

The Sea of Faith

Notes by John Maindonald

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Don Cupitt - Theologian and Author

Don Cupitt was already well-known as the author of numerous books, and as a controversial theologian, when *The Sea of Faith* appeared on British television. It comprises six one-hour videotapes.

Brought up in the conventional Christianity of public school religion, a conversion experience at age 18 brought him into membership of “a conservative and pietistic Protestant group”. He moved

. . . through a variety of ‘unorthodox’ views, eventually dispensing with the objectivity of God and the possibility of grace-given goodness in favour of spiritual development unencumbered by such ‘controls’, and moving even beyond that to a view of faith as creative response to contingency.

(D.F. Ford, 1989, p.60)

From 1966 until he retired in 1996, he was Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and a University Lecturer in Divinity. Two television series—*Who was Jesus?* and *The Sea of Faith*—have brought his views to a wide audience.

Fuller details of the way his views have changed over the course of his career may be found in Scott Cowdell’s (1988) biography.

Cupitt as Revealed by his Books

Comments that shed light on Cupitt’s religious experience appear from time to time in his books. For example:

The full-blown Protestant conversion experience, arrived at in a moment of direst extremity, undoubtedly represents one of the supreme moments in the spiritual life. Those who have never passed through it (or at least, something like it) are unfortunate; but those who have failed to move on from it are more unfortunate still... (Lifelines, 1986, p.78)

The Sea of Faith

The Sea of Faith is the name both of the BBC television series and of the accompanying book. The series gives an historical account of the disruptive effect of modern knowledge upon traditional religious world-views and values in the West. All religions and cultures will find themselves similarly affected.

The notes that follow are divided into six sections, one for each of the six videotapes. Note that they summarise the book, and do not precisely match the contents of the videotapes.

A new SCM Classics edition of the book should appear in a few months. There was an earlier 1994 SCM Press edition that was substantially similar to the 1984 edition. (It had a new preface, revisions that make the language more inclusive, and omits the illustrations.)

References

Cowdell, S. *Atheist Priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity*, SCM Press, 1988.

Cupitt, D. *The Sea of Faith*. British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984.

Cupitt, D. *The Sea of Faith*. SCM Classics Edition, 2003.

Cupitt, D. *Life Lines*. SCM 1996.

Ford, D.F. *The Modern Theologians, vol II*, Blackwell, 1989, p.60.

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I. The Mechanical Universe

(This corresponds roughly to the introduction and chapters 1 and 2 of *The Sea of Faith*, i.e., to pp. 1-55.)

Introduction

“The slow process of secularisation, the impact of science and then of biblical and historical criticism, the shift to an ever more man-centred outlook, the encounter with other faiths, and then finally the awesome and still incomplete transition to modernity – all this makes up a story which for Christians extends over three or four centuries. . . . The story we have to tell may be local, but its moral is universal. Christianity has had the great advantage of a long period in which to understand and in some measure to adjust itself to what has happened, whereas in other cultures the process of modernisation is all the more abrupt, confusing and traumatic for being telescoped to within the span of a single lifetime.” (pp.7-8).

Our lives continue to be changed dramatically by new technologies. Even more important is the impact of the scientific ways of thinking that underlie these technologies. The ideal of science is the very opposite to that required by traditional religion. The method of science is systematically sceptical. Old men should rejoice to see young men prove them wrong. Although the reality may fall short of this ideal, it remains true that science’s concessions to the critical spirit have been crucial to its success.

The success of the critical approach in science made it inevitable that similarly critical approaches would be taken over and applied to other branches of knowledge. The effect on the supernatural theological beliefs of Christianity has been severe. The theologians who have attempted to pick up the pieces have come under attack from two sides, from those who feel that too much has been conceded, and from those who want a cleaner break with the old ways of thinking.

“Religious change happens willy-nilly”. Words and practices may be preserved intact, but their meaning changes because the surrounding culture has changed. The ascension of Jesus into heaven cannot have the same meaning for us as for those who believed that the Tower of Babel, if it had continued, really would have reached up to heaven.

There is no “permanent, distinct and clear line between believers and unbelievers”. As much as people try to hold religious meanings unchanged, the meaning is changed by changes in the context that gives language meaning. The only way to first-hand personal faith is through a loss of faith in the old meanings, through to a faith that can be sustained in the new order. There is a kind of death and rebirth, and “the more you lose, the more you will gain”.

This experience of death and rebirth was a vital part of the experience of the outstanding creative and prophetic figures who have helped reshape our view of the world. The stories of a number of such figures take up a large part of *The Sea of Faith*.

Chapter 1 - Dover Beach

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

England probably remained a land of majority religious practice till 1800. By the mid-nineteenth century, the church was unpopular among the working classes. The true proportion of the total population that attended church was probably lower than the 1851 census estimate of 42%. The loss of religion among the middle classes was then just beginning. The secular realm increasingly took over functions - registration of births, education, etc. - from the church.

Why did the working class forsake the church for politics? They had left behind an agricultural society in which the human social order had been bound into and adapted to the natural order, and in which the whole scheme of things had claimed the authority of God and tradition. . . . People were thrust into a new man-made world . . . The traditional religious quest for salvation from the power of evil was reformulated. It was translated into political struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish a just society on earth.

The changes in thinking that accompanied the Industrial Revolution were an expression of a new secularised conception of the natural world. The Sea of Faith examines the origins of this new conception of the world, and of the way people understand themselves. The shift has been "from myths to maths, from animism to mechanism, and from explanation down from above to explanation up from below".

Why in spite of everything do so many people still go to church? They go "because at the deepest level religious needs and impulses are as great as ever".

Cupitt uses his experiences as a curate in the 1960s to illustrate the familiar (and futile) arguments between believers and unbelievers. Believers argue that because the faith works, the theology must be true. The sceptics retort that as the theology cannot literally be true, the religion cannot possibly work. Cupitt's message to believers is that there can be no holding back from the onslaught of critical ways of thinking on beliefs that can no longer carry real conviction. His message to both believers and unbelievers is that the resources of faith are required, not "to explain events, but in order to call up the strength to face events. . . . God is a refuge, not a theory."

Chapter 2: The Mechanical Universe

The earliest craftsmen believed they were imitating the skills of craftsman-gods. They thought of technical processes simply as speeded up versions of natural processes. Even today, the smelting-ovens of traditional Africa remain womb-shaped, reflecting the ancient idea that they mimicked the formation of metals in the womb of mother earth.

By contrast we have come to see natural energies as "impersonal, measurable, law-governed, and controllable". Nonetheless, our language and symbolism retain relics of medieval, pre-scientific thinking. We continue to call entertainers 'Stars', even though we no longer believe that the heavenly stars are living beings. Old parish churches are full of medieval symbolism. Every gate, arch and doorway marks the transition from one region of space to another. Demons lie in wait as we pass from one to another, and we must be careful.

Cupitt describes a medieval understanding of a universe in which the earth alone was changeable and corruptible, and could have a history. The planets were thought to govern human life. Surprisingly to us, “Christ was often portrayed at the centre of a zodiac, his power radiating out through its signs”. People looked to religion to explain everything. Christianity was linked with Greek science and philosophy in a harmonious whole that backed up social and ecclesiastical authority.

Galileo (1564-1642) was at the centre of a head-on clash between a medieval view of the world and the new critical scientific thinking in which he was a pioneer. The revolution in cosmology that he helped engineer made it inevitable that the source of authority would in time shift from the higher heavenly world to the world below, to within the human community. Galileo was content to say that God had written two books, the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture. It was inevitable that in time the Book of Scripture would be judged against the Book of Nature.

Pascal (1623-1662) and Descartes (1596-1650) were both brilliant scientists. Pascal cared most for religion, Descartes for science and philosophy, resulting in very different responses to the new ways of thinking. Both responses would, in the long run, be destructive of the old-world view. Descartes did retain an objective God. For Pascal the true God was “felt by the heart, not by the reason”, avoiding the challenge that Descartes’ rationalistic physics offered to his religion. It was about God that Pascal cared most. For Pascal (the words are Cupitt’s)

Arguments and proof can produce no more than a temporary and superficial assent; and even if there were a valid argument from the world to God, it would end merely in the God of the Epicureans, a being of no religious interest.

The difficulty is that once reason has been cast aside, Pascal’s faith-assertions have an uncertain status. Does it any longer matter whether they are true? Are radical theologians such as Bultmann, Cupitt, Spong free to de-mythologize faith-assertions as they will, only so long as they continue to be “felt by the heart”?

Cupitt argues that “Either you can claim to have an objective God, like Descartes, or you can have an authentic Christian faith, like Pascal. It is one or the other: take your pick.”

Any role that is given to God in Descartes’ mechanistic universe is likely to disappear as science advances. He might, though, remain as ‘Creator and Sustainer of all that is’, which gives Him a close identity with physical law. Pascal’s God is closely linked to the believer’s subjective experience.

Historically, Pascal participated in a shift to an internalised pietistic form of religion that was centred in the human rather than in the cosmic Christ.

References:

These are a selection of the references from *The Sea of Faith* (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984).

Lloyd Geering: *Faith’s New Age* (Collins, 1980)

Covers some of the same ground as *The Sea of Faith*.

James Collins: *God in Modern Philosophy* (Greenwood Press, 1978)

Surveys changes in the idea of God in the modern period.

D.A. Martin: *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (Routledge, 1969)

Susan Budd: *Sociologists and Religion*. (Collier MacMillan 1973)

These are two of several references that Cupitt gives on this controversial topic.

Hugh Kearney: *Science and Change 1500 - 1700*. (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971).

Discusses the change from the medieval view of the universe.

R.S. Westfall: *The Construction of Modern Science*. (Cambridge University Press 1978)

C.S. Lewis: *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1964)

An illuminating description of the medieval world-view.

Robert Mandrou: *From Humanism to Science 1480 - 1700* (Penguin 1978).

See his discussion of Pascal.

JHM's Additional References:

Fritjof Capra. *The Turning Point*. Fontana, 1983.

(Have we now advanced beyond Descartes' mechanistic universe? Capra argues that modern physics has brought a profound change in our world view, from the mechanistic science of Descartes and Newton to 'a holistic and ecological view'. There is an extensive discussion of Freud and Jung. Capra uses diverse ideas to fill out interlocking parts of a total picture, avoiding judgements on whether they stand on their own as 'right' or 'wrong'.)

Paul Davies. *God and the New Physics*. Touchstone Books 1984.

(What has become of the old mechanistic views of the universe, as they relate to cosmology? Do the new understandings make any difference to the place left for God? In an important sense Paul Davies is in the tradition of Descartes. Capra is consciously trying to break with that tradition.)

Paul Davies. *The Mind of God*. Simon and Schuster, 1992.

This offers new twists on the time-worn argument from design. Davies states that

. . . the physical universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it as brute fact. There must, it seems to me, be a deeper level of explanation. Whether one wishes to call that deeper level of explanation "God" is a matter of taste and definition. Furthermore I have come to the point of view that mind . . . is . . . an absolutely fundamental facet of reality. . . I adhere to the usual convention of using "he" [when speaking of God]. This should not be taken to imply that I believe in a masculine God, or even in the notion of God as a person in any simple sense

II. The Historical Animal (Chapter 3, pages 56 - 77)

The Biblical World-view

Even today most people are more familiar with the Genesis account of the origin of the world than with the scientific story. Genesis sees the world as created all at once, relatively recently, just before the human race came on the scene. Evil entered the world only with the fall of man.

The ancient stories presume a cosmology in which the dry land is a huge flat disc. There are oceans on it as well as around it. Round the edge of the disc, pillars support the firmament of the heavens. In the firmament are the 'windows of heaven', much like trapdoors, which God opens to let out snow, hail and rain. Sheol, the abode of the dead, is beneath the disc of the earth.

Note though that these are our interpretations. The stories were not a Jewish attempt at primitive science. Science works in a realm of which the Biblical writers were unaware. Where we see a natural world, the Jews saw the activity of God. Furthermore the Jewish world view was concerned with the way one ought to live, rather than with the way things are. Biblical thought is practical and religious.

Religion adjusted fairly well when the universe went mechanical in the seventeenth century and God was removed to a distance. Galileo's differences with the church did not lead to any serious crisis of faith. God could still be retained as the One Who started it all. Science's account of "the tic-toc of the cosmic clockwork" showed the excellence of God's design. The end, too, would be His. Religion plugged two major gaps in the scientific account, the gap at the beginning and the gap at the end.

Religion became less nervous and superstitious, more calm and rational. Belief in witchcraft and evil spirits, omens and portents, and little particular judgments and providences, gradually faded. People ceased to think that God was sending occult messages to them.

The Bible, and theological ideas, were understood against the backdrop of a mechanistic universe, and so were interpreted in a far more realist way than had been possible in a pre-scientific world.

When science began to give a historical account that plugged the gap at the beginning, conflict was inevitable. Geology was the first science to become historical.

William Smith (1769-1839)

Smith was a drainage engineer who studied geological strata, and the rocks and fossils that they contained, as information that was useful to him in his line of work. Smith 'had effectively shown that the Earth's surface is a buckled and worn-down layer-cake, in which each layer had its own characteristic fossils'. Smith believed that, to account for what he saw, there must have been a succession of acts of creation over an immense period of time.

Charles Lyell (1797-1875)

The definitive work of nineteenth century geology was Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33). Lyell relied heavily on Smith's work. In turn Lyell provided Darwin with the modern geological perspective that would underpin his later exposition of the theory of evolution.

Robert Chambers (1802-1871)

In 1844 Robert Chambers (who gave his name to Chambers' dictionary) published *The Vestiges of Natural Creation*. It was widely read, and was severely criticised both for its scientific inadequacies and its 'dangerous' ideas. Its importance is that it presented all living creation as part of a great chain of being, with descendants on the chain formed as part of an evolution-like process.

Hugh Miller (1802-1856)

The Scottish geologist Hugh Miller set out to prove that Chambers had it the wrong way round. Miller argued that throughout the animal kingdom the pattern was one of original perfection followed by decline and fall. The reptiles were great and splendid until God cut them down to size, and replaced them with

the mammals. Snakes were descended from noble crocodile-like creatures. The early fish were noble creatures, followed by the distorted and degraded flat-fish that appear late in the fossil record. Miller's book went into 17 editions – perhaps the most popular book on geology ever.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

In the course of his five-year stint as naturalist on the *Beagle* (1831-36) Darwin's views changed from accepting the Bible as an unanswerable authority to losing all faith in it as a source of divine authority. He became a 'traditional scientific mechanist, inclined to materialism'. Yet he still retained a belief in a First Cause. In a letter written towards the end of his life he speaks of himself both as a 'theist' and as an 'agnostic'. (Note incidentally that Darwin visited New Zealand in 1835 and Australia in 1836.)

Darwin was locked into a view that saw religion 'as a kind of primitive science, steadily withdrawing as modern science took over . . .' Cupitt prefers the modern view that the problem was less false religious beliefs than false quasi-scientific assumptions as to what religious beliefs are.

Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, in which he presented scientific evidence for believing that all life was descended from a small number of 'original' forms, appeared in 1859. There was a hint on the final page that evolutionary ideas would in due course be applied to psychology. At this time the general view was that human 'moral and religious capacities' came directly from God and somehow transcended nature.

In his *Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin developed the notion that human behaviour and human mental capacities are open to the same historical and biological explanations as the rest of the human body. The winners among competing ethical standards and religious ideas may be those that best fit us for survival, opening the way for an explanation of the human personality in terms of biological and historical forces.

Schopenhauer (1788-1861)

The philosopher Schopenhauer will be discussed more fully in chapter 6 ('Religion-Shock'). Here his importance is that in 1818, almost a century before Freud, he emphasised the pivotal significance of the sex-drive. (To anticipate Darwin, we are here because we have been successful in the drive to reproduce)

The genitals are the focus of the will. . . . In the sexual act is expressed the most decided affirmation of the will to live beyond the individual life.

To Schopenhauer we are 'like corks bobbing on the ocean, and our consciousness is a temporal by-product and a mere tool of an eternal and irresistible striving force that he calls "the will"'. He continued to affirm an ineffable ultimate state of impersonal bliss, so that in an important sense he was a religious thinker. Freud was not.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

A certain tough-minded realism about the human lot reached Freud through the Jewish tradition. . . . The highest spiritual state a human being can attain is stoic fortitude and a sober, unflinching acceptance of reality without the need for protective illusions. Freud offered his patients nothing more than 'a modest reduction in their unhappiness, just enough to make life endurable'.

There were, though, religious analogies. 'The experience of analysis could be seen as a modern version of the ancient mythological descent into the underworld. . . . The journey freed the patient from the domination of disabling illusions'.

In Freud a jealous Father-God 'who personifies to the individual the demands of culture and conscience' has in the past been crucial for the emotional dynamics of society and of religion. Freud thinks that once the crude and literal forms of religious belief become no longer tenable, then the refined forms must break down as well. He uses objections to authoritarian religion and to literal views of religious meaning as a stick with which to beat all religion. Freud's view was that religion must in future 'yield up its throne to the milder and more rational rule of science and utilitarian ethics. At first there would be some sense of loss . . . but in time the gains would be seen to outweigh the losses'.

Freud was right to think that ‘a clearer view of the psychological dynamics of faith in God would have a powerful demythologising effect’. But he was ‘too optimistic about the prospects for societies based entirely on scientific rationality, and neglects to examine the true role of religion in modern societies’.

C.G.Jung (1875-1961)

Cupitt’s focus is on the younger Jung, not the mystic sage of Jung’s later years.

In Freud’s understanding of human cultural history ‘modern Western rationality has been superimposed upon the millions of previous archaic thinking’. May it not be necessary to ‘negotiate between the conscious rational surface of the mind and its magico-religious depths’? This was the route that C.G.Jung took. In Jung’s scheme

Beneath the personal unconscious . . . lies the collective unconscious which is common to the whole human race. In it are to be found . . . innate propensities to generate patterns of myth and symbolism—from which the whole marvellous variety of religion, myth and art has arisen.

Jung seems always to have been agnostic about the objective truth of religious beliefs. ‘If he commends religious belief, he commends it as only “psychologically true”’. This ‘truth’ is written so deeply into our nature, has left such residues in our psyches, that we are bound to come to terms with it.

What did Jung mean to say? Cupitt asks. Are these doctrines [of the psyche, the collective unconscious, etc.] in some sense factual, or do they merely provide a mythical justification for the much less contentious proposition that since all religions are social products, and modern knowledge now ranges to widely, there is nothing to stop us from browsing where we wish and drawing our nourishment from many sources?

References:

Carmen Blacker and Michael Lowe. *Ancient Cosmologies*. Allen and Unwin, 1975.

James Muilenberg, *The Way of Israel*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

C.G.Gillespie. *Genesis and Geology*. Harvard University Press 1951.

Ernest Jones, *The Life of Sigmund Freud*. Penguin 1964.

Anthony Storr, *Jung*. Fontana 1973.

JHM’s Additional References:

The range of ideas that this chapter encompasses is huge. It impinges on many different areas of active research investigation and interest, some of them areas of great controversy. Note in particular the controversy over studies in evolutionary socio-biology and evolutionary psychology. These attempt to explain how our evolutionary inheritance may have influenced the sorts of creatures that we now are. But can we study such issues dispassionately? Nineteenth century anthropology was replete with strong cultural and sexual prejudice. Hrdy (2000) gives some particularly blatant examples, that should warn us, in our supposedly more enlightened era, to beware! Diamond (1992) berates the “Man the Hunter” mentality found, e.g., in Robert Ardrey’s *African Genesis* (1961), and quotes from Ardrey “an example of purple prose spawned by this men’s locker-room mentality”.

Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield. *The Discovery of Time*. Pelican, 1967.

(This is a more detailed examination of much of the same ground as Chapters 1-3 of *The Sea of Faith*, up to the end of the section on Darwin.)

Simon Winchester. *The Map that Changed the World*, by. Penguin 2002.

This is the story of William “Strata” Smith, who founded the science of geological stratigraphy.

Adrian Desmond and James Moore. *Darwin. The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist*. Norton 1994.

Deborah Cadbury. *The Dinosaur Hunters*. Fourth Estate 2001.

This account of the nineteenth century UK fossil hunters is a great read.

Jared Diamond. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*. Vintage 1992.

This is a wide-ranging and illuminating statement of current knowledge of human origins. This up to date account gives substance to Darwin's claim that human behaviour and human mental capacities are open to the same historical and biological explanations as the rest of the human body.

Notwithstanding our cultural, scientific and artistic achievements Diamond argues that the record of human destructiveness gives us reason for serious concern about the future.

Jared Diamond. *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies. A Short History of Everybody for the Past 13,000 Years*. Random House 1997.

Sarah Hrdy. *Mother Nature. Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species*. Vintage Books. 2000.

George Eliot speaks somewhere of "Mother Nature, who by the bye is an old lady with some bad habits . . ." Hrdy, while criticising the cultural and sexual prejudices that have too often shaped supposedly scientific studies of our fellow humans, does not shy away from acknowledgement of Nature's bad habits. Hrdy is an original and seminal investigator and commentator.

J.Allan Hobson. *The Dreaming Brain*. Basic Books, 1988.

(Part II includes a critique of Freud's and Jung's theories of the brain and of dreaming from the perspective of modern work in experimental psychology and brain biology.)

Susan Greenfield. *The Private Life of the Brain*. Penguin, 2000.

In the past decade, there have been huge gains in factual knowledge about the mind and the brain.

What is the neuroscientific basis of consciousness? Susan Greenfield has written a number of other books on this general topic.

Steven Pinker. *How the Mind Works*. Norton 1997.

A psychologist's account of the mind. There is much here that is interesting and fascinating.

Steven Pinker. *The Blank Slate. The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. Penguin Books 2002.

David Lodge. *Consciousness and the Novel. Connected Essays*. Harvard University Press 2002.

We have few clues on how to answer the deep questions about consciousness. What aspects of our conscious experience do we share with other primates or, more generally, with other animals? Is it in principle possible to build a conscious being other than by using the genetic and related processes of humans and other biological organisms? What are the key indicators of consciousness, as we experience it, or as other creatures experience it, or as a "creature" that had been created by humans might experience it? Many facts about the brain do not amount to an understanding of consciousness. David Lodge uses modern scientific studies of consciousness as a backdrop for his novels. For now, this seems a good way for the lay person to explore consciousness studies. The novel allows an imaginative exploration that, while conducted with due regard to the scientific background, makes no special claims and allows the reader to make his or her own judgement.

III. Going by the Book (Chapter 4, pages 78 - 112)

Scriptures

Until the modern period most education was tied to a particular religious tradition, and emphasized knowledge of the scriptures of that tradition. There was little formal secular education.

By contrast scientific knowledge is not linked to any particular religious tradition, is morally neutral, does not profess to change us inwardly or give eternal happiness, acknowledges that it is a human creation, and is ever-changing and fast-growing. It is directed to understanding and controlling the world.

The critical scientific attitude is diametrically opposed to the accepting and acquiescent habit of mind that has been promoted by religion. As people began to apply the new critical scientific and critical ways of thinking to the sources of religious knowledge, conflict was inevitable. This chapter gives sample episodes from the arguments that have raged over the Christian scriptures.

Cupitt's account passes over the long pre-history of Biblical criticism in which two of the key figures were the Dutch spectacle maker and philosopher Spinoza and the French physician Jean Astruc. Cupitt starts in the first half of the nineteenth century when scholars in the English church establishment first began to take notice of German Biblical criticism.

Eichhorn (1752-1827)

The Gottingen scholar Eichhorn began the use of the term 'myth' in Biblical studies, using it to mean the style of thinking found among all peoples in the earliest stages of their history. Eichhorn regarded the Bible as a human historical document. He discerned that the book of Genesis contained two interwoven narratives, in one of which God is called 'Yahweh', and in the other of which God is called 'Elohim'.

Edward Pusey (1800-1882)

Pusey went to Germany in 1825 to learn about the new German Biblical criticism. There he attended Eichhorn's lectures. He mused that England was utterly unprepared for such ideas.

On his return Pusey was rapidly promoted and in 1828 became Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford. For a time he defended mildly liberal views e.g. on Biblical inspiration. In his later years he retreated into 'rigid ultra-orthodoxy'.

D.F. Strauss (1808-1874)

Strauss entered Tubingen University in 1825 as a theological student. He and some of his fellow students learned from Hegel that popular Christianity is only a set of particular symbols of a higher universal truth. Strauss became curate in a small country parish, where he was constrained to speak as though the Christian symbols stood for supernatural historical facts. He could however try gradually to coax people away from the crude historical interpretation 'to the truth - already taught by St Paul - that the resurrection is really the new life upon which believers are entering'.

In 1832 Strauss was appointed to an assistant lectureship at Tubingen. In his third year he temporarily gave up lecturing to write a life of Jesus. Strauss's 'Life' made him famous, and destroyed his career. Strauss argued that 'Jesus was a Jewish teacher and martyr, imbued with apocalyptic ideas, whose followers accepted his claim to Messiahship'. After Jesus' death, his followers surrounded him with supernatural ideas that can be traced back to the Old Testament literature. Nowadays the comment would be that the Gospels are works of theology rather than simple history.

Such a collision between the theologian and the consciousness of the church is, to quote Strauss, 'necessarily introduced by the progress of time and the development of Christian theology; it surprises and masters the individual, without his being able to guard himself against it'.

George Eliot's translation of Strauss's Life of Jesus appeared in England in 1846.

Essays and Reviews

This collection of essays by a group of theological liberals appeared in 1860. Today the essays seem remarkably orthodox. Several authors argued that scripture is to be interpreted like other books, that the same methods of literary criticism are to be used. Other 'novel' views were: that it was permissible to regard such stories as Balaam's talking ass as legendary, and that it is an error to use Genesis as a source of scientific knowledge. One author expressed the hope that in due course all humans would be saved. Initially there was little reaction. The problem started when a leading freethinker, Frederic Harrison, wrote a review that argued that the lack of any response from the ecclesiastical establishment was evidence of the widespread decay of belief, a decay that the church found it painful to acknowledge. At the same time he complained that the authors had reached an unsatisfactory compromise with the demands of science:

The highest efforts of the brain must guide the best efforts of the heart. That end will not be attained by our authors, by subliming religion into an emotion, and making an armistice with science. It will not be obtained by any unreal adaptation, nor by this, which is of all recent adaptations, at once the most able, the most earnest, and - the most suicidal.

The orthodox were provoked into action. All the authors were given a hard time. The two benefited clergyman were condemned in the church courts, but were then acquitted on appeal to the privy council. One wit commented that the Lord Chancellor who heard the case

. . . dismissed Hell with costs

And took away from the orthodox members of the Church of England

Their last hope of everlasting damnation.

(White, republished 1960)

One of the authors, Frederick Temple, lived down his involvement well enough that in his later years he became Archbishop of Canterbury.

The bitterness of the controversies is consonant with the greatness of the issues involved. Once the old view of the Bible had been abandoned, things would never be quite the same again.

The Trial of Robertson Smith (1846-1894)

Robertson Smith, appointed at 24 as Professor of Old Testament in the Free Church College at Aberdeen, argued that the change did not need to be all that great. He argued that he could combine advanced critical views of the Bible with the strictest Calvinist orthodoxy.

His article 'Bible' in the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which appeared in 1875, was the chief cause of his later troubles. There was strong objection to his view that the first five books of the Bible (the 'Torah'), although containing much earlier material, only reached their present form after the exile in 587-538 BC. In Biblical times there was an understanding of authorship that made it natural to regard Moses, who was the Torah's central figure, as its author.

After facing repeated unsuccessful charges of heresy Smith was simply dismissed. He became joint editor of the Britannica, and then moved to Cambridge as Professor of Arabic.

Those responsible for removing Smith may have felt that just as the Church is right to take an ethical stand that is somewhat at odds with the surrounding culture, so it is right to be intellectually at odds with the world in which it finds itself. Does this help explain why Albert Schweitzer, though an advanced Biblical critic, had a good press? Public admiration for his ethical deed may have prevailed over objections to his unorthodox theology.

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)

Schweitzer was a metaphysical agnostic who, following Kant, saw religion primarily in terms of ethics and the will. He felt himself destined to be a man of action rather than a pure scholar. While a student of theology and philosophy he had already decided that he would devote himself to music and scholarship up to the age of thirty, and after that to the direct service of humanity.

Schweitzer's view of Christian origins has the name 'consistent eschatology'. He believed that the original Jesus had been very different from the Jesus of liberal Christianity. In ancient Jewish apocalyptic the coming of the Kingdom was to be preceded by a period of tribulation (woes). Finding that the coming was delayed longer than he had at first foreseen, Jesus came to think that it was his destiny to undergo these woes in his own person in order to hasten the final issue. Hence he decided to go to Jerusalem and put himself in the hands of his enemies. The Last Supper was a promise and an anticipation of the Kingdom-feasting that would follow his death. Its celebration following his death showed confidence that the Kingdom would speedily arrive. At any celebration, Jesus in his glory might join the disciples.

Schweitzer was accepted by the Paris Missionary Society to go to Africa on condition that he would not preach. He believed that the basis of a vigorous culture must be an ethical affirmation of the world and of life. Unfortunately the practical meaning that he gave to this reflected too much his European cultural background. 'He gave to Africa, but he did not learn from it'. So, in spite of his 'reverence for life' ethic, it is not really possible to claim him as the prophet of the new ecological humanism that is in vogue today.

Schweitzer's belief that culture must be world-affirming was at odds with the Jesus that Schweitzer saw to be a world-denying figure. Jesus did though require his disciples to practice the ethic of love in preparation for the Kingdom. The non-arrival of the Kingdom eventually forced Christianity, at the time of the reformation, to turn to this world. But there remains a contradiction between a supernaturally bestowed Kingdom and the one created by human will. This gives a tragic flavour to Schweitzer's allegiance to Jesus.

The Bible since Schweitzer

Few since Schweitzer have been able to read the Bible with Schweitzer's combination of scientific objectivity and religious seriousness. After him, faith and reason drew apart. 'It was one thing to study the Bible in a strictly critical and objective spirit, and another to make a faith-response to what you have read'.

One reason is that we understand better the size of the culture gap between the world of the New Testament and that of the 20th C believer. Ancient texts do live on and influence the imaginative and moral life of later generations. But 'the theory of how this is done is a different matter from what the text originally meant'. The distinction is between hermeneutics, i.e. the use of the Bible in preaching, and exegesis which is a purely historical study. Thus '. . . hermeneutics became an unpredictable and uncontrollable work of human creativity, by which Christianity is continually reinvented and transformed'.

Additionally, Schweitzer talked as though it was really possible to discover the real Jesus, independent of his social setting and his interaction with other people. Nowadays it is perceived that what we have are several different portraits of Jesus, each shaped in different ways by the tradition of the early church.

We may now see use of a more literary approach, in terms of the anthropologists' ways of interpreting myths and symbols, or perhaps using structuralism and more recent movements in literary criticism.

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The American Unitarian Theodore Parker was a pioneer in introducing German Biblical criticism to English speakers. His English translation of De Wette's 'dangerously radical' Introduction to the Old Testament appeared in 1843.

Frances W. Newman is nowadays much less well-known than his famous brother, Cardinal John Henry Newman. Frances had close contact with the Unitarian movement, and in 1875 was vice-president of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. Frances Newman's *A History of the Hebrew Monarchy*, which appeared in 1847, gave a systematic exposition of the methods of literary criticism, and stands well alongside the work of the German Biblical critics. In *Phases of Faith*, which appeared in 1850, Newman described the steps by which he moved ever further away from the orthodox Christianity of his student days, finally abandoning Christianity in favour of belief in a God who could be known only through personal experience. *Phases of Faith* has several excellent demonstrations of the methods of literary criticism at work. It had a wide influence, running to eight editions and attracting several attempts at rebuttal. *Essays and Reviews* was much less radical than Newman; it attracted attention because its authors were, with one exception, clergymen.

Another book that has more scholarly importance than *Essays and Reviews* was Bishop John Colenso's *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, which appeared in 1862. Colenso was Bishop of Natal. Excommunicated by the church, the courts decided in his favour. Colenso was active in defending Zulu leaders who had been unjustly imprisoned or exiled.

A bishop there was of Natal
Who had a Zulu for his pal;
Said the Zulu, 'My dear
Don't you think Genesis queer?'
Which converted my lord of Natal.

- - - - -

Is this, then, the great Colenso,
Who all the bishops offends so?

- - - - -

The bishops all have sworn to shed their blood
To prove 'tis true the hare doth chew the cud.

O bishops, doctors, and divines, beware -
Weak is the faith that hangs upon a hair!

(White, reprinted 1960).

Bishop Colenso's cousin, William Colenso, came to New Zealand as a missionary with the Church Missionary Society, and was present at the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. He became one of New Zealand's outstanding early botanists.

IV. Prometheus Unbound (Chapter 5, pages 113 - 156)

The Sin of Pride

Traditionally human pride and self-will has been seen as the very essence of sin. The gods are touchy and jealous of their dignity and privileges. Various myths have the theme that there are appointed limits to human knowledge—Lucifer/Satan the morning star who fell from heaven and was sealed in Hell, Prometheus the patron of arts and sciences who stole fire from heaven and was punished by Zeus, Pandora who opened the box and released the furies, Daedalus who with his son Icarus flew too high, and the Frankenstein myths.

The myths make an interesting connection between scientific and sexual curiosity that runs in opposite direction in the two sexes. A woman who is too inquisitive, like Eve and Pandora, will become sexually awakened. In men like Faust excessive sexual pride and desire is liable to lead on to an inordinate desire for other kinds of forbidden knowledge and power.

For both sexes there was a strong emphasis on keeping an externally imposed law — a pre-ordained and unalterable moral framework. It discouraged innovation and social change. How then did we change?

There are other strains to our tradition. The Greek influence includes a purely secular tradition of philosophical ethics, and a radical humanism that made man the measure of all things. Also, there is a radical humanist strain to Christianity itself. The faith sets before the believer a high human destiny, in which the believer will share in the risen glory of Christ. It looks for a future perfect society—the kingdom of God on earth.

The overlaid repressive strain in Christian morality became dominant, to the extent that when European culture turned in the direction of radical humanism this was seen as a revolt against religion. Yet something of Christian humanism did survive.

The seeds of protest (This does not appear in the video)

Aucassin and Nicolette, nowadays thought the most attractive of the medieval love romances, is remarkable for its explicit rejection of Christian values. The story perhaps pokes fun at the extravagance of the two young lovers. At the same time, it voiced the protest of those who saw the church as life-denying. The story shows that the old tradition of pagan Latin love-poetry was still alive, that the poets could rise up in dispute with the clerics. The church could tolerate this, providing it had the last word. Religion has borrowed sexual imagery since biblical times. Poets might fill erotic verse with religious imagery while young, and their religious poetry with erotic imagery when old. This accommodation was not to be permanent.

The Influence of Descartes

Descartes' popular and influential *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Searching for Truth in the Sciences* appeared in 1636. His boundless confidence in the powers of human reason was a dominant influence for the next century or so.

Descartes was critical, attacking the superstitions of traditional culture. It was necessary to prune the errors from traditional knowledge in order to create a powerful new system of knowledge.

He is modern in another way—he starts with the individual human subject: “I think; therefore I am”. What he thinks clearly and distinctly is true. His criterion of truth is within himself.

Descartes did, though, retain belief in God and immaterial human souls. He saw himself as a spiritual being whose essence is thought. He still wished to be Christian. God provided crucial connections in his system.

The Citizen

Protestantism took this internalisation of authority into the religious realm, teaching that the ultimate source of authority was the 'inward testimony of the Holy Spirit' as the Bible spoke to the conscience of the individual believer. Radical Protestant groups such as the Quakers and Diggers took this a step further. There was something of God (the 'inner light') in every person, and from this came the ultimate authority in religion and even in politics. As the 'Digger' Gerrard Winstanley wrote in 1648:

There shall be none lords over others, but everyone shall be a lord of himself, subject to the law of righteousness, reason and equity, which shall dwell and rule within him, which is the Lord.

Tom Paine's (1737-1809) *Rights of Man* appeared in 1791-92. He carried the principle to its limit, both in religion ('My mind is my church') and the political sphere. *Rights of Man* was speedily followed in 1794 by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*. God might after all approve of Faust's indomitable striving after knowledge. Women would from now on take their cue less from Mary, and more from Eve.

Hume (1700-1776)

We can never check whether information that comes to us through our sense organs are pictures of an external reality. Does every quality belong to a substance, every change to a cause, every perception to a perceiving mind? Positive answers seem both essential to our knowledge and unprovable.

Kant (1724-1804)

Kant opened the way to a human-centred outlook of a new kind. He well understood the questions that Hume asked? His reply to Hume was that the human mind is pre-programmed to construe experience as corresponding to an objective physical world. Even though we cannot prove that these beliefs are actually true, no other way to knowledge is possible. 'We not only can, but must, convert the chaos of sense-experience into an ordered cosmos. . . . The world mirrors the mind, and not the other way round.'

One consequence is that we cannot have knowledge of what lies beyond the boundaries of possible experience. God is not part of the world of experience, and thus sense-experience cannot connect the world or any part of it to God. A second consequence is that the autonomous human mind constitutes truth. This is a philosophical necessity. Kant sees ethics as rational and objective, but with the human mind recognising the intrinsic authority of moral principles.

Kant's religion was 'ideal and imperative'. God was not known as the Ground of things as they are, but 'the transcendent ideal goal to which the man of faith aspires.'

Kant's immediate followers developed his thought in two directions - - towards idealism, and then towards radical secular humanism.

Hegel (1770-1831)

Hegel elaborated Kant's idea that the mind confers objectivity on experience. In his new dynamic logic of process, contradictions are generated that are then reconciled in a synthesis at a higher level. There is an inevitability about the way history develops. All the ultimate questions were resolved within the system. Anything that stood over against man was a mere temporary alienation of Spirit. The Old Testament God who was over against man was succeeded by the New Testament God who became man.

Marx (1818-1883)

Hegel's idealism stood over against the reality that it generated. Why not apply Hegel's method to Hegel's own system, thereby achieving a synthesis of theory and practice? The synthesis would be found in revolutionary practice. Marx became a journalist, and his ideas developed as he continued his writing and his discussion with his friends.

Marx was soon moving away from liberal individualism. The outcome of Protestant religious individualism was that in civil life man 'is active as a private individual, treats other men as means and becomes the plaything of alien powers.' A second thrust was that, contrary to Hegel: 'Thought arises from being, being does not arise from thought.'

From here we see Marx moving towards revolutionary socialism. Only those who do not get the benefits of the present system and are outside the class system, namely the proletariat, can emancipate society. Radical philosophy can supply the theoretical tools.

Of note here is the radical humanist stance to which Marx had moved by 1844. Religion could not any longer attract his serious interest.

Since for socialist man what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labour and the development of nature for man, he has the observable and irrefutable proof of his self-creation and the process of his origin.

Hegel's philosophy had been transformed into the most thoroughgoing secular humanism yet known. 'To challenge this development it would be necessary to go back to Hegel and question his claim to have solved the ultimate questions of life within his system.'

The great institutions of Church and State were no longer able to unify the lives of individuals. Individuals had become alienated. 'Hegel proposed to cure it by teaching a grandiose and optimistic philosophical scheme of redemption, and Marx by socialist revolution.' Neither of these met the case.

Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

Kierkegaard had a brilliant and turbulent youth, with a close and troubled relationship with his father. In his ten years at University he oscillated between brilliance and dissipation. He left with a superb education, though lacking a good grounding in natural science. He became engaged to Regine Olsen and dreamed of taking holy orders. In the end he broke off the engagement; he could not go through with marriage. His first two books explored the idea that it is by 'maintaining and enduring the tragic contradictions of life, and not by resolving them, that the human spirit is tuned to its highest pitch'. Against Hegel, the contradictions are not to be overcome. The person who follows Christ will walk a lonely path, at odds with the pressures to become a component of such abstractions as 'a voter', 'a housewife', 'a ratepayer'.

Luther had distinguished between historical faith and divine faith. 'Religious truth consists not in the objective fact, but in the subjective appropriation when I act on it'. Kierkegaard carried this further. Christianity must not be allowed to decay into objective truth. Its truth consists solely in 'continual subjective appropriation and enactment in the believer's practice'.

God appears in various aspects in his writings, consistent with his understanding that all we have are various subjective images of God. It is not possible to check them against an independently known original. The worlds that humans construct and inhabit are products of their own inner lives.

Kierkegaard held that authentic selfhood can be realised only through Christ, not through another religious tradition, or through a secularised version of his own existential teaching. His teaching does not provide good support for this claim.

If Kierkegaard's position is explained to him too clearly he is sure to react with a charge of 'atheism'!

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But begin with Kierkegaard's Journals, of which there are various anthologies.

V. Religion-Shock (Chapter 6, pages 157 - 183)

The crucible

Many British cities—e.g. Birmingham—now have a great diversity of faiths, a greater genuine diversity than in California where the different groups are variations on a small number of themes. We have learned that it is well for people of different faiths to mingle easily and on equal terms, as citizens in the same society. Respect for other religions requires recognition that they too have valid insights, even to recognising that where religion is concerned there are many truths.

Toleration

Belief that one's own organisation is the sole repository for truth and salvation has in past times been the driving force for using power to drive out error. The first people martyred for their beliefs by the church seem to have been the Spanish layman Priscillian and his followers, executed for heresy in 385 AD. Augustine even worked out a theory to justify the physical punishment of heretics. The Protestant reformers were no more tolerant. The effect of the Peace of Augsburg (1555) was to partition Germany and some neighbouring states between Catholic and Lutheran, two likewise intolerant systems.

Some practical experiments in toleration did, though, begin in the 17th century. Cupitt mentions Providence (settled in 1638), which came to be called Rhode Island, which incorporated the principle of freedom of religion in its constitution. And in the 1630s, Maryland was a refuge for both Catholics and Protestants. (Cupitt might also have cited Transylvania and Poland in the sixteenth century, where toleration was convenient politically because these states bordered on areas both with Christian and with Muslim rulers. The first modern Unitarian movements took shape in these states.)

Cupitt gives a brief history of toleration in England. The Toleration Act of 1689 allowed toleration, with restricted civil rights, to dissenters. It did not give religious liberty to Catholics, overt anti-trinitarians, or atheists. (Legal penalties on those who impugned the doctrine of the trinity were finally removed in 1813.)

Important figures who wrote in favour of toleration include John Locke, G.F. Lessing (with his play 'Nathan the Wise', 1779) and John Stuart Mill. Lessing suggests that we cannot tell which religion is undoubtedly true, while Mill argues that we can be sure that no religion has absolute truth. If all human thinking and language are historically conditioned and in continual change, this makes any absolute and unchangeable formulation of the truth impossible.

The meeting with Eastern thought

Asian ideas trickled across to the West from earliest times; they may have influenced Pythagoras. The Jesuit mission that Matteo Ricci started in China in 1583 was a channel for Chinese influence on the West. Matteo Ricci decided that it would be possible to build an indigenous Chinese Christianity on Chinese 'natural religion'. The Jesuits gained influence at the court. Hopes that the Emperor might be converted were dashed when in 1704 the Pope condemned Confucianism as atheistic and the Emperor retaliated by prohibiting Christianity. The philosopher G.W. Leibniz (1646-1716) argued that the church's action was a mistake that had been based on a misreading of the texts. He wanted a policy of cultural and religious exchange in which China would teach Europe her natural religion, ethics and political organisation, and Europe would give China revealed religion and natural science.

The more permanent and effective Eastern influence was however from India, as a result of the British rule. Schopenhauer and Annie Besant are outstanding examples of two different types of influence. Schopenhauer would probably have formed similar ideas independently of any Indian influence; Indian religion may in part have been a stick with which to beat Christianity. For Annie Besant, India was the goal of a personal spiritual quest.

Schopenhauer (1788-1861)

Schopenhauer's importance is that he provided a philosophy of life for unbelievers at a time when educated people were losing their faith. Though cantankerous and ungracious, he wrote beautifully. The first edition of his masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, appeared in 1818. Later editions appeared in 1838 and 1848.

According to Schopenhauer science does no more than connect up appearances, but cannot give the real truth about the world, which can however be known through the self. What is important is not the knowing consciousness, but the "will-to-live". Its desires can never be satisfied so as to bring happiness. Dying is the real aim of life.

We can escape from our melancholy through an ethic of compassion for the sufferings of others and by contemplating works of art. We can turn the "will-to-live" back on itself. The essence of religion is not belief but holiness, leading to . . . the knowledge that is attained by "saints and beautiful souls" among Christians, and still more among Hindus and Buddhists.

The knowledge is beyond words. However its intellectual framework may have been discredited, there remains at the heart of religion something important and ineffable—the mythical. The externals of religion provide a vessel needed to carry truth. The emblems painted on the flags that the vessel flies do not matter. But it is a weak point of all religions that 'they can never dare confess to being allegorical'.

Following the Indian faiths, Schopenhauer was happy to distinguish between a religion for the populace and higher teachings for the elite.

Annie Besant (1847-1933)

Annie Besant was raised in evangelical piety, was undereducated relative to her talents, and became prey to perversity and belief in occult revelations. Her marriage at 19 to a clergyman was a disaster. Doubt led to abstinence from communion; refusing to conform she left home. By 26, with two babies, she was legally separated. Her religious journey then took her from free thought and membership of the National Secular Society, where she became a co-worker with the atheist campaigner Charles Bradlaugh. She & Bradlaugh stood trial over the right to publish information on birth control, eventually winning the case but losing custody of her children in the process. She worked with Bradlaugh in the long legal proceedings over his admission to Parliament, and worked for a science degree at London University. By 1877 her interests were moving to active socialism. Those in her circle dreamed of founding a Universal Church of Man that would bring together socialists, radical Christians and freethinkers.

Still her spirit moved on. After dabbling with spiritualism she read Madame Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, then becoming a theosophist. Gandhi's encounter with the two of them in London in 1889 helped kindle his interest in the Hindu scriptures. Cupitt notes that theosophy was at that time, much more than today, in the mainstream of religious change and social action. It was a vehicle for spreading Indian religious ideas in the West. In 1893 she attended the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which she addressed on behalf of theosophy, then moving to India.

Vivekananda (1863-1902)

Vivekananda, on his way to becoming the first Hindu missionary to the west, made a huge impression at the 1893 'Parliament'. He spread the ideas that all religions offer different paths to the one goal, and that the way to free oneself from the cycles of birth and rebirth is to learn to act disinterestedly in the world. Liberated from the trammels of one's own being, one could become the god within. Thus the ancient teachings of India became the basis for a universal faith. Through active public involvement it was possible to realise the goal of the ascetic and the mystic. The ancient Hindu tradition had been fused with the spirit of modern radical humanism.

Religion-shock

The world faiths will not for much longer be able to stay largely within their own camps, with no real accommodation with other faiths. 'Religion-shock' occurs when a sincere believer of one faith squarely confronts the reality of an entirely different faith, challenging his/her deeply held beliefs. Jewish faith

may startle the Christian because it approaches the same God, but in a different way. Many Westerners think that Hinduism as a whole is a form of pantheistic mysticism. It may come as a shock to discover the theistic and devotional Hindu piety of the bhakti kind. Buddhism may be more startling still, for it questions whether God or an immortal soul are needed in religion at all. Detachment from the world means detachment, not just from the material, but from metaphysical facts such as the existence of God.

The boundaries between faiths are becoming fuzzy, and people and ideas move readily across them. Some, following C.G. Jung, invent their own religions, their own personal myths. Or, at the other extreme, religion may be secularised and politicised; Zionism is an example. Fundamentalist approaches represent a third course—they attempt to reject the modern western culture and restore the old order at both a social and a personal level. Quite correctly, they perceive the modern science-based libertarian and humanist culture as being itself a type of religion. All of us in the west are, in our encounters with the third world, ‘unconscious missionaries of this devastatingly powerful new creed’ that carries everything with it. We who belong to this culture have an uneasy sense of hollowness and rootlessness. We fear its potential violence, and we find it difficult to hold our vision of life steady. Hence our unwillingness to let go of the old faiths completely.

What are we determined to retain? A sense of the transcendent? A discipline of the spirit? The power to support a stable public morality? The old faiths need to do more than accommodate themselves to modern reality. They need to give to modern culture ‘the spiritual substance that it so evidently lacks’, so creating ‘a durable home for the spirit in the new secular age’. For ‘where the transcendent is wholly lost, life becomes an insubstantial dreamlike flux’. It has sometimes been claimed that the transcendent robbed this present world of value and reality. In fact it is the other way round; the transcendent is needed to give this present world reality.

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VI The New World (Chapters 7 - 9, pages 184 - 273)

Chapter 7

The sense of having come to a new era has been felt repeatedly over the past 200 years. But what is modernity? It is to be fully conscious of the present, to be free of the thralls of tradition. The values and strivings of those past worlds are now only of historical interest; relative to the values of those worlds, our world is both impoverished and sinful.

Working against modernity is the pressure of the market-place. Nostalgia has taken the modern off the shelves in those arts that depend for survival on selling their products to a fair-sized public. In religion few dare even to go as far as positions explored by Matthew Arnold in the 1870s.

Yet we cannot indefinitely escape coming to terms with modernity. The revolution in ideas of which we are the products is permanent and irreversible. It is hard to grasp because multi-faceted, spreading over all areas of thought and art—astronomy and physics, geology and the biological and human sciences, biblical criticism, individual identity in society and in religion, and our view of religion itself. About a century ago the realisations that grew out of the new understandings in these various areas began to coalesce. It comes to be seen that all theories are human imaginative constructions that are imposed on experience, 'true' as long as they work usefully.

Here a spectrum of opinions are possible, from the 'nihilist' view that every reality that humans have inhabited or will inhabit is inevitably of their own construction, through to the 'critical realist' view that there is evidently some reality out there of which we can gain provisional and fallible knowledge. In practice the difference is that nihilists put ethics first and argue that the will creates reality, while the realists put (albeit fallible) knowledge first, and then invent the ethic that makes the best sense of their present understanding of the world. Even this difference tends to close as we reflect that facts are inextricably intertwined with values.

Schweitzer was one of the very few in earlier generations who had been thoroughgoing in freeing faith from all that was outworn and making it fully voluntary and creative. Behind him stands the even more extraordinary figure of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Nietzsche comes with a fearsome and misleading popular reputation, behind which lies an almost unbearable talent, tragedy, and eloquence. From a background as a precocious child in a Lutheran parsonage he gained a strict classical education and was appointed a professor at Basel age 24. By this time he saw himself as an atheist. Around 1880 he left the university to follow a self-tormenting and rigorous life as a 'free spirit', wandering from one cheap hotel to another in search of health. Nietzsche's last ten years were grim, in the grip of madness.

Nietzsche announced the dissolution of the old order, giving notice of a revolution in philosophy rather than carrying it out himself. He is a critic and destroyer of the old order, but has not discovered what should replace it. He has had a large influence on the arts.

Up to about 1880 he could argue, following Kant and Schopenhauer, that all we have are interpretations rather than facts, useful fictions rather than truths. We can achieve enough of a self-understanding to allow us to laugh at it and at ourselves, and to say 'Yes' to life. He followed Schopenhauer in seeing Jesus as a fundamentally world-renouncing figure, whose kingdom of heaven is at odds with life. He preferred to follow Dionysus' affirmation of life. This seemed to him, in line with the world-denying Christianity of the time, to be a radically anti-Christian stance, and he proclaimed himself as the Antichrist and announced the death of God. Nietzsche told a parable of a madman who lit a lantern in the morning hours, who came too early to warn his hearers that God was dead and that they had killed Him. The parable spoke of Nietzsche himself.

In the end nihilism prevailed. In the end nothing exists except the range of possible forms of consciousness that is before us, and the choice of what we will make of our lives.

So why can we not create a Christian reality? Why can Nietzsche envisage artist-philosophers, but not artist-theologians? His Christianity was a straw man whose essence was a now discredited dogmatic metaphysics. He took no cognisance of the Joyful Wisdom of the religious mystics. What of Eckhart, of the hasidim, of Zen? We must though admit that there is little sign of the rediscovery of these forgotten forms of religious consciousness that can parry Nietzsche's thrusts.

Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

Nietzsche rejected public meaning and public truth and set out to create new meanings and truth of his own. The insight of Wittgenstein's later thought was that meaning and truth are inevitably public.

Wittgenstein was born into a wealthy family that moved in an elite circle in Vienna. From studying aeronautical engineering he went to Cambridge to work under Russell on the foundations of mathematics. From there he moved to the philosophy of knowledge, in 1921 publishing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a book that draws the limits of meaningful knowledge so tightly that it makes nonsense even of itself. Its intention was to fix the limits of knowledge so rigorously that it left room for faith.

Faith in God can shape one's life without the need to feel that God exists objectively 'up there'. Indeed for Wittgenstein an objective God would have been a hindrance.

After an absence of some years from Cambridge, Wittgenstein returned to work on new ideas that amounted to a rejection of his earlier philosophy. The essential point is that language gets its meaning from the functions that it performs. This is true for religious language also; religious imagery has to be human if it is to work as religion and attract our affections. In fact:

An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.

Religion thus comes within a hairbreadth of secular humanism.

Wittgenstein was greatly concerned with the public realm. In a vigorous culture with a strong public realm there are analogies and interconnections between all the great domains of human concerns. But Western culture has for generations been in decay through the decay of the connections.

Wittgenstein may be portrayed as very conservative. Our lives and thoughts and beliefs revolve around communally determined language conventions. There is nowhere to which deviants who want to break out of these communal institutions can escape.

Cupitt thinks Wittgenstein's views on religion too conservative and nostalgic, in part because religious ideas are not put to a creative, energetic and public use.

[Surely this indicates Wittgenstein's failure to carry his own programme through completely. Cupitt seems uncomfortable with the force of Wittgenstein's observation that critical thinking is itself constrained by communal institutions. JHM]

Chapter 8 - The Turn of the Tide

Kierkegaard's Christianity demands, not that the polarities and tensions of life should be offloaded onto an objective God, but rather that they should drive an intense subjective experience, forcing the inner transformation that is Christianity's demand and promise. In Jung, Schweitzer and Wittgenstein concern for meaning entirely replaces the traditional concern for knowledge of an objectively existing God. We need to ask what kind of job the idea of God does in the language and what role it plays in the way people shape their lives.

Christianity's own logic thus points to a human-centred and voluntarist view of life, a radical Christian humanism. It is all too, easy, though, to miss a step and end with Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx in a radical secular humanism. One walks on Wittgenstein's tightrope. 'To be honest, you must walk it. To be religious, you must not fall off it.'

Jung is happy to use the popular language about God, provided that he can use it to convey the true inward meaning. The question "Does Jung really believe in God?" assumes that we know who God is, and assumes that the only possible view is the realist view. It shows a reluctance to allow Jung to explain

himself on his own terms. The question that should be asked is: "What part does the idea of God have in Jung's thinking and in his conception of the religious life?"

For Schweitzer, 'God is primarily the personified ground of the ethical will in us'. He identifies God with an amoral and conflict-riven force of which one component is a blind and amoral 'will-to-live' (much as in Schopenhauer), and another is the ethical will to love. It is the believer's task to unify God, making the goodness actual by bringing the 'will-to-live' into subjection to the will to love. It is, says Cupitt, Philistine to ask "Does Schweitzer really believe in God?" Schweitzer too is a non-realist, but quite different from Jung.

One can still ask whether the language that Jung or Schweitzer use has a coherent logic that we can make our own. Cupitt doubts whether he could in fact find a clear and coherent understanding of the role of God in Jung's thinking. If however he could, that would be as far as he is entitled to go.

In Wittgenstein concern for meaning entirely replaces questions about objective existence. Philosophy is 'essentially a quest for understanding of things that are already before us, plain to view. . . . Meaning is everything'. He never believed Christian dogma in a realist way. On the other hand his response to Christianity was wholehearted and direct.

'What inclines me to believe in Christ's resurrection?', asks Wittgenstein in a note in 1937. A dead Christ would be unable to help, and it is help that is needed. . . . 'It is love that believes the resurrection. . . . What combats doubt is, as it were, redemption.' . . . Wittgenstein is tightrope-walking again.

Wittgenstein gives religion precedence over theology --- the creed is simply the expression of the faith.

Hegel versus Kierkegaard (p.249)

Hegel is the principal source of the liberal theology that set up a wishy-washy God who was the personification of the way things are actually going. This allowed Feuerbach, Marx and others to regard the believer's objective God as his own magnified self-image. Kierkegaard reacted strongly against this merging of the individual into a larger whole, in which the polarities of life are reconciled. He was concerned to restore religious seriousness. He pointed the way to non-realism, making faith in God subjective and existential. In this he showed a degree of strain and inner disturbance that we find uncomfortable. Only much later could it become clear that we have moved into a larger and freer atmosphere.

The View from the Mountain (pp.244-245)

Now that non-realist theologies have finally established a place for themselves, they reveal a whole new view of where we are and where we have come from. The Old Testament is seen to be profoundly voluntaristic in its use of religious language --- the nature of true belief is determined by true piety. And modern non-realist theologies turn out to be extremely diverse, in a way that is hidden by the traditional realist judgement that Jung, Schweitzer and Wittgenstein were 'mere atheists'. In fact they were all genuine twentieth century believers, interestingly different from each other.

The result is the same if one chooses a group of mainline theologians from the modern period --- Cupitt suggests Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Rahner, and Wolfhart Pannenburg. Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard all bulk large in the philosophical background that has shaped the thought of these five. So markedly internal are the criteria of meaning in each case that it no longer makes sense to assess them as realists.

Cupitt complains that in many of the churches today, a nostalgic realist theology, with a narrow spiritual life that has 'lost the original breadth of the idea of God, is functioning as an ideology of decline'. 'Faith in God may disappear because the available language has become too narrow, stale and spiritually obsolete'.

Critical Spirituality

Many religions began as an attempt to see the human self and its world as if from outside, and as a whole. The shift to this perspective, especially if it happened suddenly, was intensely consciousness-raising and an excellent mechanism for self-assessment. 'People saw that their lives hitherto had been absurd, futile

and lacking in integrity of aim. It was urgently necessary to repent and begin living a new examined life.' For prophets and teachers of old, a vigorous self-criticism was an essential step to religious awakening. Why then does modern religion resist the power of critical thinking to perform this role today? What has happened is that, having gained its initial victory, religion then resists criticism in order to protect its own position.

It is important to recognise that a theory of knowledge must precede and underpin the theory of what is. Critical thinking must be highly conscious of theory. Without theories no interpretation is possible; but if we become entrapped in them we will not advance. So we must learn to use theories as tools rather than shackles, to be discarded as soon as they become unhelpful. And we need to continually try thought-experiments in which we put aside a current theory, and see how the world would look from the stance of another theory.

The idea that humans may and do advance by critically diagnosing and discarding their own illusions was developed by Bruno Bauer, a follower of Hegel. Karl Marx and Freud both developed this idea in different ways. But both Marxism and psychoanalysis (following Freud and Jung) have tended to develop into an all-encompassing body of dogma, with explanations that (once the basic premises are accepted) defy refutation. Insofar as they have thus become an irrefutable set of tenets, they are traps that act as blocks to further development.

Our theory of knowledge must, following Wittgenstein, be completely anthropocentric. The world of human practices and speech is what it is, and it is a mistake to hanker after external points of support. Wittgenstein is unclear about the religious implications. Is the end Schopenhauerian resignation or Judaic voluntarism? At all events this is the choice for critical faith; will it be content to interpret the world, or will it seek to change it?

Theology began as a concern with spirituality. In the early Christian era philosophy had very similar concerns; it was 'the active striving after wisdom that required a whole-hearted commitment to a pure and ascetical way of life'. The early Christians felt a strong affinity with the philosophers, which contrasted with their distaste for the myths of the pagan poets. The affinity was between two spiritualities, and not a matter of commonly held dogmas. The alliance between Christianity and Greek thought did eventually produce a body of dogma, which around 1200, as a university subject, began to claim the status of a science.

'All of Western thought has now become critical, and religious thought must therefore also become critical'. This means accepting the limitations that cognitive and linguistic resources impose on us. If we can get the spirituality right, we can then know what God-talk means. Working in the reverse direction, from an objectified God, creates great difficulties for traditional religious language. How can a God who is 'out there' dwell in my heart, become my God, show me the path to true selfhood? To understand such concepts we need the mystical thinking that is the essence of religion and is directly opposed to the mythical thinking that resulted from the development of dogma.

The all-good and all-powerful God of dogmatic realism, Creator of all that is, was a late and secondary development in the Old Testament. In earlier times he was perceived as the prescriber of the nation's rituals, and the embodiment of its values and hopes. In the New Testament the concern was not to justify the present world order, but redemption from the present evil world order. While New Testament faith was realist, it was not a dogmatic realism that was concerned to justify the present world order.

The Joyful Wisdom

The Protestant reformers removed funeral service rituals that directed attention to the living dead. For them, everything decisive happened before death. This led to a concentration on the here and now, and thought of a supernatural world of the dead was bound to fade away.

Kierkegaard developed this to the point where all religious doctrines become imperatives for the present. The believer no longer longs for the life beyond, for he/she experiences everything now. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not a difference in belief, but a difference in spirituality.

The greatest gain is over the question of God. St Anselm's 'proof' for the existence of God points not to an object, but to an ideal — 'that than which greater cannot be thought'. It stands out from other 'proofs'

because it is distinctively Christian. It makes its point only if it points to a non-realist God, the goal of the soul's aspiration.

The religious task has become the task of attaining true selfhood. . . . Prior to human activity, nature and human nature are formless chaos, mere possibility. Through human creativity guided by the Christian religious ideal the world is to be wholly humanised, and all nature turned into art. Thus the world at last becomes—a divine creation.

Great human poverty and impoverishment may exist in prosperous cities in the West. In spite of affluence, people feel their lives are worthless. Only a faith that is based on the ruthless rejection of illusions can cure this. There will be a temporary impression of loss, but in due course we see everything transformed, from a new viewpoint.

The historic task of religion, of embodying and conserving our values, of presenting them in symbols, and of giving them reality in human life, remains unchanged. It will do this better when the illusions that have disguised its workings have dropped away.

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Religious seriousness may take a variety of different forms of expression and thinking, which Cupitt likens to stations on a metro system. It may evolve, following different paths (lines) of progression through these different stations. Readers are encouraged to chart out the succession of stations through which they have themselves passed in the course of their own religious journeying.

Cupitt: *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion* (Fordham University Press 2002).

In addition Cupitt gives references to numerous studies of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein.