

# The Sea of Faith 40 Years On

Elaine Graham and Graeme Smith

## ABSTRACT

On the fortieth anniversary of its first broadcast in 1984, this article will consider the main themes of the BBC TV series *The Sea of Faith*, written and presented by the Cambridge philosopher and theologian Don Cupitt. It will attempt to evaluate its significance, then and now. We argue that Cupitt's 'radical' reputation for his advancement of a broadly 'non-realist' understanding of God may have overshadowed other equally significant features, not least his central argument that unless Christianity responded constructively to modern thought it would be doomed to irrelevance. The article will close with some reflections on what Cupitt's manifesto for religion might mean for those who continue to identify with his critiques of traditional theology today.

## KEYWORDS

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION, DON CUPITT, NON-REALISM,  
RELIGION AND MEDIA, RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, *THE SEA OF FAITH*

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Forty years ago, in September 1984, BBC television broadcast a six-part series entitled *The Sea of Faith*. Written and presented by the Cambridge philosopher and theologian Don Cupitt, the series surveyed the major challenges to Christianity to have taken place over the previous three hundred years. Over the course of the series, Cupitt surveyed the thought of major thinkers about religion, all of whom for him represented major challenges to traditional Western religious orthodoxy. Cupitt's memorable evocation of Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach' with its depiction of the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of religious faith forms the opening image of the series. It signifies the decline and marginalisation of Christianity in the West but also the challenges to orthodox belief occasioned by early modern and modern science and philosophy. Hence, Blaise Pascal's philosophy of science introduced a mechanical rather than supernatural view of the universe; David Strauss' Biblical criticism challenged the historical literalism of Biblical orthodoxy; the transcendence and objective reality of God was questioned as merely a socio-psychological projection; religious pluralism undermined claims to the uniqueness of Christ and exclusivist claims to salvation. Intellectually and practically, 'the claims of theological realism and religious seriousness now pull in opposite directions.' (Cupitt 1984b: 54) Cupitt's message was simple. Unless the institutional Church embraced these scientific, democratic and psychological revolutions, it was doomed to irrelevance and extinction.

Arguably, the lasting significance of *The Sea of Faith* lies primarily in its eschewal of a simplistic polarisation of fundamentalism versus atheism in favour of offering a range and diversity of religious scepticism seldom aired and in its attempt to set out an intelligent exposition and defence of complex religious and philosophical thinking for a popular audience. Audience response revealed a range of reactions from within and beyond the churches, suggesting that while some viewers were unwilling to depart from established

orthodoxies, Cupitt's own journey to authentic religious belief inspired many others who had ceased to find orthodox Christianity credible.

## Context

*The Sea of Faith* did not represent Cupitt's first foray into religious broadcasting. Cupitt had in fact been a regular broadcaster in print, TV and radio since the 1970s, contributing book reviews to *Times Literary Supplement*, *London Review of Books*, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, and radio talks to BBC Radio Three and BBC World Service. These were generally on various philosophical or religious matters, well within Cupitt's professional expertise, but they afforded him an audience beyond academia. In 1977 Cupitt collaborated with the producer Peter Armstrong to write and present a two-hour TV documentary *Who was Jesus?* (Cupitt and Armstrong 1977). The success of that programme prompted Armstrong to suggest that he and Cupitt collaborate on a further series on radical theology. This reflected the general direction of Cupitt's own thinking, as expressed in his contribution to *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977) and his own *Taking Leave of God* (1980), both of which had proved controversial.

Cupitt's growing reputation as a theological radical nearly derailed Armstrong's plans for a successor series when the BBC Religion Department declined to commission it. Nevertheless, Armstrong succeeded in persuading a different department, BBC Network Features, to adopt the project. Serendipitously, this move meant that the series was broadcast in a prime-time slot rather than, as Cupitt recalls, being consigned to a 'religious ghetto' (Cupitt 1994: 2). The result was a six-part series with a substantial budget that enabled much of the content to be filmed on location.

## Cupitt's Motivation

One of Cupitt's objectives was to produce an intelligent piece of 'modern' thinking about religion, consistent with his conviction that 'there really is such a thing as serious religious thought' which has 'arisen from a tradition of enquiry and debate that has involved many great thinkers over several centuries.' (Cupitt 1994: 3) The series was therefore primarily a survey of how Western Christianity had responded to the challenges of modernity, such as science, philosophical atheism and humanism, as seen through a pantheon of major intellectuals from Blaise Pascal to Carl Gustav Jung. Given such a focus on the biographical journeys of these figures, it is perhaps not surprising that Cupitt incorporated aspects of his own intellectual and spiritual journey into his account, and was open about his rejection of traditional theism and his embrace of non-realist theology. The opening episode contained a clear statement of his own investment in the substance of religious enquiry and debate, not simply as a matter of professional interest but as a deeply personal quest:

I'm what they call a philosopher of religion. As a Christian, I want to know in what form if any Christian faith is possible for us today. As a philosopher I want to know what view of life and what basis for values still remains to us ... We'll try to be constructive because we'll tell the story in such a way as to show the shape of the new reality that's emerging. (Cupitt 1984a: ep 1)

The series revolved around five key forces of modernity that contributed to a crisis of faith.

### 1. The Rise of Modern Science

One of Cupitt's central theses was that modern science had replaced a supernatural cosmos with 'The Mechanical Universe' (the title of Episode 1), in which humanity is placed within the laws of natural history as one animal species among many. Once religion defined and delineated our understandings of time and space as either secular or sacred, but the rise of

empiricism and rationalism deposed Scripture and tradition as authoritative sources of knowledge. This signalled the erosion of the 'world of gods and spirits' in favour of a 'man-made [*sic*] world of ceaseless change and movement.' (Cupitt 1984a: ep 1)

Drawing on the thought of the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, Cupitt demonstrated how the vastness of the universe and a shift to a heliocentric world-view diminished any sense of human uniqueness. A mathematical, rational universe is devoid of feeling, meaning or 'heart'. For Pascal, however, the hidden God can still be encountered not in the power or authority of tradition but in the person of the crucified Christ. This shift away from religion as external, objective truth towards faith as affect or sensibility, serving to guide one's inner life became one of the series' central themes, noting the gradual emphasis within modernity of religion as focusing 'on the psychological, on conversion and grace and the believer's inner life, rather than the old cosmological themes.' (Cupitt 1984b: 52)

In Episode 2, 'The Human Animal', Cupitt noted how the emergence of natural history called the literal truth of Genesis' account of creation into question, and introduced notions of nature as ordered, logical, open to systematic investigation. Darwin's theories of natural selection and evolution relegated humanity to the realm of animals, sharing common ancestry with other primates.

Similarly, a generation of psychological scientists, beginning with Sigmund Freud, posited that beneath the layers of civilised, rational consciousness lie deeper, more primal desires. The rise of the modern talking therapies such as psychoanalysis replaced traditional forms of the cure of souls. While Sigmund Freud regarded religious belief as the projection of harmful and neurotic desires, Carl Gustav Jung advanced a more positive understanding in which religious and mythical archetypes were the symbolic expressions of universal human instincts. Science and religion corresponded to the conscious and unconscious mind and logic

and myth respectively. Cupitt portrays Jung as an early non-realist: religion is a human construct, as a tangible expression of inner psychic processes, but nevertheless essential to our psychological well-being.

## **2. The impact of Biblical criticism**

In Episode 3, entitled 'Going by the Book', Cupitt traced the impact of modern Biblical criticism on traditional understandings of authority and the nature of religious understanding. A literal interpretation of the Bible only served to highlight its improbability and the gap between the ancient world and our own. Once again, the criticism of religious authority mirrored wider philosophical movements: so David Friedrich Strauss, influenced by Hegelian understandings of history as constantly evolving, shaped by human choices and contexts, argued that Scripture should be viewed as a product of its historical context, as myth rather than history or literal fact.

The authority of Scripture endures, however, in its capacity to express perennial existential concerns in mythical, allegorical or narrative forms. A core religious message can be distilled, which is one of 'reverence for life', a this-worldly ethic. For Cupitt, the scholar, medical missionary and musician Albert Schweitzer exemplified this approach, regarding Jesus' message as a command to 'follow me'. Christianity is not a doctrine but a way of life: 'its truth consists solely in its continual subjective appropriation and enactment in the believer's practice; and even that truth can never be possessed but only lived-towards.' (Cupitt 1984b: 153) In that respect, for Cupitt, Schweitzer was the 'first post-Christian Christian' (1984a: ep 3).

## **3. Radical humanism**

Another revolution within modern thought for Cupitt was its claim that human agency, rather than divine will, determined the course of history and was the source of moral

integrity. This occupied Cupitt in Episode 4. The scientific and democratic revolutions of eighteenth-century Europe confirmed a belief in the virtues of human self-determination in the face of (religious) autocracy. Societies were rebuilt according to new laws of liberty, equality and fraternity and the conviction that society could operate on the basis of reason and enlightenment rather than superstition or tradition. Such a focus on radical immanence and human experience as constituting the nature of reality should, he argued, disabuse us of fantasies of a world beyond this one. In order to become truly free as the subjects of history, rather than its objects, humanity must liberate itself from all illusions of obedience to any external power. Hence Karl Marx's critique of religion.

For Søren Kierkegaard, religion is not objective truth but a matter of sensibility and feeling. Faith is an act of freedom and commitment in which we seek personal authenticity by choosing to act on our decisions. Religious faith entails striving for integrity in one's quality of existence, free of illusion or hypocrisy; 'it is through maintaining and enduring the tragic contradictions of life, and not by resolving them, that the human spirit is tuned to its highest pitch.' (Cupitt 1984b: 151) At this point Cupitt is perhaps at his most autobiographical.

#### **4. Religious Pluralism**

Episode 5, 'Religion Shock' examined how the influence of Eastern philosophies and religious systems influenced a new wave of thinkers and practitioners towards an understanding of religious faith as a universal and this-worldly ethic. Contemporary fascination with what is sometimes called 'New Age Religion' had a much longer history, rooted in Western encounters with the world religions from the nineteenth century onwards. The awareness of religious pluralism alerted people once more to the contingency of religious traditions, dismantling claims to absolute truth by any one tradition and dethroning an exclusively Western world-view of Christendom. Nevertheless, Cupitt insisted on the



continuing relevance of religion as radical immanence, a search for personal authenticity and moral purpose, even in the face of the 'coming of a world more secular, more spiritually disorientated and more disorderly than ever before' (Cupitt 1984a: ep 5).

## 5. Meaning as fluid and contingent

Despite its iconoclastic nature, argued Cupitt, there is an ambivalence at the heart of modern thought. The liberation of human will and creativity represents a release from divine tyranny and the beginnings of human self-determination; but it also signals the end of metaphysics as the sure foundation of meaning and value. Friedrich Nietzsche's pronouncement that 'God is dead' was at once both hopeful and terrible and illustrated the disenchantment of (and with) modernity. Episode 6, 'The New World' therefore explored the question of whether, in the aftermath of the demise of traditional theism, anything can be salvaged. Once again, the theme of personal authenticity – even stoicism -- in the face of doubt and loss emerged as Cupitt's favoured spiritual path. 'There is no big answer or final truth, and the evils of life will remain unavenged. We will never be any better, or know any better than we do now.' (Cupitt 1984c: 17-18)

Nietzsche's austere creed, like that of Kierkegaard's, involved facing the world without illusion or false moralism, in order fully to realise one's own authentic being. This draws us close to the abyss of nihilism and despair, but there can be no other-worldly escape to an alternative heavenly realm, but merely the determination to remain true to our destiny. Again, the solution is to reject the objective God of the cosmos and Scripture and turn towards the inner life and an embrace of the God of the heart, 'the soul's living ideal' (Cupitt 1984a: ep 6). Similarly, Cupitt's discussion of Ludwig Wittgenstein showed early signs of his later interest in religion as expressed in everyday speech and his emphasis on moral action as the essence of Christian faith. 'Faith in God can shape your life, without its being necessary to suppose that God exists objectively "out there".' (Cupitt 1984b: 218)

## God is Real in a Non-Realist Sense

Throughout the series, Cupitt traced a movement within religion after modernity from a focus on belief (in the person of a real, transcendent God) to an emphasis on religious living: a shift from ontology to practice. This argument was already apparent in one of the articles published in advance of the TV screenings:

Religion and faith come to be seen as human and voluntary. Faith is a virtue, a disposition, an attitude to life, rather than a content believed ... There is no longer anything out there for faith to correspond to, so the only test of faith now is the way it works out in life. The objects of faith, such as God, are seen as guiding spiritual ideals that we live by, and not as beings ... The world is not made of *beings* but of *meanings*, and religious meanings are purely practical ... Religious activity now has to be undertaken just for its own sake, as an autonomous and practical response to the coolly perceived truth of the human condition. That is true religion: all else is superstition. (Cupitt 1984d: 5, authors' emphasis).

Yet in the face of radical doubt, argued Cupitt, one must embrace the uncertainties of one's existence and choose life. This is possible if we allow the idea of 'God' to function as a kind of regulative ideal, rather than an objective being.

God ... is the sum of our values, representing to us their ideal unity, their claims upon us, and their creative power ... God is man-made only in the non-startling sense that everything is ... But even on my account God is as real for us as everything else can be, and more primally authoritative than anything else is. (Cupitt 1984b: 269, 271)

With this goes an onerous challenge: to embrace life to the full, to choose one's path and to allow personal integrity to serve as one's moral compass. 'We must choose what to be, what

to value, and what world to constitute about ourselves, and that fearsome responsibility is absolutely primal.’ (1984b:20)

At the close of the series, Cupitt reiterated his central arguments. First, the premise that a modern scientific world-view renders much of traditional religious thought incomprehensible, such that ‘the claims of theological realism and the claims of religious seriousness pull in opposite directions.’ (1984b: 229) It followed, then, that contemporary religious belief must turn from traditional theism to a form of non-realist theology in which the most pressing questions concern not the existence of God but the meaning and practical efficacy of the idea of God. (1984b: 245) A third theme, that of the primacy of practice over doctrine, was summarised thus:

Our search for new ways of achieving selfhood, of gaining immediacy after reflection, of at last “becoming a Christian”, cannot be just a thought-experiment cast in the form of doctrinal speculation; it has to be performed in reality and in deed. (1984b: 266)

In his concluding remarks, Cupitt also confirmed his own personal understanding of religious faith not as assent to propositional belief so much as a way of life, annoying some of his critics who believed his non-realism disqualified him from continuing to call himself a Christian.

When I look into the void of the modern situation and I see that it’s entirely up to me what I make of myself and my life, I find I need religion to give me a path, to give my soul shape, to give me categories to live by, goals to pursue. I’m a priest in the Church of England and I practise in a rather traditional way, but when I say the creed I regard it not as giving me supernatural information but is showing me a way to walk in.

(Cupitt 1984a: ep 6)

## Reception and controversy

The pattern of correspondence received by Cupitt in response to the TV series<sup>1</sup> shows an initial predominance of adverse reactions through the early episodes, although gradually a more receptive (and perhaps considered?) set of correspondence began to arrive. By the end of the series, positive and negative sentiments were more evenly balanced. But what is also remarkable is the range and breadth of opinions and reactions voiced in these letters to Cupitt. This tells us something about the state of religious observance and popular spirituality. For many, the institutional Church had lost its authority and ability to dictate their beliefs. People were not afraid to make their own decisions about what constituted credible and functional beliefs. Alongside this loss of Church control, people's attention had turned to what worked for them in terms of their personal faith commitments. Religion had become more pragmatic and performative, a return perhaps to the norms of previous eras. Cupitt was concerned that unless the Church could speak to this new generation, accepting its intellectual premises, then it would become increasingly irrelevant.

## Evaluation

What were Cupitt's intentions in making *The Sea of Faith*? Despite his detractors' claims to the contrary, Cupitt was not seeking to destroy the Church or promote a secular atheist agenda. Rather, Cupitt's mission, both in *The Sea of Faith* series and throughout his career, has been to rework religious faith in the face of modern and postmodern world-views

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<sup>1</sup> The Don Cupitt Archive, Gladstone's Library, Hawarden contains over twelve boxes of correspondence in addition to Cupitt's other published and unpublished material.

in order that it can continue to offer a life-affirming, robust and efficacious path through life (see Graham and Smith 2023).

As we have already observed, Cupitt himself was on something of a theological and spiritual journey at the time of the making of *The Sea of Faith*. A long view of his career reveals that his thinking was constantly evolving. Cupitt admits that *The Sea of Faith* was far from a definitive statement of his own intellectual or religious convictions. He recalls, ‘Until 1993, I was more-or less [*sic*] chronically in intellectual turmoil, a condition in which you can perhaps write complicated, interesting books, but you certainly cannot do large-scale media work.’ (Cupitt 1994: 3) This provides an important clue not only to the nature of the TV series itself but also, arguably, to Cupitt’s intellectual career as a whole: better at posing questions than resolving them, restless, conditional, highly subjective. Perhaps this element of Cupitt himself as a seeker after truth as well as authoritative academic philosopher was one aspect of his appeal to his viewers.

*The Sea of Faith* marked something of a mid-point in Cupitt’s career, as he moved away from an interest in classic philosophy of religion to his rejection of metaphysical theology and embrace of non-realism towards a later interest in postmodern philosophy (see Hyman 2018). Yet while the series may stand at the cusp of Cupitt’s transition to postmodern theology and philosophy, its core premises remain largely framed by a Western modernist paradigm. To condense Cupitt’s key preoccupations and recurrent themes throughout the series is to see how much he favoured the idea of the heroic religious life, in which the autonomous individual, divested of the trappings of metaphysics, undertakes a spiritual journey involving detached, rational, disinterested self-actualisation. ‘In the modern situation, the individual stands absolutely alone with his [*sic*] freedom before the ultimate questions of life’ (Cupitt 1984a: ep 6). Scott Cowdell (1988: 38) speaks of this as ‘Cupitt’s way of purgation’: a

surrender of metaphysical foundations in order to embrace a more austere, decentred spirituality.

## Lessons for Today

In some respects, *The Sea of Faith* reflected the values of its day. To a twenty-first century audience, Cupitt's choice of thinkers appears anachronistically white, Western and male. Furthermore, Cupitt's particular form of existentialist asceticism is vulnerable to criticism for its endorsement of a Western, androcentric ideal. Feminist theologians such as Valerie Saiving (1960) and Daphne Hampson (2002) have long been critical of the implicit gender bias to be found in the Kantian elevation of individual autonomy and self-determination as the highest moral ideal. Esther Reed notes that while many feminist theologians and philosophers resonated with Cupitt's critique of the hierarchical and dualistic nature of patriarchal religion, his non-realist emphasis on the absence of God merely reinforced their sense of exclusion from dominant religious discourse in which women were denied access to the transcendent and forbidden to name themselves as made in the image of the divine (Reed 1994).

Similarly, apart from a brief discussion of liberation theology in Episode 6, Cupitt's discussion lacked any dimension of religion as political engagement. Yet *The Sea of Faith* coincided with perhaps one of the most political periods in the recent history of the Church of England, such as the controversy following the publication of *Faith in the City* (1985) and leading Bishops' (such as David Jenkins) criticisms of Thatcherism. As one critic commented on the tenth anniversary of the series, 'overall one is left with the impression that little express connection is made between equally radical social and political theologies, such as, for example the liberation movements that have developed over the past couple of decades.' (Hart 1994: 9)

What might such a TV series look like today? As religious belief and practice has dwindled to the margins of public life, the question of the nature, prominence and tenor of religious broadcasting itself is coming under increasing scrutiny (Ahmed 2022). Even in 1984, Cupitt was aware that despite the success of his series, there was much that was uncertain about the future of such programming. After the series was finished, Cupitt speculated on its aftermath and the questions which the BBC should consider next. First, whether ‘there is a public demand for open and critical exploration of difficult and often controversial questions in philosophy and critical thought.’ (Cupitt 1984e: 24) Second, he wondered whether the documentary format had been the best approach, conceding that while the series’ focus on key representative figures with a strong narrative helped to mediate Cupitt’s central arguments, it also imposed its own constraints.

Nevertheless, there is much of lasting significance and value to be found in revisiting *The Sea of Faith* after forty years. First, it reminds us of a range and diversity of religious scepticism which even today, is seldom aired. Despite its focus on a particular kind of Western canonical thinkers, it is clear that Cupitt was not simply presenting the religious alternatives as a straightforward dichotomy between fundamentalism or literalism and atheism. Rather, the series amounts to an *apologia* for the view that critical thinking and profound questioning might still be compatible with an intelligent religious commitment. In terms of the mission of public sector broadcasting in the UK, it stands as an important attempt to present academic theological and philosophical thinking which took account of modern and postmodern intellectual norms. The responses to the series reveal much to us about the transitions already underway in mid-twentieth century British society, from an audience identifying largely with Western Christianity (however heterodox their spiritual journeys might be) towards a religiously pluralist and disaffiliated population. That legacy - of the series itself, the vitality of audience response, not to mention Cupitt’s own unstinting

commitment to religious authenticity – should affirm those today who continue to look for opportunities to engage in open, critical and honest discussion about the existence of God, the nature of faith and the future of the Church.

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