

The Spong-Cupitt Debate (2)

By Douglas Lockhart

Today, the public reputation of Christian ethics has crashed, amidst far too much evidence of great unhappiness and truly malignant human relations within the churches. There has been too much child abuse, rampant misogyny and homophobia, and reflex fear and hostility towards new technical and scientific developments, especially in medicine and genetics. In some places there has been too much collusion with nationalism. It is not surprising that public bodies are no longer quite so keen to have church representatives on ethics committees.

Don Cupitt
Reforming Christianity p. 4.

The issue here lies in breaking out of the traditional theistic definition of God, which blocks for so many the meaning of Jesus. It is the fully human one who makes the holy visible, the fully conscious one who enables us to see that the human and the divine are one, and the fully alive one who enables us to see that death is ultimately a dimension of life through which we journey into timelessness.

John Shelby Spong
Eternal Life: A New Vision p.xviii.

The End of Monotheism?

The above quote from Don Cupitt's 2001 book, *Reforming Christianity*, helps sets the pace for what we are about to consider, for if anyone has taken Christianity to task for its many misdemeanors, it is Cupitt, and rightly so. So also Bishop Spong. He too has lambasted Christianity in book after book, although with a tangentially different purpose in mind. Which takes us back to The Spong-Cupitt Debate Part One where I compared their separate philosophies and concluded that their contributions reflected the intellectual/emotional struggle detectable among a wide arc of theologians and New Testament scholars. When I say "emotional" I am of course not referring to emotionalism, but to the evaluative-feeling dimension of human nature; an observable adjunct of Spong's charismatically articulated vision that is not strongly represented by Cupitt. Cupitt's reforming vision, although so similar in many ways to Spong's, is a cool, logically directed vision driven by a Pinkeresque acceptance of neuroscience's dictates, Spong's,

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although no less intellectual, a capturing of the human spirit's more intangible qualities - qualities he now identifies as having a mystical undertow. For Cupitt, mysticism in any form is a return to irrationalism; for Spong, mysticism represents a way out of Christianity's present dilemma, the dilemma of it no longer making sense, even to Christians - thoughtful Christians, that is.¹

As the supra-mundane God of Christianity began to flicker and fade, so also did old-fashioned Christianity; it no longer had the infusions of raw, reactive emotional energy necessary for its ongoing survival. The world had undergone almost unimaginable change in a relatively short period of time, and the Church, Catholic and Protestant, had failed to properly evaluate and respond to those changes. Adjustment in terms of its core beliefs were seen as weakness, accommodation of the world's spiritually corrosive intellectual vision a threat to everything it stood for. So what to do? For many in the hierarchy the answer was simple: ignore what was happening and carry on as usual. For others it was a matter of intensifying belief in the Old, Old Story: a stand had to be taken in the face of Godless, atheistic scientists and similarly oriented philosophers. Two thousand years of Christian teaching should not be thrown away on the basis of it not measuring up to secular society's spiritually bankrupt vision of reality. Christian reality was altogether different from secular reality; it was a revelation sent from God, and as such could not be contradicted whatever science or philosophy might have to say about the world and how it worked. Or how the mind worked. Or how mythology worked. Or society. Christian congregations in the West were not so sure. After some decades of argument and confusion they responded with their feet, each decade seeing a quarter of what was left melt away, each generation half of what was left disappear.² A plausible, rational case for the truth of Christian doctrines had failed to materialise:³ the Christian metaphysic had collapsed in on itself like an imploding star.

Cupitt's and Spong's confronting evaluations of conventional Christianity are well known to those interested in religious matters, not so well known, perhaps, those of the late Alan Watts, one time priest of the Anglican Communion and Episcopal Chaplain at Northwestern University in the mid-forties.

A radical thinker about Christianity long before radical thinking became fashionable, Watts recognised Christianity's impoverished state and tried to do something about it. But more about that in a moment. What interests me about the whole situation is that Spong has never entirely given up on Christianity, whereas Cupitt seems to have done so in spite of claiming that he still cares about the continuation of the Christian tradition.⁴ In Cupitt language that means "develop[ing] a new form of religious life that will be genuinely truthful, livable and productive",⁵ and it does not matter whether this new form of Christianity calls itself "Christian" or not. The old brand name is tarnished almost beyond repair, he tells us, particularly for those trying to trade under it. For reasons of personal feeling, however, he would prefer to retain it.⁶ Spong, too. Everything he says points to a deep and abiding love of the Christian tradition. But reformation is on his mind, and a radical reformation at that. And not just in the sense of thinking radical thoughts about Christianity; he's done that, and is more or less finished with it as a task. No, he's more concerned with a dimension of experience beyond thought and language, namely, that of "Being". Spong wants to "Be" Spong in the deepest possible way, and that has meant dipping into his own sensibilities beyond the limitations of language. To do so, however, he has had to "walk through his faith tradition", not just abandon it as so many have done.⁷ Cupitt has done much the same thing, but with a quite different result. His emphasis has been on thought and language as the ultimate state of being Cupitt; which makes Cupitt and everything he stands for an adjunct of language and naught else. But that's not quite right; he also recognises the validity of personal feeling.

Alan Watts held both a master's degree in theology and a doctorate of divinity, but was best known as an interpreter of Zen Buddhism, and of Indian and Chinese philosophy in general. So says the cover blurb for his book *Behold the Spirit*, a study in "the necessity of mystical religion"⁸ published in 1947. Recognised as one of the most original and "unruffled" philosophers of the

century, he authored eighteen books on the philosophy and psychology of religion, and was a guest lecturer at most of the principle universities in America. He also completed a two-year research fellowship in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, and traveled extensively in both Europe and the Far East. Seen in this light, Watts is an early, highly educated thinker similar in style to Cupitt and Spong whose fundamental intention was to redirect Christianity back to its mystical roots: an insight now shared by Bishop Spong, but flatly rejected by Don Cupitt. In his preface to a new edition of *Behold the Spirit* published in 1971 - twenty-five years after its initial release - Watts evaluated his own early thinking on Christianity's dilemmas and decided, that as an experiment, it still had validity.⁹ Catholic and Protestant theologians might find his thoughts useful, he tells us, but only if they had minds open enough to understand that non-verbal spiritual experiences were possible, and that they were preferable to doctrines and precepts delivered didactically. Having rationalised the Mass into the vernacular, Catholicism had "made the liturgy an occasion for filling one's head with thoughts, aspirations, considerations and resolutions, so that it [was] almost impossible to use the Mass as a support for pure contemplation, free from discursive chatter in the skull."¹⁰ Free from discursive chatter in the skull? Watts weighs into his subject and shows himself to be more than merely familiar with contemplation as a "subject"; he is also schooled in its untoward subjective/objective demands to the extent that experiences of profound, outer-edge contemplative/meditative activity can, in spite of Cupitt's denials, be correlated across cultures and religious traditions. Not in identical terms of course; such experiences transcend the visual/emotional projections of the religiously needy. At some decisive point of profound inner experience everything settles towards, well, something altogether different.

Alan Watts published *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* in 1965, a book dramatically different from *Behold the Spirit* in that it deals with expansions of consciousness via LSD, mescaline and psilocybin. This little book of a hundred pages is a record of the author's own experiments, experiences of heightened consciousness ranging from "aesthetic insights into

nature to a philosophical view of existence as a comedy at once diabolic and divine, resolving itself into 'a cosmology not only unified but also joyous.'"¹¹ In *Behold the Spirit*, Watts sounds like Spong and Cupitt rolled into one in that he is outlining an extensive reprogramming of Christianity's tenets of belief in alignment with rational thinking and mystical insight. But it is mysticism he is mostly interested in, not to the detriment of rational thinking, but as that which allows the mind to soar creatively beyond the natural limitations of rational thought. "Mysticism", he tells us, "is not a collective term for such spookeries as levitation, astrology, telekinesis, and projection of the astral body. Theologians can no longer dismiss or distort the mystical teachings of either East or West without revealing plain lack of scholarship."¹² Field theory, ecological dynamics and the transactional nature of perception tells us that we are not independent observers in an "alien and rigidly mechanical world of separate objects."¹³ The so-called rational belief that human beings are an "island-ego in a hostile, stupid or indifferent universe seems more of a dangerous hallucination".¹⁴ Which is an interesting perspective on our present highly rational view of self, other and world - perhaps rational hallucination would be a better description.

Bishop Spong, in turn, sums up the mystic's unique view of reality rather well when he says, "Mystics appear to be those strange people in whom all boundaries have been removed."¹⁵ God ceases, in other words, to be the supra-mundane God of the Christian imagination; he turns instead into an unbounded presence, or timeless reality, an Eternal Now which vanquishes and annuls the need for a supernatural, external deity.¹⁶ We have come, Spong suggests, to a point in our understanding of reality where the old conception of deity is a violation of our expanding consciousness of human life.¹⁷ That is certainly so in relation to society's intellectual rejection of all supernaturalisms, but it is not true in relation to Christianity's general theological stance: the Church in its many incarnations continues to hold and advocate the Old Testament's conception of

deity in spite of New Testament attempts to modify that deity's temperament. It's now all about "love", we're told, but when all is said and done love seems to be thin on the ground. Cupitt sums up the situation with characteristic frankness. "[There is] too much evidence of great unhappiness and truly malignant human relations within the churches . . . too much child abuse, rampant misogyny and homophobia, and [too much] hostility towards new technical and scientific development, especially in medicine and genetics." Spong's response is to target God himself: "the traditional theistic definition of God" has to be challenged, he tells us.¹⁸ I agree wholeheartedly; the much loved tyrant God of Abraham's children is in effect directly responsible for the present debacle facing both West and East, the narcotic threatening us religious, just as Marx suggested. But that should not be taken too literally; religious sensibility is not all of the supra-mundane God's making - there's more to it than that.

The new, radical way of comprehending what God is, is as an experience. What that might mean is clearly articulated by Spong when he says "I experience God under the category that I call 'being'. If God is the 'Ground of All Being,' the phrase I attribute principally to my shaping theological thinker Paul Tillich, then my 'being' not only is part of but participates in the 'being' of God."¹⁹ Radical thinking, for some, and he isn't finished. This God then becomes "the depth dimension of being itself".²⁰ In such a moment God ceases to be a religious concept and we move beyond religion.²¹ These are daring words; they will challenge many. But I detect a flaw in Spong's adventurous reasoning, for the term "God" is still operative, and whatever meaning you subscribe to it that term remains a religious concept laden with supra-mundane baggage. Which of course sets up a dichotomous situation in the mind where what is being transcended is being used to describe and underpin the act of transcendence itself. If we have truly moved beyond mundane religion and the concept of God, then it is surely impermissible to bring God back into the conversation in this manner. To my way of thinking, making God the Ground of All Being is a form of fuzzy logic whereby God, whatever the definition offered, is kept in the equation because to not do so

is too disturbing for the thinker to contemplate. I fully appreciate Spong's dilemma in this regard, but I cannot go along with the reasoning under offer. Moving the decimal point one place is insufficient; much better to scrap the word "God" altogether and replace it with the neutral term "being". Sneaking God back into the picture imprisons us, yet again, in the Holy Bastille of His apparently inescapable clutches. Why not let "being" speak for itself out of the human condition, not as God in some new, sophisticated guise, but as the experienceable depth dimension of being alluded to by Spong himself. By such a means would the confusion between "being" and "*a* being" be overcome. In other words, let "being", *be* without interference.

The Medium Really is the Message

The above observations present us with a problem that has to be solved, and with a further raft of problems that have to be solved if we want to progress towards some kind of sensible resolution in relation to "being" and "beings". Of the many thinkers and researchers trying to nut out a new direction for Christianity (or in philosophy for that matter), John Shelby Spong has, I believe, properly identified our understanding of "being" in terms of depth, or our lack of depth, as the critical issue. But as suggested, there is a glitch in Spong's thinking that damages his premise even as it forms. But not altogether, for that premise also contains, by default, shadowy elements of humanism's three successive developmental stages, the third of which presents us with the opportunity to recognise and rectify past mistakes. First-wave humanism was after all nominally Christian; it only later turned into second-wave secular humanism's rejection of Christianity. Which does not mean that third-wave humanism is in some sense first-wave humanism about to reclaim its old territory; it means that a whole new kind of humanism is forming capable of transcending both its religious and secular origins. In this sense we are not journeying back into God by a more sophisticated route; we are in fact journeying, finally and irrevocably, out of God and into our own unfathomable natures as being in terms of Ground. Spong almost says as much when he describes our old conception of deity as a violation of our expanding

consciousness of human life,²² (my italics) but when all is said and done what we're left with is an intellectual conception of being. The experiential is Spong's concern, there is no doubting that, but it is a concern worked predominately at the intellectual level. He has however come to an appreciation of mysticism's worth as "the means through which the essence of yesterday's religion can be transformed into tomorrow's spiritual understanding."²³

Don Cupitt's approach to God is altogether different from Spong's; he is all for ditching God and getting on with the business of life, and living. In his spiritual manual understanding is reached when we accept that being in existence has no meaning in itself. Talk of "being" leaves Cupitt stone cold; he is only interested in beings. Being is no more than "an unthinkable unthing prior to language - a non-word."²⁴ Outside of language being has no existence. Some thinkers may consider being the most important question in philosophy, but that can be put down to fear in relation to "the radically outsideless contingency and transience of all existence."²⁵ Existence is "irremediable groundlessness and insecurity. Our whole existence is absurd, gratuitous, *de trop*."²⁶ Which leaves us flailing in a wilderness of deteriorating social values, egotistical inflation and withering existential hopes. The best we can expect from Cupitt's vision is an aesthetic cuddle from nature or the consolation of art, if we're lucky.

Not so with Spong, or Alan Watts. Their vision short-circuits us out of this frame of mind and into a sense of things altogether different; and that in spite of Watts concluding in *The Joyous Cosmology* that "the 'knower' is no different from the sensation of the 'known', whether the known be 'external' objects or 'internal' thoughts and memories."²⁷ Cupitt would not disagree with that; it fits perfectly into his neuroscientific overview of the self being composed of perceptions, rather than having perceptions. And Watts seems to compound the problem further by adding: "In this way it appears that instead of knowers and knowns there are simply knowings, and instead of doers and deeds simply doings."²⁸ I

can almost hear Cupitt applauding; it's what he's been trying to tell us all along: we're not individual selves, we're just bundles of perceptions held together by the illusion of being individual selves. Problem is, Watts isn't describing the result of scientifically arrived at ideas; he is describing what he considers to be transcendent ideas experienced in altered states of consciousness. So the question must be: In what do these two visions differ? Answer: they don't. The only difference is the medium through which they have travelled - the medium, in more senses than one, really is the message. Filter such information through the rational, language-bound ego, and you end up with Cupitt's vision. Filter it through the expansive, non-linguistic states experienced by proficient meditators, or through the chemically enhanced states of consciousness experienced by serious experimenters, and you end up with Watts' vision. Or with a radically adjusted intellectual vision such as that offered by Spong as he steps out of his faith tradition towards the exit.²⁹ Confident in his postmodernism, Cupitt speaks of the "irremediable groundlessness and insecurity" of life; Watts, confident in his cosmic deviousness, of a "rapacious and all-embracing cosmic selfishness [that] turns out to be a disguise for the unmotivated play of love."³⁰ Unmotivated love? What might that be, I wonder? Is it again God by another name; or is it in some difficult to define sense ourselves released from fear? Cupitt is not wrong about our fear, it's real enough, but only in the sense of it being ego-driven. It is our limited apprehension of reality that's the problem, not reality itself. Take the ego's blinkers off and everything falls into a wholly (holy?) new configuration.

The Death (almost) of God

Lloyd Geering is/was Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand. He is also a Fellow of the Westar Institute in the US, an institute dedicated to the task of spreading religious literacy. Don Cupitt and John Shelby Spong are also Fellows of Westar, their contribution to the subject of religious literacy being amongst the most challenging the Institute has to offer. Challenging too for those involved in the Institute's research programs; they have

to do battle with their peers to make their research findings stick. Which results of course in high calibre books and academic papers. Of such calibre are Lloyd Geering's published works and presentations, his 2002 book *Christianity Without God* being particularly arresting. No less arresting is the Forward penned by the late Robert W. Funk, Director of Westar at that time. Christians (thoughtful Christians that is) are no longer theists, he tells us, they have become a-theist, which, when translated, means that they "no longer believe in a personal, objective, thinking God "out there" somewhere. The theistic God has not survived the acids of modernity." These are strong words, but they are only true in relation to those who have done battle with the Bible's supra-mundane God and emerged victorious. Victorious? In the sense of having finally shrugged off that God's overbearing presence and influence. Don Cupitt has quite obviously managed to do this, as has Bishop Spong, but the outcome of their having accomplished this ultra difficult and demanding task has not been at all the same. One thing is certain, however: God in the traditional sense of God, is dead for both men.

In his inimitably lucid style, Lloyd Geering tracks how belief in God arose and developed in *Christianity Without God*, a book of summerisations that manages to convey hugely complex, interwoven slices of religious and secular history in abbreviated form. In such a manner does Geering approach the question of God's existence, a question he breaks down into four basic elements, or arguments: the Cosmological, the Teleological, the Moral and the Ontological. The Cosmological Argument is based on the world's existence and how it came into existence, the Teleological on observations of what is believed to be order and design in the universe, the Moral on the sense of moral obligation human beings feel towards one another, and the Ontological on the concept of God's existence only being conceivable because such a God existed in the first place. All of these are said to have been based on the original mythological notion of the "gods", polytheism's ancient, imaginative attempt to explain and control natural phenomena. Then came a change during which the "gods" collapsed into a conception of the singular "god" of Jewish religious tradition. Fine, we've made progress, but what comes next is difficult for theists to take on board, for the concept of God as found in later Christian monotheism is described by Geering as

"a simple refinement of what originated there",³¹ the doctrine of divine revelation having hidden this fact until the whole idea of revelation came under scrutiny in our own time. Suddenly, embarrassingly, "the essential continuity between the gods and God was rediscovered",³² the theist conception of God shown to be a human creation no different from that of the gods. We humans had not only created the gods, we had also created God, and just as the gods had died and faded away, so also was the God of theism now dying, and fading.

This is a clean, neat evaluation of the gods, of God, and of the transition period we are now in, and it proceeds to analyse with precision the hypothetical presence of God as it was transposed into another explanatory key by thinkers such as Paul Tillich and Bishop Spong. God is dead for some people, but dead only in varying degrees for others.³³ For those others the word "God" has ceased to mean what it meant in the past, but remains operative in a radically new way, Paul Tillich's creative theology said to be of this ilk. In Geering terms, Tillich's God became a symbolic term for "ultimate concerns", God himself perceived as the ultimate concern of all human beings.³⁴ God was dead, but in some curious metaphorically sense he was still alive. Quoting what he terms Don Cupitt's "non-realist" view of God (God as no more than the mythical embodiment of our spiritual concerns), Geering nevertheless places Tillich in the "realist" camp (God imagined as an objective being) because of his reluctance to "surrender the last element of objectivity in the concept of God."³⁵ Tillich wasn't a realist, but neither was he fully a non-realist; he was perhaps hedging his bets because he could sense where non-realism might end up. Hence his talk of the God beyond God, a description derived from Meister Eckhart and remarked on by Geering. Spong's sophisticated stance on this issue is similar to that of Tillich's, and for good reason; I think he too can feel the cold breath of postmodernity on his neck. Not so Don Cupitt to whom the issue is as dead as the supra-mundane God killed off by non-realism. Which leaves us with what? Well, to my mind it leaves us with two problems, not one: the problem of Cupitt's ultra-rationalistic certainty, and the

problem of Spong's sometimes quirky charismatic ambiguity. One leaves us with only the frail human ego to fall back on, the other with a symbolic, metaphorical formula for God ever in danger of toppling back into a subtle literalism. That does not seem to be a problem for Spong, he handles it dexterously, but it is certainly a problem for Cupitt and for those of similar persuasion.

And for those who respond to Spong's message; they perhaps sense that something important is being safeguarded without knowing exactly what. So the question has to be this: is there, potentially, a third position that can be taken up, a position that gets the best out of both of these approaches without annulling either? I think there is, and I think it has to do with overcoming our culturally inbuilt fear of psyche, a fear nurtured by Christianity in spite of appearing to do the opposite. Indeed, a fear consciously developed by Christianity in accordance with its doctrinally externalised God as a being "out there" somewhere, heaven as "up there" somewhere, and hell as "down there" somewhere, notions wholly discarded by some, but not by all. Or simply dormant in the unthinking, unconcerned mind. Fact is, psychic depth was swapped early on for a magical, supernatural conception of reality where psyche was perceived as harbouring infernal forces. A shield of Biblical texts and images had to be placed between the individual and his/her depths, prayers of fixed content used to ensure against the possibility of psychic free-fall into the mind's abyss. Armed with Godly thoughts, with verses of Scripture and holy images, the spiritual aspirant's ego remained firmly lodged at the conscious level of the psychic spectrum, psyche's more profound offerings categorised as inherently subversive. In this scheme God was a puppet master capable of suspending the laws of nature to accommodate the needs of his supra-mundane son's devotees, supplicatory prayers the means by which this God's mind could be influenced, or changed. The orthodox Christian juggernaut was on its way, but to where, exactly? God as "being" was operative as a concept, but it was a crass literalisation of being's more profound meaning, a stepping down of "being" to "*a* being" that would cause historical havoc as the centuries rolled in towards our own.

Friedrich Nietzsche announced the "death of God" in the late nineteenth century, adding that we ourselves had killed him. Which was a nice play on what

was supposed to have happened in the first century when human beings unwittingly killed God's son, that theologically incomprehensible projection of himself into the world in human form. Nietzsche was smart; smarter than most orthodox theologians then or now. What he had realised was that the death of God in his own century was due to sheer neglect, not to any conscious act by the general public. The God of theism had simply become unbelievable³⁶ and dropped out of most people's perception of reality. And that, basically, is the meaning of death for most of us: when someone drops predominately out of conscious awareness, then that person is to all intent and purpose dead, that is, finished with as a useful memory whether actually dead or not. In this sense, theism's God is all but dead; he is a flickering memory in the public mind that has all but lost its power of presence and influence. We are mostly free of him, mostly capable of living without reference to him, mostly able to put up with life and living minus any need to address him. We may address him regularly through profanities, but that in itself confirms how we have become distanced from any prior need for God, if indeed such a need ever existed.

For many, if not most young people today, need for God has never been experienced at all. And therein lies a problem, for if sense of being even in the sense of God as a kind of ultimate being hasn't registered on the mind, then "being" in the deeper, more profound sense of our own living presence in the world may go unnoticed. By that I do not mean our physical presence in the world, I mean sense of ourselves as a living presence over and above our physical presence which, when encountered, dramatically changes our perception of self, other and world. Hence society's need of religion, not merely in terms of a regulating moral force, which it no longer is, but as a possible, although uncertain, conduit into an experience of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence in this sense has nothing whatsoever to do with losing oneself in God, it has to do with finding oneself through the process of waking up into our own existence. Not just intellectually, but experientially in relation, say, to our not existing due to death. The clue to our existing in real terms lies in that untoward direction, for once appreciate what to not exist means and something of one's depth dimension will form, and inform.

Don Cupitt thinks otherwise. In *The Revelation of Being* he tells us that there is "no non-temporal Being. Everything comes to be, and is apprehended or understood bit by bit, in time. . . Everything is be(com)ing, everything is subject to changes and chances, and everything - truths and values, particles and galaxies - has a finite life-span. . . Everything is on the skids, and nothing is wholly and securely self-present."³⁷ In terms of consciousness, ego and language, Cupitt is absolutely correct in his reading of reality; there is no doubting that everything is a be(com)ing just as he says. In terms of ego consciousness brought to a stand still within psyche, however, he is not correct; in fact he could not be further from the truth. Truth? Not "truth" as it is generally conceived, the kind of truth that comes laden with conscious values; more the kind of truth hinted at by Heidegger in terms of an experiential dimension related to primordial thinking. Primordial thinking is not like ordinary thinking; it is not knowing things bit by bit; it is an embracing of everything *simultaneously*. Being is not then realised as *my* being; it is realised in coincidence with the *being of all things*. It is, in other words, a form of experiencing that cancels out the gap between perceived objects and leaves us with a beyond differentiation appreciation of reality. Such a realisation short-circuits ego out of its comfort zone of this *and* that into an apprehension of this *as* that. And it is the same for everyone who crosses this perceptual frontier: nationality, culture or language cannot change this experience into anything other than what it is in itself, and what it is in itself is a blunt denial of Christianity's basic premise of sin and salvation. We are not in bondage to sin or in need of a Messiah to free us from the limitations of our natures; we are in bondage to a form of perception that holds us hostage to the utilitarian belief that what we see is all there is. It may appear to be so, but so also did the sun's circling of the earth at one time. Quantum physics has long since superseded the Newtonian, push and shove model of the universe, but that is something not yet properly taken on board by many postmodern philosophers and psychologists. Newton's model still works, but only at the surface of everyday materiality; something altogether different is going on at the quantum level, and that difference is detectable experientially at the deeper levels of psyche.

Christian Materialism

Christian belief is a kind of materialism, a conception of spiritual reality dumbed down into a form of hard knowledge grounded in the vicissitudes of history. Believing Christians have come to view history as the conduit used by God to insert his wishes into the world, and in doing so they have set up a situation where the whole of history is open to their unique interpretation of events. By such means the Christian vision became materially evident and provable, its claims and ambitions terrestrially anchored and materially substantial. And supernatural, of course. There was no avoiding the supernatural element when that conception of things got going. Which is of course a contradiction in terms given what we now know about the nature of material reality. Faced with this obvious contradiction, it is at first inconceivable that Christianity can undo the epistemological knot it has tied without unravelling the "faith" at its existential core. For once deny Christianity its historical credentials, and you deny it the right to exist. No, that's not right. That ought to read: and you deny it the right to exist in its present form. A reprieve is possible, but as both Cupitt and Spong are well aware, it takes courage and effort to set that reprieve in motion.

If an ability to change one's mind is the prerequisite for change on any other level, then Don Cupitt fills the role admirably. In fact he himself remarks on this characteristic when he says "My critics seized on this. 'There is no reason at all why we should take Don Cupitt's ideas seriously', they said: 'He keeps changing them all the time!'"³⁸ Cupitt's critics were not wrong; he had moved from being a realist to that of a non-realist, from being a non-realist to that of an anti-realist, postmodernist, and ended up in what he describes as the camp of creative expressionism/aestheticism. Rejecting the realist need for a system of fixed conclusions, dogmatic closure and timelessness in relation to truths perceived as unchanging, he had accused his critics of not thinking at all, and with a flourish reduced being to a temporal, ever-changing restlessness upon which no great truth could be founded.³⁹ Only unsystematic truthfulness was possible, the kind of truth sought for by the philosopher Kierkegaard. In a word, truthfulness *in via*,

or "on the way", a therapeutic and aesthetic truth that liberates us "to be creative and productive."⁴⁰

Accused of being an atheist because of his temporalising of being, he then admits to using the "craftily-chosen vocabulary" of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, and with that said places the question of being in a different interpretive box. Being is now situated somewhere between theism and Buddhism, between East and West, between Eternal being and Absolute Nothingness. Suddenly, unexpectedly, being is reintroduced as the religion of being,⁴¹ (something he thinks Heidegger steered away from) a change of heart he attributes to a monkish, minimalist streak⁴² that his subtracting nature delights in. Some people are adders; he is a subtractor, and the more subtraction the better. And so it can be said that God is "nothing", that "nothing" is eternal, and that the experience of God is indistinguishable from the blissful void talked of in Buddhism. Suspension in an Empty Infinite, in the five-fold nothingness spoken of by St. John of the Cross is preferable to the complexities of a belief system that one cannot let go of. The less there is of belief, and of oneself, the happier one is.

On one level I have no problem with Cupitt's deeply considered conclusions, but on another I cannot but reject his assumption that what Buddhism describes as the "Void", and what St John of the Cross describes as a "five-fold nothingness", are identical in meaning to his own private notions of "nothing" as *emptiness*. The word "empty" remains the same, but in terms of what is being described they are in fact radically different in relation to mysticism and to the self. But Cupitt is already on to the possibility of descriptive inadequacy, for in a follow-up statement he says that he "cannot claim to be any sort of expert upon [his] own ideas."⁴³ Why not? Because he had come to them out of "violent elation and distress", and cannot even be sure that he understands them himself. He suspects he is on the right track, but is not entirely sure why, or how. His tendency to subtract rather than add has led him to a position "somewhere between pragmatism and Buddhism", a stance based on a rigorous

stripping away of everything intellectually superfluous.⁴⁴ If you want to improve the look of a system of ideas, he tells us, then better to purge and purify it of all embellishment.⁴⁵ That, in a nut shell, is mysticism proper. Better the *via negativa* where everything falls away into nothingness, than the *via affirmativa* where images seem to confirm one's belief in this, that, or the next thing.⁴⁶ Question is, to what exactly is Cupitt referring when he speaks of the *via negativa* and the *via affirmativa*? He obviously understands image-projection in the ascetic sense, but he seems not to have grasped that mystical experience in the *via negativa* sense has nothing whatsoever to do with either the bottom falling out of the ego's capacity to keep itself psychologically intact, or, similarly, the ego's decision to apply an intellectual scalpel to what it considers to be intellectually superfluous. *Via negativa* experience is neither existential angst nor intellectual rigour; it is the cessation of ego involvement on all levels of perception/conception. *Via negativa* is not ego doing anything; it is ego frozen into perceptual and conceptual immobility staring into the depths of its own unfathomable nature.

Arthur Koestler misinterpreted this state of mind as "controlled annihilation", and Cupitt is not far behind when he conceives the *via negativa* space to be no more than negative nothingness. So when he says "In nothingness, we've nothing to fear. When I am inwardly coolest and emptiest, I am happiest. The less the better", he is in fact missing the point of what has been written about the *via negativa* state by those who have experienced it. And to later suggest that Heidegger's vocabulary can be applied to his own "partial synthesis, or inconclusion"⁴⁷ is to jump ahead of his own admitted lack of expertise in this area and do Heidegger an injustice. For as we saw at the end of chapter twelve, Heidegger's conception of truth carried not only an ontological dimension such as Frege postulated, but also the possibility of an ontologically-driven experience that transcended both ordinary and non-ordinary thinking in relation to the being of beings. But only in relation to language somehow transcending its own syntactical limitations.

The Depth-Dimension of the Self

When it comes to what mysticism is in itself, Westar Fellow and Professor of Religion and Philosophy Paul Alan Laughlin's approach and comprehension is a pleasing change from the above. In a two-part article titled "Pray Without Seeking", Laughlin complains that the "Contemporary discourse about the nature of mysticism, even among scholars, manifests a great lack of clarity and much confusion."⁴⁸ Without preamble he takes on Evelyn Underhill's scholarly claim that "mysticism [is a] sense either of oneness with God (unitive) or of being in the presence of God (numinous)", when at depth it is in fact neither of those. Such an interpretation strikes him as "an example of an affective devotionalism (usually in the form of love, faith, and worship) directed toward an Other, generally a profoundly transcendent deity."⁴⁹ Laughlin prefers the Princeton philosopher Walter T. Stace's definition of mysticism as "the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate."⁵⁰ And there is very good reason to think this definition of mysticism's cardinal features better than that of Underhill's, for it accurately reflects how this state "transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness."⁵¹ The major strand in the history of mysticism was not devotionalism, says Laughlin, it was the "immanent (that is, indwelling) One abiding within the cosmos, world, and nature, and (most importantly) in the individual's deepest self."⁵² Not an "Other" in the sense of a divine responder, which was/is the foundation argument for monotheism's God out there somewhere, more "a non-personal, immanent power-presence . . . that is none other (or non-Other) than [our own] spiritual core".⁵³ To pray without ceasing is then "an evocative exercise in self-realisation" where the ego-self is "distinguished from one's deepest and truest identity",⁵⁴ not an invocative,

petitionary device hostage to a supra-mundane deity's whims. There is a mysterious, a-rational depth dimension beyond the ego-self's flat, one-dimensional conception of self, other, and world, and non-supplicatory prayer is a mechanism through which that dimension can be entered.⁵⁵

This tells us that there is something profound going on in the depths of psyche of which we are only vaguely aware, something in relation to the self that has to be experienced to be believed. Not believed in as with the notion of the supra-mundane God's existence, but experientially encountered through the process of meditational or contemplative descent. To pray without ceasing has then nothing whatsoever to do with verbal, ego-driven, supplicatory wants, hopes and desires; it is quite simply the sustaining of a state of mind within which language is silenced and an ever deepening silence becomes the means of communication. This silence is certainly empty, but it is neither the minimalistic emptiness Don Cupitt associates with the reduction of belief through intellectual acuity, or Koestler's controlled annihilation of the self through suicidal yogic practices: it is the cessation of all thought as sense of self undergoes profound change and another quite different self begins to emerge.

But let's double back, for in Part Two of his article, Laughlin notes that Stace, like Underhill, makes a distinction between inner and outer forms of mystical experience, but with one subtle difference: his outer, extrovertive, nature-based type of mysticism is experientially no different from that experienced in an introvertive sense. Immanence in the sense of an indwelling Oneness is just as detectable "within the cosmos, world, and nature [as it is] in the individual's deepest self."⁵⁶ This is not Cupitt's aesthetic appreciation of nature by another name, nor is it "nature mysticism" in a Wordsworthian sense; it is an altogether different experience in relation to consciousness in the throws of perceptual/conceptual change. The ego-self's inveterate need to differentiate between self and other is, in such instances, switched off and another mode of perception takes its place. In an attempt to integrate this mode of perception into a humanist, person-centred interpretation of reality, Laughlin shuffles our rational, empirical faculties in the same manner as he notes Plato does with "soul" and

"psyche", but he in the end falls back into talking of a "mysterious Presence or Power that (at least for mystics) permeates or infuses the cosmos".⁵⁷ That is the telling point, for if we have no sense of a depth-dimension in human nature, which is itself an expression of Nature, then our evaluation of the human will remain flat and one-dimensional even if the human is central to our philosophy.⁵⁸

Bishop Spong has such a sense, and it is deep, but it is in many ways different from Laughin's and Stace's, and certainly different from that of Cupitt's. Unlike Laughin, Spong equates "being" (the depth-dimension of the human) with God in terms of an "expansion of human consciousness", aligns "being" with God as the Ground of All Being, and before you can say, well, anything, makes "being" not only part of God, but also that which "participates in the being of God."⁵⁹ God then becomes "not a separate entity, but the depth dimension of being itself . . . present in every living thing but [which] comes to self-consciousness only in the human life."⁶⁰ This is a remarkable linguistic feat using philosophical theology as a distractingly flexible tool, but it is perhaps too convoluted in its reasoning to assess whether it is accurate even in its own terms. That said, it is still a brave attempt to shake off traditional theism's stranglehold on western society, albeit at the intellectual level only. That may sound churlish given the attention Bishop Spong pays to the question of being and capitalised Being, and to his deep engagement with such questions, but when all is said and done his philosophically profound evaluation of our spiritual dilemma remains no more than a formula that only a trained intellect can appreciate.

So also Don Cupitt's ruthless, rational rejection of everything and anything he considers a halfway measure in relation to the same fundamental questions, questions that have caused him "violent elation and distress" as he pondered them. Such profound emotional engagement cannot be ignored, but neither can Cupitt's rather bloodless conclusions. As a substitute for old-fashioned religious experience, aesthetic appreciation and a more robust sense of Nature is a poor offering, particularly as it is a nineteenth-century formula long since laid aside.

There again, if Cupitt is right in his thinking, then all we can do is talk about how we talk about things, all experiences of God, or of "being", being reduced to no more than religious vocabulary, all religious views being relative in that they are no more than different vocabularies fulfilling different social functions. Which, to say the least, does not alleviate the social and international tensions caused by conflicting religious visions; we need to look elsewhere if we are "to deal with what can only be called the conceptual and practical mess we find ourselves in with regard to the assessment of religious beliefs and practices."⁶¹ So says John Kelly in *A Fine Mess*, an article that tracks, and attacks, the Geering/Cupitt argument in relation to language, and it is an approach with which I wholeheartedly agree in that anti-realism's thesis falls far short of a satisfactory answer to the crucial religious and social concerns of our time.

References and Notes

- 1) Spong, John Shelby, *Eternal Life*, HarperCollins Publisher, 2009.p. 140.
- 2) Cupitt, Don, *Reforming Christianity*, Polbridge Press, Santa Rosa, California, USA., 2001. p 1.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Ibid, p. 3.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Spong, John Shelby, *Eternal Life*, (as above) p. 175.
- 8) Watts, Alan, *Behold the Spirit*, Pantheon Books, USA., 1971. Preface, p. xi.
- 9) Ibid, Preface, p. xi.
- 10) Ibid, Preface, xii.
- 11) Watts, Alan, *The Joyous Cosmology*, back cover.Vintage Books, US., 1965.
- 12) Watts, Alan, *Behold the Spirit*, Preface Pantheon Books, US., 1971. p. xiii.
- 13) Ibid.
- 14) Ibid.
- 15) Spong, John Shelby, *Eternal Life*, (as above) p. 140.
- 16) bid.
- 17) Ibid.
- 18) Ibid, Preface, p. xviii.
- 19) Ibid, p. 143. With regard to Tillich's philosophy, William Braden remarks that Tillich insisted that absolute faith should be preceded by absolute doubt and despair because one must first confess that existence is meaningless, then accept one's existence *in spite* of this. According to Braden (p. 87), this was Tillich's *courage to be*, an acceptance of meaninglessness through an act of faith that overrode doubt and despair through an acceptance of the absurd. Absolute faith was absolute resignation, a state of mind beyond reasonable faith. This is not the New Testament definition of "faith", however. As Braden points out, John, in his Epistle, does not say that faith is based on the absurd; he says it is based on *evidence*. Faith, like science, is a form of deduction; it's just the methodology employed that's different. Science relies on the conscious, rational mind,

faith on the unconscious, intuitive mind. In this sense the churches were ignoring the vital role of the unconscious in religious experience. Summing up, Braden writes, "If people cannot find ultimate reality in Jesus Christ, they are not going to find it in Tillich. (p.120) 20) Ibid. It is interesting to note that Bishop Robinson, famous for his book *Honest to God* (1963), eventually jettisoned the term "Ground of Being" due to it causing so much confusion among the faithful. Assuming Ground of Being to be an impersonal phrase, believers construed the term to be a questioning of God's personal existence, and as such a questioning of their personal relationship to God. Which left Robinson with a real problem, for an inner, as opposed to an outer, churchy, belief-laden experience of God was exactly what the good Bishop wanted people to have, but the only way the faithful seemed capable of realising this inner experience was through conceiving of God as a personal possession.

- 21) Ibid, p. 143.
- 22) Ibid, p. 140.
- 23) Ibid.
- 24) Cupitt, Don, *The Revelation of Being*, (as above) p. 15.
- 25) Ibid, p 17.
- 26) Ibid.
- 27) Watts, Alan, *The Joyous Cosmology*, (as above) p. 90.
- 28) Ibid, p. 91.
- 29) Spong, John Shelby, *Eternal Life*, (as above) p. 140.
- 30) Watts, Alan, *The Joyous Cosmology*, (as above) p 89.
- 31) Geering, Lloyd, *Christianity Without God*, Polbridge Press, Santa Rosa, California 2002. pp. 46-47.
- 32) Ibid, p. 48.
- 33) Ibid, p. 58.
- 34) Ibid, p. 59.
- 35) Ibid.
- 36) Ibid, p. 50.
- 37) Cupitt, Don, *The Revelation of Being*, CSM Press, Ltd., 1998. p. 59.
- 38) Cupitt, Don, 'The Wandering Philosopher', article in *The Fourth "R"*, the inhouse magazine of the Westar Institute, Vol. 14 No. 1. Jan-Feb 2001. p. 4.
- 39) Ibid.
- 40) Ibid, p. 5.
- 41) Ibid.
- 42) Ibid, p. 6.
- 43) Ibid, p. 5.
- 44) Ibid.
- 45) Ibid.
- 46) Ibid.
- 47) Ibid.
- 48) Laughlin, Paul Alan, 'Pray Without Seeking', Part Two, *The Fourth "R"*, inhouse magazine of the Westar Institute, Vol. 22. No. 5 & 6, Nov-Dec 2009. p. 20.
- 49) Ibid.
- 50) Ibid.
- 51) Ibid.
- 52) Ibid.
- 53) Ibid, p. 21.
- 54) Ibid.
- 55) Ibid.
- 56) Ibid, p. 20.
- 57) Ibid, p. 21.
- 58) Ibid, p. 22.
- 59) Spong, John Shelby, *Eternal Life*, (as above)p. 143.

- 60) Ibid.
- 61) Kelly, John, "A Fine Mess" The Fourth "R", inhouse magazine of the Westar Institute, p. 24.