

# Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith Archive

Elaine Graham presented this report to the SOF Annual Conference.

Since 2019, Graeme Smith and I have been collaborating on a research project based at Gladstone's Library, Hawarden, North Wales. The aim of our project is to carry out an extensive study and evaluation of the life and work of Don Cupitt by examining his many publications, lectures, reviews, media engagement, correspondence and so on, utilising the extensive archives now lodged at Gladstone's Library.

Working with a substantial archive of primary and secondary sources, previously unexplored, this project aims to produce a range of study and research resources to facilitate discussion of Cupitt's ideas and their continuing significance. Our project will engage with, and benefit, a range of academic and non-academic participants, including teachers and students of religious education, philosophy of religion and theology, media professionals, church members and last but not least, members and supporters of the SOF Network.

We want the research to promote greater understanding of Cupitt's context, significance and legacy. We think that Cupitt's work has been neglected, especially within academic circles, but that his ideas continue to be supremely relevant today. In inviting his readers to embrace a 'non-realist' religious ethic that might serve as a positive and humanitarian vision for the world, Cupitt stands to address many of the questions about faith, reason, belief and non-belief, that many people are still asking; questions that are not necessarily being answered by institutional religion, which often seems more interested in counting membership and defending orthodoxies rather than asking deep and searching questions.

## What is this project all about?

There are two main strands to our investigations. The project will be distinctive in that it pays attention not only to Cupitt's academic reputation but also to his role in the foundation of a popular movement, namely the Sea of Faith Network. In many respects, they are intertwined, or at least run in parallel. But there are also significant ways in which each trajectory takes separate directions as time goes on.

## 1. Cupitt's own work and significance

We hope to undertake a comprehensive in-depth multidisciplinary academic analysis of Don Cupitt's ideas about non-realism, language and the nature of God. We will be asking how his thinking emerged in the context of his own intellectual career, as well as its subsequent reception and continuing intellectual relevance.

## 2. The *Sea of Faith* TV series and its after-life

We are also looking to identify and evaluate the factors that led to the success of the 1984 BBC TV series *The Sea of Faith*, examining the interaction of its intellectual content and production techniques. What prompted the commissioning of the series? What understandings of the BBC's role as a public service broadcaster (especially in relation to coverage of religious issues) informed its production? Would such a series, in similar or different format, be made today?

We also want to trace the enormous response to the TV series in the 1980s, as documented within the massive collection of correspondence from members of the public, contained within Gladstone Library archives. The series also helped to generate the formation of the *Sea of Faith* movement itself, arising out of that public response to the TV series and associated publications. Our research project will attempt to hear how Sea of Faith Network members' own spiritual and intellectual journeys were affected by the programmes and by Cupitt's thinking.

Finally, we would like to evaluate the wider significance of that public response to Don Cupitt's work, and what we can learn about trends in 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual, cultural, sociological and religious history. Why did Cupitt's ideas, and the programmes, attract such controversy and enthusiasm in equal measure, and what does that tell us about people's ordinary beliefs and religious practice?

## Key Research Questions

So overall, our project represents an attempt to put Cupitt's ideas in their original context; to evaluate the substance of his thought; and to trace the impact of his work over a 40 year period. In summary, our questions are as follows:

- i) What were the main features of Cupitt's thought?
- ii) What place did Cupitt's ideas have within broader intellectual movements of his day?
- iii) What is the lasting significance of Cupitt's theology and how does this relate to the future of progressive, non-realist theologies?
- iv) What contributed to the success of the BBC TV series?
- v) What can be learned from audience responses (including correspondence received) to the series about changing patterns of religious belief, understanding and affiliation?
- vi) What can contemporary media professionals, religious groups and educationalists learn from the series about contemporary approaches to religious and philosophical questions for popular, non-specialist audiences?
- vii) How has the Sea of Faith movement grown and developed in different countries since 1984?
- viii) Is there a constituency for Cupitt's brand of non-realist theology today; how would people encounter such ideas and express them in practice?

Overall, we think of our research as having particular relevance for three key areas:

- Changing patterns and currents in religious belief and practice and 'popular spirituality' within and beyond organised or institutional religion;
- Academic debates in philosophy of religion and study of theology;
- Public understandings of religion through media representations of questions of faith, doubt, belief and spirituality

## Wider Context

Our research sits within a wider set of cultural, religious and intellectual issues. These mean that we believe our research is timely, in terms of speaking into a changing sociological landscape. It is often assumed that religion is disappearing from Western culture. Throughout the twentieth century, the evidence for declining religious affiliation, the diminishing influence of faith in matters of morality, culture and belief and the pre-eminence of alternative secular world-views, seemed indisputable. However, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, while many of the signs of religious decline still endure, the majority of the world's population still identifies as religious, and religion continues to wield considerable global



Don Cupitt. Photo: Anglia TV.

political and cultural influence. Scholars of religion today are therefore engaged in trying to understand how these apparently contradictory trends – of continuing decline alongside significant signs of persistence or even resurgence – might be reconciled.

Sometimes this is called a 'post-secular' society. But even to regard religion and secularity as two coherent, homogenous categories separated by a deep divide would be mistaken. For example, while formal religious affiliation may be declining in Western culture, interest in matters of spirituality as it impacts individuals' search for meaning, personal fulfilment and well-being is flourishing. More importantly, currents of orthodoxy and heterodoxy have always coexisted within 'mainstream' religion. Furthermore, many contemporary manifestations of modern secular thinking – forms of non-belief, agnosticism, religious scepticism and even atheism – can trace their roots to forms of early modern theological thinking; and contemporary theological discourse has, in turn, been profoundly influenced by modern and post-modern philosophies.

Another factor is that countries like the UK are more religiously pluralist than they were in the 1980s. Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* series was assuming that it spoke to a largely culturally Christian audience, who would be at least nominally familiar with the architecture of Western Christianity and Western theism. That is no

longer the case; and it may mean that today, his ideas can speak afresh to those who have never encountered traditional Christianity, or who identify with other religious traditions, but who nevertheless wish to engage with theological and philosophical ideas about God, belief and spirituality. It is into this complex and fluid religious landscape – to the interplay between belief and non-belief, faith and doubt, and the interaction between those of many faiths and none – that this research aims to speak.

## Progress to date

We have been successful in obtaining funding from the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust for a grant of £9,752 to develop an online resource 'hub'. Using the web domain of [www.doncupitt.com](http://www.doncupitt.com), we will be able to make some of the materials within the archive more widely accessible. We also plan to augment these with additional commentaries, critical discussion pieces and further study resources. Due to lockdown, access to the physical archive at Gladstone's Library has not been possible, but we have been able to commission a post-doctoral research assistant to assemble a full bibliography of all items about and relating to Cupitt and SOFN – a list that runs to over 1,000 items!

Currently, we are completing another funding application to the Arts & Humanities Research Council for a Network Grant. This would bring fourteen scholars together for a series of meetings and webinars over two years. This is where we hope a significant amount of progress can be made, both in terms of working through the archival resources in order to evaluate the significance of Cupitt's work then and now, but also to begin a concerted phase of dissemination and public engagement. The network will meet both in plenary and in four thematic sub-groups. These will reflect the key elements of Cupitt's thought, public reception and continuing impact.

### *i. Non-Realism, Language and the Philosophy of Religion*

This sub-group's activities will aim to enhance awareness of the Sea of Faith archive as a major resource for researchers, teachers and students looking to understand Cupitt's contribution to philosophical and theological debates about non-realism, language and the nature of God, including the impact of such ideas on school and university curricula in the study of religion, philosophy and ethics.

### *ii. Religion and the Media*

The second cluster of research participants will be interested in understanding what the process of collaboration with BBC on the of Sea of Faith TV series, and subsequent public reaction, reveals

about representations of religion and religious debate within the media. They will also explore what can be learned about changing patterns of religious belief, understanding and affiliation in UK society and its dissemination from audience responses to the series.

### *iii. The Future of Radical Theologies*

This thread will be made up of those wishing to trace the continuing trajectory of Cupitt's intellectual legacy, enhancing understanding of his key ideas and the development of his thinking. It will also stimulate debate about the future prospects for non-realist philosophy and progressive or radical theologies and bring together those interested in exploring whether there is a constituency for Cupitt's thought today.

### *iv. Theology, Society and Culture*

This strand will place Cupitt's work in the context of the history of ideas and in particular what the evolution and reception of his ideas tells us about changing patterns of religious belief and affiliation in the UK and beyond from the last quarter of the twentieth century. By setting Cupitt's own contribution in broader sociological and historical context and by placing his intellectual trajectory – and the reception of his ideas – against wider trends in changing religious belief and affiliation and other liberalising factors within twentieth-century Christian theology, this strand will enable scholars to locate Cupitt's ideas within the broader intellectual climate of his day.

Each of these four sub-groups will organise two open webinars for a broader audience of stake-holders: such as other researchers, media professionals, teachers, students, church people and SOF Network members. The network will also generate further study materials in support of the webinars and for the online hub. As a way of bringing the project to a close, we are considering a large public event at Gladstone's Library in late 2024 (along the lines of the annual *Gladfest* literary festival), to mark 40 years since the first BBC TV programmes.

It is our hope that this research project will offer important new insights into twentieth and twenty-first century radical religious thought. It promises to enhance significantly our understandings of the intellectual underpinnings of non-realist, radical and progressive Christianity and its impact on popular religious belief and practice, and enable us to think creatively about its future.

---

Elaine Graham is Professor Emerita of Practical Theology at the University of Chester ([profegraham@gmail.com](mailto:profegraham@gmail.com))

Graeme Smith is Professor of Public Theology at the University of Chichester ([g.smith@chi.ac.uk](mailto:g.smith@chi.ac.uk)).