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

**2. Public Intellectual**

**Abstract**

The 1984 BBC TV series, *The Sea of Faith*, offered Don Cupitt an exceptional degree of public recognition and notoriety. His advancement of a non-realist and social constructivist theology had a strong polarizing effect on his audience, engendering disapproval and approbation in equal measure. Opinion was strongly divided between those who resisted any kind of critical approach to Christian teaching and those who felt liberated by Cupitt’s call for a more modern and questioning theology. Through archives of audience reactions to his broadcasts and writings, this article will consider whether Cupitt’s influence through *The Sea of Faith* and other writing and broadcasting was sufficient to rank him as a ‘public intellectual’. It will argue that the controversy Cupitt attracted and his categorization as ‘atheist priest’ and ‘radical theologian’ may ultimately have limited his efforts to promote broad-based, serious theological debate.

**Keywords**

Don Cupitt, British Broadcasting Corporation, religious broadcasting, public intellectual, Sea of Faith.

The first article in this series considered whether Don Cupitt’s controversial reputation as a broadcaster and popular writer contributed to his marginalization by the academic and ecclesiastical establishments. This article will examine that media profile in more detail, with particular focus on Cupitt’s development as a public intellectual, including especially the audience reaction to the BBC television series, *The Sea of Faith*, screened in the autumn of 1984.[[1]](#endnote-2) The series provided Cupitt with a platform for his ideas and led among other things to the establishment of the *Sea of Faith Network*, a membership organization dedicated to exploring his non-realist theology.[[2]](#endnote-3)

Cupitt chose the path of the public intellectual by actively cultivating media and broadcasting opportunities in pursuit of what he regarded as the vital task of the renewal of theological thinking in church and society. His public profile therefore had a very distinct character, as a religious sceptic and critic of the traditional beliefs of the institutional Church. For some, he was anathema, a destroyer of simple faith and orthodox, Bible-based Christianity. For others, he became the figurehead of a radical, questioning theology that gave ordinary people a sanction to explore and articulate their own spiritual journeys. Such public sentiment reflects a wider trend within religion at this time, away from formal observance towards a more subjective and autonomous spirituality. Cupitt’s own trajectory from orthodoxy to a more personalized and existential creed may therefore have commended him to an audience searching for permission to undertake a similar journey.

**‘Public Intellectual’**

To what extent can Cupitt be classed as a ‘public intellectual’? A public intellectual is someone who achieves prominence in a particular field (often academia) who then becomes known to a wider, generalist audience. To qualify, ‘one must participate in debate to clarify issues, expose the errors of other public intellectuals, draw attention to neglected issues and participate in debate to clarify issues, expose the errors of other public intellectuals, draw attention to neglected issues and generally vivify public discussion.’[[3]](#endnote-4) In his 1993 BBC Reith Lectures, Edward Said characterized the public intellectual as both outsider and insider. They must be capable of representing the marginalized and giving voice to dissent while still maintaining a degree of credibility in order to ‘speak truth to power’. They are autonomous and independent and often take an overtly political stance.

The intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d'etre is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously.[[4]](#endnote-5)

At a certain point, the public intellectual will transcend their own field of expertise and be elevated to a more symbolic position, as one whose personal reputation serves as the warrant for their popular prominence and credibility. The distinction between public persona and private reputation becomes blurred, as the individual’s own fame ‘dissolves and rises and merges with the spirits of all the men and women who have thought and imagined and struggled before them.’’[[5]](#endnote-6)

In Said’s terms, Cupitt could be said to be both insider and outsider. He was a disrupter of complacency within the churches with a mission to confront awkward questions about faith, the nature of God and the challenges of modernity. He was also a religious insider who cared enough about the cultural credibility of Christianity to advocate greater openness and debate. The question is whether Cupitt was too much the disrupter who, because of his radicalism, could be dismissed as a liberal extremist. To explore that question we need to investigate the ways in which Cupitt developed his profile as a public intellectual, transcending his status as an academic theologian, and then how popular audiences responded to his ideas.

**Cupitt’s Media Profile**

Cupitt did not become a media personality overnight. The success of *The Sea of Faith* was built upon Cupitt’s extensive prior experience in the popular media. He had been a regular broadcaster in print, TV and radio since the 1970s, contributing book reviews to *Times Literary Supplement, London Review of Books, Times Higher Education Supplement*, and giving radio talks to BBC Radio 3 and World Service. In 1977 he collaborated with the BBC producer Peter Armstrong on a two-hour TV documentary entitled *Who Was Jesus?*[[6]](#endnote-7) Armstrong, a respected producer, recognized in Cupitt the skills needed to be an effective presenter.

Cupitt was an advocate of public sector religious broadcasting and its mission to provide serious and independent contributions to popular debate, as an article from this period demonstrates.[[7]](#endnote-8) Presciently, he noted that while non-institutional forms of religion were on the wane this should not be equated with the cultural currency of interest in faith and spirituality, as reflected in the enduring popularity of forms of religious broadcasting. Even so, despite being ‘on the whole the most interesting thing the BBC does’[[8]](#endnote-9), such output is subject to disproportionate degrees of criticism and tends to be marginalized in mainstream scheduling. Programme-makers and commissioners should be encouraged to diversify their output, and cultivate ‘more uninhibited speculation, argument and exploration of the ultimate facts of life: myths, ritual, holiness, evil, death, the gods, the soul and the endless diversity of man’s quest for the supreme good.’[[9]](#endnote-10)

As a result of the success of *Who Was Jesus?*, in 1982PeterArmstrong proposed a further series on radical theology with Cupitt as writer-presenter. According to Cupitt’s own account, this presented him with a dilemma. He had only just received tenure (or permanent appointment) at Cambridge, and was loath to abandon this for a full-time media career. Instead, he combined the BBC project with his Cambridge duties – no easy task, but a sign of an emerging profile that attempted to balance the dual roles of career academic with public commentator.

The major *leitmotifs* of the series were, first that religion was a human construct, second, that Christianity had to reform in the face of modernity and finally that the Church had allowed the purity of the example and moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth to become corrupted. These themes played into popular sentiment which similarly contrasted what was perceived as the core message and teaching of Jesus and the subsequent distortion of a simple gospel of love by the Church. We can gauge this from the responses to the TV series itself.

**The Public Response to *The Sea of Faith***

Correspondence arrived after each episode. At one stage Cupitt was receiving 60 letters a day. Cupitt remarks how writers would refer to the programmes as ‘talks’ as if they were spontaneous affairs, rather than a series that had taken over two years to plan and produce. But perhaps this naturalism or realism represented some of the secret of the series success, because the artifice and editing of the material was not apparent. ‘Ordinary folk in the audience assumed that what they were seeing was happening spontaneously before their eyes, just like that, in real time.’’[[10]](#endnote-11)

What did Cupitt himself attribute to the success of the TV series? He was acutely aware that portions of his audience believed they were being given permission to question what passed for religious and theological orthodoxy. Cupitt made it acceptable to engage in serious intellectual enquiry into the nature of religious belief and to demonstrate to an audience unfamiliar with the history of philosophy that such a tradition of critical enquiry towards religion had a long and respectable pedigree. ‘People were thrilled, not merely by the answers that were offered to them, but by the new landscape of thought that was opened up.’’[[11]](#endnote-12)

The sentiments expressed in the correspondence fell into a number of categories but were quite markedly polarized between critics and supporters. On one hand, a significant proportion of letters expressed appreciation for an opportunity to engage seriously with questions of faith. Many echoed Cupitt’s own desire for greater rigour and seriousness towards religious faith among Christians.[[12]](#endnote-13) Some expressed gratitude for a presentation that made complex philosophical ideas accessible;[[13]](#endnote-14) ‘a rare treat for the mind’[[14]](#endnote-15) . Many correspondents focused on Cupitt’s emphasis on the significance of Jesus as a moral teacher and exemplar[[15]](#endnote-16), concurring with Cupitt’s contention that faith was a matter of practical morality – a religion of ‘being and doing ‘[[16]](#endnote-17) – rather than a question of orthodox belief or dogma. One correspondent concluded, ‘How dreadfully we treat people who help us to think’ [[17]](#endnote-18) Many shared their own personal stories of spiritual, psychic or supernatural experiences, often with little reference to the programmes themselves but in response to what they clearly perceived as Cupitt’s sympathetic and accessible persona.

A consistent theme to emerge from the correspondence favourable to Cupitt is a frustration on the part of many viewers at never having encountered anything similar despite years of faithful churchgoing. This only served to expose the paucity of critical thinking within the churches. The disaffection of this group mapped closely onto a long-established theme in Cupitt’s work, namely the intellectual redundancy of the institutional Church in the face of modern science and technology.[[18]](#endnote-19) But Cupitt also challenged a widely-held notion (not least in the media) that the only possible expression of religious faith was ultra-conservative and fundamentalist.[[19]](#endnote-20) As well as giving voice to those religious sceptics who regarded religious faith as the very antithesis to reason, humanism and progress, Cupitt insisted on an alternative trajectory in which an intellectually respectable religious commitment could contribute to a good society. ‘We can’t live much longer in a sceptical post-Christian twilight. Either we recover religious seriousness, or the spirit of man [sic] will die, and that soon.’ [[20]](#endnote-21) This would necessitate a return to the roots of critical thinking about religion from the Enlightenment as well as greater intellectual honesty on the part of Church leaders towards theological debate.[[21]](#endnote-22)

However, for many of his correspondents, Cupitt’s questioning approach was precisely the danger he represented to the faith of the nation. Of those, many reiterated or defended Biblical authority and doctrinal orthodoxy and strongly contested the decision to make the series altogether. Other correspondents objected not so much to the series itself but on Cupitt’s very right to present such ideas on television. Several writers asked how Cupitt could remain as a priest in the Church of England if he no longer subscribed to its core doctrines.[[22]](#endnote-23) Another correspondent made a fervent appeal to Cupitt to recant his critical views and return to a faith founded on acceptance of Jesus as Friend and Saviour.[[23]](#endnote-24) Others insisted that faith was a matter of the heart or of experience of a distinct spiritual realm rather than intellectual enquiry and reasoning, arguing that Cupitt’s rational approach served to inhibit a ‘personal spiritual experience of the living Christ’ .[[24]](#endnote-25) For another, a ‘strong faith in a God who loves me’ rather than intellectual justification was a sufficient grounding.[[25]](#endnote-26) In this sense Cupitt achieved Said’s criterion of the public intellectual as a disrupter of orthodoxy.

Even so, the sentiments expressed by many of Cupitt’s correspondents match emerging patterns of religious belonging and believing from the last quarter of the twentieth century which saw a gradual decline of formal religious affiliation alongside patterns of popular spirituality that were highly affective, experiential and heterodox in nature. The *British Social Attitudes Survey* from 2016 traces this trajectory over more than thirty years.[[26]](#endnote-27)Responses to the questions,*'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? IF YES: Which?'* were as follows:

**1984** Christian = 67%, non-Christian = 2%, no religion = 32%

**1991** Christian = 61%, non-Christian = 3%, no religion = 35%

**2001** Christian = 54%, non-Christian = 5%, no religion = 41%

**2009** Christian = 43%, non-Christian = 6%, no religion = 50%

**2016** Christian =41%, non-Christian = 6%, no religion = 53%

Source: *British Social Attitudes*, 2016

The correspondence Cupitt received from viewers of *The Sea of Faith* offers further insight into this trend. While many people remain broadly committed to Bible-based and doctrinally orthodox world-views, an increasing proportion of the rest were choosing to depart from (or ‘take leave’ of) their Christian upbringing in search of alternatives. Even those who express sympathy with Cupitt’s thinking often do so alongside other, more eclectic and heterodox beliefs, such as angels, spirit visitations, psychic and paranormal phenomena, miraculous healing and reincarnation.[[27]](#endnote-28) With that, comes a greater reliance on personal experience and moral integrity over and against institutional teaching.

So the narrative of *The Sea of Faith*, with its charting of the roots of modern religious scepticism and its focus on the personal quest for authentic faith, spoke into a wider cultural trend away from institutional, credal religion towards a more personal and individualized journey into the sacred in all its manifestations.[[28]](#endnote-29) In his later work, Cupitt would himself arrive at a similar appreciation of popular spirituality with his work on ideas of God in ‘ordinary-language’ and everyday speech[[29]](#endnote-30) although his analysis makes no reference to the material contained in the correspondence of the mid-1980s.

In the years after *The Sea of Faith*, however*,* there were signs that Cupitt’s reputation as something of a religious iconoclast – an outsider – was actually inhibiting his ability to engage with the kind of diverse mass audience that he had enjoyed for *The Sea of Faith*. For example, one reviewer noted that ‘Cupitt is a household word for extreme theological liberalism’.[[30]](#endnote-31) Commenting on Cupitt’s appearance at the Christian festival *Greenbelt, The Church of England Newspaper* observed that ‘Cupitt … has not been successful in creating an apologetic for his work that will bring people to faith.’[[31]](#endnote-32) Another reviewer observed that Cupitt’s views were unfashionable because the establishment feared him but also because he never engaged in dialogue with other people.[[32]](#endnote-33) More caustically, David L. Edwards observed that Cupitt has ‘painted himself into his own small corner so energetically that it is extremely hard to see why he combines courageous honesty and indisputable cleverness with a determination to remain a priest serving a God whose reality he has repeatedly denied.’[[33]](#endnote-34) John Turner, writing a critical profile for *The Tablet*, described Cupitt as a ‘deeply earnest and spiritually troubled person’ and also a ‘theological iconoclast, a loner’. [[34]](#endnote-35) Even some of Cupitt’s friends noted that much of his work did not conform to traditional academic norms, leaving him open to dismissal as a polemical extremist.[[35]](#endnote-36)

Cupitt continued to attract a loyal readership for his books well into the twenty-first century and maintained a healthy media output of comment, reviews and opinion. However, his categorization as an extreme radical theologian who had placed himself beyond the pale of mainstream Christian belief – whether entirely fair to him or not – enabled his detractors to play down his contribution to serious debate. His radicalism undermined his position as a true public intellectual because he became too much of an outsider for the churches.

**Conclusion**

*The Sea of Faith* television series aimed to explore the roots of contemporary Western civilization in which religious belief is no longer taken for granted and the universe is no longer a fixed, unchanging reality but a construct in which we are responsible for our own destiny. Cupitt believed that religious thought could not be immune to the forces of modernity, and much of his popular writing and broadcasting was precisely dedicated to ‘involv[ing] people in a completely free and undogmatic kind of religious thinking’.[[36]](#endnote-37)

Cupitt wanted to promote reasonable, open debate about religion and hence chose to foster a media profile despite some personal cost to his health and his professional prospects. He was committed to the role of public intellectual and commentator because he believed in fostering greater public understanding of religion. Ironically, however, once he had become established as a recognized name, he was already somewhat pigeon-holed as a radical unbeliever, which limited his ability to speak beyond a relatively narrow constituency. He retained his status and influence within groups such as the Sea of Faith Network and continued to be in demand as reviewer and broadcaster. But this was in the main because he could be relied upon to offer provocative views rather than to promote or advance new thinking. Reflecting after the conclusion of *The Sea of Faith*, Cupitt himself questioned whether there was ‘a public demand for open and critical exploration of difficult and often controversial questions in philosophy and critical thought.’[[37]](#endnote-38) Certainly, Cupitt’s fortunes would suggest that there was relatively little appetite in British public life for radical or critical thinking in relation to religion. The polarized reception to his ideas confirms the supposition that his audience either wanted to shut him down completely or were captivated by what they regarded as the rare phenomenon of a senior church figure prepared to countenance dissatisfaction with the theological status quo. Once these fault-lines were drawn, however, there was relatively little neutral space in which further debate could be advanced.

1. **Notes**

   The Don Cupitt Archive, Gladstone’s Library, Hawarden contains over 12 boxes of correspondence in addition to Cupitt’s other published and unpublished material. For reasons of confidentiality, comments are drawn from, but not attributed to, particular correspondents. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.sof.org.uk/. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Naughton, John. 2011. “Why don't we love our intellectuals?” *Observer .* London 8 May. Accessed December 9 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/08/britain-public-intellectuals. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. E. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual,* pp. 11-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. A. Lightman, ‘The Role of the Public Intellectual’, *MIT Communications Forum* (online), https://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/legacy/papers/lightman.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. See D. Cupitt and P. Armstrong, *Who Was Jesus?* London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1977. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. D. Cupitt, 'And Behold, a Multitude'. *The Listener*, March 18 1976, 332-333. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. D. Cupitt, 'And Behold, a Multitude', p. 332 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. ‘And Behold’, p. 333. Cupitt does not appear, however, to differentiate between religious programming that speaks to self-identified believers, such as public worship, and other more factual or investigative output. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. 'And Behold, a Multitude', p. 332. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Would I do it again? p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. DC/SoF/1-F2-#7. References to individual items of correspondence relate to their box file number in the Don Cupitt Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. DC/SoF/1-F2-#14. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. DC/SoF/1-F2-#14. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. DC/SoF/1-F2-#13. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. DC/SoF/1-F2-#13. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. DC/SoF/2-#115. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. See for example, D. Cupitt, *The Worlds of Science and Religion*. London: Sheldon Press, 1976; *The World to Come*, London: SCM Press, 1982, *Only Human*, London: SCM Press, 1985; *Mysticism After Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998; *The Great Questions of Life,* Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. D. Cupitt, “Has failure of nerve caused this new divide?” *Times Higher Education Supplement* April 12 1977, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. D. Cupitt, ‘No Liberty without Religious Liberty’, *The Listener*  April 1 1976, 411. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. D. Cupitt, “Has failure of nerve caused this new divide?” *Times Higher Education Supplement* April 12 1977, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. DC/SoF/1-F4-#3, DC/SoF/1-F8#1, DC/SoF/2-#1. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. DC/SoF/1-F3-#4. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. DC/SoF/2-#101. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. DC/SoF/2-#87. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. ‘Religious affiliation among adults in Great Britain’ *British Social Attitudes* 28, 2016, https://faithsurvey.co.uk › download › bsa-religion.pdf (accessed December 9 2022) [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. DC/SoF/1-F5-#4, DC/SoF/3-#52, DC/SoF/1-F5#6, DC/SoF/2-#1, DC/SoF/2-#57. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Vincett, Giselle and Woodhead, Linda. 2009. “Spirituality.” In *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, edited by L. Woodhead, H. Kawanami and C. Partridge, 321-337. London: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. D. Cupitt, *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (London: SCM Press, 1999); *The Meaning of it All in Everyday Speech* (London: SCM Press, 1999); *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech* (London: SCM Press, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. W. Schwarz, ‘Our Father Which Art on Earth’ (Review of *The Long-Legged Fly*), *The Guardian*, September 21 1987, p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. *Church of England Newspaper*, 8 Sept 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. G. Kelly, ‘Cupitt’s Measure’, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. David Edwards, ‘He may know the questions, but beware of his answers’, (Review of *What is a Story?*) *The Tablet*, December 14 1991, p. 1546. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. John Cornwall, ‘Don Cupitt’s Gospel’, *The Tablet*, August 6th 1994, p980. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. See, for example Denis Nineham reviewing *After God* in *Times Literary Supplement,* 26th December 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Would I do it again? p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. D. Cupitt, ‘The Sea of Faith: the Backwash.’ *The Listener* November 1 1984, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)