

Volume VI Number 1

Spring 1983

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A THEOLOGICAL FABLE

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Two theologians once contemplated a ravine. The question was how to cross it without falling in. One theologian had left home some time ago and carried with him only a small knapsack which contained a few philosophical tools, gathered here and there but hardly constituting a complete set. Also in the bag were a few light strips and struts of a recently developed but relatively untried theological alloy. It was not clear whether the tools and the alloy had been manufactured in Birmingham or Banares, or perhaps in some continental conceptual factory. (In fact the other theologian thought that they had been manufactured in the Scilly Isles and regularly said so – but more of him anon).

The first theologian decided to try to cross the ravine by using his tools and alloy strips to build a foot-bridge capable of taking at least one person. Thus he set out to build such a bridge, anchored on this bank and gradually stretching out towards the other side. Since the light at that part of the gorge was a little hazy he wasn't quite sure how far it was to the other side. However he did not want to remain on this side so he decided that he would use his philosophical tools and theological alloys to build a bridge in the hope that he would have enough alloy to reach the other side.

Now the other theologian was also travelling light but he had with him a rather different set of tools, which were old, tried and trusty tools (indeed, 'too old to be any longer trusty', the first theologian thought) stamped with the hallmark 'Metaphysics'. In addition he had some old maps which indicated that the ravine has once been spanned by a single-arched medieval timber bridge of, for that time at least, rather grand dimensions.

His tactic was to try to find that bridge in the hope that it was still strong enough to act as a main thoroughfare, and that even if it needed some remedial work done, the old tools, plus perhaps the new pen-knife and screwdriver which he had bought, would be adequate for that.

In fact he found the old bridge. It was roughly where the map predicted. Some wag had nailed a notice to it saying, 'Danger: No Longer in Use', but it was an old notice, almost as old as the bridge perhaps. In any case the notice had been published jointly in Edinburgh and Koenigsburg, and indeed may even have been the inferior later edition from Vienna and Oxford. Certainly it was not enough to deter him so he set about carefully repairing and crossing the bridge step by step.

When each had got about half-way across the mist and cloud lifted a little and the two theologians saw each other. For a moment each paused and laid down his tools, suddenly interested in what the other was doing. They each invited the other to come over to their bridge. Each refused. Then they began to shout advice and warnings about the foolhardiness of the other's enterprise.

Unbeknown to them, on the bank of the ravine from which they had started was a third figure who didn't know whether he was a theologian or not. So he did what such

scoundrels are likely to do, he decided to while away the time till the theologians either succeeded or fell in, by practising his hermeneutics. He consoled himself with the half-memory that he had once read in a rather advanced religious quarterly that such a solitary activity was, in the view of Whitehead at least, as near as one can get to true religion these days. However since in this case hermeneutics involves demythologization, in order to practise it he had to step out of the fable and prepare the following manuscript.

In 1980 the Revd. Don Cupitt, Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge published a book entitled *Taking Leave of God* (S.C.M. Press). In 1982 the Revd. Professor Keith Ward, F.D. Maurice Professor of Moral and Social Theology at King's College London, published a reply entitled *Holding Fast to God* (S.P.C.K.) which he concludes with the sentence

'We may take leave of an image of God,
but God himself will never let us go.'

This encapsulates most of the differences between these writers. They share much – both are academics, both are ordained clergymen in the Church of England, both teach in Faculties of Theology and Religious Studies – but they differ radically in their reading of the contemporary situation of the believer. Essentially the difference is that Professor Ward can and does make affirmations of the above sort whereas Mr. Cupitt has 'taken leave' of the God of whom Ward speaks. What are we to make of this?

First and foremost we must say that there is a real difference between the two. They might both be wrong, but they cannot both be right. They disagree on two essential and related matters – the content of Christian belief and the nature of Christian belief. It is a question of some importance whether if they do disagree so radically they can both be called Christian believers. The answer to that will have quite some significance for this discussion, for it is in part a question about both the nature and the content of Christian belief. At best some remarks *relevant* to answering it can be offered: fortunately the definitive answer is a matter not for me but for Ward's God – 'if he exists' (Cupitt)!

Perhaps the most important point to emerge from consideration of both these books is that what might appear to be a religious difference has in fact many dimensions to it. For example we could not find a clearer case of the interdependence of philosophical presuppositions and religious outlook – Cupitt and Ward may share a denominational affiliation but they diverge religiously because they diverge philosophically. It is here that I have the greatest affinity with Ward's views because I find that his most telling criticisms of Cupitt are those which show much of Cupitt's case to be stated in terms of bad arguments and weak philosophical foundations. I shall return to this point in due course.

The main theological divergence of opinion is over the question of God. In essence Ward is an objectivist who believes that there is a God who exists and who would exist even if there were no human beings who believed in him. Such a God transcends this world but is yet active in it. Ward claims that whatever Cupitt may say this is not the God of whom Cupitt has taken his leave, for Ward argues that the image of God whom Cupitt has undoubtedly rightly

abandoned is the image of a tyrannical capricious God in whom no 'sensible' or 'real' Christian believes.

Ward's objectivism then extends to regarding God as 'logically, a thing; that is, he can be referred to, identified and can possess various properties.'

Cupitt would deny that God is 'logically' a thing, and that therefore he is the bearer of properties.

Undoubtedly this disagreement is as fundamental as any theological difference can be. Its foundations, however, go even deeper for they are philosophical – at least according to Ward. His argument is that Cupitt is basing his view on bad philosophy, for as he points out, Cupitt's view is premised on the acceptance of a naive version of logical Positivism. In fact I am inclined to believe that Ward's alternative diagnosis of the ill effects of a limited form of Kantianism, is nearer the truth.

The main problem for Cupitt is that his arguments do lend themselves to the severe mauling which they receive at the hands of a skilled professional philosopher such as Keith Ward. Ward is absolutely right when he points out that Cupitt's rejection of metaphysics, and therefore of metaphysical theism, itself is based on a rather narrow and dogmatic metaphysical view which he has taken over from others. He is again well justified in his insistence that Cupitt is dogmatic and mistaken in his account of what it is possible for modern man to think or believe, for as Ward points out, as a matter of fact, at the time of writing, three out of five Professors of Philosophy at Oxbridge believe in the sort of God of metaphysical theism whom Cupitt has abandoned and in whom he claims modern man *cannot* believe. Now, as Ward would agree, counting even such distinguished heads does not prove Ward right and Cupitt wrong on the substantive issue, but it does show Cupitt's account of 'modern man' to be wildly inaccurate.

The objectivist in Ward shows itself further in his insistence upon a view of salvation which requires the forgiving and healing activity of God, rather than one in which salvation is to be understood *completely* as an inner re-orientation. Ward also argues for the importance of historical beliefs about the figure of Jesus and about the resurrection of Jesus. These would be happily consigned by Cupitt to the language of symbol and myth.

A further point of considerable importance which shows the disagreement between these two to have even wider repercussions is Ward's insistence upon the grounding of moral belief in belief in God as against Cupitt's suggestion that belief in God can be morally harmful or distracting. Cupitt's worry is that to continually seek supernatural *imprimatur*s for our moral decisions is to remain at the level of moral immaturity. At one point (p.63) Ward rather unfairly juxtaposes this view to his own rejection of a rather different view 'that we . . . just *make up* what is right'. This latter is not a fair statement of Cupitt's view and if Ward believes it to be a logical consequence of Cupitt's 'metaphysics' then he should establish this by independent argument. He could do this if he could show that the existence of God is logically necessary for the objectivity of moral values, but in fact his more limited conclusion is that

'the objective existence of God provides the most adequate justification for moral beliefs.' (p.70)

This is a well-argued conclusion for Ward shows how the idea of the objective existence of God, of a consequent account of human nature, and of the 'fit' of moral values and ideals to that nature, all go well together. As such he does produce a solid counter-argument to Cupitt's suggestion that belief in God can undermine moral beliefs.

In a summary Ward rejects Cupitt's views on the nature of God, and of religious language, and on the nature of moral beliefs and their relation to the order of things. His charges are that Cupitt relies on an unacknowledged set of metaphysical and philosophical presuppositions, which once examined are found to be narrow and limited. As a result many of the arguments offered by Cupitt to support his views are bad arguments. Sometimes they are bad because they rest explicitly on what is a weak premiss; sometimes they are bad because they are apparently unaware that premisses are being appealed to or are necessary. Equally often the arguments fail because they offer choices between false dichotomies e.g. between a God who is a capricious despot and no God at all.

This being said, what are we to make of it?

The first point is that Ward's bold and decisive argument has shown that and how an essentially traditional form of theistic belief, metaphysically based, is possible. Paradoxically it is a sign of the currency and force of the type of view to be found in Cupitt's writing which leads one to regard Ward's exposition as an 'achievement'. To find academic theologians willing to argue with such power, clarity and single-mindedness for traditional metaphysical theism is the exception rather than the rule. (It is almost as rare as finding Biblical critics who agree about what the text does mean as distinct from agreeing about what it doesn't mean!)

Against this however must be set Cupitt's achievement, for real achievement there is. What Cupitt has done – as is clear from both the enthusiasm and venom with which his work has been received in other quarters – is to touch several raw nerves in the consciousness of contemporary Christianity. In blunt and perhaps over-simplified terms, I believe that Cupitt has succeeded in forcefully asking many of the right questions, but that he has not provided adequate answers.

As is even more apparent in his most recent book, *The World to Come*, Cupitt is in many ways clothing himself with the mantle of the prophet. He is, in that book, enunciating a diagnosis of the state of religious belief and practice in our society. Of course there are good prophets and bad prophets, diagnoses full of insights and diagnoses which are a projection of inner fantasies. The problem with prophets is that it is sometimes difficult to tell 'in their own country' (or equally in their own age) whether their utterances are true or false.

It is not however, quite as simple as this – Ward the philosopher dissecting Cupitt the prophet – for Cupitt has dressed his 'message' in the language of philosophy and theology. (In fact it is almost as if he has rejected the idea of the *imprimatur* of God and replaced it with the idea of

imprimatur of academia). Ward has shown that this will not do, for philosophy drives a hard bargain and demands its pound of logical flesh.

Nonetheless this is not a one-sided argument, for although Ward has established the plausibility and consistency of a view which Cupitt has dismissed in a manner that is too simple and at times too flashy, we must still ask whether Ward's view *convince*s us. Ultimately this is Cupitt's question, and for all the ingenuity and skill with which Ward has undermined Cupitt's *formulation* of the question, the question still stands.

The difficulty of course is that Ward has set himself a specific and limited task in this book – 'a reply to Don Cupitt' – but as both he and Cupitt would agree the issues are larger than that. Thus at one level Ward may have (and indeed has) replied effectively to Cupitt, while at another he has made only limited reply to the questions of the many who have found in some sense that Cupitt speaks for them.

Ward has shown that if you do think about God in the general way which Cupitt rejects, then there is much more to be said for this than meets at least Cupitt's eye. But Cupitt's naive acceptance of some limited non-religious philosophies as the basis for an alternative view, should not blind us to the importance of the questions which still remain about Ward's God.

Just as, on closer analysis, Cupitt modified some of the firm and hard-edged claims which he makes, so too does Ward introduce subtle and possible *sotto voce* qualifications into his discussion. Thus for example, he would accept that our language about God is indeed complex and that analogy, symbol and myth must play their part. In his rejection of anthropomorphism he is at one with Cupitt, but what is not sufficiently clear is how the picture develops from there.

Certainly Ward believes in a personal God who exists whether or not human beings (or theologians and clerics!) care to admit it. His God also acts. But

'When we say that God acts, we mean that certain events happen, and that they are correctly interpretable in terms of an intention to bring about some end.' (p.93)

Further,

'a truly personal God must act in hidden or ambiguously interpretable ways'. (p.95)

Here Keith Ward the slayer of anti-metaphysical dragons becomes a little coy. Does God act or does he not?

The second quotation suggests, quite properly, that there are major epistemological problems. The first indicates, again quite properly, the immense difficulties facing a proper analysis of the status of the claim that 'God acts'. These difficulties lie at the root of the attractiveness of Cupitt's writings. It is not clear, even in Ward what we mean when we say that 'God acts' and as long as that is the case then Cupitt's questions have a most important purchase-hold on religious belief – namely that of the credibility of any attempt to clarify the basic elements of theism, belief in a personal God who acts.

The point is this: Ward has attacked Cupitt by showing that the words and concepts which he (Cupitt) uses have a logic. To make any affirmation is to entail and imply other claims, whether or not they are stated. Cupitt has made claims which commit him to espousing certain highly dubious philosophical assumptions. However, the same strategy must be applied to Ward's own affirmations and it is the awareness of this which leads him to, for example, the qualifications quoted above. Yet they do not fully satisfy, and that for two reasons.

On the one hand the first qualification quoted is itself based upon an assumption formulated thus:

'To ask about God's acts in history is to ask how particular parts of the world contribute towards the divine purpose, or how they themselves express it.'

With respect, I find this difficult to accept. One is asking more than this, for one is asking about the *special* relationship of God to that particular part of the world. If not, then the work 'act' is out of place, for although 'the whole world is the act of God' (*ibid.*) or the whole of history might conceivably be thought of as 'the act' of God, the idea of acts (plural) in history implies a specific relationship to particular parts of the world or segments of history.

In the second place, if we do regard some areas of the world and of history as correctly described ('interpreted' is too weak for the thoroughgoing theist surely) as 'acts of God', then we do have considerable problems of consistency and coherence in giving an account of the relationship of such a God to those elements of history which are not so described: whether because *prima facie* they seem too trivial to qualify for that description, or whether more seriously they cannot in any clear way be 'correctly interpretable in terms of an intention to bring about some (worthy) end.' The latter may be interpretable as 'unavoidable evils' but that is the point at issue. Is such a description compatible with the picture of God presented to us by Keith Ward?

Of course, these questions are not new for they have been a constant refrain to the history of theism. I am inclined to think that their force is more widely felt and that it is this pressure which moves a number of theologians, of whom Don Cupitt is perhaps the most extreme contemporary Anglican version, to question not simply the distorted image of God on the surface of *Taking Leave of God*, but also the rather different God to whom Keith Ward holds fast. The strength of Ward's book is the robust defence which it gives of that belief: the weakness, which does not much detract from what is a fine piece of polemic is that it does at times make holding fast seem easier than it is. Unfortunately this may give comfort to some whose need is perhaps better met in being disturbed by Cupitt. It is however a book which will amply re-pay careful and open-minded study.