

“Taking Leave of God”

OR

“Holding Fast to God”

Keith Ward vs. Don Cupitt

Two Recent Theologies

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There is definitely a return to natural theology.¹ In the 1970s, we had the two books of Richard Swinburne: *The Coherence of Theism*² and *The Existence of God*.³ But now, in the early 1980s, we have a book of Don Cupitt which causes a certain scandal by its very title: *Taking Leave of God*.⁴ It provoked a reply from Keith Ward under the title: *Holding Fast to God*.⁵

I want in this paper to present briefly the views of Don Cupitt and Ward's reaction to them. But, before I present Don Cupitt's views, it will be useful to recall its antecedents in Logical Positivism and the Linguistic Philosophy of Religion.

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1. cf. the book of F. H. Cleobury : *A Return to Natural Theology*, London, James Clarke and Co., 1967.

2. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.

3. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979.

4. London, S. C. M. Press, 1980.

5. London, SPCK, 1982.

Logical Positivism and Linguistic Approach to Religion

It is well known that, for some 30 years, between 1930 and 1960, the intelligentsia in British Philosophy kept almost completely silent about God, in some of its most important gatherings, like those of the *Mind* Association. This was due to the influence of Logical Positivism. Since propositions about God could not be verified in the sense the Logical Positivists wanted it, they were all considered as meaningless and therefore could no more be entertained in philosophical discussions.

But since the fact could not be denied that there existed a great deal of religious language, both in the religions of the world and in the philosophies of all times, the Positivists, turned Linguistic Analysts, had to see what was at least the use of all that religious language. For, now, the meaning of propositions was no more confined to the objects of discourse as man, the world, or God, but extended to cover their use. A proposition could be meaningful, because, for instance in Ethics, it could be the expression of my feelings. A proposition like : "It is wrong to punish the innocent" would not be empirically verifiable but was used to voice my emotion of revulsion when I see an innocent punished.

In the 1950s, there was the curious view of Professor R. B. Braithwaite of Cambridge, who wrote *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*.⁶

He held that religious statements are like moral assertions which for him were only expressions of the readiness of the one who makes them to subscribe to a certain policy. If I say that an employer must be just, I mean that I am ready to pay just wages, if I become an employer. Thus religious assertions would also be "declarations of commitments to a way of life."

But religious assertions differ from moral assertions because they are connected in the various religions with different 'stories'. For instance, if we say that 'God is love', it means that we are ready to follow an 'agapeistic way of life,' i.e. to serve others for the love of God.

⁶ Cambridge, University Press, 1955.

Common to all religions would be the 'story' that the followers of religion are doing the will of God. But God is only a 'story'.

Reactions to this view were not slow to come. Some people wondered how Professor Braithwaite reconciled such a view with his Christian profession.

Professor Ramsey of Oxford pointed out : "It does not follow that the only alternative to 'straightforwardly empirical' is 'fictional'.

Later, there were also the writings of Bishop Robinson, who called for a better understanding of God, in his book *Honest to God* (1963). This was a different approach but which led to serious ambiguity when he raised such question "Can a truly contemporary person not be an atheist?"⁷ He answered saying that a contemporary person should be an atheist. I found students of theology who thought this was his true position, while actually he meant only : if you have the conception of God held by many, then one could as well be an atheist than admit that, and then he went on proposing a better conception of God, according to him, as the ground of being, rather than God up there.

I do not want to discuss the merits and demerits of this new understanding, but it is symptomatic of the effort made to renew the understanding of religion and of its implications.

We need not recall the story of the 'death of God' theology, and of the return to a more realistic theology. But something of it remains in the view of Don Cupitt which I shall now expose.

Don Cupitt's "Taking Leave of God"

Don Cupitt is Dean of Emmanuel College in Cambridge. From a reviewer of his books, I came to know that he is also a priest of the Church of England.

On the title page of his book *Taking Leave of God*, published in 1980, he quotes one of Eckhart's sermon which says : "Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for

7. *The New Reformation*, 1965, p. 107.

God's sake, he takes leave of God."⁸ Incidentally, it must be noted that the quotation given here implies, it seems to me, a misinterpretation of Eckhart. For Eckhart did not recommend a leaving of God as Cupitt suggests in his book, but a leaving of God as manifested in the Trinity of the three Divine Persons to seek the Godhead which is the ground of God and is indescribable. But let us not anticipate our critical remarks.

Don Cupitt's main interest is in a spirituality of radical human freedom. Cupitt wants to soften, if not eliminate, the objective sense of God. According to him, "spirituality precedes doctrine,"⁹ namely, the attitude of interiority counts more than truths supposed to copy an external reality. "God is a symbol that represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us and promises to us." At the core of spirituality is spiritual autonomy. We must decide for ourselves what we want to do. What counts is the law of charity in our heart.

We need, he advises, to change our sense of God. First of all, he claims that the proofs of God have broken down. He rejects, and rightly so, the ontological argument to prove God's existence. But he rejects also the arguments of Thomas Aquinas on the ground that modern philosophy has refuted the sense of motion and of cause. He makes the argument of Aquinas from finality verge towards the optimism of Leibniz and then he shows that such an optimism is unattainable. Thus the argument from design is also disposed of.

He concludes : the arguments "that begin from premises about religious experience, knowledge and morality do not seem to be particularly friendly to objective or realistic theism."¹⁰

Then, he rejects the objection that his chipping away at theological realism leads to a kind of reductionism, i.e. not taking the full views of reality but reducing it. Though he invites us to pay less attention to dogmas about God and

8. Henceforth this book will be quoted with the abbreviations T. L. G.

9. T. L. G., p. 11.

10. T. L. G., p. 33.

more to religious practices, he rejects also the objection that this leads to subjectivism. Religion is made up of the attitudes we are ready to take to express our faith. Thus Cupitt holds a kind of expressivism. "To believe in God is simply to declare an intention to be loyal to religious values whatever happens."¹¹ Thus faith is more than an emotion, because, if we have attained the proper spirituality, we are able to maintain certain attitudes, whatever be our emotions. We are ready to try to change our whole life, to satisfy the inner demand which is the essence of religion. Religion is a claim from the self. But even worship does not require a realist view of God. Cupitt places the essence of religion in disinterestedness. "The religious...is the highest degree of dispassionate compassion, selfless self-awareness, and *disponibilitate*, or attentive and free availability to others."¹² This way of looking at religion, he claims, would by-pass the difficulty created by theological pluralism. We could all be religious without having the same views. God could still be spoken of, but as in the Gospel, Jesus spoke of a precious pearl, not in the objective metaphysical sense that the pearl or God would exist.

Cupitt thinks further that God, as usually understood, threatens human freedom and autonomy. "For us God is no longer a distinct person over against us who authoritatively and by his *ipse dixit* imposes the religious demand upon us."¹³ "God is the religious requirement personified."¹⁴ Cupitt interprets the meaning of "God acts" only in the sense that I change my life by taking possession of it. "The word 'God' is an incorporating or unifying symbol connoting the whole of what we are up against in the spiritual life."¹⁵ Thus, for Cupitt, "We choose to be religious because it is better so to be." According to him, it is not the case that God first exists and wants us to be religiously minded. If God would be and would have any particular determination of his being, that would restrict the freedom which has to be the essence of our spirituality.¹⁶ Cupitt writes:

11. T. L. G., p. 54.

12. T. L. G., p. 76.

13. T. L. G., p. 85.

14. *Ibid.*

15. T. L. G., p. 97.

16. T. L. G., p. 107.

"On my account faith is a free-undertaken commitment to live by certain values and subject to a particular standard."¹⁷

"Faith is a virtue, not a means by which we gain esoteric information about occult entities."¹⁸

On the realist view, to justify faith, one must justify the beliefs. On Cupitt's view, the justification of faith is more like the justification of morality. One looks for the attitudes one is ready to adopt.

"Religion, then, is about holiness, exaltation, power, lordship, spirituality, autonomy, freedom, knowledge, blessedness, universality and transcendence over nature."¹⁹

What then becomes of God? Cupitt answers: "I continue to speak of God and to pray God. God is the mythical embodiment of all one is concerned with in the spiritual life. He is the religious demand and ideal, the pearl of great price and the enshriner of values. He is needed but as a myth."²⁰

Keith Ward's "Holding Fast to God"

Keith Ward, a Professor at King's College London, has written "A Reply to Don Cupitt", and to follow the lead given by Cupitt, he entitles his reply: "*Holding Fast to God*."²¹ It was published in 1982, two years after Cupitt's book.

Against Cupitt's stand, Ward defends a definite form of theism. Ward had not always held such theism. On the contrary, in his book: *The Concept of God* (1972) he had held views amounting to atheism. But he moved away from this atheism, to what is described by Sir Norman Anderson, in the Foreword to the book, as "a fairly traditional Christian view."²² Ward believes that "Cupitt's curious blend of Logical Positivist Philosophy, scientific theory and quasi-Buddhist agnosticism simply 'will not do'."²³

17. T. L. G., p. 113.

18. T. L. G., p. 126.

19. T. L. G., p. 156.

20. T. L. G., p. 166.

21. Henceforth referred to as H. F. G.

22. H. F. G., p. vi.

23. *Ibid.*

Ward is ready to admit that Cupitt has well seen the problems which beset the human mind today in matter of religion and even concerning Christian faith. He writes: "his diagnosis is right; but his proposed cure for pain is to kill the patient. That does stop the pain; but it also stops the patient".²⁴

He finds Cupitt's solutions too hasty and that he is not sufficiently ready to consider the problems at greater depth. Keith Ward has done this in a book entitled: *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*; this book would deserve a special separate study. I shall record here only Ward's reaction to Cupitt's book. Ward advocates a blending of experience; revelation and reason. Theology is the interpretation which results from such blending. We have some religious experience and it has gone on throughout centuries. Revelation, for him, is also not just a set of propositions somehow dictated inerrantly to passive human transcribers. It needs to be formulated by human imaginations, responding insights, inspirations or moments of illumination very hard to put into words.

He adds: "Reason cannot prove God, but belief in the existence of God should be shown to be reasonable. This is the function of the so-called 'proofs of God'".²⁶

Ward accuses Cupitt of having been too much under the influence of Positivism and its anti-metaphysical bias: Kant also has influenced him.

Ward is ready to appeal to causality to explain the world and concludes: "If there is to be a final explanation, there will have to be something which is not caused".²⁷

Ward advances into the defence of certain attributes of God, and thus he is opposed to Cupitt's claim that the ultimate should be left undeterminate. We need not enter into this discussion which would force us to spend too much time on Ward's theology.

24. H. F. G., p. x.

25. Oxford, Blackwell, 1982.

26. H. F. G., p. 14.

27. H. S. G., p. 24.

But Ward then passes on to a rather devastating attack on the basis of Cupitt's rejection of the usual understanding of God, viz, his claim that human autonomy requires the fading out of God.

Ward finds Cupitt's sense of freedom confusing. Cupitt takes it, Ward says, in at least 16 senses, of which Ward analyses only eight, from autonomy as civil self-government, to autonomy acquired by the discovery that religious language has not to be taken like other forms of language, allenging in between that an autonomy which accepts obedience to God, would amount to sinfulness. Thus Ward concludes: let us leave out the question of autonomy for solving the question of God.

From here on, Ward advances to his own positive understanding of God, of his creative action, providence and help to salvation. All this is diametrically opposed to Cupitt's defence of autonomous spirituality and religiosity. It would be interesting to follow Ward in the detail of his argumentation, but I prefer to present now my own reaction to Cupitt's views. I shall do so by considering mainly the relation of freedom and religion as I understand them.

God, as Symbol of our Spirituality

But before I come to this discussion I want to point out that Cupitt's attempt to have a Christianity without God is not quite new. As I said earlier, we had Braithwaite's "*Empiricist View of the Nature of Religious Belief*." But, there, God was still part of the story. Thus Christianity was not quite left without God. In an interesting chapter of his book *Philosophers and Philosophies*,²⁸ Father F. Copleston speaks of "Christianity without Belief in God" as the subtitle of Mr. Alistair Kee's *The Way of Transcendence*.²⁹ Kee himself left that way open, but he accepted that one might not follow it and still be a Christian. Copleston rejects this: "If the creative God is eliminated, the resulting interpretation of the world is no longer Christian."³⁰ Copleston thus anticipated Keith Ward's reaction to Don Cupitt.

28. London, Search Press, 1976, pp. 68-78.

29. Harmondsworth, 1971.

30. *Loc. cit.*, p. 77.

Let me say first what I appreciate in Don Cupitt's approach. I appreciate his emphasis on spirituality. He emphasizes the priority of the law of charity in our heart. St. Ignatius of Loyola emphasized this also at the very beginning of his *Constitutions* for the Society of Jesus, but because he thought that this law of charity is inscribed by God into the heart of men or given by His grace. Cupitt may neglect the origin of that law, but still he pays attention to it and recognizes his presence. Also I like his inclusion in religion, as I said earlier, of "the highest degree of dispassionate compassion, selfless self-awareness, 'disponibilitate' or attentive and free availability to others."³¹

I quote here at length a text, to specify the religious values Cupitt stands by :

"It is good that one should appraise oneself and one's life with an unconditional religious seriousness that tolerates no concealment or self-deception."

"It is good that one should cultivate meditation and contemplative prayer, and especially the inner fortitude and resilience needed to combat evils of all kind."

"It is good that one should come to transcend the mean defensive ego and learn absolute disinterestedness and purity of heart."

"It is good that one should commit oneself to existence in religious hope and receptivity to grace."

"In spite of all the ugliness and cruelty in the world, it is good that one should at least sometimes experience and express cosmic awe and love."

"It is good that such values as these should not only be cultivated in and for oneself, but that they should shape our attitudes towards other people and be expressed in our social life."³²

All these values are beautiful and it is good for us to be reminded of them. So I would not like that my further questioning should sound as a disparagement of them.

31. T. L. G., p. 76.

32. T. L. G., p. 82.

Yet certain questions have to be asked. Sincerity to oneself is surely a virtue. But shall we be able to maintain it so well, if there is nobody who finally pierces the hearts and minds and judges our sincerity or insincerity? Should disinterestedness be that integral? If we are made in such a way that we have more joy in giving than in receiving, what is wrong with enjoying that joy? To try to cancel that joy might lead to self destruction.

What is the point of religious hope, if it is only hope in what we can achieve? What is receptivity of grace, if nobody gives? What is the meaning of thanksgiving before the world, if there is nobody to thank, except the world itself?

All the hints coming from these religious attitudes point, beyond an ideal, to a real being who should be there to scrutinize our hearts, whom we should thank for having made us the way we are made, who can support and help us, weak as we are.

All these values, as I said, are wonderful and attractive, but are we such giants and supermen, to have to cultivate them, in a context of "as if" God were there, rather than in the context of His reality and real action in us and in the world? Have we to try, alone, with the help of a symbolic ideal only? Why is Cupitt blocking our way to a real God?

I find his analysis of the proof of God's existence rather simplistic. It is true that modern science has given new account of local movement, but a metaphysics of ontological change is still required. Hume may have attacked causality, but Fr. Copleston, with all his learning in history of philosophy still admits the use of the principle of causality.³³ I do not admit Cupitt's objections to the arguments for God's existence, for these objections are more casual and less precise than the arguments they oppose.

Freedom and Religion

Having said this much against his negative attitude to God, I want now to consider what seems to me the crux of

33. *The Tablet*, 8 Dec., 1984, p. 1231.

his opposition to God, or his main reason for "taking leave of God", and that is his understanding of autonomy.

We mentioned already Keith Ward's objection to Cupitt's presentation of freedom. Ward said there were 16 meanings of it and he finds this confusing. I discern all the same a basic sense of freedom which identifies it with autonomy. And it is here that I would disagree most with Cupitt.

The remarkable book of Paul Ricoeur, the French phenomenologist of Paris, on "*Freedom and Nature*"³⁴ has vindicated quite some time ago, the meaning of human freedom, as "only a human freedom".³⁵ That means, on the one hand, that to be free is not necessarily to have that autonomy or freedom which could be conceived as divine autonomy and freedom.

On the other hand, without perhaps being aware of it, Cupitt wants also an autonomy or a freedom somewhat similar to Sartre's sense of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. A freedom without norms or any restriction whatsoever.

So, his concept of freedom falls short of what I think to be real freedom, on two counts at least. First it is transformed into a divine-like freedom, which is not the case, and secondly it is conceived in negative terms of absence of constraints or necessity, while it is actually more as a power of self-possession and of choice than as an absence of something, or even of necessity. There are necessities to which we are free to consent as the one of our character and that can make our greatness.

If our freedom is conceived as another divine freedom, then God would be intolerable to it, as God would not tally with another God. There cannot be two infinities. If our freedom is a spiritual power which is finite, then it can be shared and participated from another infinite freedom, as the knowledge of a teacher can be shared by the students, without the teacher losing anything because the students

34. Translated from the French by E. V. Kohak, Evanston-Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 1966.

35. cf. The concluding chapter of the book.

come to know; and without the students being denied true knowledge, because the teacher did not lose anything.

The rejection of God for the sake of human autonomy thus seems to me to be based on a wrong understanding of man, before it is also a wrong understanding of God.

Sartre had also in his play *"The Flies"* presented a God which was jealous of human freedom, because Sartre had projected into God his own biased and wrong understanding of human freedom.

Having refused Cupitt's main reason "to take leave of God" I have not developed here my reasons "to hold fast to God" as Ward invites us to do. But I would surely do so for the reason not only that I have faith in Him, but also that I have philosophical arguments for his existence and an understanding of human freedom which is quite at home with religious attitudes and values.

At the invitation of Professor D. Mackinnon of the School of Divinity in Cambridge, I had, some years back, given there a lecture on "Approaches to the Philosophical knowledge of God." I have no time to develop here these approaches, but they tried to overcome the agnosticism of Kant regarding metaphysical arguments for God's existence. I described there the arguments of Newman, of Maurice Blondel, and especially Marechal's and Longeran's efforts to go beyond Kant.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have to be grateful to Don Cupitt for his maintaining, in the materialistic context of today, the value of spirituality. We have to be grateful to Keith Ward for helping us to avoid making the mistake of Don Cupitt who upholds the spiritual values at the expense of true religion.

It is for us to find, in our faith in God and in our thinking about God, the sense of a deeper human freedom. Just as my freedom does not require that you cease to be free, so also our human freedom does not require religion without

God. Love which is the supreme value does not require that the other be not there. But the more he is there, the freer he is, the freer can I be and be truly loving.

We must not only hold fast to God ; we can also love Him and expect much from His love. Is it not this that Christianity is about : to tell us that God loved us first ?