

Church. If that is so, it would be an appropriate complement to his thinking on the place of the laity in the shaping of Christian doctrine as well as on the infallibility of some conciliar and papal pronouncements. Manning would, of course, have read the text with complete acceptance, but it seems particularly apposite to think rather of Newman when reading Vatican II's account of the People of God ("Lumen Gentium", 9): "Through trials and tribulations the Church makes her way, strengthened by the power of God's grace promised her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not fall away from perfect fidelity but remain a bride worthy of her Lord, never ceasing to renew herself, under the impact of the Holy Spirit, until she comes, through the cross, to the light which never sets".

*(To be continued)*

## **The Image of the Invisible God**

**A Review of Jesus and the Gospel of God,  
by Don Cupitt,  
Lutterworth Press, Guildford and London 1979, pp. 103, £5.50**

**Geoffrey Turner**

When the editor of *New Blackfriars* reviewed in August 1977 the collection of essays published as *The Myth of God Incarnate* (edited by John Hick, SCM Press, London 1977) he had some very critical remarks for most of the contributors in their evident lack of understanding of orthodox christology, but of Don Cupitt he said that he had written 'the most lucid and perceptive chapter in the book', 'his article is an outright rejection of Catholic Christianity', and he looked forward to 'the debate on fundamentals which surely ought now to arise between Don Cupitt and his fellow sym-

posiasts . Cupitt has now written a short book explaining his understanding of the man (decidedly *not* God) Jesus of Nazareth and his message about the radically non-human God.

In his article of two years ago Cupitt expressed his views in terms of the history of Christian iconography and the way in which pictures of Jesus showed a progressively divinized Christ during the first few centuries. Of course the key event for Cupitt was when the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion early in the fourth century so that Jesus Christ became an Emperor-like figure, and in the present book he says that the words of the Apostles' Creed (probably a fourth century Roman baptismal creed) can be defended – 'and in Jesus Christ his only Son ... on the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven and he sits on the right hand of the Father, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead' – while the words of the Nicene Creed cannot – 'true God from true God, begotten not created, of one substance with the Father'. The creed with which we are now familiar is in fact a revision of the original creed of Nicea which was made at Constantinople in 381, but it is not simply a matter of chronology for already in 325 (and the Apostles' Creed may be as late as that) the original creed of Nicea had made the above affirmations about Christ and had also condemned those (Arians) who say that 'there was a time when Christ did not exist' or 'before he was begotten he did not exist' or 'he came into being from non-being'.

Nonetheless Don Cupitt concludes that 'the true New Testament teaching is preserved in the Apostles' Creed, and that the Nicene Creed goes a crucial step beyond anything the New Testament says.' This suggests that Cupitt rejects the view that we should go outside the New Testament in our understanding of Jesus, which raises severe hermeneutical difficulties about the whole question of historical understanding. Cupitt says that 'It is necessary ... to start again from Jesus himself' and yet there is a real problem about who is Jesus himself. With his clear advocacy of critical method Cupitt cannot believe that we have access to the "pure" Jesus factual-history; Schweitzer knocked that on the head years ago. Our understanding of Jesus is mediated by the understanding of Paul and the evangelists. But we cannot stop there, for our understanding of Jesus and Paul and the evangelists is also mediated by centuries of Christian tradition: the early creeds, the Fathers of the early Church, Councils, Popes and theologians of all ages. Our mediated understanding of Jesus is a very complex affair. Theological hermeneutics tries to clarify this but there is no hint of theological hermeneutics in Cupitt's book. This is perfectly understandable in so short and semi-popular a book, but his hermeneutical presuppositions remain unstated. Cupitt seems to

assume that we can at least have a direct understanding of the New Testament (a position I find very doubtful as our understanding of the text is determined by all kinds of other factors) but in fact Cupitt is rather choosy in his selection of New Testament texts. He discounts the understanding of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel and the Letters of John, which clearly affirm the incarnation, on Harnack's grounds that we here find the beginning of 'dogmatic faith ... essentially an adaptation of Christianity to the requirements of Greco-Roman culture'. His selectivity of texts within the New Testament is hardly surprising, however, for Kasemann showed that if you try to suppress 'catholicism' in theology and scripture you have to suppress Paul and he wrote the earliest complete documents in the New Testament. 'Non-catholic Christianity' – if it ever existed – had already been overtaken by the catholic variety by the fifties AD. Indeed to maintain his attack on the incarnation Cupitt should have been even more selective than he has been.

When it comes down to it, Cupitt looks for a core of historical truth about Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels because 'in the documents of the Council of Chalcedon the outlook and values of Jesus himself have been almost wholly buried', John has so transformed Jesus's message 'that the original man is barely recognizable', and Paul is too uncomfortable to be looked at in detail. What, for example, would Cupitt make of Philippians 2:5–11 and Colossians 1:15–20; they do not of course express the incarnation as such, as John does (1:14), but they are well on the way: 'the image of the invisible God ... all things were created through him and for him ... in him all things hold together ... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.'

Don Cupitt's 'real Jesus' is a man with a message about God, the God who is, as Kierkegaard said, 'wholly other'. He condemns the orthodox view whereby 'the incarnation doctrine is something God has revealed *about* Jesus' instead of holding that 'there is a self-revelation of God *in* Jesus'. This is typical of Cupitt's caricature of catholic belief. The whole point of the belief in the incarnation is that in Jesus we discover something about *God*. By looking into the face of Jesus we experience, believe and worship God. Even before any of the Gospels had been written Christian belief and preaching had become focused on Jesus. To take a (more or less) random chapter from Paul, God 'has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'; unbelievers are kept 'from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ'; the focal point of preaching is 'Jesus Christ as Lord'. Paul still distinguishes between 'God' and 'Christ'; Christ is by no means 'simply identified with God the Father' as Cupitt says is the case with orthodox belief. But since when has orthodox

belief 'simply identified' the Father and the Son in the Trinity? There is one sense in which they are to be identified ('I and the Father are one') and another sense in which they are to be distinguished ('the Father is greater than I') – and it is all there in the New Testament provided one does not hold to a reduced canon.

When we come to Cupitt's historical Jesus we find that he is the Jesus of a number of synoptic passages. He says that there are three marks of the historical Jesus: 'Jesus was a charismatic prophet of the Kingdom of God', 'Jesus was also an exorcist and healer', 'Jesus was a spiritual master and a teacher of Wisdom.' In connection with the last point Cupitt refers to particular Wisdom books in the Old Testament and Apocrypha and says that 'Their main concern is with morality and piety'. The implication is clearly that Jesus the teacher was mainly concerned with morality and piety; a view as obnoxious to me as it would have been to Paul and a view which is an expression of the Protestant liberalism which Cupitt claims to reject. (*Theological liberalism is in such bad odour these days that I doubt that anyone would actually claim to be a liberal, but God knows there are enough about.*)

In this version, Jesus the eschatological prophet of the Kingdom of God preaches something like C. H. Dodd's realized eschatology. The Kingdom of God cannot be pressed into having a specific meaning, we are told; it is 'that which a certain set of linguistic techniques shows to and actualizes in a receptive hearer'. Jesus did not teach doctrine about the Kingdom. . . . It is above all in his words that he is the Kingdom-bearer or Messiah.' There is a sense in which the Kingdom of God has a political meaning for Cupitt not that God will directly transform human social existence in any apocalyptic sense, it seems rather to be a question of individuals undergoing a spiritual transformation and collectively, first in small communities and then in bigger groups, transforming social values and patterns of behaviour. At this point it all sounds rather Pelagian and we do get suggestions of a semi-Pelagian view of faith where the realization of God's Kingdom in the individual is said to be 'God's absolute action and man's too', for it demands the act which transcends all other acts, the act of faith. Faith sounds rather like a "work" which justifies one before God.

There are also problems with Cupitt's theology of God. The God of the philosophers is out, the God of the Old Testament is in. In itself this is no bad thing, but according to Cupitt we do not see God in the face of Jesus nor in his resurrection. Jesus was a man with a *message* about God (hence the title of the book). In this sense he is the way to salvation; but then, in a less impressive way, so is Isaiah and John the Baptist and the Buddha and Mohammed. Why then should we believe what Jesus says about God? What grounds are there for believing in God and in *this* God, the God of Jesus? Cupitt, like Schleiermacher before him, grounds our

belief in experience: 'The existence of God can only be shown indirectly by showing faith's continual movement, its critical character, its receptivity and the sovereign freedom and the spiritual liberation it enjoys.' Elsewhere faith seems to be self-justifying: 'Unconcerned with speculation of any kind, his [Jesus's] legacy is a body of highly charged words, linguistic actions which incite us to act in faith: to renounce, to decide, to step forward into the reign of God.' For all his advocacy of critical method and his disparagement of dogmatic theology, there is a marked absence of criticism in the establishment of the grounds for his faith, which has now been cut loose from reason and based, it would seem, exclusively on religious experience.

Cupitt believes in a specifically religious non-philosophical God and he leaves us with five rules for speaking about God which are:

- 1 we can say what God is not,
- 2 we can use 'linguistic techniques' like those of Jesus,
- 3 we can use traditional metaphors of a noun plus an adjective, like 'heavenly Father',
- 4 we can use special technical terms to express our new life in God, such as salvation, grace and forgiveness,
- 5 we must learn these rules by means of a religious discipline.

This rather limited theology of God omits large traditional areas of discourse about God and I wonder whether Cupitt would refuse to speculate about creation, God's relation to creatures and objects of creation, grace (other than in experiential terms), predestination, our grounds for believing in God, and so on?

When it comes down to it, Cupitt's religion is typical of present-day liberalism which is not unlike the nineteenth century variety. Cupitt's Jesus does not have the bourgeois characteristics of many nineteenth century "Jesuses"; he is after all said to be an eschatological prophet (though eschatological in rather an existentialist sense not unlike Bultmann's – 'the end of the world', for example, is identified with repentance, *ΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑ*). But this Jesus has strong similarities with the figure Harnack said was a teacher with three main doctrines, for want of a better word: God as the Father of all men, the supreme value of the human soul, and the 'higher morality' of love. We are left in this book with a man who talked in a striking way about, God, and we are assured that if we follow his practical example we can experience a transformation in our lives. In these and other ways already mentioned Cupitt reminds me in certain respects of D. F. Strauss, Scheiermacher and Harnack and one wonders if his theology is any more destined for success than theirs. Important as those scholars were I feel on surer ground by allying myself with Paul, John Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas and Luther.

The fundamental difference between Cupitt and myself can, I think, be pinned down to an hermeneutical issue. The difference is not to be found in his advocacy of the New Testament, indeed I would claim to be much more faithful to it *as a whole* than he is. Nor is the difference to be found in his use of the critical method. I too would want to use that method (who would not these days?) and our conclusions on the value of the Synoptic Gospels might be a little different, particularly on the resurrection, but not substantially so. I must also add that I do not hold the caricatured version of orthodox belief that Cupitt describes. I find this distorted account tedious and in places offensive, and to set up such an obvious Aunt Sally and claim a number of bonus points for having knocked it down is pretty shoddy. The effect is cumulative, but here is one passage which offends me,

“To realise imaginatively what Chalcedon says is very difficult, but here is the closest possible parallel case. Imagine a human who from the moment of his first conception has been taken over by an immensely powerful alien intelligence. For reasons of its own the alien does not wish to swamp him entirely, so it permits him to enjoy a relatively autonomous human intelligence and will; but he is not really an individual human being. He is the alien living a fully human life.”

Cupitt then goes on to castigate ‘Christendom Christianity’ which has ‘elevated Jesus to a cosmic status very like that of ancient kings. He was the universal monarch, and the mediator between the heavenly and earthly realms. He bound the cosmos together, and all authority in church and state descended from him.’ Again ‘In Christendom Jesus Christ came to stand between man and God, so that God looks through Jesus to see man, and from the opposite side man looks through Jesus to see what God is like.’ Let us ignore the reference to kings and monarchs – though to call Jesus ‘the Messiah’ was to see him as a sort of king, an ‘anointed one’; bearing in mind Jn 6:15 – and let us see how Christendom Christianity which Cupitt dislikes so much stands with regard to the New Testament. Colossians (‘in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... he is before all things and in him all things hold together’) and Hebrews (‘He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power’) and John’s Gospel (‘when I am lifted up I will draw all men to myself’) all give Jesus a cosmic status. Hebrews calls him the mediator of a new and better covenant, a high priest ‘who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.’ Colossians (‘He is the head of the body, the church’) and Ephesians (‘the church is subject to Christ’) give him authority over the Church. Romans on the other hand ascribes authority over the state to God, but it is

quite natural that Christ outside the New Testament should have been given that authority. I doubt that Christianity has ever said that God can only see man through Jesus, but 2 Corinthians suggests the converse ('For it is God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'). Just about everything that Cupitt attributes disparagingly to Christendom Christianity is to be found in the New Testament.

Cupitt does not in fact look at New Testament texts in detail. I would, however, strongly recommend another short book sent for review which offers a simple but admirable account of the status of belief in the incarnation in the New Testament. Neil Richardson's *Was Jesus Divine?* (Epworth Press, London, 1979, p. 96, £1.35) is a popular but intelligent book which limits itself to an exposition of scripture author by author with questions for parish discussion groups at the end of each chapter. It does not pretend that there is an explicit statement of the incarnation in a developed form in the New Testament but it does show how that belief is grounded in scripture. It is an honest, non-technical book which obviously rests on genuine critical scholarship.

The difference between Cupitt and myself does not, then, lie in his superior devotion to the New Testament. Our differences would to some extent be affected by different forms of pre-understanding which we bring to bear on the New Testament texts – the differing understanding we have of concepts which make up that pre-understanding. I have explained at greater length elsewhere that we approach biblical texts, or any other historical text for the matter of that, with a conceptual framework which we perforce impose on the text, and how we understand the text will in part be determined by that pre-understanding. But I am not sure that our differences at this level would be decisive. The crucial difference is to do with how we think historical understanding takes place at all. For Cupitt understanding seems scarcely to be an historical process. We have to 'start again from Jesus himself'. It would seem that we can leap the centuries and have direct access to the consciousness of the first century – a view expressed by Karl Barth in the Preface to the second edition of *Romans*. We discover 'the historical Jesus', 'the real Jesus', 'Jesus himself'; the Jesus, I suppose he means, of objective fact unsullied by subjective interpretation. What others made of Jesus at any stage in the Church's history seems to be of no help and in actual fact has been such a distortion of 'the real Jesus' that it has been enormously damaging: 'eventually the faith evolved so far away from Jesus as to be incompatible with his original message and outlook'. A privileged place has been given the New Testament authors, presumably because we are likely to find fewest distortions in such early docu-

ments, but in fact it is clear that even here Cupitt is faced with some problematical texts to which he does not do justice.

I, on the other hand, reckon that one only has access to a figure from the past through a tradition of understanding. One cannot leap the centuries, but one can be linked with a figure from the past by a chain of specific understandings of that figure. Historical understanding always involves interpretation and we must pick our way along this path of traditions through a variety of interpretations, some of which remain enlightening interpretations, some of which were good but have lost their value, some of which we can now see have always been inadequate. But there can be no short cuts here and no direct access to Jesus. Even when we see someone face to face we do not have a pure objective understanding of them. We form a subjective interpretation which develops with further information and further reflection. So it is with Jesus. We must recover what we can of the Jesus of past history by means of critical-historical method, but our understanding of Jesus is not limited by that. We can only reach Jesus by way of Athanasius's Jesus, Ignatius's Jesus, Paul's Jesus, and any number of other Jesus's including Arius's, Schleiermacher's and the rest. Indeed one may be brought closer to Jesus by reading Cupitt, by disagreeing with him and focusing more closely on alternative interpretations.

Understanding is a developing process. In retrospect, in the light of new events, in the light of new forms of social existence, we revise, expand or reduce our historical understanding. It was, I suggest, perfectly legitimate for the early Church to develop its understanding of Jesus, and it was inevitable that they should do so. In this respect I am not sure that Jesus's consciousness and self-awareness – of which Cupitt makes much play – has much relevance. But anyway we do not have any direct access to his consciousness; to some of his words and actions maybe but not his self-awareness, or only to the extent that we find it reflected in his reported words *in the text*. We have the Jesus of Paul and John, Mark and Luke, Hebrews and James, Ignatius and Justin, and so on. How many of these had met Jesus? Probably none, but all are part of a tradition of understanding, a hermeneutical tradition, a Church tradition. I am not suggesting that we have no access to the historical Jesus, but that we find him only in these mediated forms of understanding. The Jesus of pure uninterpreted fact does not and cannot exist, and would be uninteresting if he did. Within this tradition of understanding we give a privileged place to the books of the New Testament but there is no reason why we should accept only the testimony of the New Testament (*sola scriptura*). Scripture is itself the product of the Church; members of the Church produced these documents and the Church decided finally what would go into the canon of the New Testament.



There is no single way of understanding Jesus in the New Testament; the Church's understanding is multi-dimensional. No one expression – Chalcedon or whatever – exhausts the depths of understanding we may have of Jesus and new possibilities in christology are always open, though the Church has closed the way to some types of understanding (Arianism and so on). The Councils of Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon certainly closed the approach of Cupitt's christology, but that does not bother him. What worries me about his position is that it is so elitist. He disparages Church dogma and early Christian preaching (the *kyrgma*) about Jesus alike in favour of critical history, so that the only Christians who have got it right, according to Cupitt, are presumably a number of anonymous early Christians who preceded the authors of the New Testament, Paul and the synoptic evangelists, and some critical theologians and other intellectuals during the past hundred and fifty years. As for the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, as for the Bishops in Council, as for Popes and theologians and dogmatic reactionaries like myself, well ...! But did Paul know the historical Jesus? Paul knew only the figure whom he saw or heard on the Damascus road, 'the image of the invisible God'. Did Mark, with his distinctive interpretation of Jesus in history, know the historical Jesus? Did Peter in his sermons in Acts? All are interpretations of Jesus. How, then, has Don Cupitt such privileged access to the Jesus of history?

Perhaps we should ask *why* Cupitt feels the need to attack the incarnation doctrine. It is not easy to be sure about this on the basis of this book alone, but he clearly feels the need to separate God from man more decisively than does historical Christianity. Here we have a radical dissimilarity between God and man. Grace does not build on nature, it overcomes it. It is close to idolatry to 'believe in a God who cares enough to involve himself, to share our sorrows, to stand alongside us and to share our fate', though this is one of the points developed so convincingly by Jurgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God* (SCM Press, London 1974). It appears that God does not act directly and decisively in history and Christianity becomes similar to other monotheistic religions. Christianity loses much of its distinctiveness and becomes more 'religious', more a human quest for God and a project of self-transformation – what a Lutheran would call "works-righteousness".

Let us make no mistake, I am not complaining that what we may call the second order language of theological reflection is faulty in this book, but that the first order language of belief is wrong. It is Cupitt's confession of faith that many will find unacceptable. This is why this bad book gets such a relatively long review, for Don Cupitt has also become something of a theological pundit on TV recently. But it is also a disappointing book because

a teacher of Cupitt's calibre could have produced a much tougher book, I am sure, which would have made us wrestle with our understanding of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. I consider, however, that orthodox belief in the incarnation has not been falsified here (it has been systematically misrepresented) and no better alternative has been suggested.

## Faith And Experience

### IX The Rational, The Irrational, And the Non-Rational

Simon Tugwell O. P.

Recent discussions of religion have, as we have seen, made much use of the idea of "ineffable experiences". It is suggested that there is, beyond reach of conceptual language and the discursive intellect, a primary *experience* which grounds religion. It is also suggested, at least sometimes, that this experience is common to all religions, in spite of their considerable doctrinal and philosophical differences.

In my last article I expressed some doubts about this suggestion. And it is, in fact, very difficult even to see what it is actually meant to be suggesting. Quite apart from the extreme vagueness of the word "experience", it is not at all clear what sense can be given to "ineffable" simply on the basis of experience. Presumably experiential ineffabilists, if I may so designate them, would not wish to deny that there might be all kinds of experience which make us talk in terms of ineffability or inexpressibility. "It was inexpressibly beautiful". "It was unspeakably horrible". "It was more terrifying than you can conceive of". And so on. But if it is possible to pick out in some way (as, for instance, Otto tries to do) just what kind of inexpressible experience is intended, then it is not clear in what sense it is said to be inexpressible, unless, indeed, nothing more is meant than that the experience is "too wonderful for words".

But perhaps, after all, the concern with ineffable *experiences* has been leading us on a wild goose chase. It is a fact worth noticing that a great deal of the original literature, both philosophical and religious, which is concerned with ineffability and incomprehensibility and such like, does not approach these matters from the vantage point of *experience*. And, in so far as it is this literature which constitutes the sources for the study of ineffability as a religious concept, we must ask whether the modern students of