Don Cupitt and the State of Radical Theology

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ABSTRACT

Don Cupitt’s non-realist thought is an important part of the ongoing story of radical theology. This article surveys some of the most important recent figures and trends in that story to assess the current state of the field. It sets out ways in which Cupitt’s attack on dualistic and dogmatic thought is strongly echoed by thinkers such as John Caputo, Richard Kearney, Catherine Keller and Grace Jantzen; and how major materialist philosophers like Slavoj Žižek still show a fascination with the emancipatory potential of Christianity. The article argues that some of Cupitt’s positions need to be challenged in the light of the contemporary ecological and metaphysical concerns of radical theology today*.*

KEYWORDS

DON CUPITT, PROCESS THEOLOGY, RADICAL ORTHODOXY, WEAK ONTOLOGY

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# Introduction

Radical theology names a cluster of interrelated discourses which seek to challenge the fundamental claims of theological discourse when it comes to reality and truth. Though they differ, they often seek to overcome the dualism that subordinates the world of time, change and matter to the world of eternal truth, static reality and supernatural spirit. At the same time, they retain a sense of the creative and subversive potential of religious symbols and stories.

Of course, radical theology has its own origin stories. One such derives from Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He limits religion to reason alone, while cutting reason down to size. God becomes a moral ideal which guides our striving but offers no metaphysical purchase on the nature of reality itself. This rather denuded religion was important for Don Cupitt’s early non-realism and represents a rational radicalisation of liberalism.

An alternative story goes back to Hegel (1770-1831), for whom God comes to full actualisation only in and with historical change. For Hegel, the story of the world is also the story of God’s journey through embodiment, self-loss and self-fulfilment. His thought represents a richer turning to history and time than Kant’s, though it comes with its own (often Eurocentric) baggage. Both stories inform the background to Cupitt’s work and the ongoing wider projects of radical theology. They help explain why it is a contested terrain, and why it is worth taking a snapshot of where it finds itself in the present moment.

In what follows, I will therefore try to set out the recent story of radical theology. In doing this, I am conscious of Cupitt’s own argument: that we need stories to shape our identity, but that they must remain contingent, multiple and open-ended (Cupitt 1991). There is no master narrative, and no God’s-eye vantage point from which to tell it.

There is the germ of an argument running through this account. In my view, the non-realist claim that the world and meaning are entirely human constructs struggles to meet the challenge of our contemporary ecological dysfunctions. For this and other reasons, it is only right that radical theology continues to revisit its legacy and move in directions not fully taken by Cupitt. That said, it is striking just how much his own restlessness changed his outlook. He moves from the heroic Kant-inspired rational individualism of the early 1980s to the beautifully expressive celebration of our emptying out into the ceaseless flow of life in his later writings.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this way, his path continues to resonate with the wider story of radical theology and its future.

# Weakening Being

One of the fundamental contentions of Cupitt’s work is to challenge the way Western philosophy and theology have framed the issue of the nature of reality. Ontology – the philosophy of being or the nature of what there ultimately *is* – has often based itself on a binary. On the one hand, we have the finite world of Becoming: changing, contingent, unreliable, tied to the limitations of matter. On the other hand, we have Being: what there truly Is. Being is unchanging, non-material, impassive. It is the gold standard for objective truth and reality.

This Being/Becoming dualism can be understood in different ways, but its function remains that of trying to secure a firm foundation upon which reality, and our knowledge of reality, can stand. Cupitt’s case has been that this dualism is both unwarranted and pernicious.[[2]](#footnote-2) First, it is unwarranted, since none of us can attain the kind of transcendent viewpoint which would allow us to determine the nature of Being. How can we, from our human perspective, presume to stand outside of that perspective to see and say what defies vision and language?

Second, it is pernicious because, in the absence of any neutral justification for its validity, the Being/Becoming distinction relies upon the exercise of power. It is a tool of repressive societal and sacred hierarchies. And it is mapped on to key distinctions that define our place in the world. Being/Becoming is reflected by Male/Female, Human/Nature, Reason/Passion, Spirit/Matter. In each case, the first term signifies stability, control and transcendence; the second is associated with chaos, irrationality, the heaviness and rebelliousness of the flesh. The overall effect is to diminish and denigrate this world, and to tell us that our true home is in a world above.

Cupitt wants to return us to this world, to celebrate ordinariness, secondariness and transience. In the process, he wants to challenge the baleful dualisms and power structures which are so damaging. There is a story of redemption at work on Cupitt’s texts, which echoes that of incarnation: abandoning the heavens, the divine is found within the web of this fleshly world.

In the background here is the work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger is a difficult and controversial figure. However, he sets a key agenda for radical theology by calling into question the ‘ontotheological’ approach of much Western thought (Heidegger 2002: 42-74). Simply put, ontotheology happens when we define the ultimate nature of Being as *a* being: a timeless God, for example, who stands apart from the world we exist in as its foundation. In effect, ontotheology creates an image of God as one more item of furniture in the universe: a supreme being, but a being nonetheless. Heidegger himself is much more inclined to understand Being as event rather than noun, as a process of unfolding and unveiling rather than a fixed point.

Cupitt is thus part of a wider debate which questions deep-rooted ways of framing our basic picture of the world. Other contemporary voices have sought to spell out the implications of this shift for theology, notably John Caputo. Caputo is heavily influenced by Jacques Derrida, himself a major figure who sought to deconstruct the presumptions of foundationalist philosophies. Interestingly, Derrida moved from rejecting theology to a more sympathetic view. He came to write of a ‘religion without religion’ or a ‘messianism with a Messiah’: a religion which names a restless movement of hope, an abandoning of fixed idols, a prayer which does not know if it is heard (Derrida 1994).

Caputo builds on this (Caputo 1997, 2006, 2013; see also Caputo and Vattimo 2007). He engages with Derrida but also with older traditions of thought such as mystical writing and St Augustine. Read sensitively, such traditions emphasised that ‘God’ is not a thing we can simply name and possess. God names that which incites desire and love, which holds open our life to future transformation. God never simply ‘arrives’: that would be to turn God into a fixed and decided being. No, God names what prevents our systems of thought and society closing in on themselves, the radical promise of other ways of being.

Like the Italian philosopher Gianco Vattimo, Caputo promotes what he calls a ‘weak’ ontology. A strong ontology would be one which claimed to be able to determine what there really is and use it as a basis for legislation for how the world should be. In contrast, weak ontology claims no such authority to fix truth and meaning. Being is be-ing: the dynamic, uncontainable flow of what there is. The word God, then, does not point to or grasp a definable being. Rather, the word harbours a possibility, an event, a call to live differently. Language about God ‘trembles’ with this call and promise, elicits our yearning. This, far more than any presumption to define God, represents the heart of the religious path. Following Augustine, we do now know what we love when we love our God.

There are clear affinities with Cupitt, who has also tried to pull religious language away from its supposedly descriptive or legislating function towards a more creative and evocative understanding of how it works. Religious language does not merely try to reflect a pre-existing world out there or up there. It actively shapes, or performs, a new reality. Cupitt’s development of this approach has led him to collapse the dualism of language and world. What there is, for Cupitt, is communication, signs whose outward face is language and whose inner face is the felt sensations which prompt and shape perception. Nature and culture are two facets of one stream of be-ing. Religious life is directed towards reconciling us to this ‘outsideless’ transient life and releasing our creativity within it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As for Cupitt, in Caputo there is a moment of ‘atheism’: letting go of the idol which turns God into an object. However, Caputo would probably not nail his colours to the mast of non-realism in quite the way that Cupitt does. To say that God is a human invention, that the world is a product of human language would seem to say too much. It limits God to the bounds of the human, where the human is put in the place of the divine. Of course, Cupitt himself moves away from the more individualistic non-realism of *Taking Leave of God*, as he places the human within the ever-flowing webs of life and signs which run through us (Cupitt 1980). However, his insistence that the world we experience is an entirely human product is in tension with other streams of radical theology. As we will see, it results in particular problems when facing the need to reset the relationship between the human and more-than-human ecologies of which we are part.

# Process, Nature and Gender

In many ways, the development of Cupitt’s work away from hyper-Protestant beginnings has made him more able to engage with ecological thinking. In *Taking Leave of God*, God is a spiritual ideal we project and strive to follow. The stress is on a single-minded, disinterested and rather austere individual religious life. Non-realist about God it may be, but it still sounds like an attempt to overcome and leave behind the baggage of our nature.

However, from soon after this first foray into non-realism, Cupitt sought to do justice to the inescapably social dimensions of human life and language. As his thought developed, he sought to integrate nature and culture, rather than seeing them as separate. The movement of signs runs together with the sensitive participation of the body in the lifeworld we share. Increasingly, the symbol of God gets displaced by that of *Life* – the humming world of sensation and expression in which we live, move and have our being (Cupitt 2003).

As mentioned in the previous section, Cupitt is adept at identifying and challenging the dualisms which structure the world into hierarchies, where one pole is always seen as subordinate, derivative and excluded in relation to the other. In this, he shares much with feminist, ecofeminist and queer theology. Well-established examples would include Rosemary Radford Reuther and Mary Daly, both of whom challenged patriarchal models of being and transcendence in our imaging of God. More overt kinship to Cupitt’s non-realism can be found in the distinctive approach of Grace Jantzen.

Jantzen’s major constructive work was published in the nineties but remains one of the most significant creative pieces of feminist philosophy of religion (Jantzen 1998). Blending philosophy and psychoanalysis, she resists any attempt to specify the objective reality of God. Instead, she uses the symbolism of ‘becoming divine’ to resist otherworldliness and affirm the ultimate worth of embodied relationality and flourishing in this world. Jantzen argues that much Western philosophy and religion is unhealthily obsessed with defining human life in terms of death. Our mortality – and related fear and desire to avoid death – drive us to seek solutions in an immortal world above. In contrast, Jantzen stresses our ‘natality’: that we are born, embodied, open to life and possibility as worth cherishing in and for itself. The approach she uses draws on feminist resistance to dualism and the associated masculinist tendency to devalue and objectify the flesh (especially women’s bodies). Sadly, Jantzen died before she was able to develop this further.

A related project, still ongoing, is found in the writings of Catherine Keller (2007, 2015). Keller is a process theologian, part of a movement inspired by the work of Alfred North Whitehead in the first half of the twentieth century. Process thought offers a metaphysical view of the universe, but one which goes against the dualistic grain of much Western thought. It seeks to affirm the fundamental reality of time and change, seeing the universe and everything in it as a process of becoming. Everything in the world evolves; everything is interconnected, made what it is by the dynamic web of relationships that bind it to all other realities, past and present; and everything is open to the future. In this vision of reality, God is not detached, and not defined by omnipotent lordship over creation. God and the world evolve together, shape each other: God too is in process.

Keller’s work brings significant creative advances to process theology. She has argued powerfully against the dominant Christian theological model of *creatio ex nihilo*, and in favour of a genuine mutuality and co-creation between the divine and the world (Keller 2002). Her commitment to ecofeminism and postcolonialism means that she is explicitly mindful of how some metaphysical models of transcendence have contributed to ecological, gendered and racial violence. She draws on deep currents of mysticism to question the ways we specify the being of God and others. The way of unknowing or unlearning what we thought we knew becomes an invitation into deeper relationship with all that exceeds our dreams of domination.

Again, it is worth noting that none of the thinkers mentioned here are drawing explicitly on Cupitt, or wholly endorsing a non-realist approach. However, feminist and process radical theologies are still fighting the shadows of Platonism and dualism. In different ways, they connect with Cupitt’s own approach: the dialogue with contemporary philosophy; a rekindling of mystical thought; and a deep affirmation of transience and becoming as inherently sacred, rather than inherently flawed and fallen.

Jantzen, Keller and others do push radical theology to engage with a wider horizon, beyond its more ‘humanistic’ roots. The ecological crisis demands a serious reckoning with more-than-human meanings and lives. Deep-rooted hierarchies of gender and race persist – not least because they have made an intrinsic contribution to the modernity in which we live. Empire, capital, colonialism and the exploitation of the earth have shaped the modern world at its roots. This makes any appeal to a grand story of modernity as one of enlightenment highly suspect. It is naïve to think of secularism as a default norm, let alone a liberating one. Liberalism is often complicit with reductive rationalism and Eurocentrism. Scientific method is enormously powerful, but *scientistic* ways of thinking contribute to the instrumentalization and domination of the earth. In this context, radical theology becomes interestingly political and materialist, in ways which question and complicate Cupitt’s own relative optimism about the story of Western secularism. In the next section we look at some further significant examples of this in contemporary thought.

# Radical Political Theology

One of Cupitt’s great contributions as a teacher and thinker was to put theology and philosophy of religion in touch with creative currents in radical European philosophy. One of the striking things about thinkers in this post-Kant and post-Marx tradition was how religion had not simply died but remained an incredibly fertile focus for thought. In the constellation of major twentieth century philosophers - Derrida, Levinas, Irigaray, Kristeva, Nancy, Deleuze and others – religious themes are insistent. Even in this European context, the easy narratives of secularism fall flat.

One figure from this milieu still pushing the boundaries of rethinking religion is Slavoj Žižek. While inheriting a materialist, Marxist approach, Žižek filters this through a psychoanalytical lens, resulting in a sympathetic interpretation of key aspects of Christianity without accepting anything of its supernatural dimension.

Žižek echoes the ‘death of God’ theology which rose to prominence in the 1960s, with such thinkers as Thomas Altizer and Gabriel Vahanian (see Žižek 2000). Žižek himself reaches back to the earlier roots of that movement in the nineteenth century philosophy of Hegel. Key to this is seeing the crucifixion as the real or symbolic emptying out of God into the world and time. The divine loses its aura of sacred power, and is most fully manifest in abandonment and dereliction. This radicalisation of Christian belief in the incarnation dethrones God and understands the divine now as wholly immanent to the world.

For Žižek, Christianity and Marxism are allies in fighting the obscurantism of sacred power, or its more consumer-friendly versions packaged as ‘spirituality’. Such fantasies provide cover for capitalism to exercise its sway unhindered. Modern spirituality is the new opium of the masses, an experiential fix for those addicted to the status quo. Against this, Žižek’s self-professed ‘Christian atheism’ calls for a radical and revolutionary break with systems of control and domination. God is in the world as the Holy Spirit, the alternative community inspired by Jesus. This community (not of course identical with the institutional Church) no longer follow the fantasy of the Big Other, the symbol and fantasy of Absolute authority and hierarchy.

This brief account can only be inadequate, but I hope I have indicated how even politically materialist thinkers have engaged seriously with a kind of radical theology.[[4]](#footnote-4) Earlier liberation theologies tended to be politically radical but theologically conservative, or at least reticent. Newer political theology is more willing to be exploratory with its metaphysics. Žižek is a hugely controversial and problematic thinker (not least in his disdain for identity politics) but there is no doubt he has inspired creative work in political theology, where the continuing relevance and impact of theological themes to political structures and ideas is central.[[5]](#footnote-5)

# Radical Orthodoxy

Before drawing some of these threads together, it is worth mentioning a very different form of radicalism in contemporary theology: the neo-traditionalism of Radical Orthodoxy. This was a movement which emerged in the 1990s, through the work of scholars such as John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In many ways, it is a fascinating aspect of Cupitt’s legacy.[[7]](#footnote-7) It shares his engagement with contemporary European thought. It insists that truth is mediated and narrated, rejecting any ‘view from nowhere’ or self-evident starting point for thought. It dismisses the idea that secularism offers any kind of enlightened, neutral, and rational court of appeal for truth or political value.

Of course, here similarities end. Radical Orthodoxy decried the legacy of liberal and radical theologies. They were judged complicit with the nihilism of modernity. Secularism was merely the fraudulent mask worn by a violent ideology, nothing less than a perverted form of theology. The answer was to return to the resources of a robustly ecclesial and liturgical tradition, without apology or compromise. Such a tradition, which affirmed our participation in God through the liturgy, could alone out-narrate the myths of modernity.

Obviously, we are a world away from Cupitt here. But it is a sign of vibrancy in theological debates that such diverse voices could still share something of a common vocabulary. Radical Orthodoxy, launched rather self-consciously as an oppositional movement, fell a little too much into bombast to sustain interest. However, some of its leading voices and sympathisers have since piloted their own course, including significant engagement with queer theology.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps the queering of orthodoxy is as radical as anything else!

# What Future for Radical Theology?

If nothing else, Radical Orthodoxy compels us to ask hard questions about the direction of travel for radical theology. It would indeed be naïve to simply buy into myths of modernist progress, or secular enlightenment. At the same time, the urgency of radical theology’s challenges remains: to speak of God without recourse to consoling otherworldly guarantees; to subvert dualistic hierarchies and sacred powers (religious or ‘secular’); to find the unconditionality of the divine in possibility, transience and embodiment.

It is interesting to see how the - often demanding - scholarly work of radical theologians has found an audience in the churches, not least with a ‘post-evangelical’ generation tired of dry certainties.[[9]](#footnote-9) The alternative worship and emerging church scenes of the 90s and 2000s have laid the groundwork for on ongoing cross-fertilisation between radical theology and creative preaching, liturgy and social action.

Cupitt’s contribution to these questions is immense, both directly through his work and indirectly through those he has inspired. As we have seen, radical theology today encompasses new challenges that are not always addressed adequately in his work. Chief among these are issues of ecological flourishing and our need to overcome human-centred philosophies; and our related need for a politically engaged theology which is postsecular and postcolonial.

Increasingly, metaphysics has made a comeback. Thinkers are wary of the pitfalls of a position in which humans, and humans alone, make the world. Such ‘radicalism’ can be the flipside of a modern obsession with human domination over all other realities. Nowadays, issues of the nature of being, the vibrancy of matter and the political stakes of our answers to these questions are alive and well in the current scene.[[10]](#footnote-10) A recovery of the unconditional nature of God’s reality calls into question any sense of setting God’s infinity and transcendence over against, separate from or alongside the world’s immanence. I would suggest that this also revives the question of a more sacramental view of life, in which material reality bears the fullness of the divine. And God – that often tired, overused and abused word – remains a stimulus to think what is of ultimate worth, and to receive a grace beyond price.

Radical theology continues to push us to think and act in the wake of these questions. The story is not over.

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1. Not least in Cupitt 1995 and 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The theme is pervasive in Cupitt’s work. See, for example Cupitt 1989: 43ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Cupitt 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also the non-supernaturalist religious anarchism of Simon Critchley (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A significant emerging figure here is Marika Rose 2019, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Key texts include Milbank 1990 and Milbank, Pickstock & Ward 1998. See also Shakespeare 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Indeed, some of its leading thinkers and sympathisers were taught by Cupitt or otherwise indebted to his work. See the appreciative tone of the contributions by Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward and Gerard Loughlin in Hyman 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Queer theology of course harbours a significant radical element, key to issues of identity and power. See, for example, Althaus-Reid 2000 and 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A key text here was Rollins 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Robbins 2016, especially the final chapter.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)