younger and highly-motivated officers and those content to mark time untroubled by ambition. Cupitt speculated that his preference for the company of the latter group reflected his own character as one less attuned to institutional conformity and more likely to thrive in solitary pursuits. He continued, ‘when in the early 1970s I was offered my own chances of high office, first in the church, and then later in the academy, I turned them down with only the briefest hesitation – and within a year or two I had burnt my boats by publishing ideas that put me permanently out of the running anyway’ (2001a: 18). That the decision not to pursue advancement was Cupitt’s own choice seems to be confirmed by Nigel Leaves. He reports that in the 1970s Cupitt still seemed destined for high office in the Church but having experienced a few weeks of ‘great intellectual excitement’ whilst writing *The Leap of Reason* he realised his desire to continue as a writer and creative thinker (Leaves, 2004: 20). This led him, according to Leaves, to turn down a Church appointment which was a ‘traditional path to the highest office’ (2004: 21). Whatever the truth, it exposes the presumption that a position of leadership in the Church is incompatible with the pursuit of critical scholarship.

Too Popular for the Academy?

There is little doubt that Cupitt remained a well-known, if controversial, figure throughout his career. He achieved the sort of popular renown that is far beyond the dreams of most academic theologians and philosophers of religion. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s he was a regular contributor to, and subject of, the mainstream media. He had access to a popular audience outside both Church and academy beyond the dreams of most other professional academics. But did this mean that he was falsely categorised as a populariser rather than a serious and substantial researcher and thinker?

One scholar-priest who was bemused by Cupitt’s lack of preferment or promotion was Denis Nineham. In a review of *After All*, published in 1994, Nineham states that the fact that ‘so able and omnivorously well read a scholar as Dr [*sic*] Cupitt should have escaped preferment for so long gives food for thought’ (1994: 448). He does wonder whether this might be because Cupitt’s ‘voice here is at times that of a preacher’ or because he adopts a more poetic style. Even so, Nineham laments that ‘the issues he raises are the really important ones, and it is a pity that his fellow theologians do not tear themselves from their more esoteric concerns to enter into constructive dialogue with him’ (1994: 448). In a review of *After God*,Nineham again confronts the accusation that Cupitt’s style is insufficiently academic, conceding that the book ‘is not couched in the style normal in accepted academic works, where each advance is consolidated, and every flank covered, before any further move forward is attempted’. Yet Nineham insists that Cupitt’s work deserves ‘respectful attention’ because ‘it is the vision of an exceptionally able and sensitive man, with remarkable grasp both of the history of religion and of the current cultural situation’ (1997: 5).

Similarly, in a generally positive review of Cupitt’s book *After All: Religion without Alienation*, Angela Tilby also observes that ‘Cupitt has never received the recognition he deserves in academic circles.’ (1994: 16) She suggests that envy of Cupitt’s ‘Telly Don’ status has caused him consistently to be passed over for senior positions. This is tragic, Tilby argues, since his writing is ‘vigorous, witty and poetic’ and because he ‘is unique among theologians and philosophers in really understanding the spiritual complexities of the present’. Unlike his peers he does not expend his ‘energies chopping linguistic hairs. His goal is the “big picture”’ (Tilby, 1994: 16). As a BBC producer at the time of the review, Tilby also commends Cupitt on his ability to connect with and communicate to a mass audience that is generally religiously sceptical.

An Apologist and Missionary?

Cupitt’s reputation as the ‘atheist priest’ hostile to the Church endures to this day, as, largely, does his academic neglect. Essentially, however, Cupitt regarded his task as one of reforming the Church’s intellectual and moral priorities in order that it could engage with modern society with greater relevance and credibility. In other words, he viewed the role of the theologian to be central to the Church’s mission. In a short article in the 1990s written for a publication aimed at those training for Anglican ministry, Cupitt makes this clear. He defends the notion that theologians should be accorded a large amount of freedom of enquiry. He argues that the Church is confronted with the reality of a ‘free and pluralistic’ society, which presents the Church with a choice. Either it could retreat, try to shut out modern reality, ‘batten down the hatches, and maintain the traditional doctrine and authority structures’ or it could do the opposite, and let ‘a hundred flowers bloom’ (1994: 23). The Church should abandon ‘the ideas of the priority of dogma and unanimity in dogmatic confession’ and allow itself to be as pluralist as Hinduism. This would entail abandoning the ‘military, monarchical and ideological attitudes’ of the past as simply untenable in the contemporary context (1994: 23).

In fact, Cupitt’s conviction that by clinging to an essentially pre-modern cosmology and failing to engage with the insights of modern science the Church was becoming ever more irrelevant to wider society forms a constant thread throughout his career. Even before 1980 and his break with traditional theism, he was arguing that much of the traditional language of sin, guilt and submission was repugnant and undermined any claims on the part of institutional Christianity to moral superiority (Cupitt, 1972). Similarly, the historic trappings of Christendom and inherited medieval world-views form obstacles to the effective communication of the Gospel, which Cupitt argues must return to a focus on the person and work of Jesus himself (Cupitt, 1979).

Cupitt’s perennial concern with the future of religion, belief in God and the Church is further illustrated by his short autobiographical reflections which appear at the beginning of various of his published works. In 2000, in his *Preface* to *Philosophy’s Own Religion*, Cupitt describes how his own work has always wrestled with the question of what religion might look like in a contemporary Western society which has rejected traditional beliefs and creeds. He records that up till 1990, his hope was that

church reform was possible, provided that one were allowed to interpret traditional belief in a non-realist way (1980-1985), or provided that the church’s disciplinary control of truth were relaxed enough to permit a decentred, “disseminated”, much more fluid and plural, motion of religious symbols (1986-1989). (2000: viii)

By 1990 he admits that, ‘amid much turmoil’, he had come to believe that such hopes had proven a ‘vanity’. In 2001, in his Introduction to *Reforming Christianity*, he states his aim is ‘to show how the profession and practice of a thoroughly reformed version of Christianity could again come to look attractive to a thinking person’ (2001b: 2). Cupitt never stopped hoping that Christianity could be reformed, made credible for the modern world, thereby enabling the Church to avert its seemingly inexorable path of decline.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that one way of regarding Don Cupitt’s reputation is as a ‘prophet without honour’. There is reason to believe that his theological ideas were judged to be too radical for him to receive Church preferment and that his work and the nature of his media profile was also judged as insufficiently weighty as to merit academic promotion. There is some truth to these, but arguably such representations obscure Cupitt’s wider significance. Cupitt may be more accurately understood as a priest whose enduring mission was to investigate how Christianity could be restated as a plausible belief system within the accepted intellectual and cultural norms of contemporary Western society. His gradual adoption of non-realist theology, together with a growing emphasis on the lived expression of religion as primarily one of ethical authenticity, was consistent with his commitment to a relevant and credible Christian theology. Yet as a consequence of his characterization as ‘atheist priest’, the very important contribution that Cupitt might have made to either the Church of England or the theological academy was overlooked.

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1. We recognise that the distinction between the Church of England and the Universities during the period of Cupitt’s employment is not as clear cut as it might appear in our characterization of two separate spheres. Senior academics in many theological faculties were Church of England priests with strong links to senior clerics in the Church. Hence any consensus that emerged about Cupitt’s work tended to be shared across Church and academy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This aspect of his career will be considered further in our second article in this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example Crowder, 1997, Hyman, 2004, Leaves, 1994, White, 1994, Ward, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a timeline of Cupitt’s career, see the Timeline at https://doncupitt.chi.ac.uk. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)