A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF THEOLOGICAL NON-REALISM

by

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I declare that A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF THEOLOGICAL NON-REALISM is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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15/06/2007
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SUMMARY

This study in philosophical-theology investigates the problems and prospects of theological non-realism, as proposed and developed by the Cambridge philosopher of religion Don Cupitt. After contextualising non-realism within the worldview, epistemology and theology of pre-modernity, modernity and postmodernity, the study appraises the prospects of non-realism as a new philosophical and theological default position for Christianity and how it relates to what has been referred to as the New Reformation. The study hypothesises and contends that, although radical in orientation and multifarious in prospect, it is a viable and valid basis for Christian reformation. After contextualising, considering some religious and theological content, as well as critique and contrapuntal positions, the study delineates theoretical and practical reformatory options. By and large concurring with Cupitt, the study also deviates from him, particularly with respect to the prospect of ecclesiastical post-Christianity. Although this is not a study in practical theology, this study nevertheless aims to move the debate about the New Reformation forward by proposing non-realism as a basis for a new Church.

Key Terms

Philosophical theology
Philosophy of religion: realism, anti-realism
Nihilism: religious prospects
Theological non-realism
Modernity and postmodernism: theological aspects
Postmodern theology
Don Cupitt, appraisal of
Religious Humanism
Christian doctrines
Christianity: New Reformation.

CURRICULUM VITAE

MARTHINUS JOHANNES BADENHORST was ordained as a minister of religion in the Dutch Reformed Church in Bloukrans, Colenso (KZN) in March 1978, after having been awarded the degrees, Bachelor of Arts (BA) (Hebrew and Philosophy) by the University of Stellenbosch, Bachelor of Divinity (BD) by the University of Pretoria as well as a Post Graduate Diploma in Theology (Dip. Theol) by the same university. After serving in various ministry capacities, including as senior producer of religious programmes for SABC TV, he enrolled as a doctoral student in New Testament at UNISA, as a result of growing interest in Jewish-Christian relations. After two years he passed the doctoral examination with distinction and embarked on research, particularly on the Judaic matrix of early Christianity as well as various aspects of the scholarly Jewish-Christian Dialogue. He paid special attention to the contribution of the later Paul van Buren. As his research deepened, matters relating to the philosophy of religion loomed large, as a result of which he was afforded the option of changing from New Testament to Religious Studies based on a new research proposal. The last three years most of his research was done at the University of Cambridge, focusing on the work of the contemporary radical theologian and Cambridge philosopher of religion, Don Cupitt.

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PREFACE

When I strode onto the splendid, sprawling campus of the University of South Africa and found my way in near-miraculous fashion to the offices of the Faculty of Theology on a June day in the final year of the twentieth century, I was wrestling with a few vexing questions. Now, after seven long, lean years, I am content that I have been able to find the answers, although many more questions, even more vexing in nature, have taken their place. What I have found, therefore, is that research is not about entering the rest after conquering a few giants and then celebrating the security of certitude, even, perhaps especially, if the field of study is theology. Amongst other things, it is about the three c's: consultation, critique and conversation, which translate into reading, reflecting and the arduous activity of writing. If there is one more thing I have gleaned from the lean years, it is that the days of the *answer* are over. This is question time. Every arrival is a new departure, every end, a new beginning.

In particular, it was the perplexing cluster of questions on ancient and modern Jewish-Christian relations that precipitated my progress towards the present study. It led me to a series of fissures between Church and Synagogue, Old Testament and Torah, New Testament and Early Jewish-Christian literature, the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith, to name but a few. While the writings of Neusner, Sanders, Dunn, Crossan, Borg, Charlesworth, Vermes and others were extremely insightful and challenging, I had a rather protracted engagement with Paul van Buren. While I appreciated his new post-critical Jewish-Christian position, I remained intrigued also by his earlier radical theology. This eventually led to a reading of the 'radicals', particularly John Robinson and the so-called Honest-to God debate. It was a short step from there to Don Cupitt, whom I had first encountered in the Myth of God Incarnate debate.

Although I had proceeded quite far with a study of Christology and Christian supersessionism, pertaining in particular to the debate surrounding anti-Semitism in the Fourth Gospel, I welcomed the opportunity to change from New Testament studies to Religious Studies. It afforded me the opportunity to engage with Cupitt, and philosophical theology, particularly Cupitt's proposal and development of theological non-realism, and its implications for some of the great questions of

theology like christology and ecclesiology. Credit for my progress in this must go to Professor Pieter Botha for perceptively sensing this development and proposing the switch. He helped to clear away all the administrative impediments, no doubt with the able assistance of Professor Pieter Craffert. But he was also prepared to remain my supervisor and to see me through.

Don Cupitt is a fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and, in spite of the fact that I have, over the course of the last three years, worked at Cambridge, availing myself of the resources of the University Library, as well as the pleasant environment of the library of the Divinity School and, in spite of the fact that I have been a member of Sea of Faith (UK) since 2004 and also a member of the Cambridge local group, I have not met Don personally. In justification of this seeming paradox, I submit that I resolved to read most of his work before troubling the prolific writer with my trivialities. More seriously, I did not want to run the risk of being either enthralled or disappointed by the man while I immersed myself in his life's work and words. With the completion of this study, including some criticism of his work, I am looking forward to the privilege of meeting this extraordinarily gifted and rather neglected thinker and writer.

A number of people contributed to my reaching this milestone, for which, and to whom I am sincerely grateful. I have mentioned my promoter, Professor Pieter Botha. He was instrumental in providing a reading list for my doctoral examination that was both challenging and conducive to personal enlightenment and preparation for further research. Further, he arranged for me to work as a tutor at the University of South Africa for two academic years, during which time I not only gained invaluable experience, but also made a few friends, one of whom was Professor Maretha Jacobs, whom I thank, not only for the many challenging conversations, but also for assisting me in various valuable ways. I also fondly remember the late Professor Johan Engelbrecht, a kind man who facilitated my enrolment and who allocated me to Professor Pieter Botha. Also, the late Professor Richard Lemmer is fondly remembered for his friendship and support. A special word of thanks goes to my editor, Dr. Karen Batley for the innumerable alterations and improvements to my text.

My family has been a bastion of support, particularly my long-suffering spouse, who not only (literally) suffered along with me and was always the first and the last to hear about my discoveries or disappointments, but has been our main provider over

the last three years. The achievement of becoming a social worker in England, and recently also being promoted to Senior Practitioner within the short space of three years, is an exceptional achievement. To have achieved this, after an absence of two decades from the profession, as well as the fact that she is not British-trained, while English had never been her strong point, matches any achievement this study might represent. Our three children and their spouses contributed in many ways, from providing a roof over our heads, to wheels when required to just being true to form, the sheer pride and joy they have always been. Without them, this journey would have been impossible. A special word of thanks to my mother, for her unwavering love and support, financial and otherwise, and for her constant prayers. I also remember fondly and with gratitude the support and affection of my late father.

I conclude with a dedication to Alexander Charles Lyell. He was, of course, the famous geologist who made a vital contribution to Charles Darwin, by calibrating, as it were, his natural clock to geological time and fervently encouraging him to publish his thesis. The rest is history. I was also privileged to receive vital impetus from Alexander Charles Lyell. He is our first grand child, born a month after we arrived in England. During the course of the last three years, he has learned to walk and talk and laugh and sing and it is his undiluted exuberance and unbridled love for life that often served as an instant antidote against gloom and doom during the dark, lonely days of reading and writing, while having to contend with the loss of the glorious African sunshine, the new country and most precarious and painful of all, my philosophical and theological paradigm shift.

I therefore dedicate this thesis to all my family, past, present and future.

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CHAPTER ONE

THEOLOGICAL REALISM AND NON-REALISM

THE CUPITT CONTROVERSY

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Stage

In philosophical terms, religion has always been about epistemology and ontology, and Christianity is no different. It is about knowing and being and the relationship between the two. When the current world religions came into being, during what is now referred to as the Axial Period (800-200 BCE),[1] they assumed the great responsibility of providing answers to primordial questions and showing how they related to a rewarding life. Amidst the brevity and brutality of life in antiquity, religion pointed the way to life beyond this life. True life lay beyond this shadow of existence. The answer to the riddle of life lay high up in the sky, beyond the blue dome, in the place called heaven, in many respects the headquarters for all principalities and powers.

This scenario has collapsed irretrievably in the new world, referred to simply as the *now* world, modernity. The old has passed away, and all has become new. For five hundred years now, Christianity has been watching the new world emerge around its cloister walls. The modern world no longer functions on the Biblical-Christian worldview. It no longer comes to the church to receive knowledge. Modernity is based on human, scientific knowledge, and what might be referred to as a clearing-up has taken place. The misty-murky clouds have cleared giving way to the clarity of day. Humanity has come of age. But where does that leave the old religions that hail from such a different time and place? What about their role of providing answers and giving direction? What is the way forward? What does the

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[1] Lloyd Geering (2002:41). Leaves (2005:1) (no reference) credits Karl Jaspers with this description. During this period, the pagan gods were dramatically superseded by a more sophisticated monotheism.

future hold for the traditional religions, now that their claim to know both the future and the One who holds it sounds like a faint echo from the past?

What if Christianity were to fully acknowledge the new knowledge? Would it still have a place, a role as a religion? Modern intellectuals like Richard Dawkins do not think so. Of course, the champions of orthodoxy like Alister McGrath and Brian Hebblethwaite staunchly defend the veracity of theological propositions. For the members of the Dawkins camp, religion goes bankrupt with the advent of the death of God. No real God means there is no role for religion, the God-business. The defenders tend to deny the crisis, claiming that those who know about the demise of God know 'an awful lot' (Greenfield 2006:29). If it cannot be proven, they choose to heed Pascal's wager and carry on, business as usual. It is ironic, though, that the most ardent fundamentalists avail themselves of the most modern equipment to get their message across. Although they modernise in all other aspects, they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge that their knowledge-base has become obsolete and therefore untenable.

Some traditionalists welcome the new postmodern situation. They read it as an escape route back to the pre-modern pastures. It is contended here that although postmodernism removes a certain distortion of modernity, it cannot be treated as a card trick whereby the implications of the dawning of modernity is cancelled. Even when 'magic', 'wonder' and mysticism become new, compelling options, the inverted commas indicating irony remain.

The overriding question, therefore, concerns religion after metaphysics, that is, religion, particularly Christianity, in the (post)-modern world. Christianity, particularly in its protestant form, is a confessional community confessing certain beliefs. Could Christianity be converted to confess the paradigm-shift of modernity, re-invent its master narratives and return to this world? Could this new a-theistic confession, Christianity without God, ever become a reality, and would this constitute the New Reformation, the radical transformation or would this spell the final demise of Christianity and the death of the Church? This is the context of the debate about theological realism and non-realism. It is about the credibility and the integrity of Christianity as broker of truth.

1.2 The Scene

The debate about theological realism and non-realism both is and is not the Cupitt controversy. Of course, the debate is much wider than the views of one philosopher of religion from the University of Cambridge. Cupitt (Greenfield 2006:1) himself has always pointed to the dim past, referring back at least to the English deists of' the late 17th century. Certainly, the time of the great *Aufklärung*, (1770-1845) can be considered the prime time for the precipitation of the debate and the ensuing controversy. In his famous monograph, *The sea of faith* (1984)[2], a review of the receding tide of faith, Cupitt probed into the recesses of modern history.

This important work was by no means a dispassionate review of the history of modernity. Cupitt intended to make it clear that the problem and the proposed solution were far from recent innovations and to demonstrate at least that the issues involved were old ones. Early moderns like Pascal and Spinoza had grappled with them. It has been observed that Cupitt used the opportunity to 'preach his non-realist gospel' (Leaves 2004:33). Cupitt has been accused of misrepresenting history. This may be the case, but it is significant that the criticism comes from defenders of theological realism and orthodox Christianity.

Although the issues are old, there is a sense in which the theological realism versus non-realism debate has become a Cupittian controversy. Certainly, Cupitt has been regarded as a highly controversial thinker in Britain and abroad and theological non-realism has become synonymous with his opinions. Many critical thinkers have been described by various different names, but in terms of the realism/non-realism debate, as it became associated with Cupitt in particular, they have wrestled with the same problem, incurring, like Jacob, the inevitable injuries.

And this is the point. It can all be reduced to a struggle with *someone* or *something*. It is vivid and awesome, but when morning comes, as Jacob realised, it is difficult in the clear light of day to say what it was all about. Long before the dawn of modernity, it was already difficult for rational people to be adamant about the Other. Apart from being a critical, liberal scholar, Cupitt was also substantially influenced by the apophatic, mystical tradition, the *via negativa*, which regards it as improper to describe or portray the numinous. Karen Armstrong (cf. 1999:242-95) has convincingly demonstrated that all three of the Abrahamic faiths, in spite of having

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[2] The Sea of Faith was broadcast as a six-part, one-hour BBC TV documentary, accompanied by a book with the same title.

rather recently developed virulent fundamentalisms, have strong apophatic traditions. Although this does not represent fully-fledged non-realism, it is definitely not realism, as this study will show. Strictly speaking many non-realist positions are those of semi-real, or thin-line theists, and their differences, it will be argued, may not amount to much more than nomenclature and some 'political' positioning.

Cupitt is a pivotal figure in a very wide and important debate, one with very deep roots in the story of modernity. This debate can only be ignored by Christians or the church at their own peril. It will be contended, during the course of this appraisal, that theological non-realism is very significant and well-worth digesting, although it is obviously a sophisticated position, difficult to acquire, assimilate and maintain. Non-realism represents and refers to a crisis. It is about passing through the fire. Some have already passed through the fire; others did not experience it as such, so they should not find it difficult to adopt theological non-realism, because they have already become non-real without realising it. This can occur easily, because of the pervasiveness and power of the relevant worldview paradigms. For Christians encountering non-realism in a direct way, without any preparation or orientation regarding the relevant context, it might sound like atheism garnished and presented as a valid theological and religious position. It might sound devious and malicious, and there is no doubt that, with the ever-ready assistance of fundamentalists, they can be 'saved' from heresy. Many critical intellectual people, ex-patriots from the Church, are in exile,[3] because of ecclesiastical 'management's' insistence on maintaining a worldview that has become incredible. It seems ironic to enlightened critics that, although the Church insists on being believed, it continues, unperturbed, to present its faith in a way that has become quite unbelievable to modern people. And this is part of the question. Is it merely the presentation of the faith, the 'packaging' and 'marketing' that is archaic, or is it, in fact, the very product, the substance, that has become incredible? Cupitt and others are persuaded of the latter option. Cupitt, having progressed from a critical liberal position to radical theology and beyond, delivers the damning indictment that because of the church's persistence in upholding an obsolete, redundant, worldview, Christianity has *de facto* become a false religion (Cupitt 1980:3).

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[3] This description originating with the late Bishop John Robinson and used by his 'successor', Bishop John Shelby Spong will be referred to later.

How did Cupitt arrive at this position? What does it mean for the reformation prospects for Christianity, and indeed for Cupitt's proposals for reform? What then of the new reformation? Is Christianity as a faith, or just the ecclesiastical form of it, beyond the pale? What is post-metaphysical Christianity? What, in fact, is post-Christianity, and what is the so-called, 'religion of the future' that Cupitt and others have begun talking about? What is non-realism's theology, christology, ecclesiology and eschatology in traditional theological terms? These are some of the questions that come into the equation.

2 MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE: RESOURCES AND TRAJECTORIES

Because of the limited scope of this dissertation, this section is not intended to be an exhaustive literary review covering the entire debate. Also, it is not a complete review of the entire Cupittian corpus, a task recently undertaken laudably by Nigel Leaves.

2.1 Primary source: the Cupittian corpus

Don Cupitt is the proverbial prolific writer, with a publishing career that commenced in 1961, with his first published article in *Theology,*[4] and extends to 2006, with the publication of *The new creed and the old*, and he is still writing. His first piece of substantial research and writing was on the work of the 19th century philosopher Henry L. Mansel.[5]

Cupitt's first monograph, *Christ and the hiddenness of God,* appeared in 1971. This was followed by another eight over the course of the rest of the decade. *Christ and the hiddenness of God* reveals two trajectories that are important for the understanding of the early Cupitt. Although Cupitt had begun to think critically about the lofty position of Christian orthodoxy and the role of doctrine, prompted by his reading of Mansel, he nevertheless remained well within the confines of orthodoxy. He was a critical liberal scholar, and this is the first trajectory, namely the historical-critical, liberal project. He pointed to Jesus as a concrete role model, a trajectory that stood him in good stead twenty-five years later, when he became closely aligned with

[4] 'What do we mean by 'The Church'?' *Theology, 64:* 1961:275-81.
[5] 'Mansel's 'Theory of Regulative Truth', *Journal of Theological Studies, (*18); 1967:104-26.

the Westar Institute[6] and published *Reforming Christianity* (2001). Here he emphasised the importance of the historical Jesus for 'kingdom' Christianity. It was also during the 1970s that 'tele-don', as he was called in jest, first appeared on television. The subject was 'Who was Jesus?'

A second trajectory is the apophatic tradition. 'Immersed in the apophatic tradition he declared that one could never achieve total knowledge of God. Therefore one must refer to that reality only analogically through the work and person of Jesus' (Leaves 2004:22). Leaves (ibid.) observes that many of the themes of Cupitt's later thesis were already apparent in Cupitt's first monograph. As a result of these two trajectories, Cupitt's theism, the prime picture of theological realism, was already quite thin, as he availed himself of tell-tale metaphors like the void, silence, abyss and a shoreless sea (ibid.).

Hyman (2004:5) remarks that, although Cupitt's first book was hailed by many as the work of a, 'talented reformulator of orthodox doctrine', it was nevertheless clear over the course of the decade that 'his orthodoxy was becoming increasingly suspect'. There was still a very arduous ascent, or a very deep sinking away, all depending on which side of the debate under discussion one stands, before Cupitt could declare in exasperation that 'orthodox' is a 'thought that gives me a headache' (2001a:78).

A significant milestone affecting Cupitt's career is his association with 'the myth of God incarnate' debate (1977), the project edited by the renowned philosopher of religion, John Hick, in which seven British academics wrote chapters relating to the 'mythical' quality of Christology. This was, in other words, a sort of non-realist approach to Christology. The furore it evoked was almost as substantial as the 'honest to God' debate associated with the publication of Bishop John Robinson's book, *Honest to God* (1963).

The most important milestone for the purpose under review, however, was undoubtedly Cupitt's 'coming out' book with the evocative title *Taking Leave of God* (1980). This book, with which Cupitt opened 'Orwell's' auspicious decade, was in many ways a watershed. The works of the 1970s 'brought him to the attention of an academic audience', but from this point onwards Cupitt's notoriety widened and he became 'something of a household name' (Hyman 2004:6). Looking back, Cupitt

[6] The academy founded by Bob Funk that is responsible for the Jesus Seminar. Polebridge Press, the publishing company associated with Westar, had just recently become Cupitt's publisher.

stoically, and with a touch of satire, commented: 'When *Taking leave of God* appeared there was a hell of a row and I realised that it had finished my career as an academic and in the Church' (Leaves 2004:27). Hyman (ibid.) comments that this book gave rise to 'a flurry of replies and responses', articles and books, even evoking mention in the popular press.

Cupitt (2002:1) explains his intention: 'I planned to keep the practical and religious use of the idea of God, whilst dispensing with the old metaphysical God out there who orders and unifies the world and knows everything as it really is.' During that time, his philosophy of religion was in close harmony with the theological ideas of Tillich and Bultmann. His non-realism 'didn't actually change the doctrines very much at all. I just translated them into rules of life, as Wittgenstein had said one should do' (Cupitt: 2002:3).

In 1984, Cupitt presented the six BBC documentary programmes entitled *The sea of faith*, while the book with the same title appeared alongside. The 'sea of faith' is a metaphor taken from Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach':

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Matthew Arnold[7]

The Victorian poet laments the loss of faith experienced on a grand scale, almost like global climate change. This sea-view permeates Cupitt's writings.[8] He is fully persuaded that we are still in a global cultural change, a second Axial Period, in which the continental drift, or glacial slippage of culture, is occurring ominously,

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[7] Paul, H. W. 1902. *Matthew Arnold.*

[8] Although the metaphor becomes a major theme in Cupitt's writings after the broadcast of the BBC documentary series *The Sea of Faith* and the accompanying book, in 1984, it is significant to note that this theme had already been used by N. Lash for his inaugural lecture at Cambridge University in 1978, as suggested by his wife (1978:21). Lash's theme is also significant: 'Doing theology on Dover Beach.' This, he argued, is the kind of critical theology that must take place after Auschwitz, a theology that does not have to provide certitude, but pursues a path of critical enquiry (ibid.). Lash engages with the likes of Maurice Wiles, Macquarrie, Ninian Smart, Paul van Buren and others.

slowly, but surely. Cupitt is persuaded, and remains so throughout his many works, that the old religions, originating from the Axial Age, are in terminal decline.

It may be noted that Cupitt never gives any statistical figures, and never refers to any sociological studies to substantiate this view. He treats it as a commonplace, a melancholic melody reminiscent of the Romantic era. It is quite easy to supply statistics and figures to back it up, because the church attendance figures, to name just one factor, in the United Kingdom, Cupitt's front yard, are very low indeed, which seems to corroborate the despondency. On the other hand, it must be recognised that the predicted 'twilight of the gods', the evaporation of faith by the end of the twentieth century, did not occur.

Also in the year 1984, Cupitt read the book by his American counterpart Mark C. Taylor, which seems to have made a great impression on him,[9] leading him to look more deeply into the emerging continental deconstructionist criticism and the talk of postmodernism. The way for the new continental turn had been gloriously prepared by Cupitt's thorough study of Nietzsche in the early 1980s, which resulted in the 'Nietzschean' book *The World to come* (1982). In this important work, Cupitt contends that nihilism, the void, is unavoidable. He had also been persuaded that the liberal approach to reformation was never going to be enough. This led to the notion that reformation must be radical. He declares: 'We do not just need reformation—we need new religious thought' (Leaves 2004:31).[10] Cupitt (2002:1) narrates the effect on his thought: '...[I]n the following years [the eighties] my non-realism spread from God to become a general philosophical position, and everything began to shift and crumble.' The Nietzschean, anti-realist trajectory is a very important one for appreciation of the 'Cupittian' controversy. *Only human* (1985) represents the postmodern turn, where Cupitt begins to introduce Derrida into his thinking. Leaves (2004:35) believes Derrida replaced Kierkegaard as a significant figure in Cupitt's philosophical firmament. He also comments that the book is written in the style of Foucault. *Life lines* (1986) is also representative of Cupitt's postmodern turn. In the book he presents a 'metro Map of the Spirit', where he delineates the different realist and non-realist positions or stations, or routes of the spiritual journey. There is a crisis in terms of which there are pre-crisis and post-crisis positions. The trajectory of

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[9] The title of this work: *Erring: a postmodern a/theology*. This event is reported by Hyman (2004:9), who also adopted the description a/theology for Cupitt's thought. Cf. Chapter Four *infra*.
[10] This is from a personal letter to Leaves.

the crisis will be encountered quite frequently during the journey of this analysis. *The long-legged fly* (1987) is also a deliberate post-modern work. We will also experience the recurrent appearance of the excellent metaphor of the light-treading insect that lives a precarious life on the surface of the pond. The trajectory of horizontalism that deconstructs the old verticalism is integral to Cupitt's thesis and to this analysis. Cupitt (2002:3) indicated that significant changes occurred when he moved into 'all-out postmodernism'. He wanted to rethink religion as self-expression, or expressionism. He also felt the latitude to 'drastically reinterpret tradition'.

Radicals and the future of the church (1989) was the first book after the first Sea of Faith conference, organised by a growing number of critics (positive), clerics and countryman who had been affected by Cupitt's thought and who felt it necessary to set up some sort of forum. The question that was beginning to burn was whether radicals, as non-realists are also called, could remain in the church, and, if they did, what was their role? Cupitt's views on the future of the church and the prospect of radical reformation came into perspective. It is interesting to note the continuity, but also the progress between Cupitt's two 'church' books, *Reforming Christianity* (2001a) appearing twelve years after *Radicals*. It is the contention of this study that Cupitt's major pre-occupation, the undertone of all his thought, is reformation and that Cupitt can aptly be described as a 'New Reformer'. An important trajectory featuring quite strongly in *Radicals* is Cupitt's anti-realist/non-realist views on ethics and the role he believes ethics plays and can play in the reformation of Christianity. His concept of solar ethics plays a very important part in his 'system'.[11]

Cupitt (2002:2) intimates that it was art that came to his aid. He had always appreciated the movement from realism to impressionism and, contemplating this shift in art, he began to realise the powerful thought that 'what we made, we can remake' (ibid.). The realisation of the loss of realism, and the realisation that religion is only human is not the end, but could, in fact, be a new beginning. If religion was wholly and only human, that was not the death of religion. It was only the death of a dated view. If we made religion, in the same way that we made all art, then we could optimistically start remaking it.

In *Solar ethics* (1995a), Cupitt developed the metaphor of the sun. The sun's life is its dying and in doing so it gives life. People's lives could resemble the

[11] The word is used cautiously, because Cupitt's thought in many ways deliberately defies the idea of a system. Part of the criticism of Cupitt is the constant revision and regular turns.

sun, expending and expressing themselves brilliantly without reserve or regret. This is also based in the Nietzschean criterion of 'life affirming' or 'life denying' attitudes and actions. Thenceforth his reconstructionist thought was never again without the sun. It is an important trajectory whereby non-realism becomes active and creative, transcending traditional, liberal demythologising.

The previous year (1994) had seen the publication of *After all: religion without alienation*. This work is significant as part of Cupitt's emphasis on, and development of, his expressivism, or expressionism. It is also significant that Cupitt's concept of post-Christianity began to appear at this juncture, a trajectory that would play a very important role in the rest of his corpus. He developed the emphasis on 'kingdom' in contrast with the church. Kingdom was proclaimed and expected, but what we are stuck with is the church, which has actually usurped the kingdom. Cupitt's historical Jesus views were now updated and he relied quite strongly on the Jewish Jesus portrait by Geza Vermes, in combination with his affinity with Albert Schweitzer, employed as one of the significant figures of the Sea of Faith-project, a decade earlier

His postmodernism now pronounced, Cupitt produced another 'after' book, entitled *After God: the future of religion* (1997a). This work was probably the peak of Cupitt's active non-realism, the attempt to inflate the flat balloon of non-realism's negation of religious realism. The book reiterated the main themes of his expressionism, solar living, ecstatic immanence, aestheticism and anti-realism (Leaves 2004:74). As Cupitt attempts to state the 'bottom line', which is particularly difficult given the post-modern *penchant* to resist all meta-narratives, he nevertheless makes clear what it is 'all' about. It is not about preservation of the old religions, but, in keeping with his 'kingdom' view, it is about moving closer to the global view of a religious view that allows people to live their lives beautifully and happily, while caring for others and the planetary place we call home. The new religion should no longer divide people into a 'we' and a 'they'.

In the same year (1997b), in *Mysticism after modernity,* he revisited his engagement with the apophatic tradition three decades before. The trajectory of mysticism is never very far from sight in Cupitt's corpus. What role this persuasion plays in terms of post-Christian prayer will be indicated in due course.

Cupitt also engaged with Heidegger, which led to the publication of two works published in the same year (1998), which gave rise to a more pronounced

view on life and be-ing. Cupitt argued that 'just as Heidegger tried to overcome the distinction between the eternal realm (being) and the temporal realm (becoming) by saying that only this world of be-ing (coming to be) existed, so we too must concentrate on how to live in this world of temporality (be-ing)' (Leaves 2004:7).

The attempt at bottom-lining without closing the postmodern openness is reflected in Cupitt's turn to ordinary speech, an integral aspect of his vision of democratising religion. As the century and millennium draw to a close, Cupitt's philosophical-theological-religious views also emptied-out (or overflowed) into ordinariness, simplicity and openness, as is evident in the trilogy of 'everyday speech' books, *The new religion of life in everyday speech* (1999), *The meaning of it all in everyday speech* (1999) and *Kingdom come in everyday speech* (2000). It became clear that all of Cupitt's philosophical persuasions were coming together in a simple and universal religion of everyday life. These little 'life' books contain very important trajectories that constitute, as it will be proposed in this thesis, a new a/theology. The fact that *Reforming Christianity* (2001a) was preceded by the 'life' trilogy and *Philosophy's own religion* (2000b), gives it particular significance. What are the prospects for a non-realist, new reformation on the threshold of the third millennium of Christianity? Where in the world is the faith heading? 'Empty-ing out' or 'running on empty' are good working metaphors for the description of Cupitt's last stand. Paradoxically it is also the filling up, overflowing or in older parlance, 'coming of age'. The trilogy was followed by *Emptiness and brightness* (2001). Leaves encapsulates:

> Unlike radical orthodoxy[12], which reinforces the distinctions between God and man, master and servants, light and darkness, nihilism promotes a world in which everything is on the same level and everything is open and explicit. This is the anti-realist, nihilist, Kingdom vision of postmodern secularism and early Christianity.
>
> Leaves 2004:107

Cupitt's bottom-line emphasis on Life is further expressed in another Polebridge book, entitled simply *Life, life* (2003). It contains short chapters that can be read almost as a 'thought for the day'. Although they are very simple, they represent the summit, even the *summa* of a very long and arduous climb, and they relate to a long, retrospective view of the story of modernity, now extending over five hundred years. It is one man's view of life, but this man is a very significant voice in an important

[12] This critical alternative to non-realism will be considered in Chapter Four.

debate. This leads on to *The way to happiness* (2005), which sounds almost banal in its simplicity, but as is always the case with Cupitt, the philosophical undertow is strong and this little work, written in a novel narrative style without any table of contents or chapters, contains, in fact, Cupitt's ideas on a new theory of religion. Poignant to the present quest, is Cupitt's conclusion: 'I have brought religion very close to culture. And, conversely, I have brought culture very close to religion' (2005:77).

2.2 Secondary sources

Cupitt attracted quite substantial attention, as well as stringent criticism, particularly after *Taking leave* (1980). Keith Ward's *Holding fast to God* (1982) assisted his upward mobility in academia and church, while *Taking leave* was the beginning of Cupitt's decline as far as those institutions were concerned. Brian Hebblethwaite's *Ocean of Truth* (1988) was a deliberate and comprehensive critical reaction to Cupitt's *The sea of faith* (1984), since when Hebblethwaite has remained steadfast in his criticism of Cupitt, regularly devoting writings to Cupitt, with the latter corresponding in kind. Between Cupitt's 'Sea' and Hebblethwaite's 'Ocean' lies a desert of discontent.

Prior to Leaves' study, there were two attempts at comprehensive analysis of Cupitt's corpus. Scott Cowdell's analysis, *Atheist priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity* (1988) saw the light in the same year as Hebblethwaite's *Ocean*, and although it represents a significant development in Cupittian criticism (Leaves (2004:10) regards it as a standard textbook), it is severely dated with respect to Cupitt's virulent output since the middle-1980s, and Leaves (ibid.) quite correctly contends that 'an enormous shift' occurred in Cupitt's thinking, as well as in the *Zeitgeist* and world events in general. Cupitt (2004:vii) points out that Cowdell introduced the methodology of reconstructing the development of Cupitt's thought, which Leaves adopts and refines. Although what he says is not a 'refutation', Cowdell nevertheless defends the critical realist position which , in final analysis, is not much different from the course taken by Hebblethwaite. Stephen Ross White's analysis, *Don Cupitt and the future of Christian doctrine* (1994), although an updated analysis, nevertheless firmly stands on the realist side of the controversy, defending Christian orthodoxy.

Indicative of the perception that the realist-non-realist debate has become the Cupittian controversy is the fact that Cupitt's name is now more readily found in theological/philosophical dictionaries under the rubric of realism/non-realism or anti-realism, as in the *Oxford companion to Christian thought* (2000). The article is authored by William P. Alston, who, in his appraisal of Cupitt's anti-realism, only mentions the solitary aspect of autonomy as a hallmark of modernity. In dismissing it as an insufficient argument against 'traditional attitudes to God', he is able to dispense with Cupitt as well. It is rather alarming to see that only *Taking Leave* of God (1980) appears in Alston's bibliography. Up to circa 2000, the time of the publication of the above *Oxford Companion*, Cupitt had published no less than twenty books explaining and expanding his position. No wonder Alston is persuaded that realism should remain Christianity's 'default' position (2000:595).

Colin Crowder did slightly better in his article on Cupitt in the same resource (2000:147), citing two quite representative works, *sea of faith* (1994)[13] and *After All: religion without alienationl* (1994). Apart from dismissing Cupitt's non-realism as more of a thought-provoking, 'polemical, playful...infuriating...fascinating', yet unconvincing position, he nevertheless gives a succinct, if small, overview of Cupitt and the Cupittian controversy.

2.2.1 Nigel Leaves

Nigel Leaves' twin works, *Odyssey on the sea of faith* (2004) and *Surfing on the sea of faith* (2005)[14] are of prime importance to Cupitt studies. They are comprehensive and thorough, encompassing all of Cupitt's books up to 2001. After making extensive use of them as an invaluable resource, the writer agrees with Lloyd Geering's appraisal that it 'is of such a quality that it may be regarded as definitive'.[15] Cupitt (2004:ix-x) endorses them as 'the best attempt so far to trace the development of the main themes of my thinking...'.

Where Cupitt acknowledges several 'stages' in his work, and some reviewers[16] indicate 'three successive stages of theological development', Leaves (2004:2) has delineated seven stages:

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[13] Reprint of 1984.
[14] The two books are supported by extensive research for what Cupitt, in the foreword of *Odyssey* described as an 'enormous Ph.D. dissertation'.
[15] Comment on the cover of *Odyssey* (2004).
[16] http://www.faithnet.org.uk/Theology/cupitt.htm.

Stage 1: (1971-1979) The negative theology

Christ and the hiddenness of God (1971)

Crisis of moral authority (1972)

The leap of reason (1976)

The worlds of science and religion (1976)

Who was Jesus? (1977)

Explorations in theology (1979)

The nature of man (1979)

The debate about Christ (1979)

Jesus and the gospel of God (1979)

Stage 2: (1980-1985) Non-realism: "Coming Out"

Taking leave of God (1980)

The world to come (1982)

The sea of faith (1984)

Only human (1985)

Stage 3: (1986-1989) Postmodernism and anti-realism

Life lines (1986)

The long-legged fly (1987)

The new Christian ethics (1988)

Radicals and the future of the church (1989)

Stage 4: (1990-1997) Expressionism

Creation out of nothing (1990)

What is a story? (1991)

The time being (1992)

Rethinking religion (1992)

After all: religion without alienation (1994)

The last philosophy

Solar ethics (1995)

After God: the future of religion (1997)

Mysticism after modernity (1997)

Stage 5: (1998) The turn to being

The religion of being (1998)

The revelation of being (1998)

Stage 6: (1999-2000) Ordinary language

The new religion of life in everyday speech (1999)

The meaning of it all in everyday speech (1999)

Kingdom come in everyday speech (2000)

Stage 7: (2000 onwards) The religion of the future

Philosophy's own religion (2000)

Reforming Christianity (2001)

Emptiness and brightness (2001)

Is nothing sacred? (2002)

Life life (2003)

Not included in Leaves' analysis:

The way to happiness (2005)

The old creed and the new (2006)

Leaves (2004:1) uses this scheme to narrate the flow of Cupitt's thought, emphasising that Cupitt's work is a 'flowing project' 'that is always changing'; that Cupitt is always reinventing and rethinking (2005:156); and that trying to conclude on Cupitt is like attempting to draw the landscape from a moving train.[17]

2.2.2 Colin Crowder

It was Crowder's review of Cowdell's Cupittian analysis that prompted Leaves' project. Crowder, in his review of *Atheist Priest,* called for a 'substantial critique...that would have to consider the implications of a radically anthropocentric constructivism' (cited in Leaves 2004:11). *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism* (1997) is a good resource, providing 'a symposium of views (both for and against) non-realism' (ibid, 11) and setting the debate in a context wider than merely a Cupittian

[17] Cupitt used this simile regarding his perspective of the difficulty of devising a philosophical system in the current postmodern climate (Leaves 2004:115).

controversy, although Cupitt's influence is nevertheless palpable and pervasive throughout the debate.

2.2.3 Joseph Runzo

Is God Real? (1993), edited by Runzo, is based on another, slightly earlier but relevant symposium that addressed the salient aspects of the debate. This remains a very good resource and it has been extensively consulted in this study, particularly in Chapter Four where this study engages with the main contenders of the debate. Runzo brings together contending, diverse views from across the spectrum of the realist-non-realist debate and contributors are often given an opportunity to respond directly to opponents' papers. Significant contributors *inter alia* are Don Cupitt, Brian Hebblethwaite, John Hick, D. Z. Phillips and Joseph Runzo.

2.2.4 Gavin Hyman and the festschrift

Gavin Hyman is the editor of *New directions in philosophical theology* (2004), a Festschrift of *essays in honour of Don Cupitt,* comprising contributions by ten former colleagues and students of Cupitt. All of them pay tribute in some way to him, before indicating points of divergence, which they feel represent 'new directions in philosophical theology. Cupitt is praised for breaking ground and for being bold when it comes to experimentation, thereby for blazing trails for new directions in philosophical theology.

Gavin Hyman has made a considerable contribution with his laudable attempt (2001)[18] to bring Cupitt and Milbank, the two polarised positions within the postmodern approach to the controversy, into dialogue. In Chapter Four, both the radical orthodoxy camp of Milbank, as well as the middle road advocated by Hyman, will be considered.

There seems to be some doubt as to whether Cupitt's 'nihilist textualism' (Hyman 2001:3), in spite of its overtly Nietzschean persuasion and Cupitt's postmodern claims, can really be regarded as postmodern theology at all.[19] Indicative of such a view is the glaring omission of Cupitt from *The Cambridge companion to postmodern theology* (2003), edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Cupitt is not even

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[18] *The predicament of Postmodern Theology, Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism* (2001).

[19] It could even be questioned whether theology is *überhaupt* possible in postmodern perspective. The road to the return of theology is by no means unequivocal.

mentioned in the index, although this is not the case with his American counterpart, Mark C. Taylor. John Milbank and even Rowan Williams receive ample attention as valid expressions of post-modern theology in spite of their overt orthodoxy. This is testimony to the current state of theology and to the collapse of the liberal consensus (Hyman 2004:1).

2.2.5 Trevor Greenfield

Trevor Greenfield gives Cupitt and non-realism pride of place in his *Introduction to radical theology: the death and resurrection of God* (2006), for which Cupitt furnished a foreword. Greenfield's book is significant as a counterpoint to the impression created in mainstream publications, under the sway of orthodoxy that radical theology was a flippant fad that burst onto the scene in the silly sixties and died a sudden death due to the innate implausibility of its preposterous propositions. This is more or less the impression given in, for instance, Alister McGrath's *The twilight of atheism: the rise and fall of disbelief in the modern world* (2004). What is even more astounding is that Cupitt is not even mentioned in the dismissal of radical theology. John Robinson is mentioned and, of course, Thomas Altizer, who is brusquely brushed aside before the author assaults the wayward Bishop Spong (ibid: 163), whom he depicts as someone who is not favourably accepted even in his own diocese. It is strange that McGrath does not apply this criterion to Jesus himself. Nevertheless, there is no mention of Cupitt and the reader is left with the impression that the death of God theology has met the same fate it claimed for the Almighty.

Greenfield (2006) redresses this imbalance and shows that radical theology was not a flash in the pan, but is an old and prevalent persuasion involving serious issues. The issues he identifies and focuses on are: 'Christology and Jesus, Ethics and Worldview and his proposal of radical theology as the new wisdom literature. He concludes with some new directions in radical theology. Cupitt (2006:3), referring to himself as 'a "traditional" Death-of-God radical', believes Greenfield's book addresses 'very great questions' that call for careful consideration.

2.2.6 John Shelby Spong

For Greenfield, non-realism is intimately related to radical theology, and, although Cupitt identifies with the description, the term is more applicable to Bishop John Shelby Spong, the (retired) Episcopalian who has strongly followed in the footsteps

of Bishop John Robinson. Although Spong and Cupitt differ, as will be pointed out at various points of the dissertation, Spong is significant, particularly in terms of his avowed conviction to bring about radical change of Christianity as a faith, but also in terms of its institution, the church. Furthermore, Spong may be regarded as the foremost new reformer, who has actually, in Lutheran fashion, posted his twelve theses. Although Spong is therefore undoubtedly a vociferous radical theologian, his theology is different from Cupitt's, and this is due to a difference in philosophical under-girding. Although the two are not identical, what Spong says should be read in conjunction with Cupitt and vice versa.

2.2.7 Lloyd Geering

This is also the case with Geering. Although there appear to be influences of one on the views of the other, Geering has become, like Cupitt, fully non-real. In terms of the new reformation, Geering's focus is more global than ecclesiastical and in this sense he seems to have influenced Cupitt's later thought. Geering comes from a somewhat different background to that of Cupitt and Spong, but, despite differences, it is useful to read Geering along with Cupitt.

3 FRAMING THE QUESTION / QUESTIONING THE FRAME

3.1 Questioning the frame

The underlying problem relating to realism and non-realism is the governing and opposing frameworks that serve as paradigms governing the epistemology, theology, hermeneutics and religious expression. When Christendom was in place, the Christian paradigm dominated and dictated. With the dawning of modernity, it was the rupture of the consensus prevalent under Christendom that precipitated the new contentious and conflicting situation. Since the rise of modern liberal theology, a consensus developed among critical academic scholars that the modern paradigm could not be ignored, but had to be discounted in all theological work, although there was more or less consensus on the view that a compromise between the two competing frameworks had to be sought. It could not be conceived that the Christian paradigm could be declared obsolete and redundant. Even in the most liberal approach, this was regarded as a bridge too far.

Recently the consensus and compromise has been ruptured and Hyman credits Cupitt, particularly in the British context, with noticing and contributing significantly to the new contentious situation.

> It would not be an exaggeration to say that in the British context, he was the theologian who effectively inaugurated the subsidence of the liberal consensus within theology and ushered in the new more contested era in theology that we are experiencing today.
>
> Hyman 2004:3

Hyman (ibid.) is persuaded that it is by and large a question of framework and presuppositions. The liberal consensus operated solely on the Kantian Enlightenment framework and sought to bridge the chasm between religion and secularism, offering a fusion of the two (Greenfield 2006:21). Hyman (2004:1) attempts to pinpoint the 'liberal compromise', mentioning characteristics like the alignment of theology to 'post-Kantian' philosophy, revision or restatement of traditional theology in accordance with contemporary culture, and engagement in apologetics to justify theology's legitimacy, an attempt to show how theology 'represents' reality. With the advent of postmodernism, the framework shifted and the former consensus crumbled.

Cupitt (2006:4) also refers to what he regards as the misplaced optimism, lasting for a century or more, that the critical methods could render a sufficient revision to make Christianity modern and yet somehow retain a semblance of orthodoxy. He believes the 'critical style of thinking' was underestimated by moderate reformers, its implications were 'much more revolutionary' than it first appeared. The overall religious landscape has now changed. Neo-conservatives and evangelicals are in command and Cupitt laments the prospect that an 'academic theological liberal' like Rowan Williams seems forced by Evangelicals to tow the line (ibid: 3).

Zooming out a little and surveying the broad religious landscape, it is possible to perceive a triangular contest, with the traditional faiths holding some of their ground against their polar opposite of secular humanism, the one tending to remain fully theist and the other tending to be fully atheist. The third contestant comprises the new religious movements and new spiritualities which, together with their unlikely partner, fundamentalism, seem to represent the contemporary resurgence of faith and religious practice. Cupitt does not fit into any of these positions.

The mature Cupitt inclines towards the position of positively appraising secular post-modern culture as 'Christianity-become-kingdom'. Greenfield (2006:26) observes, 'For two generations theologians have spoken of religionless Christianity. Now it is coming into being. The lifestyle of the West in the twenty-first century is Christian, regardless of individual beliefs. Western culture is inherently Christian'. Paradoxically, atheism is the new Christianity of the West. Not only is this paradoxical, but also ambiguous, because Cupitt and non-realist radicals retain religion and want to form and reform it. They acknowledge that culture, having subsumed Christianity, now informs religion. Religion, in this sense, is not only an expression of 'Christian culture', but also an individual self-expression. Religion in this sense has become entirely humanistic, even as God has (radically) become human.

Theology has become a contentious terrain (Hyman 2004:1) and 'a community of contested discourses' (Macintyre).[20] To some it indicates the impossibility of theology and part of the presupposition is to indicate what sort of theological definition is adhered to. Further, methodology has become highly framework-sensitive. Postmodernism has made it precarious to 'name the present' (Tracy 1994) and postmodern theology is no exception. Cupitt (2001:78) refers to Right-post-Modernists, 'provocative neo-traditionalists' who, 'affirm standard Latin theology'. Leaves contends that in their treatment the postmodern becomes pre-modern. Cupitt (2001:78) refers to Left-postmodernists, including himself, who 'accept the metaphysical truth of nihilism and accept that theological statements cannot be understood realistically'.

In spite of the noise, Hyman (2004:2) concludes that the new 'situation has been immensely exhilarating and exciting and has served to revitalise the field'.

3.2 Framing the question

What then, are the prospects for a non-realist approach to theology and religion? This study attempts to demarcate by supplying a framework and indicating the areas of investigation.

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[20] Cited by Hyman (2004:2)

3.2.1 A negative position

It is evident that the primary prospect of theological non-realism as a negative position lies in its being the antithesis of theological realism. For this reason, the first line of enquiry is to determine what theological realism is and what is wrong with it.

3.2.2 Philosophical foundation

It should also be evident that there is a particular relationship between the theological and the philosophical aspects, the philosophy underlining, or under-girding the theology, indicating the need for a philosophical enquiry. This entails a look at epistemology and ontology, specifically classical metaphysics and how it relates to Christian theism, that is, theological realism.

3.2.3 Worldview

Very closely related to the questions about the theory of knowledge is the question of worldview. The problem at hand is mainly about conflicting worldviews, the Christian and the modern/postmodern.

3.2.4 Religion

Part of the framing of the question is how the worldview, philosophy and theology translate into belief, ethics and worship. Although the nature of this study is philosophical theology, it nevertheless keeps practical application in view, in much the same way as practical theology keeps the underlying philosophical aspects on which practice rests, in view.

3.2.5 Reformation

It will be contended that the proposal of non-realism is innately and radically reformative. The nature and objective of the reformation is not clear at first glance, and therefore it constitutes another line of enquiry. If non-realism is part of the new reformation, what is its relationship and role? What does it imply in terms of the, individual, social and global aspect?

3.2.6 Problem statement

The study is a critical appraisal of (Cupittian) theological non-realism, particularly with regard to the prospects and problems associated with a radical reformation of Christianity. A hypothesis is posited to serve as a general guideline: non-realism as the core of a new theology of life, is a valid and valuable basis for the new reformation of Christianity. Five questions, serving as gate-ways that open into fields of related questions guide the investigation. These questions pertain to context, content, criticism and conclusion:

1. What are theological realism and non-realism?
2. What is the road to non-realism?
3. How did Don Cupitt 'inflate' non-realism?
4. What are the main criticisms and contending positions?
5. What are the prospects for a radical (root) reformation?

3.3 Envisaged conclusion and contribution

Although the study by and large endorses Cupitt's influence, while also taking note of the contending and alternative positions, the study inclines towards a non-realist ecclesiastical integrity which constitutes a clear parting of the ways with Cupitt and most other significant voices. Although a practical proposal will be made in this regard, it will also be shown that the road ahead in terms of religious reform is multifarious, opening into a sort of delta with many co-existing and equal paths leading into a non-apocalyptic, non-eschatological future. The study departs from the death of God premise and the *a priori* that religion is a wholly human creation.[21] Although this is a study in philosophical theology, the practical and pragmatic implications are also considered. As practical theology cannot function without keeping underlying philosophy in mind, philosophical theology should also keep the practical implications in mind, thereby engaging in conversation across the theological spectrum.

[21] The latter is part of the vision statement of the Sea of Faith Network (UK).

The thesis aims to make a distinctive contribution to the current non-realist and particularly Cupittian debate by:

- a concise delineation of the historical and philosophical context of non-realism by tracking the trajectories of Don Cupitt's development to philosophical anti-realism and theological non-realism. (Chapter Two and first part of Chapter Three).
- providing an interpretation of the theological and religious implications of this development. (Second part of Chapter Three).
- entering the critical conversation with Cupitt and by considering some contending alternatives. (Chapter four).
- uniquely setting the non-realist question in the particular context of the New Reformation. (Chapter five).
- interrogating Cupitt's ambivalent anti-ecclesiastical attitude and by proposing a new non-realist ecclesiastical course. (Chapter five).

By contending strongly for the New Reformation prospects of non-realism, particularly in a new ecclesiastical *modus*, the author hopes to move the debate to a different level. Non-realism and the philosophy of the church is combined in a unique way. It is not however a complete and prescriptive model, but rather the proposal of a new angle to the debate.

CHAPTER TWO

MODERNITY AND THE ROAD TO THEOLOGICAL NON-REALISM

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about context, the road to theological non-realism. The journey leads along the landscape sculpted by the glacial slippage due to the cultural climate change, that is modernity. The methodology is to keep an eye on worldview in general and epistemology in particular and then move on to theology, taking a historical look at the reaction to the crisis posed by modernity. Don Cupitt is contracted tour guide, while a side-glance is cast at his own odyssey[1], how he came to and handled the crisis. The chapter commences with a look at the 'marriage made in heaven' between metaphysical epistemology and theological realism, after which Cupitt's explanation of the diverse pre-crisis, realist stations on his metro map are briefly considered, before the focus is turned towards the divorce, dawning of modernity and the clearing-up (Aufklärung) associated with it. The struggle of theology with the modern paradigm, as well as the advent of Radical Theology is also briefly reviewed, before the focus is turned to Don Cupitt and his 'coming out' with the proposal of theological non-realism in 1980.

2. METAPHYSICAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL REALISM

2.1 Classical Metaphysics and Western Civilization

A. N. Whitehead has described the history of Western thought as 'footnotes to Plato' (Cupitt 1997a:62). It is so interconnected with the Western way of thinking that it may never be fully exorcised, as prominent anti-metaphysical thinkers like Kant, Wittgenstein and Derrida have all suspected (ibid.)

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[1] 'Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and Writings of Don Cupitt' (2004), is the title of Nigel Leaves' review of Cupitt's oeuvre.

The term 'metaphysics' literally means 'after', or 'beyond', physics or nature. Plato (427-347 BCE)[2] regarded the world of sensual objects as contingent. There is a gulf between the world of the sensual and the world of timeless essence, that is, the world of ideas, of which the sensual objects are mere shadows. These timeless ideas exist independently of mind. They 'exist as real entities and as originals for empirical objects' (Delius *et al* 2005:12). This is the essence of Platonic dualism. The world of sense knowledge is knowledge of shadows. Our temporal, mortal existence on earth is depicted graphically by Plato's famous cave allegory, introduced in his dialogue, *The Republic.* People are chained up for life in a cave where they see on the wall shadows of things on the outside. They are not able to see the things, only the shadows cast by the things. Because of their restricted view, the inmates regard the shadows as real, 'However, the things themselves are mere images of an ideal existence...' (ibid.).

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who studied under Plato for twenty years, founded his own Academy in Athens when he became critical of his former teacher. In particular, he criticised the unbridgeable gap between the ideas and the world of experience, between the essence and the actual object' (ibid, 15). Aiming to focus on natural philosophy and on the physical, he moved the speculation on ontology, cosmology and philosophical theology to fourteen books that came 'after' his *Physics,* and they have become known as metaphysics.[3] This was an arrangement of subjects ranging from the sensory perceptible to the supra-sensory. In terms of Aristotle's understanding, however, it is ironic, because he 'defined metaphysics as the science of first causes', and therefore these subjects actually belong at the beginning of his system (ibid, 114). 'Metaphysics, is the general theory of wisdom or the "original philosophy" , the basic theory of the first causes and principles of being and of thinking' (ibid,15).

Aristotle is famous for postulating a first cause or prime mover. A being was thought to exist who is the cause of all other beings, although his being is not caused by anything. He is the unmoved mover. It is interesting that 'while Aristotle

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[2] The view of Plato, presented in this paragraph follows the conventional perception. It should be acknowledged, however, that there is a reappraisal of Plato extant, associated with the work of scholars like G. Fine, who differ markedly from the traditional perception, largely following Aristotle's criticism of Plato. For a review of Fine's work and critical discussion of the debate, cf. J. Van Eck (2005:304—7). Also, Fine, G, *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays,* XII—447. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[3] Greek: *ta meta ta physika* (Delius *et al* 2005:114)

calls this entity "God", it did not create the world, nor does it guide the world now, or take any part in it' (ibid.).

2.2 Metaphysical Realism: Onto-Theology

Classical Greek metaphysics is also referred to as onto-theology.[4] Ontology is about being and the question about the highest being is theology. Because Heidegger believed Western thought to be pervaded by and founded in these two questions about how things are, he describes the whole of the Western metaphysical tradition as onto-theological (Thompson 2005:13).[5] Christian theology became established within an epistemology of direct correspondence between thought and being. Cupitt describes the old, pre-Cartesian, pre-crisis way of thinking with reference to Aristotle:

> You began with Being—and Being made itself understood by you. As Aristotle[6] puts it, only in God is there fully autonomous thinking. For the rest of us thought is not autonomous, but rather is evoked by its object. Human thought was not separated from Being, because to be thinking at all was already to be participating in the universal intelligibility of Being in all beings, the immanent Logos.
>
> Cupitt 1986:5

Knowledge in the old system before Descartes typically started with ontology. It started with the object of the subject-object relation. Descartes, we shall see in due course, is the watershed, where a shift from ontology to epistemology occurred, specifically to the thinking subject.

Butchvarov (1999:562) defines metaphysical realism as:

i) The contention that there are real (spatio-temporal) objects
ii) They have an independent objective existence apart from our experience or knowledge.
iii) They can interrelate apart from our knowledge or language.

Cupitt (1986:222) distinguishes medieval realism from modern realism. In Antiquity and medieval times, realism was the 'belief in the real existence of universals (the Platonic forms), apart from the individuals which exemplify them...In

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[4] Thompson (2005:7 n.1) ascribes the term as a neologism, to Kant. Although, 'The term was popularised by Heidegger as a catch-phrase for the failings of the metaphysical tradition in philosophy' (Wrathall 2003:1-2) Cf. also Vanhoozer (2003:21-2). It is very interesting to note that Feuerbach already used it. (1841:38).

[5] Ameriks (2000b:258) applies this indictment also to German Idealism in particular and philosophy in general: '...an alienating effort to carry out theology by other means.'

[6] Cupitt does not provide a reference.

modern times 'realism' is more often used to mean belief in the reality of the external world'.

2.3 Idealism and Anti-Realism

In contrast, *Anti-realism,* a term introduced by Nietzsche (Cupitt 1987:222) and now widely used, rejects the propositions mentioned above. A position that 'merely denies the existence of material things' is usually referred to as 'idealism' (Butchvarov 1999:562).[7] Idealists maintain that the world-order is not gleaned from an independent, intrinsic order but is constituted and imposed by the mind of the observer.[8] *Anti-realism* is a stronger form of Idealism and may also be regarded as (Nietzschean) perspectivism (Cupitt 1986:223).

2.4 Theological Realism

Cupitt defines theological realism:

> The theory that religious objects such as God and spirits are distinct, objectively-existing quasi-personal beings independent of the believer's consciousness, and experienced as sources of energy, or powers. Religious beliefs are therefore understood as describing or at least as referring to objective beings, states of affairs and supernaturally-caused occurrences; and the truth of such beliefs is seen as lying in their correspondence with what is the case.
>
> Cupit 1997a:223-4.

2.4.1 Platonic dualism and embryonic Christianity

Metaphysics in general and Platonic dualism in particular was pervasive in the Hellenistic world in which the evangelists composed their gospel narratives and it is particularly prevalent in Paul's writings, regarded by many as the architect of Christianity. It was also strong in the Apostolic and Nicean Fathers and from there pervaded Western consciousness. Truth is essentially from outside and enters this world through revelation as special knowledge. Privileged agents or brokers faithfully receive this special knowledge, whereby they are able to glimpse what is true. The mind has to be regenerated, set free from captivity, before it is able to comprehend

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[7] Cf. for instance a discussion of the dialogues of George Berkeley (1685—1753), in Rader, M 1980:168-192.

[8] It should be noted that the meaning of Idealism is rather more complex and still open to discussion, as Ameriks (2000a:8) contends. It could denote that 'matter, *or* the external world , is not independently real, *or* at least that it cannot be known, *or* known with certainty, as real.' Ameriks proposes the use of more specific terms like 'immaterialism', or 'skepticism'. For a nuanced discussion on Idealism and anti-Realism, as well as the traditional cold reception of it in the 'analytical' British-American tradition, cf. Ameriks, K, 2000a, pages 7-10.

the things of the mind of God. This world is a shadowy world of captivity, but one day the redeemed will be free and enter the teleological destination, heaven, the home of God.

Metaphysics therefore, as we have shown (§ 2.2 above, is onto-theology. By the same token, traditional Christian theology is metaphysical in terms of worldview in general, and epistemology and ontology in particular.

2.4.2 Theism and related terms

The traditional onto-theological literalist view of God, in the Western tradition of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is referred to in philosophy and theology as theism (Thompson 2003:111). John Haldane (2003:17), a Christian philosopher and apologist, describes theism as the belief in a single, all-knowing, all-good, all-present and all-powerful, eternally existing God who created and sustains the universe.[9] It is the view of an objective,[10] real existence of God as the Supreme Being, for which faith, biblical faith, is required. God is the infinite, spiritual, personal, *ex nihilo* creator of the world, who is the sovereign monarch of the universe. He is regarded as male, a loving father who is able to enter into personal relationships with human individuals. Bishop Robinson described theism:

> Theism...understands by this supreme Person, a self-existent subject of infinite goodness and power, who enters into a relationship with us comparable with that of one human personality with another. The theist is concerned to argue the existence of such a Being as the creator and most sufficient explanation of the world as we know it. Without a person 'out there' the skies would be empty, the heavens as brass, and the world without hope or compassion.
>
> Robinson 1963:46

Dawkins (2006:18) adds: '...intervenes in the world by performing miracles; frets about good and bad deeds, and knows when we do them (or even *think* of doing them.)' Basically, it is the view of the Bible, taken literally.[11] Belief in the existence of such a God is theism and the conviction that no such God exists has become known as a-theism. The view that there is no conclusive evidence to decide whether God

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[9] The debate (2003) between John Haldane, defending theism, and Ninian Smart, rejecting theism, is informative in this regard. Also the feud between Dawkins and McGrath.

[10] 'Objective' in this regard can mean two things: i) Can be proven, and ii) Existing independently of mind.

[11] Alston (2000:595) contends that 'realism is the "default" position for Christian thought, the position to take in the absence of sufficient reasons against it'.

exists or not has become known as agnosticism, a term invented by T.H. Huxley to describe his own position of indecision (Kennedy 1999:215).

An identification of God with the physical universe is referred to as pantheism, a term coined by J. Toland (1705) (Delius *et al* 2005:115) and usually associated with the rationalist thought of Spinoza. A modification attributed (Geering 2002:54) to K. C. F. Krause (1781-1832) is called panentheism.[12] It describes the idea that God is not simply identified with nature, but everything is nevertheless regarded as being *in* God. Theism emphasising transcendence was regarded as unconvincing and pantheism which emphasised immanence was regarded as too crude (ibid, 54-5). The idea of an external designer God who created the world, but is not immanent within it, is referred to as deism and it was the favoured position of Enlightenment thinkers. This is usually what modern physicists[13] have in mind when they refer to God. Dawkins (2006:18) is decidedly under-whelmed: 'Pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism'.[14]

2.4.3 A prevailing perspective

In spite of the Enlightenment and the dawning of the secular modern world, to which we will turn shortly, theism and its Platonic roots are still prevalent, and, as we have seen in the case of Haldane and others, is staunchly defended. Cupitt (1997a:58) relates how his thoughts were provoked by a remark made by a colleague at Cambridge regarding the death of a fellow colleague: 'Well, he knows now, doesn't he?', Cupitt viewed this as a sort of window into the residual, but nevertheless pervasive worldview with which Christian faith is associated. Cupitt drew up a summary of the most important aspects implied in the remark—(adapted and paraphrased):

- Truth is not made by us, but revealed and received
- Truth exists out there somewhere, objectively
- The answer to the riddle of life evades us and awaits us after death
- The ready-made answers to all our questions are theoretically, accessible
- There is an onto-theological unity between thought and being

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[12] This position has won great support in the modern period by noteworthy names like Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, John Robinson and Moltmann (Geering 2002:55).
[13] Geering (2002:54) refers to Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Fred Hoyle and Paul Davies.
[14] In his treatment of these theistic terms, Dawkins does not refer to *panentheism.*

- Our life is a pilgrimage and death is the door to life eternal
- Death then, is the moment of truth
- Each person's life is, as it were, a scripted story

On the view that our life is a sort of pilgrim's progress to the moment of truth, Cupitt (1997:59) distinguishes a number of binary contrasts typical to this paradigm: we move from:

i) relative to absolute
ii) time to eternity
iii) transient to constant or permanent
iv) sensuous to intelligible Being
v) mediated to unmediated

In all of these cases the second is superior to the first and governs the first to affect it.

2.4.4 Various forms of theological realism

Don Cupitt devoted an entire monograph, 'Life Lines' (1986), to the various different theological positions, ranging from fully realist to non-realist, varying in terms of their philosophical foundation, drawing up (1986:3) a 'metro map of the spirit'. He contends that 'every station on the map or stage in the religious life represents a more or less coherent and autonomous religious philosophy' (ibid.). Cupitt's metro map of the spirit refers to stages of the religious life which an individual could journey through, while at the same time it roughly reflects the history of ideas of humanity. The Crisis is the period of transition between realism and non-realism. In the history of ideas it refers to 'the great period of theological crisis (1780-1845)' (Cupitt 1986:13). The journey represents in the history of ideas what Cupitt (ibid, 14) views as a 'long process of demythologizing'. In a certain sense, the process can be seen as a journey from myths to maths to metaphor. Cupitt (ibid.) describes the (painful) process as one of 'progressive gain, by progressive loss. He thinks the truth lies, not in a single station, but in the journey. Cupitt distinguishes five different kinds of theological or religious realism: the pre-crisis stations: Mythical, Doctrinal, Metaphysical or Ladder Realism, Designer Realism and Obedientiary Realism. The writer presents a very brief summary of each.

2.4.4.1 Mythical realism

Mythical realism (Cupitt 1986:26) is not a live option. Although myth is still with us, mythical realism hails from a distant past. It corresponds to a stage in society's development which has long been left behind. It refers to tribal, agrarian society, the pre-doctrinal period of innocence. In the development of an individual it corresponds to the dreamy time of early adolescence. It is a time of pure, unadulterated symbol and story. These vivid pictures, these myths, are just simply accepted without scrutiny. It is 'pre-theoretical and unconscious realism' (1986:54). It is naiveté. It is 'traditional society that lives within its stories'. Cupitt describes it as beautiful and innocent, confessing that he feels the most nostalgia for this kind of concept. But, it was irretrievably lost, long ago (1986:79).[15]

2.4.4.2 Doctrinal realism

This form of realism is partnered by power and authority. It is 'religion as credal [sic] belief' (Cupitt 1986:35). The young person enters the stage in which rules and personal values are developed. Adolescence is very often the time when the heavenly father is being replaced in importance by the earthly parent (ibid, 42) Cupitt uses the apt analogy of a surfboarder, 'swept forward ...on the mighty tide of the divine will.' It has the sense of 'an intensely enhanced sense of life' (ibid.) The individual who accepts the credal rationalism and accepts the doctrines as the truth feels secure, but at the same time realism becomes an instrument of power in the hands of an authority that demands submission.[16] The price for this is that any competing rationality is viewed as a potential threat to the neat and cosy security and must therefore be invalidated. Religion in this credal, authoritarian aspect functions as a fortress on a hill that has to be protected from the menacing world. The price for doctrinal security is submission.[17]

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[15] This was by no means Cupitt's last word on this subject. His revisions will be considered in a subsequent chapter. His point at this juncture is historical, but nevertheless still valid.

[16] Cupitt's religious faith during his high school years, owing to the influence of Darwinism, was what he describes as *Designer Realism* akin to Deism, which made God and religion distant (2002:2). He was 'converted' at Cambridge, even though he was still studying Biology at the time. What he was taught at Cambridge, still 'rather extrinsic' (1986:92), Cupitt regards as *Doctrinal Realism.*

[17] This is what Bower (2005:54), as a modern rationalist, regards as so detrimental. Christianity, by its insistence on submission, causes the 'closing of the mind', hence the title of his work: *Open minds, closed minds and Christianity.*

2.4.4.3 Metaphysical or Ladder Realism

In Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, *Doctrinal Realism* is blended with, and mitigated by, mystical realism, which Cupitt believes gives the soul room to move (1986:79). It pays lip service to the dogma and authority of its host, the ecclesiastical institution, heavily invested in, and bolstered by *Doctrinal Realism.* At the heart of 'ladder', or Metaphysical Realism, lies the *via negativa*, the Apophatic tradition. This tradition is very diffuse, maintaining that the best that can be asserted about the divine is what it is not. God is the ineffable. The view is so diffuse that Cupitt thinks it can hardly be called realism at all (ibid.).

2.4.4.4 Designer Realism

Realising that science will eventually threaten religion's credibility, religion withdraws. This is the natural theology of the scientific age. Realism decreases as scientific knowledge grows. This position is associated with *Deism* and the ontological argument from design. It is the 'simplest and most popular form of realistic theism' (Cupitt 1986:69). Although God is anthropomorphic (ibid, 55), the great architect of the cosmos, he is nevertheless dispatched to the periphery. He does not interfere with his own laws. The world works like clockwork, like a machine. This is the theological position of Newton, who maintained that God was the architect and he was a mere student of His works (ibid, 65).

2.4.4.5 Obedientiary Realism

This is 'a rather dreary name' he invented, Cupitt (1986:69) says, to describe a theological realist view, which wields power and calls for obedience: protestant realism. A salient difference between *Designer Realism* and *Obedientiary Realism* is that, in the former, God borrows his goodness from the good cosmic order, while, in the latter, nature is corrupt and in need of redemption. God must first condemn and then redeem (1986:77). Cupitt observes that, where *Designer Realism* tended to be rather 'weightless', this particularly Protestant form of realism is 'weighty' and, in his view, often becomes psychologically unendurable (1986:80).[18] The associated pictures are vivid and real: God, the Devil, Heaven, Hell, Sin and Judgement. God is

[18] At university, Cupitt (2002:2) relates, he was converted to evangelicalism and this *Obedentiary Realism.* However, the prevailing powerful influence of science and empiricism, (he was still studying Biology at the time), made him feel uneasy with the 'dualistic and intellectually estranged outlook'.

a vivid, enthroned feudal Lord standing over and against the human 'slave' or 'child'. God's sovereignty is posited at the expense of human autonomy. God's will is to be sought, not the will of the believer. God has a plan, not only for this world and the total cosmos, but for each individual. Juristic condemnation and redemption are prominent and consequently, also, are the importance of personal conversion and a life of obedience. The language of heteronomy is pronounced: 'man [*sic*] is a dumb beast and unable to do what is right; stands in need of a new inner creation through conversion, a change of heart' (1997:71). Everything that occurs is meaningful in terms of God's will, design and plan. Although the plan is hardly ever completely clear, it has to be sought after diligently. The human condition is like being in a traffic jam. You cannot go forward, back or anywhere. You cannot save yourself; you cannot achieve anything. You need redemption from above to get you out of the jam (Ibid, 74). Salvationist religion helps the believer to escape from the harshness of this vale of tears. The believer constantly needs to reject their old life and live the new spiritual and supernatural life (Cupitt 1986:76). Cupitt avers that, although the conversion experience is ecstatic, it usually lasts only a short while and then the condemnation and the pessimism about the naturally depraved human condition in the form of an awareness of sin and guilt returns. The Bible plays an important role in this scenario. During the Gutenberg[19] event, the Bible became a 'portable oracle' (ibid, 71). God's revealed will was now available to each individual. Through the Protestant Reformation, the Bible became an essential and insuperable source of knowledge and guidance for every believer.

Although the epistemology is metaphysical and the imagery vividly mythical, the Protestant revolution was part of the *Age of Reason* and *early Enlightenment,* and it nevertheless represented a democratisation of religion that empowered the individual and diminished the power of the authoritarian, ecclesiastical authority. With these distinctions Cupitt attempted to show that theological realism was not only pervasive and powerful, but also diverse, and still prevalent and potent in spite of the crisis of modernity. The distinctions are encased, however, in Cupitt's newfound postmodernism, which emphasises plurality of perspective.

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[19] Hastings (2000:443) remarks, 'Modernity started just as printing, 'modernity's supreme tool', was being invented.'

2.4.5 Summary

The match between Theological Realism and Metaphysical Dualism, if not a match made in heaven, is nevertheless quite heavenly-minded. It is a vertical affair, which determines and dominates the mundane, the human and the horizontal. God is real, and he is capital T-truth. The crisis of modernity and postmodernism, which the writer now considers, is a radical revolution, which turns the T upside down. In fact, it turns the world upside down, in contrast with the Christian metaphysical worldview.

3 MODERNITY AND THE CRISIS

3.1 A cultural cataclysm

The crisis of modernity that the writer will attempt to describe has become known as The Death of God. It is a shorthand description of a very large and complex event in the history of Western civilization. Cupitt describes the Death of God as a 'complex cultural event' (1989:158). It is an 'extraordinary cultural upheaval' (ibid.), radically revolutionary and, in Cupitt's (1997:79) view, apparently extant: 'The last few millennia are going up in smoke'. Five to seven millennia of agricultural civilization have just ended. During this time, humanity was guided by laws emanating from a sacred centre. Cupitt (1997a:124-5) is persuaded that the centre has been lost. This implies that 'there is no unifying principle, no transcendent focus around which everything converges, no coping-stone that holds everything together (ibid.) Geering (2002:48) refers to this major event as the Second Axial Period. When the first occurred, most of the major world faiths were born. It was the advent of the death of the gods in favour of the more enlightened monotheism. Cupitt and Geering concur that we are in a similar crucible in which humanity has once again become enlightened and the result is the Death of God, or at least the final nail in the coffin of theism.

3.1.1 Historical overview

The difference between modernity and the medieval period it superseded is like the difference day and night. It is no wonder that modernity is often described in terms of daybreak, the appearance of light after night; the 'dawn of modernity' (Delius *et al* 2005:26). The modern era is associated with the coming of the light that of course casts a shadow over the medieval period. Although it is probably not correct to view

the middle ages as too dark, the contrast is nevertheless striking when we take a retrospective view of the developments of humanity over the last five hundred years.[20]

A symbolic date for the start of the medieval period, in terms of philosophy, is 529 CE, when Plato's academy was closed by the Emperor Justinian. It is significant that in the same year the Order of St Benedict was founded (Delius *et al* 2005:20). 'The beginning of the middle ages also marks the beginning of the spread of Christianity in Europe'. This period of approximately a millennium ends with the beginning of the Renaissance at the end of the fifteenth century. The vantage point for the retrospective view from which the beginning of the Renaissance and the end of the middle ages could be seen was during the eighteenth century (Ibid.). At this point of the Enlightenment, people became aware that they had been living in a different epoch for three hundred years (ibid.).

Over the thousand years of Christendom, there existed hegemony of onto-theological knowledge. We are moving towards the crisis of modernity, depicted graphically as the Death of God, and indeed, from the beginning of the dawn of modernity, 'God' was in trouble. This means that the old Truth, the old system of knowledge, the old points of reference and departure, the old science and epistemology were being challenged. The harmony between heaven and earth and the match made in heaven between metaphysics and realist theology were being ruptured.

3.2 The modern worldview

Cupitt (1980:17) identifies four aspects that mark the change from the old world to the new: *Cosmology; Epistemology; Social Institutions* and the *Self.* The writer will make use of these insights in the following brief review of the birth of the modern world and what it entails.

3.2.1 Pre-modern cosmology

The 'house' of the old worldview was a pretty, enchanted, rather haunted sort of place. It was full of myth, mystery, magic and wonder. 'Omens, portents and occult

[20] The designations of the periods, like Medieval, Renaissance, Modern Era, are modern and reflect the retrospective view from Modernity. The designations of time and epoch during the medieval period were different and based in the marriage of philosophy and theology (Delius et al 2005:26).

forces' were part of the existing order' (Cupitt 1980:17). An individual had to make sure that they were properly harmoniously aligned with the plethora of perceived supernatural forces. However, with the dawn of the modern world, 'we have experienced the disenchantment of the world. For us the world is what the sciences of nature have shown it to be—morally and religiously neutral and without magic' (Cupitt 1980:17-8). Magic is now a sleight of hand, an optical illusion. When people see things and hear voices, we regard it as either paranormal or pathological.[21]

The medieval map[22] of the world is a narrative of the story and identity of the world seen from the lofty, metaphysical, mythical point of view. The earth is a flat disk with the history of the world embedded in the map. The centre of the world is Jerusalem. The whole map is superimposed over the crucified body of Christ with his head, feet and hands indicating North, South, East and West.

Cupitt (1984:38) reads the medieval worldview in the architecture of churches. The church building of Christendom is an image of Christ's body and of the cosmos. Approaching the church and approaching the sanctuary through the various sections of the church tells the story of the pilgrim's progress towards heaven, holiness and the throne of God. Space and time are organised on a religious basis.

The medieval universe was saturated with meaning. Everything was in some way connected with the throne of God and the triumph of Christ. Cupitt indicates that this view is not purely Christian, but has its roots in Greek philosophy and cosmology. Again, it hails from 'Plato, his pupil Eudoxus, Aristotle and Ptolemy' (Cupitt 1984:39). In the Ptolemaic cosmology, the earth was situated at the centre of the universe and was fixed. Planets and stars were in motion 'powered from above, motive energy descending from God through his angels...' (Ibid.) Within the earth was the underworld, or Hell, with descending steps to Satan, the opposite pole of God. The universe was full of meaning and story. 'It was like a sacred text, full of signs and hidden meanings that called for interpretation...' and, of course, the interpreter was not a scientist but a wise man of God, a theologian who had the privilege of a 'sneak-peek' into the infinite mysteries of God. This worldview made the church, the purveyor of divine knowledge, extremely powerful (Cupitt 1984:42).

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[21] The former refers to what cannot be proven by normal means, and the latter is treatable as mental illness.

[22] For instance the Ebstorf Map, circa 1238 (Delius *et al* 2005:24)

3.2.2 Copernican cosmology and the crisis

Between the times of Copernicus and Newton, cosmology changed dramatically and had a profound impact on the general worldview. Indeed, this is aptly referred to as the Copernican revolution. The new view of the heliocentric world was literally an earth-moving thought. Instead of being flat, and fixed on its pillars by God, the earth became a moving sphere rotating around the sun and spinning around its own axis. It set the heads of all who were steeped in pre-Copernican cosmology spinning. The church authority felt the quake quite distinctly when one of its staunch members, Galileo Galilei, confirmed the theory of Copernicus.

Cupitt (1984:48) contends that Galileo's confidence in the new cosmology 'put many religious ideas on the spot' and the church authority swung into awesome action, defending the Christian paradigm, which was now being threatened by the new scientific one. Galileo, under pressure, and also because he was a good catholic, compromised by contending that God had actually written two books, the book of nature and the Bible. There could not be disharmony between the two. The book of nature was written in the language of mathematics and the book of Scripture was written in religious language. After severe ecclesiastical pressure, Galileo recanted. Cupitt sums up the importance of the Galileo event:

> ...it is clear in retrospect that the revolution in cosmology whose success Galileo ensured was to have enormous social implications, because from now on great institutions like kingship, religion and the moral order could no longer claim the sort of cosmic backing that they had always had in previous societies. In the long run people would begin to perceive authority and order as coming up from below rather than from a higher world above...
>
> Cupitt1984:46

From Copernicus and Galileo, the trajectory runs through Bacon, the father of the empirical method, until it reaches 'its first great peak in Newton' (Cupitt 1984:133) and the full acknowledgment by the scientific community of the mechanistic nature of the natural world. The world was a large natural machine that operated on the basis of fixed laws. If God was in the picture, it was as a designer who did not interfere with the laws of nature. The old world of the gods, miracles and wonders had all but collapsed.

3.2.3 Darwinian biology and the crisis

The rupture caused by the Copernican crisis in the first half of the modern era was matched in importance and impact by the theory of, and meticulous empirical

analysis into the origin of species and the evolution of animal life, by the English biologist Charles Darwin.

Darwin was a rather traditional, conservative believer, although during, and as a result of his work, his faith waned. It was through the diligent and meticulous study of the natural, biological world that Darwin arrived at the theory of the evolution of species through natural selection. In due course, this earth-shattering theory caused one of the last vestiges of the philosophical proofs for the existence of God, namely the argument from design, to collapse.[23] Did God and natural causes work together to create the animal world? Did God design and nature refine? Cupitt observes that Darwin was one of the greatest pioneers in showing that the best explanation is the natural one, not the supernatural or metaphysical. Cupitt (2002:1) encapsulates Darwin's insight. Cupitt (ibid.) contends: 'Just time and chance and the natural process of things, over sufficient time[24], can give rise to astonishingly complex and self-maintaining objects such as the housefly on the wall...': Philosophers usually do not like to admit that a mere scientific theory could be of such enormous intellectual importance; but the fact is that Darwinism has probably been the chief influence in bringing about the Death of God and the end of metaphysics. Cupitt adds a biographical note:

> In my own case, the conflict in my thinking between Platonism and Darwinism was eventually resolved after thirty years, when I first put forward in 1980 the non-realist doctrine of God, and then in subsequent books extended non-realism through my philosophy generally.
>
> Cupitt 2002:1

It seems, then, that as Plato was a towering figure in the old vertical knowledge, Darwin may be regarded as a towering figure in the change to the horizontal.

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[23] The teleological argument from design had long been used and was given new impetus by the work of the Rev. William Paley, 'Natural theology—or evidences of the existence and attributes of the Deity collected from the appearances of nature (1802). Paley is famous for his watch and Watchmaker analogy—if one picked up a watch and analysed its intricate design, if followed causally that there had to be a designer. The same applied to creation. Darwin's work showed that his argument did not apply to the origin of species. Species originated through mutation over long periods of time. Dawkins' 'The Blind Watchmaker' (1986) is a meticulous critique of Paley's 'watch' simile and a staunch defence of Darwinism.

[24] It is on the issue of time that the geologist Charles Lyell had such a significant influence on Darwin. The former was accustomed to thinking in geological time and was observing the astonishing geophysical results that occurred at a very slow rate, in geological time. Adding some noughts to Darwin's thinking provided a vital contribution to the success of Darwin's observations.

3.2.4 Social institutions

The cultural revolution that is modernity has also brought an important change in social institutions. In the pre-modern era, social institutions were 'thought of as divinely ordained' (Cupitt 1980:19). In modernity they have become products of history and humanity. They are not revealed and received and set in stone, but can be modified and changed. Social institutions are not received from God, but are conceived by humans for the service of humanity and they can and need to be reformed. The vertical to horizontal shift observed above is also apparent in terms of social institutions, politics and government. There is a move away from theocracy or the recognition of the divine right of kings to democracy, the absolute right of the people. There is much more to say on this subject, but the case of modernity and the monarchy is of prime importance.

3.2.4.1 Modernity and the monarchy

Nowhere is the move of power clearer than in the events surrounding the monarchy, particularly in England and France. In England, in 1649, the King was not only dethroned, but also decapitated, and when the institution was allowed to return eleven years later, it was by the grace of the people and parliament; no longer by the grace of God. In France, the king (1792) and queen (1793) were sent to the guillotine and the whole system of divine right was cancelled as a result of the French Revolution (1789). The British monarch is now a constitutional figure, a symbol of the state, representative of the people, and is no longer regarded as the representative of God on earth. It may be said that this was a shift towards non-realism. Monarchy has become a metaphor.

3.2.5 The story of history

The dawning of modernity ushered in a different view of history and of historiography. Historical sense may be regarded as a hallmark of modernity. In pre-modern times history was shrouded in myth, but, as modernity developed, religion lost its grip on history, and myth was dispelled. The present was most often assessed in terms of the link with the sacred past, in terms of Confucius or the Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad. As the modern worldview progressed, the legitimising link with the past became tenuous until it was finally severed.

Breisach (1983:371) refers to a historiographical revolution, 'The Age of Anthropocentric Histioriography', that occurred between 1300 and 1700 and challenged the very link between religion and historiography. In the 1690s Christopher Cellarius suggested the division of *Ancient*, *Medieval* and *Modern*, a division which is still popular. In doing so he 'expelled the Christian story from its central place' (ibid, 378).

Texts and contexts of the past became the objects of critical enquiry. Even the Bible would become subject to historical sense, historical enquiry and modern historiography. The more history became the human story rather than God's story, God himself became a problematic figure in terms of historiography. How was God a figure in history? How was He an active agent in history? In the eighteenth century, history was still viewed as God's education for humanity (ibid, 379). By the 19th century, God no longer governed from 'outside', but was becoming immanent as an *Urgrund* or as a dynamic spiritual principle (ibid.) All of history according to the working of this principle was really *Heilsgeschichte*.

In the influential philosophy of Hegel the complex relationship of creator and creation in time was transformed into the self-realisation of the all-encompassing Idea (pure thought). There was a dialectical process, a journey towards a t*elos*, 'God' and humanity's self-realisation.

Another modernist view of history is that of Auguste Comte, the father of modern social science, who coined the term *sociology*. (Easton 1970:828; Delius *et al* 2005:94). Comte proposed a three-stage interpretation of history:

- Theological
- Metaphysical
- Positive

The latter is viewed as the fulfilment of history, a culmination where no absolutes and essences are recognised, only laws governing relationships between phenomena (cf. Easton 1970:828).

3.2.6 Summary and reflection

The modern worldview based in scientific knowledge instead of metaphysical, ontotheological knowledge is a radical and irrevocable paradigm shift.[25] The shift is quite simply 'from the old sacred, highly-wrought, finite cosmos to the new 'meaningless', boundless mechanical universe' (Cupitt 1980:17), from the magical to the mechanical. Secularisation is, in a sense, a process of 'disenchantment' (ibid.), although it is not all loss. What we have lost in mystery, we have gained in science and much more. In a certain sense, the world has become wonderful by becoming wonder-less. Science contributed to the disenchantment, making the world wonder-less in the sense of the loss of miracles, but, on the other hand, science has succeeded in showing the natural world in all its awe-inspiring splendour, which continues to evoke wonder, even in ardent atheists like Richard Dawkins.[26] Woodruff (2002:136) remarks, regarding the scientific revolution, that '...nature, which had been the shadow became reality and that which had been reality, the soul, receded to shadow'.

3.3 Epistemological enlightenment

The study has reviewed briefly how scientific knowledge became modern and how it strained and strove until it became fully released from pre-determining constraints. This freedom undoubtedly contributed significantly to the string of scientific revolutions, resulting in technological advance over a spectrum ranging from movable type to the internet and from internal combustion to Concord, space travel and the like. The focus now shifts to philosophy and the dramatic epistemological emancipation from its pre-modern moorings.

As epistemological reflection progressed, the fundamental question that came into focus was about the status of sense-based data. What is the relation between sensual perception and thinking? Thompson says:

> The fundamental issue here is whether our knowledge originates in, and is therefore dependent upon, the data we receive through our senses, or whether, (since we know that all such sense data are fallible), the only true certainties are those that come from

[25] The term was coined by Thomas Kuhn, renowned historian of science (Barzun 2001:760) and it refers to frameworks that are regarded as evident and by which we measure judgments. Kuhn showed conclusively that scientific knowledge made 'jumps', instead of being a smooth evolution. This is akin to the sudden shifts of the earth's tectonic plates.

[26] Dawkins (2006:11-19) acknowledges this, particularly with reference to the quasi-religious remarks made by eminent scientists like Einstein, Sagan, Hawking and himself. We no longer require myth and metaphysics to evoke awe. Science does it better, is Dawkins' point of view.

> our own minds—from the way in which we think and organize our experience, from the principles of reason and logic:
>
> Thompson 2003:13-4.

From this basic problem two schools emerge:

- Empiricism—all knowledge starts with the senses
- Rationalism—all knowledge starts with the mind' (ibid.).

The philosophical basis changed dramatically in the birth of modernity. It can in generally be referred to as an understanding, and *Aufklärung*,[27] which refers to a major breakthrough in terms of human self-understanding in relation to the world. It is a breakthrough in knowledge and the philosophy of knowledge.

3.3.1 Cartesianism and the crisis

In many ways Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is foundational to Enlightenment epistemology. He represents the watershed between metaphysical thinking and 'pure',[28] rational, thinking.

3.3.1.1 Contribution

In Descartes' famous book on method (1637),[29] he introduced a rational system of methodical doubting, thereby contributing immensely to the character of modern knowledge as critical thinking and as systematic doubting. *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) became the first principle of philosophy: the doubting subject. Descartes set the agenda for modern epistemology. The modern subject became incredulous of everything, not only of onto-theology, but all preconceived ideas. It put the thinking, doubting, enquiring, rational subject in command. Cupitt observes:

> Rene Descartes introduced a new way of thinking in which the individual human mind was to become increasingly conscious of itself as an autonomous centre of constructive thinking activity, like Aristotle's God. It is fully present to itself and thinks itself before it knows of any independent reality to think about.
>
> Cupitt 1986:6

Knowledge now became subject-centred, mind-centred, rather than object-centred (ibid.)

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[27] *Iluminismo* (Italian); *Siecle des Lumines* (French).
[28] 'Pure', (Rein) in the Kantian sense is 'speculative or theoretical' Reason (Cupitt 2006:135).
[29] 'Discourse on the method of rightly conducting the reason and searching for truth in the sciences' (1637).

Barzun (2001:201) observes that the modern method of rational reasoning inherited from Descartes is to take a problem and break it up into as many parts as possible, to deal with each part separately and then to reassemble the parts and make sure that none are left out. Cartesian reasoning starts from the rational *a priori,* a clear distinct indubitable abstract free point, assumed to be true.

The pre-modern self was highly heteronomous owing to the metaphysical dualism. The self was a slave to the master Mind, and was never to question. The self always had to be aware and beware of the ominous Presence looming over its head. It was thought, in a manner of speaking, that the sky would fall if people questioned the Ultimate. Although Descartes was a Christian, as all Europeans during Christendom were advised to be, he contributed greatly to the emancipation of the mind, the self and the individual, which became one of the hallmarks of modernity.

3.3.1.2 Faith matters

a) Descartes and the Divine

Even though Descartes put the rational subject almost in the position of God, able to think for itself in a sovereign way, he nevertheless contended that it was 'the radiant power of God that helped reason to discover truth' (Delius *et al* 2005:113). In this respect, although he was a significant figure in the age of reason, he was only a foundational figure in terms of the enlightenment that shone forth later, particularly in the figure of Emmanuel Kant. Although Descartes strove for the divorce with metaphysics, he nevertheless retained one foot in the old epistemological paradigm.

b) Pascal's problem

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) was a contemporary of Descartes, a good scientist, but also a pious man with a deep-seated faith who sensed the crisis of modernity on a very private and personal level. Pascal is famous, particularly among critics of the Enlightenment and also among evangelical believers as a scientist,[30] a rationalist[31]

[30] Pascal was a prodigy, publishing his 'first work, on the conic sections at seventeen' (Cupitt 1984:49). His famous work on the principles of the barometer is only one of many scientific and technological contributions.

[31] Not only was Pascal 'highly cerebral' but also 'puritanical and liable to depression' (ibid.)

who did not lose his simple faith.[32] His saying representing his struggle between reason and faith, 'the heart has its reasons that the reason does not know', is well known. 'The void in your heart is one that only God can fill' (Cupitt 1984:50). Where the conflict in Galileo's case was with the authority and censure of the church, the conflict raged famously and furiously *within* Pascal, who was, on the one hand, a brilliant mathematician with a great mind, but was, on the other, a sensitive and pious, even pietistic person. The conflict was between reason and revelation, between the human mind and God's mind, between what we need to figure out and what we need to accept by faith as something that God has to figure out.

Cupitt delineates the difference between Descartes and Pascal. The former 'took the human mind out of the world of nature in order to exempt it from natural law and enable it to observe nature from outside, from the theoretical viewpoint of a pure scientist (1984:50). This 'alienation of the mind from the world, which Descartes finds so desirable from the point of view of doing physics, is terrifying to Pascal from the religious point of view' (ibid.). Pascal finds the disinterestedness, the objectivity, the distinction between faith and reason, difficult. Descartes did not have a problem with it. For Pascal it became a massive crisis of faith and a massive emotional crisis. Pascal, the sensitive soul and the sensitive believer, finds Descartes' dispassionate, cool science unpalatable, even revolting. Pascal is worried about the implication of reason, science, and the scientific revolution on his relationship with God.

Cupitt (ibid: 52) sees in Pascal the rudiments of 'pietism, methodism and evangelicalism' seeking the true, personal God, the God of the inner religious life. The retreating God of the philosophers and of reason and science precipitated this flight into the soul. God was distant and difficult and doubtful, but the personally revealed God undercuts the widening distance caused by emerging modernity. In Pascal and the comparison with Descartes, the epistemological crisis and the growing crisis of realist faith can be witnessed. It is possible to see the advance of the Death of God, the Enlightenment of Reason, and the divorce from metaphysics and the rigours associated with a realist faith, invested in metaphysics.

At this point the contention of theological realism versus theological non-realism becomes more prominent. 'To use terminology which I have recently been

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[32] Barzun (2001:219), critical of rationalism and scientism, commends the fact that Pascal gave place to reason, but also to 'the heart'.

trying to introduce, Pascal, in religion, is a realist who thinks that there exist special religious objects corresponding to religious ideas, or is he a non-realist?' (Cupitt 1984:54). Is Pascal's position fright and flight, or is it acceptance of theological propositions as symbolic? Pascal lived in the heat of the cataclysmic upheaval. Modernity was in the birth canal, experiencing the trauma. God was not dead yet. Cupitt observes the appearance of a stark choice at this juncture, the *either, or*, the claim of either religious realism which demands faith in an objective (though distant) God, or the claim of religious seriousness and an 'authentic Christian faith'.

c) Spinoza's solution

Where Pascal's solution was the warmth of pietism, Spinoza's was the width of pantheism, not that Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677); the Spanish Jew from the Hague was not in need of warmth after being excommunicated from the Great Synagogue for heresy. In Judaism, this means being ostracised from the community and declared dead, forfeiting all social contact. In spite of this awful fate, Spinoza, a supporter of the epistemology of Descartes,[33] became the first intellectual in Europe to live as a modern person 'successfully beyond the reach of established religion' (Armstrong 2001:22).[34] For a person living in 17th century Europe this was indeed remarkable. Spinoza was years ahead of his time, a Jew contributing to the Enlightenment two centuries before the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, commenced.[35] Spinoza's ideas, 'although prohibited by both Catholics and Protestants' (Rader: 1980:90), was nevertheless used by scholars and had a profound effect on the study of the Bible and theology. Spinoza's solutions for the question of God and the world were one. God was fully revealed in nature and studying nature was, in fact, studying God. God and nature are identical. This means that there is no reality-God beyond nature, but there was also the implication that nature was God. Spinoza 'explained all ideas of divine intervention as products of pre-scientific ways of thinking, and was led to an outlook that was both profoundly mystical and also thoroughly rationalist and naturalistic' (Cupitt 1984:15).

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[33] He wrote an exposition on Descartes in 1633, forty years prior to his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). The latter work resulted in the offer of professorship at Heidelberg on the condition that he did not 'disturb the established religion', which he declined (Cf. Rader, M. 1980:. 90).

[34] Karen Armstrong (2001:22) believes Spinoza was a 'genius', a 'genuinely independent man' who 'could sustain the inevitable loneliness it entailed'. Armstrong herself had gone through a similar trauma and had persevered splendidly (Cf. her two autobiographies: *Through the Narrow Gate* (1981) and *The Spiral Staircase* (2004).

[35] Moses Mendelsohn is usually regarded as the first Enlightenment Jew (Schoeps 1963:105).

So, where Pascal internalised, Spinoza externalised. For Pascal, the crisis went underground and for Spinoza the crisis was all but solved, giving up the vestiges of dualism. When we are involved with nature and fully scientifically, critically engaged, we are actually keeping ourselves busy with God. Spinoza maintained that all 'ideas of divine intervention' or miracles were merely pre-scientific ways of thinking (Cupitt 1984:15). Spinoza's solution was also mystical, but at the same time rationalistic and naturalistic. There was no tension. He was a Naturalistic thinker who denied any moral order (Cupitt 1984:204).

Much later, the man who so vociferously announced and furthered the Death of God, Friedrich Nietzsche, found much in common with Spinoza's thought, particularly with radical, rational, naturalistic mysticism, Cupitt cites Nietzsche's advice, which, with respect to Spinoza, was 'to look upon the world as upon a god.' (1984:204

3.3.2 Kantian constructivism and the crisis

A. N. Wilson (1999:36) expresses the opinion, probably a consensus among intellectuals over a broad spectrum, that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the most influential modern philosopher, an unlikely[36] pioneer of 'the greatest revolution in modern philosophy' (Wood 2006:11).[37] Indeed, Kant is regarded as the 'founder of modern critical philosophy and pioneer of German *Idealism'* (Delius *et al*: 2005:118) and the most important contributor to the *Aufklärung.*[38] Other leading lights of this epistemological watershed were Wolf, Lessing and Hegel in Germany, Diderot, Montesquieu and Rousseau in France, and Locke, Berkeley and Hume in the British Isles (David Hume was a Scottish).

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[36] He [came] from a family of 'devout Pietists' (Wood 2006:11). His family were poor and he was 'an unsalaried, marginal academic—well into middle age' (ibid, 17).

[37] His greatness may be measured by the fact that he is regarded as the one philosopher since Plato and Aristotle 'whom all subsequent philosophers are assumed to have read.' (Roberts 1988:9).

[38] It should be noted that there are several different forms of Idealism. In Beiser's (2000:18) view it is indicative of the crisis of the Enlightenment (as opposed to the crisis *caused* by the Enlightenment, as it is narrated in this thesis, following Cupitt's guidance. Beiser (ibid.) distinguishes between *transcendental idealism* (Kant), *ethical idealism* (Fichte) and *absolute idealism* (Schelling and Hegel), (ibid, 31).On the other hand, it should be noted that some scholars view Kant's philosophy precisely as a reaction, even a refutation of idealism as much as a reaction to empiricism. (Cf. the discussion in Bird, 2006, p. 8).

3.3.2.1 The Copernican revolution

Before the Enlightenment, the epistemological consensus was that concepts must conform to the world of things. There is order in reality and we need to read it carefully. When it is done successfully, from the position of various epistemological presuppositions, our mental picture reflects the world accurately. The mind 'mirrors' the world, it was thought. (Cupitt 1984:138).[39]

Emmanuel Kant is turned this upside down, or inverted it. It is our mind that creates order and superimposes a picture on the world. After superimposing the template on the world, we are able to 'read' it as a reflection of 'reality'. It is the world that mirrors the mind. We pour, as it were, the 'world' into the mould of our mind. And because it depends on the position of the viewer, it is relative and not absolute.

> As far as Kant was concerned, no part of the object world could be readily attributed to 'things out there'...Even the most basic level of experience, for Kant, involves the possibility of rational judgement; and even the simplest of rational judgements involves presuppositions...In other words, according to Kant, there really is nothing in 'experience' which we can safely attribute to 'out there'.
>
> Roberts, J. 1988:31

Kant's revolutionary thesis, therefore, is that objectivity is not something in the world, but is conferred upon the world by the perceiving mind. Because of the similarity with the revolution wrought by Copernicus, Kant called his discovery a Copernican revolution in epistemology and it has since become known as such.

We cannot have any possibility of what lies beyond human experience. It is epistemologically irrelevant. Some implications of this 'constructivist' view are:

- There is no objective world
- We make, construct, the world
- Truth with a capital T collapses
- Knowledge based on experience, not revelation—not receiving, but finding out and forming and constructing.

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[39] It is interesting to note in this regard the 'post-modern' quality of Cupitt's assessment of Kant, even before his post-modern turn: 'To put it brutally, there *is* no ready-ordered objective reality any more: there is only the flux of becoming, and the continuing ever-changing human attempt to imagine and impose order. And before his turn to Wittgenstein? : 'We have to *make* sense; *we* have to turn chaos into cosmos.' (1984:188).

- The Copernican revolution places the sun in the centre. Kant places the subject in the centre. Knowledge is human, not divine; made up, not sent down.

Kant made a distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*. The first refers to reality beyond the reach of the human situational epistemology. This would be God's view, how things are apart from being perceived, how they are in themselves. The latter refers to the knowledge on the epistemological level, based on what humans can perceive, objectify. This is knowledge of how things are in the world, the world of phenomena. Because of the Kantian destruction of the Archimedes–type fixed point, knowledge is always partial, contingent, conversational and extant (on-going). The Copernican revolution is revolutionary and heralds the dissipation of 'dogmatic metaphysics' (Cupitt 1984:153) and is the root cause of the evocative later depiction: The Death of God.

The ultimate questions and the relationship between reality and perception are just given up as a dead project. It is the end (the death) of onto-theology. In spite of this paradigmatic shift, Cupitt (1984:188) remarks, however, that 'like the realists, the Kantians still saw the world in terms of Aristotle, Euclid and Newton'.

3.3.2.2 Kant and the crisis

Kant's epistemological position made him agnostic in terms of the 'real' world. The God's-eye view, or what God might think, is epistemologically not thinkable. By the same token, God cannot be part of empirical experience (Cupitt 1984:138). Cupitt observes, therefore, that radical European anthropocentricism first appeared with Kant (1984:155). The trajectory of anthropocentrism, humanism, is of course at least two centuries older, but with Kant it intensifies significantly, 'a man-centred look of a new kind' (Cupitt 1984:135). It was Kant who depicted the Enlightenment as 'Man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity', encapsulated by his famous slogan '*Sapere audi*—think for yourself' (Delius *et al* 2005:113; Wood: 2006:21). Clements (1987:10) concurs, pointing out that for Kant the Enlightenment was a 'decisive step towards the emancipation of man [sic] from the 'tutelage' of mediaeval times'. This is where we find the beginning of the trajectory which led to the depiction of humanity as 'come of age', no longer immature (ibid.)

Kant did not become an atheist. He sought and found room for God through the door of ethics, based on his categorical imperative. Cupitt (1984:145) observes poignantly that Kant remained a 'tough old ultra-protestant' and the ultimate questions remained alive'. The realists said that the principles of those thinkers were 'objectively valid, and therefore compulsory, whereas the Kantians said that they were subjectively necessary as conditions for knowledge—and therefore also compulsory' (ibid.). Although Kant sought space for God, his epistemological revolution dealt a mortal blow to the medieval proofs for the existence of God. The net result was simply: God's existence became 'contingent rather than necessary' (Greenfield 2006:35). Cupitt summarises and concludes:

> Kant had been a metaphysical agnostic who had argued that our knowledge cannot be extended beyond the limits of possible experience, so that the existence of God as transcendent Creator cannot be proved by theoretical reason. God should rather be interpreted as a guiding ideal, not given in experience but instead functioning as the ultimate focus and goal of our intellectual and moral life.
>
> Cupitt 1984:230

3.3.3 Feuerbachian fire

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), born three months after the death of Immanuel Kant, was a child of the *Aufklärung* and probably the most important figure of left-wing Hegelianism (Delius *et al* 2005:117). If Kant intensified the anthropocentric trajectory of early modernity, Feuerbach's individualised view tipped philosophy and theology over into full-scale anthropology (ibid, 85; Robinson 1963:50). Although Feuerbach, who studied under Hegel, wrote a critique[40] of his famous teacher, his most famous work was on the philosophy of religion in a work entitled *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), in which he proposed and defended the thesis that God was a human projection. He drew a sharp distinction between what he regarded as false and true theological propositions. His idealistic, anthropological projection theory constituted the basis of true theological propositions, while the old metaphysical propositions were no longer true.

Feuerbach's position was simple and to the point. Religion, owing to the marriage with metaphysical realism, results in an 'ideology of the unsensuous person, who squanders on heaven his earthly energies and capacity for happiness' (Delius *et al* 2005:83). Feuerbach's position can therefore also be described as

[40] 'The Critique of Hegelian Philosophy' (1839).

'anthropological materialism'(ibid.). Feuerbach (cf.Surber 1999:306) may be seen as 'pivotal in the intellectual history of the nineteenth century in several respects...' He, it can be summarised:

- revived, in a new form, the original Kantian project of philosophical critique
- his method of 'transformatory criticism' (of Hegel) was adopted by Marx (The inversion of Hegel's view: The individual is a function of the Absolute).
- philosophy was ultimately an extension of theology and theology was (merely) religious consciousness systematised.

It should be clear already from the above that Feuerbach's influence on the young Hegelians like Freud and Marx and, through them, on many other minds in modern intellectual history, is enormous. Friedrich Engels encapsulates the enthusiasm with which Feuerbach was received by intellectual idealists in the 1840s: 'We immediately became Feuerbachians' (in Roberts 1988:184; Delius *et al* 2005:85). Of course what was a spark of sensuous life to these philosophers was the spark of the Feuerbachian fire[41] to theologians and thinking Christians. Fundamentalists of all periods, however, have managed quite well to ignore Feuerbach altogether and ignorance is the reason for their bliss.

Robinson and the radicals, however, did not and could not evade the Feuerbachian flame and neither does Cupitt. Although he was not given a separate slot in *The Sea of Faith* (1984) list of luminaries, Feuerbach's influence is recognised by Cupitt in his discussion of several other figures, while, in Cupitt's development of religion as a human creation, which became the vision of the Sea of Faith Networks, the influence of Feuerbach is unmistakable.

3.3.4 Nietzsche and the Crisis

Of all the philosophical 'stars' there is probably none more stellar than Friedrich Nietzsche. He is as controversial as he is famous and his influence is now enormous, although this was not the case in his own time.[42]

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[41] The phrase, 'the fire of Feuerbach' was expressed by P.J.J. Botha in conversation with the author.
[42] There was a cold reception of his work during most of his lifetime. (Lavrin 1971:107) observes that George Brandes, Danish historian and literary critic, was the first to give a course of lectures on Nietzsche at Copenhagen University. (No date supplied).

3.3.4.1 Aspects of his thought

Although Nietzsche may be regarded as a philosopher, in the sense of a reflective thinker, he was much more and his influence can be detected in the post-modern worldview in general, as well as in numerous modern disciplines like Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, History, Literary and Art Criticism, in particular. Many people today live according to the principles of Nietzsche, without ever realising it. Cupitt (1995b:141) comments on Nietzsche: 'Such gifts, such catastrophe. By sheer determination Nietzsche made himself into perhaps the greatest human being and writer of modern times...'

In Nietzsche's early period he concentrated on art. He regarded Plato and Socrates as the enemies of Greek tragedy (Lavrin 1971:96) because they introduced rationalism as the redeemer of the people and they took the focus away from this life and focused it on an ideal and future world, thereby robbing humanity of living and enjoying life to the full. Nietzsche saw the role of art as an essential comfort, which was replaced by reason. Tragedy was no longer required, because reason came to the rescue to remove the fear of death.

A brief summary of Nietzsche's mature thought follows:

- **Will to Power.** This is the basic drive of all humanity, individual and corporate and even of the universe as a whole. It is the need and desire for power. It will be coated and presented in all sorts of disguises, but it is nevertheless always operative. Even the weak use their weakness and meekness as a *will to power.*
- **Perspectivism.** There is no true way of seeing the world. The best we have is perspective. Anti-realism and Nihilism are usually associated with Nietzsche's perspectivism.
- **Language.** All knowledge is always expressed in language and language is tainted and coated with perspectives and preconditions. Our attachment to our language is so strong that we could not readily do without the fictions it describes (Lavrin 1971:59). This is true of all language, even the language of Physics.
- **Master/Slave Morality.** Society, by and large, has produced a slave morality. People are trained to be sheep and to keep quiet. Religion is the main culprit

in this regard, training people to be subservient. Nietzsche believes the master morality is that of the *Übermensch*, who will not succumb to the sheep-slave morality. *Ressentiment* is what the slave feels toward the master and, through a clever and covert ploy, gets the master to acquiesce to his pitiful moral code, thereby gaining the upper hand through guile.

- **Eternal Recurrence.** Nietzsche develops this idea that, given enough time, what has been will be again. He asks, then, whether one is prepared to live one's live over and over again. This serves as a test. If the answer is negative, it is a clear indication that life is not embraced, but that there is still a yearning for an idealistic, metaphysical 'heaven', which is denial of life. Nietzsche's formula for greatness (from *Ecce Homo*) is *that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity.*

3.3.4.2 The Death of God

There are two aspects to be considered. First there is the indicative. Nietzsche interpreted and proclaimed an extant state of affairs in the history of Western civilisation, which could be described as the Death of God. It comprises the whole divorce of metaphysics, the rise and independence of scientific knowledge, the collapse of pre-modern epistemology in the Enlightenment. Cupitt (1984:207) observes, 'the apocalyptic crisis in European Culture that Nietzsche calls the death of God had begun long before. He did not think of himself as bringing it about'. Nietzsche, as a preacher of the modern state of affairs, announced what was already the case. His 'madman' searches what he does not expect to find. His lantern is comical, because of the brightness of day. It is no longer night by the time the madman starts asking his question.

Secondly, for Nietzsche there is also an imperative involved in the Death of God. Not only is it the case, but also required. The 'killers' whom the madman indicts are to continue. In terms of religion and morality, God is not desirable and must be resisted. The death of God epistemologically must be continued and completed theologically.

> The death of God is more than a simply dogmatic atheism...Rather, it means the final loss of belief in any external reality at all that might guide and sustain human life, including even an ordered objective world: it means nihilism.
>
> Cupitt 1984:208

Lavrin assesses Nietzsche's predisposition:

> He did not want to know how far such and such a religion was true, but whether it was valuable or harmful form the standpoint of an ascending type of life, And no sooner had he noticed its emphasis on the 'beyond' at the expense of our earthly existence than he rejected it as being of no value at all. The same applies to the problem of God. Even had he been sure that God existed, the invalid Nietzsche would not have accepted Him unless god first produced credentials to the effect that He was not hostile to life, that is, to our 'biological' life this side of the grave.
>
> Lavrin 1971:65

Cupitt (1984:211) contends that Nietzsche could not fathom that religion could ever be reformed and, in Cupitt's terms, that means growing up and becoming fully non-realist, embracing nihilism, instead of being dissolved by it. He comments on Nietzsche: '...[H]e could not see that it might eventually lead to religion's becoming at last fully self-conscious and regaining the Joyful Wisdom'.

3.3.5 Summary and reflection

Woodruff (2002:141) sums up the paradigm shift associated with modern Enlightenment (paraphrased and adapted). There is a clear shift of emphasis from:

- Sacred to secular
- Religious to Rational
- Divine to Human.

The end of metaphysics quite simply means the end of absolute knowledge (Cupitt 2001:11). All knowledge is human and perspectival, conversational and, therefore, must be open-ended.

4 THEOLOGY AND THE STRUGGLE: THE ROOTS OF RADICAL THEOLOGY

In the preface to Greenfield's *Introduction to radical theology*, Cupitt (2006a:1) expresses the view that the roots of radical theology run deep in the soil of modernity and extend back at least as far as the 17th century Deists. He stresses, however, the seminal role of Kant and Hegel, whom he regards as the founders of modern philosophy. He also expresses the view that Schleiermacher is the father of liberal theology (ibid.) The account of radical theology in the 20th century will be taken up in

due course, but first it is essential to see theological modernism in general as the context and trajectory for its narrative.

4.1 Modernism and Liberal Protestantism

The modernising movement in Catholicism is usually referred to as modernism, while in Protestantism it is called Liberal Protestantism (Ward 2000:442). The prominent Catholic names are Alfred Loisy, who was eventually excommunicated because he rejected Christian theism,[43] and George Tyrrell, who 'upheld 'the right of each age to adjust the historico-philosophical expression of Christianity to contemporary certainties (Wikipedia).[44] Karl Rahner and Hans Küng are included.[45] The Catholic modernists were concerned with keeping and making Catholicism relevant in modern society.

There is quite understandably substantial friction and discord among Modernists (Catholic) and Liberal Protestants,[46] but there are also wide areas of agreement. The most important point of concurrence is on the view that Christianity is contextual and historical. By the same token it is necessary to keep up with historical changes and remain relevant within the broader picture of culture (Ward 2000:442). There is also agreement on the move towards immanentism, away from transcendence (ibid.).

4.1.1 Liberal Protestantism

The discussion focuses on Liberal Protestantism for this brief contextualisation of radical theology. Reardon (1968:9) indicates that it is not an easy matter to define Liberal Protestantism. How is 'liberal' to be defined? Reardon (ibid.) refers to J Réville who made a distinction between mere Protestant Liberalism and Liberal Protestantism'. Reardon nevertheless arrives at a definition:

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[43] Professor Loisy incurred the rancour of Popes Leo XIII and Pius X, and was dismissed as Professor in 1893. His books were condemned and he was excommunicated in 1908 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Loisy).

[44] Father Tyrell (1861-1909) was expelled from the Jesuits and suspended from the sacraments. Although he received 'extreme unction on his deathbed', he was nevertheless denied burial in a Catholic cemetery. A priest who was present at the funeral made a sign over the grave and was suspended for this action (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Tyrell).

[45] Although Professor Kung had to leave the Catholic Faculty and is not allowed to teach Catholic theology, he remained at the University of Tübingen.

[46] As for instance in Harnack's condemnation of Catholicism as obscurantist, and Loisy's 1903 work, offered to the public as an apologia for Catholicism and by the same token a refutation of Liberal Protestantism (Ward 2000:442).

> Liberal Protestantism implies not only liberalism in the matter of dogma or doctrine—by which presumably is meant a piecemeal adjustment of the received theology to at least the more insistent demands of contemporary thought—but certain convictions which, although erosive of the inherited doctrine of all the Protestant churches, is nevertheless held to be not only more responsive to the needs of the present time but also more in keeping with the original spirit of the Reformation and of the gospel itself.
>
> Reardon 1968:9

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), as has been mentioned, is generally regarded as the 'father of modern theology' (Mason 2000:386; Gerrish 1984: xi). Clements (1987:7) describes him as the 'Pioneer of Modern Theology...With him, modern Protestant theology effectively begins.' Cupitt (1980:35) puts it quite graphically: 'The rot set in with F D E. Schleiermacher.'[47]

> Faced with the task of restoring the credibility or Christianity after the devastating criticisms levied against it during the Enlightenment, he began a trend to subjectivism, basing his theology on man (sic) on human feeling and on religious experience, and playing down the old supernaturalism...'
>
> Cupitt 1980:35

'His *Speeches on Religion* (1799) probably remains the greatest summary of liberal protestant ideas' (Mason 2000:386). His contribution is comprehensive and significant, and it may be encapsulated in the view that he put theology on a new footing and gave it a new agenda. He moved the focus away from the ethical and institutional problems associated with the Reformation, to an engagement with the crisis of modernity, or 'the alienation of the modern world from the entire Christian tradition' (Gerrish 2000:644, as some choose to frame the problem. It is significant that Schleiermacher went through the crisis of modernity on a very personal level. After starting as a Moravian Pietist, and after completing his studies at Halle, which had become a rationalistic institution, he found a sort of second naiveté, declaring,'...I have become, after all, a pietist again, only of a higher order' (ibid.).

Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89) was another significant progenitor of Liberal Protestantism and his Lutheran school may be regarded as the 'spearhead of the

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[47] And for this very reason Schleiermacher has had many adversaries, particularly the neo-orthodox, since Barth and Brunner (cf. Clements 1987: 8). The main criticism of Schleiermacher is that of subjectivism, 'instead of tending to the true 'object' of faith, namely God himself (Clements 1987:37). Clements defends Schleiermacher in this regard, contending that there is more 'depth and subtlety' pertaining particularly to the self in relationship: 'the self can never be extracted from the realm of otherness' (ibid.). Gerrish (1984:xiv) believes Karl Barth's indictment that 'One can not speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice' is a misrepresentation of Schleiermacher.

Liberal Protestant movement' (Reardon 1968:20). Where Schleiermacher put the emphasis on spiritual experience, Ritschl, like Kant, emphasised ethics (cf. Mason 2000:386).[48] Religion is about ethical judgements, rather than about facts. Christianity is a 'completely spiritual and ethical religion, which, based on the life of its Author as Redeemer and Founder of the Kingdom of God, consists in the freedom of the children of God...' (in Reardon, ibid: 27).[49]

The Liberal approach was furthered significantly by the young Hegelians. It was indicative of the decline of German Idealism, particularly Absolute Idealism, that disciples of Hegel parted company with the master. Ameriks (2000b:259) indicates three strands in terms of Christian claims. The first strand focused on the '*historical* details of religious statements' showing contradictions in the Gospel narratives. The second denies 'overt literal claims' in favour of *'covert'* 'mythic' truth, representative of the early communities. The third is the route of Feuerbach, 'who argued that even in its covert meaning Christianity is a bundle of contradictions, and the logical conclusion of its unravelling is an exaltation of humanity' (ibid.).

The second of the young Hegelians' partings of the ways with Hegel represents the approach of D. F. Strauss, a towering figure of the liberal movement. Cupitt (1984:92-5), commenting on the harsh treatment by church and academy of this talented young scholar, and referring to 'the Tragedy of D. F. Strauss', maintains that *The life of Jesus critically examined* (1835) was a 'tremendous success', but it destroyed his career. 'He never fully recovered from the blow.' (Cupitt 1984:94). Among other things, Strauss became a casualty of the war between the supernaturalist realists and the rationalist non-realists. The former sought to continue the traditional view of miracles, accepting the Holy Writ in a literalist way, that is, at face value. The liberals regarded this as no longer being a credible or responsible position to maintain. Strauss became an important figure in the long saga of what became known as 'the quest for the historical Jesus'.[50] Strauss (Cupitt 1984:95) explained the dilemma: 'By the church the evangelical narratives are received as history: by the critical theologian they are regarded for the most part as mere myths'.

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[48] Reardon (1968:22) contends therefore that both Ritschl and Schleiermacher started with experience. They merely differed on what exactly constitutes experience. They agreed however, that *a priori* rational validation of the Christian truth is neither necessary nor possible. (Cf. Reardon: 22—3).

[49] From *Justification and Reconciliation*, 13.

[50] Taken from the English translation of Albert Schweitzer's comprehensive analysis of the subject (1910).

This is a crisis, indeed.[51] The critical theologian now, apart from having a crisis of faith, also has an identity and integrity crisis, which manifest as a crisis of communication between theology and tradition, science and church. The struggle caused by the Enlightenment, by modernity, has been raging unabated. Many highly gifted and critical theologians have been ostracised and victimised by the church and its defenders. On the other hand it is the case that the findings and propositions of critical theologians are highly alarming and unnerving and plunges traditionalist believers into a severe crisis. Modernity causes a crisis for anyone or any system that hails from a metaphysical, pre-modern era.

Schleiermacher laid the platform and started a trajectory, which found particular expression in work by Paul Tillich (1886-1965). Tillich, in his three-volume *Systematic Theology,* engaged with the epistemological crisis caused by the Enlightenment. His proposal boils down to the view of religious propositions as symbolic correlations for ontological questions: 'The symbol *God* is the reality that answers the question of the meaning of being' (Scharlemann 2000:706). In this way Tillich cleverly tried to circumvent the problem of theological realism. It is not so much a matter of being, but of meaning. Tillich made great strides in establishing what later became recognised as theological non-realism.

Of all the other stellar names associated with the critical, liberal movement in Protestantism, there must be a brief mention of Rudolph Bultmann (1884-976). Bultmann is widely regarded as 'the 20th century's most influential interpreter of the New Testament' (Kay 2000:84). He is the primary and illustrious exponent of the form-critical method and his work remains highly acclaimed. Bultmann's existentialist connection is well-known, as well as his indebtedness to Kierkegaard, and particularly Heidegger, and this became important facets underlying his existentialist

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[51] Two perspectives, digressing from the present train of thought should be acknowledged: First is the fact that Liberal Protestantism has been heavily criticised. Some of the reasons are that it 'produces a *reduced* Christianity' (Reardon 1968:64), reduced, particularly to an ethical religion. Also it was felt that it was attainable but to intellectuals and academics. The adaptation of an historical religion to the modern Western mind was also regarded as an impossible prospect. (For more traditional or conservative criticisms, cf. Reardon: 64—5.) Secondly, attention should be drawn to the perspective that the Enlightenment, apart from causing the crisis of modernity, itself struggled with 'inner tensions', which became the subject of 'intense debate among them (the Aufklärer) in the 1780's' For a full discussion on the connection between the Enligtenment, idealism and these inner tensions, cf. F Beiser 2000, pages 19—22.

theology and his hermeneutics. Bultmann believed that Jesus Christ mattered for the 'individual transition from inauthentic to authentic existence' (ibid: 83). This did not mean that believers had to subscribe to pre-modern cosmology. 'Christian faith is neither a leap out of modernity nor a retreat from intellectual honesty' (ibid.). Bultmann effectively engaged with modernity and arrived via a vastly different route at a place not unlike Tillich station.

Cupitt (1984:246) views Bultmann as part of 'mainline theologians of the modern period' along with names like Barth, Tillich, Rahner and Pannenberg, and intimates that they are all 'creative theologians'. He contends that 'In each of the five cases there is a philosophical background that shapes the thought at a deep level, and in which Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard inevitably bulk large'. Cupitt (ibid.) continues:

> Barth's God is part of Barth's theology, and Bultmann's of Bultmann's...In short they are artist-theologians. Their theologies are serious attempts to come to terms with the crisis of modernity and ultimately with the Death of God.
>
> Cupitt 1984:246

4.1.2 Semi-Realist stations

Whereas the modalities of religious and Theological Realism mentioned *supra* are steeped in Platonic, metaphysical dualism and what the liberal theological movement since D. F. Strauss have identified as myth, there have emerged, as a result of the Enlightenment, various adaptations which have become partly demythologised. Cupitt identifies them as semi-realist positions.

4.1.2.1 Protestant Ethical Idealism

This form of religious realism emphasises humanitarian ethics. It is well attested in the writings of Harnack, Tolstoy and the towering figure of Albert Schweitzer. At the centre of the focus is Jesus, the teacher of humanitarian ethics. It is found mostly in charitable organisations (Cupitt 1986:81). Superficially the outlook is quite modern, but it is still rooted in realism, in a realistic, anthropomorphic theism. It is, however, a distinct shift away from a 'one-to-one intimate personal fellowship or intercourse between ourselves and God. This view does not require interventionism, but emphasises human responsibility on the basis of realistic objective value. It is not so much about serving God personally, but serving God for goodness' sake. Tolstoy began to define God as goodness (Cupitt 1986:85). Doing good is being godly, truly

human and peripherally pleasing to God. Here is a shift away from vivid realistic theism; hence the depiction of semi-realism. The shift is also evident in Hans Kung, where God is defined in ethical terms. God is the possibility of a good life.

Cupitt summarises: 'Via the ethical, and only by that route, it makes a veiled and implicit ontological claim' (1986:85). Cupitt observes that, in this view, mere biological human existence is clearly not enough. A transcendent ideal to live by is still required and posited. However, 'God, the moralisation of life, is an ideal waiting to be actualised rather than something given in a deep unconscious way from the very beginning' (1986:87).

Nietzsche was not impressed. He rejected this inherent remaining dualism, in the same way that he rejected Hegelian idealism. He rejects any vestige of morality that in his view is anti-life (Cupitt 1986:87). With Schopenhauer, Nietzsche contended that the world is a-moral.

Cupitt criticises Liberal Protestantism's *penchant* for things that are timeless, constant; for 'eternal truths' (Cupitt 1986:91). In his personal religious development, 'after flirting' for a while with *ethical Protestant idealism,* particularly as it was demonstrated by W. R. Inge, he moved towards the mystics and began to 'settle on *Ladder Realism',* which was 'orthodox, catholic and religiously-rich, while yet allowing some spiritual and intellectual room for movement' (ibid.).

This is also the point on the map where Cupitt's academic and publishing career commences. His first phase, identified by Leaves is the 'Apophatic' Phase of the *via negativa;* Negative Theology, during the years 1967-1979. Cupitt's prolific output picked up momentum during this time with the publication of no less than nine books (Leaves 2004:2).[52]

'In this first stage Cupitt was still firmly rooted in Liberal Christianity and his main concern was to question and search after the Truth' (Leaves 2004:3). Cupitt agreed with Tillich, as did John Robinson, that God was the ineffable, that the God of *Theism* was too small. We should not look for God up there somewhere or even out there somewhere, but God was indeed the root of our existence, the 'ground of our being'. We climb the ladder of mysticism until we find the ineffable, mysterious God, who is not a thing in this world.

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[52] *Christ and the Hiddenness of God* (1971); *Crisis of Moral Authority* (1972); *The Leap of Reason* (1976); *The Worlds of Science and Religion* (1976); *Who was Jesus?* (1977); *Explorations in Theology* (1979); *The Nature of Man* (1979); *The Debate about Christ* (1979); *Jesus and the Gospel* (1979).

Although semi-realists like John Shelby Spong agree that God is not a thing, and that he is rather *in* everything, hence the revisionist term *Panentheism*, God is nevertheless there, and he can still act and be related to. Spong, more than his mentor, Robinson, makes a clear distinction between *Theism* and a dated and incredible picture of God, and God as pictured with a more diffuse, nondescript picture of God, *Panentheism.* God is beyond words, they concur, but he is nevertheless 'there', although they endeavour to minimise the onto-theological realism. Semi-realist panentheists agree to the Death of Theism, but not strictly to the Death of God. The crisis in their view does not obliterate the transcendent, leaving us with only immanence. Referring to traditional realist *theism* Spong maintains:

> If there is no other possible understanding of God, then surely God has died...I still could not dismiss what seemed to me to be an experience of something other, transcendent, and beyond all of my limits...I knew I had to find another God language. Theism was no more.
>
> Spong 1998:55

4.1.2.2 Objective Symbolism

Objective Symbolism is a turn towards a more Catholic path, in Cupitt's view the 'natural successor to ladder realism in a historically-minded age' (1986:93). This position is popular with liberal historical theologians, and Cupitt says he was part of that position during his thirties (ibid.).

Cupitt engages with scholars like Nineham and Bultmann, also taking note of Barth and Gadamer in his discussion. He argues that although liberal critical scholars are fully persuaded of the symbolic, historically conditioned nature of faith propositions, they nevertheless hold on to some vestige of objectivity or at least universality or transcendence. They remain captivated by the mirage of absolute knowledge (1986:104). If we can determine the universal aspect to which the mythological, now alien, symbol pointed, we can understand or reformulate what it means to us and so the hermeneutical circle is completed. The theologian's task ultimately is to create new symbols.

Cupitt (ibid: 96) criticises the presumption that somehow or other we can get to what he calls 'the far side' of symbolism. He contends that we are stuck on the near side of it. Cupitt concedes that the mirage of transcendence is debilitating, it causes faith sickness, which he avers can only be overcome by facing head-on the full-blown crisis of faith and going through the fire of Feuerbach (ibid:104).

4.2 Radical Theology

After having set the scene for radical theology within the context and climate of modernity, modern theology and Liberal Protestantism, this analysis now turns to the mid-twentieth century, when radical theology, as Death-of-God theology, made a rather grand entrance. In a typically superficial way, with a substantial amount of sensationalist spin, it was presented by the popular press as 'new', which is how 'radical' is often presented and understood. This analysis should give a hint that this is not the case, although this is asserted with some measure of ambivalence, because it has been observed that modern means 'new'. The fact is, however, that this 'newness' is five hundred years old.

It is significant, that in a recently-published introduction to radical theology, Cupitt was called upon to write the preface (Greenfield 2006a). This is fitting, because Cupitt has been arguably the foremost radical theologian, at least in the United Kingdom and probably Europe, since Bishop John Robinson.

4.2.1 The Sixties and pop culture

It was the 'Swinging Sixties' and it was America. It was an era of optimism after WW2, but it was also an era of youth uprising. The youth, largely disappointed with the older generation, turned to their peers for their values (Cupitt 2006a:1). There was a sense among the youth that the morals of the older generation were bigoted and bankrupt. In this climate there was a feeling among certain liberal theologians that religion, that is, Christianity, was old and bankrupt too and in need of a serious reworking.

The designation Death-of-God theology originates from a sensational *Time* magazine article in October 1965. It focused on a number of theologians who had recently published radical books. America was, for a short while, aghast at the 'new', 'sensational' phenomenon with many newspaper columns, articles, talk-shows and, of course, fundamentalist sermons, devoted to the new demon on the block.

4.2.2 Theological hall of infamy

Should radicals be inducted into the hall of fame, or should there be a special hall of infamy for them? Greenfield (2006a) writes in positive and approving terms about them, while McGrath (2004) is full of wrath, denigrating them with rancour. They nevertheless form an important context for this consideration of Cupitt, whom Nigel

Leaves (2004:1) believes should definitely be given a place in the theological hall of fame and for whom McGrath (2004) could not afford a single reference in a work of almost three hundred pages.

4.2.2.1 Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton

Thomas Altizer[53] and William Hamilton co-authored a work called *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1968). The death of God constituted a cultural crisis in terms of language and meaning. With the conviction that the transcendent God had been lost, what residual value was left for the proposition? The authors set out to delineate describe and construct *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, facing the fact squarely that God had once been alive, but was now dead. They maintain that Christianity had missed the point by not accepting the radical nature of the Incarnation. God died at the incarnation. God, radically and unequivocally, came down onto the cross and died in and with Jesus. Christian theology made a big mistake by trudging back to the back door of Eden. The Incarnation closed the back door, but Christian theology erred by opening it again (Cf. Greenfield 2006:87). God's self annihilation should have been gladly accepted, not corrected! Ontologically this would have meant the shift from dualism to monism. Now when monism has finally arrived in a non-theological way, theology is stuck in the mud of platonic dualism. If Christian theology accepts, although begrudgingly and belatedly, the history of modernity, it acknowledges that it is, in fact, the story of God. The story of the world is now the story of God.

4.2.2.2 Gabriel Vahanian

Gabriel Vahanian (1961) also insisted that theology and the church had to radically adapt to secular culture in order to be meaningful again. For Vahanian, God, as the transcendent, was literally beyond words. God was culturally constructed and linguistically described in ancient Greek culture, which no longer appeals to modern culture. 'For Vahanian the remedy for this estrangement was a redefinition of deity in terms of contemporary US culture...' (in Greenfield 2006:83). For Vahanian it is clear that God in the old mould is incomprehensible and that God had to be remade in the

[53] Altizer's famous (or infamous) work of the time was *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1967).

mould of modern culture, otherwise God will be dead and buried. It is significant that Vahanian stresses the aspect of language and of constructivism.

4.2.2.3 Paul van Buren

Van Buren's[54] point of departure was heavily influenced by Logical Positivism, which held the verification principle[55] to be very important. God, because of his very nature, is a proposition that cannot be verified and as such it is not a fact. God clearly has no referent in reality and anything that has no referent is devoid of meaning. In other words, it is meaning-less. So God is a word without a referent and therefore God is meaningless. We cannot assert anything meaningful about it (Greenfield 2006:84). Van Buren felt it was important to construct a god-less theology. Under-girded by various modernistic streams, he attempted to restate the meaning of the Gospel for modern secular man, including himself. He moved from God to Christ, because only in Christ, who does have a referent, can something meaningful be constructed. Like Altizer, Van Buren also sees the incarnation in a radical light as the essential death, not of the Christ, but of God.

In the middle-1980s, van Buren made a post-liberal turn and repudiated his earlier positivist point of view. He spent the latter half of his career engaged in Jewish-Christian Dialogue, in which he rose to a level of prominence and appreciation among Jewish and Christian (Barthian) post-liberals.

4.2.2.4 Harvey Cox

Greenfield (2006:85) observes that Harvey Cox's position was, in a sense, the opposite of Van Buren's. It was not so much that the word 'God' had no referent, but that there were so many confusing meanings attached to it. The real meaning had been lost in the maze. There were just too many ambiguities in the word 'God'. What does it actually mean? Society had not arrived at a point at which the word 'God' had no meaning, but rather that it had too many meanings! (ibid.). What he felt would be of help was to move away from the 'spatial symbolisation' of God and consider the concept more in terms of its human and political significance. The realm of God and everything concerned with it is incredible and insignificant in the light of the concerns

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[54] *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (1963).

[55] The verification principle has run aground and lost its appeal, among other things because it is itself regarded to be unverifiable. Greenfield (2006:84) also observes that empiricist philosophy, maybe for this very reason, 'was largely disregarded as a valid vehicle for theological discussion'.

of 'the Secular City'.[56]

4.2.3 Bishop Robinson and the *Honest to God-debate*

Because there are so many significant links[57] with Cupitt, we place a little more emphasis on Bishop Robinson[58] as a contextual figure. The direct influence of Robinson on Cupitt appears to be negligible. Cupitt appears to be influenced somewhat more by Altizer than by Robinson.

4.2.3.1 Worldview

Robinson took the alienation of moderns seriously. Moderns were being alienated from the house of faith because of its persistence with the old antiquated worldview. It was significant that he, in his capacity as a bishop of the church came out and acknowledged that the worldview is now foreign, even weird. He (1963:12) acknowledges that the biblical worldview was typically one where people looked up and from whence God looked down. Paul, Peter and the apostles had no need to demythologise, because the mythical worldview was the prevalent worldview. But this was decidedly and irrevocably no longer the case. That view had become untenable. Robinson (ibid: 95) refers to George Macleod's *Only one way left,* in which he delineates some of the major differences between moderns and the medieval paradigm. (Adapted here.):

Medieval Man	**Modern Man (sic)**
Life was boring brief and brutish.	*Life is long and full of possibilities*
Look up through a telescope	*Look down through a microscope*
Feared calamity from above	*Fear power from below (nuclear)*
Matter doesn't matter	*Matter is marvellous.*

'Modern man is earthed; materially environed. We are enmeshed in materialism' (in Robinson 1963:95).

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[56] The title of Cox's famous book (1965).

[57] They are Cambridge men, Englishmen and priests of the Church of England, to name a few obvious similarities. In addition both became the focus of a public debate, Robinson in the sixties and Cupitt in the eighties. Both remained steadfast in their church affiliation.

[58] McGrath (2004:159) mentions that Bishop Robinson was nicknamed 'Honest John' after his book 'Honest to God' became a best seller. We use it here with respect. Apparently McGrath does not think much of the late bishop's worldview.

Robinson borrowed from Bonhoeffer and was in agreement with Bultmann. The mythical wrapping of the Bible had to be removed to free its essential and existential quality for the modern reader. Robinson (1963:21) said the road would be long and arduous and although to many of the fold it would be 'a reluctant revolution', it had to be undertaken, 'I believe, however, that we may have to pass through a century or more of reappraisal before this becomes possible and before this language ceases to be an offence to faith for a great many people' (Robinson 1963:15).

Three vital changes regarding worldview had to be made:

- Natural instead of supranatural or supernatural.
- Science instead of superstition
- History not myth

The radical theologian accepts that the modern worldview is not at fault. It is the 'revelation'. There has been a reversal. The former revealed worldview has become erroneous. The radical theologian faces up to it and embraces it boldly. Says the bishop: 'There is no going back to the pre-secular view of the world, where God is always 'there' to be brought in, run to, or blamed.' (1965:116).[59]

4.2.3.2 Thwarting Theism

Robinson, persuaded of the modern worldview, became persuaded that traditional theism ought to be thwarted. It was untenable because it was incredible. There were at least three general indictments to be levelled at the traditional God.

a) Intellectually superfluous

Due to scientific, technological, industrial revolutions, we can explain almost anything through the scientific method. We can make anything and fix anything, so we don't sit with a host of unexplained questions. There are very few inexplicable things and there is no mystery or miracle. There is no fear of finding out, no fear of making, and exploring and crafting. The reverential, religious fear has been replaced by scientific

[59] This is from Robinson's second book in a trilogy, *The New Reformation?* (1965) and therefore he may be viewed as the author of the designation: New Reformation, even though he added the question mark.

knowledge, certitude and positivism. The God of the gaps is no longer necessary, because most of the gaps are closed.

b) Emotionally dispensable

This comes from the thoughts of Freud in psychology and goes back to Feuerbach in particular and voiced boldly by Bonhoeffer: Man has come of age. He is no longer a child and tied to the apron strings. Religion is a prop, it is a dangerous illusion, as it keeps people from facing reality. The call is to cut the apron strings and become independent and mature, to have the courage to stand. Rob agrees with this. He believes that some forms of belief in providence pander to emotional immaturity, where we want to retain God in the gaps of our ignorance or fears. God is portrayed as a celestial manipulator interrupting, and providentially overruling. It is debilitating, a superstition—fatalism. He concedes we must not use God as an excuse. A God who relieves us of responsibility 'requires killing' (1965:112).

c) Morally intolerable

Robinson reports on, and by and large agrees with the moral indictment emanating from such names as Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre, Mauritain and others. A God who causes, or allows suffering is morally intolerable. 'One of the liberating effects of secularisation is that this idea of causation has at any rate been discredited' (1965:114).

Robinson maintains that the God portrayed in traditional Christianity can now be discarded because it is a culturally-produced, human construction. It is indeed an idol. He has great sympathy with traditional theists, because it is his God also that is in jeopardy. He sympathises, however, with those who have become atheists because they find God incredible. However, he wants to leave (realist?) room for God when he says he believes they react against an image, the Christian God of tradition. God is not for time and eternity bound to that constructed image. He doesn't want to lose these people. He does not want the church to become completely alien to them. He also wants to ensure a place for Christianity in a 'world come of age', a world without religion (1963:126).

4.2.3.3 Not quite non-real

Robinson was an advocate of *panentheism* (1963:145). He says *panentheism* is an incarnational model. God is in the world, but 'God was *in* Christ...' this means that it doesn't fall into pantheism where everything is God and God is everything. Often, Robinson perceives that those who have attempted to go beyond the God of theism have sunk below it. In their attempt to supersede the supra-personal Deity they end up with one that is less than personal. Theism gives us a god we can visualise, a super-person who can feel and who can enter into relationships and can hear and understand. If God is depersonalised and becomes a force or presence, then he becomes less than human beings. In Robinson's (1963:132) view there is vital ground that must not be surrendered.

Robinson remains a realist. He wants to question the image, but wants to maintain the reality. God is a reality in the world that people experience in all kinds of ways, but the question is how to depict this properly. Rob thinks that what theism tried to confirm by making God personal is the *relation,* and this is what he wants to maintain: God as a relational reality. In Pantheism the relationship becomes impersonal.[60]

Robinson does not think there is much wrong with anthropomorphism, as long as we know what we are doing. They are metaphors. God is Father means God is *like* a father and God is as much in reality a father as he is a rock. Robinson concludes, 'If the only alternative to a personal God is a less than personal Absolute, then let us by all means retain the former' (ibid,137).

Robinson expresses the hope and prospect of getting beyond the dilemma of *theists* and *atheists,* something we might say with admiration that Bishop Robinson partially achieved. By being so 'honest' and 'out' he made a seminal contribution. Although he does not appear to have influenced Cupitt directly, he has had a strong influence on Bishop John Shelby Spong, who may be viewed as Robinson's successor flying the flag of panentheism. Based on Cupitt's views Robinson and Spong are semi-realists who, like John Hick also, maintain 'a sliver of objectivity' (Leaves 2005:155).

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[60] A criticism of panentheism might be this very perspective. If panentheists retain the personal relationship, even referring to God as 'he'. is this not slightly modified theism? Can one expect 'him' to hear and respond?

4.2.4 Cupitt and non-realism

The discussion has taken a grand tour through Western intellectual awakening. Cupitt was the guide for most of the way, as is the case with a good guide. The discussion has also contextualised, set the scene for a closer look at Cupitt's post-crisis position, which has become known as theological non-realism.

In 1980, when the 'rad fad' of the sixties, the Honest to God-debate had abated, Cupitt made it all relevant again, by the publication of his 'coming out' book, 'Taking Leave of God'. Cupitt had already incurred some friction and infamy by his participation in The Myth of God Incarnate' (1977)[61] storm, labelled by sensationalist media as the 'Seven against Christ'.

4.2.4.1 The mystic modern

Cupitt's 'coming out' occurred after a period of engagement with the ancient apophatic tradition, the *via negativa*.[62] According to this tradition, the best we can say of God is that he is ineffable, unknowable. Religious mysticism has long been a way of evading and even subverting theological realism. It confronts metaphysics in a mystical way and ameliorates its crude effect. In this way the mystical tradition has been a forerunner of Enlightenment. The orthodox have always been uncomfortable with the apophatic approach. They invest in clear-cut realism and insist on it dogmatically, not least because of the power it provides. Mysticism empowers the individual, but it is perceived as weak and a-theistic.

Cupitt had been a critical liberal scholar before he engaged with the apophatic tradition, exploring the Christological (Jesus of History) question, ethics, the relation between science and religion, the nature of 'man' (sic) and other subjects. Philosophically speaking, he was modern, critically aware of the big bang of modernity and its crisis for faith. Aware of the Death of God, he, like all liberals, tried to soften the blow and find some way to save God, save the faith and save face in the process. In Cupitt's 'coming out' he lost the latter aim. If the 'Myth of God' incarnate had caused a furore for the 'seven against Christ', Cupitt's first book of the

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[61] Edited by philosopher of religion, John Hick.

[62] Leaves (2004:2) identifies 'Negative Theology' as the first of a seven-stage 'odyssey' of Cupitt's thought. This period is represented by nine monographs and it is quite evident from the titles that two streams converge: the stream of Liberal-critical Protestantism and the Medieval Apophatic tradition. The titles are: *Christ and the Hiddenness of God* (1971); *Crisis of Moral Authority* (1972); *The Leap of Reason* (1976); *The Worlds of Science and Religion* (1976); *Who was Jesus?* (1977); *Explorations in Theology* (1979); *The Nature of Man* (1979); *The Debate about Christ* (1979); *Jesus and the Gospel of God* (1979).

eighties caused 'a hell of a row' (Leaves 2004:27). Cupitt intimated as much in retrospect in a letter to Nigel Leaves '...and I realised that it had finished my career as an academic and in the church' (ibid.).

4.2.4.2 The process of 'coming out'

The book was *Taking Leave of God* (1980). On the opening page Cupitt still holds the hand of the mystical tradition, eliciting help from Meister Eckhart: 'Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God.'[63] This sounds radical, but it does represent ambiguity, as it can be interpreted in an onto-theological sense as well (Leaves 2004:28). Cupitt still held on to a slither of reality based on Kant's idea that, although the numinous is not knowable, it might still function as a guiding ideal. This reading of Kant, combined with the aphophatic tradition, brought him to the point where God became *deus absconditus,*[64] and, although he was now taking bold steps towards non-realism, he was still, in his own later admission, 'a thin-line' theist (ibid: 29). Cupitt is therefore at this stage a (strange) combination of a modern, critical-liberal-mystic. Foci standing out are: internalisation, autonomy and disinterestedness.

a) Internalisation

Cupitt emphasises that authentic faith is not ontological. It is not about believing in the existence of super-sensible, extra terrestrial realities. It is also not important, and, surveying the religious history, it has always been of the utmost importance to internalise God, to make it one's own. Cupitt attacks 'objective theism' (1980:9) saying that it does not matter what people think. What matters is spirituality, interiority. In a true modernist, but also existentialist way Cupitt avers, spirituality cannot be imposed upon us from without...on the contrary the principles of spirituality must be fully internalised *a priori* principles, freely adopted and self-imposed. A modern person must not any more surrender the apex of his self-consciousness to a god.'

This makes Cupitt's interiority different from Pietism. It is an interiority combined with modern autonomy. Pietism, although it puts God 'in the heart',

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[63] From the sermon: *Qui audit me.*
[64] *The hidden God.*

reacting negatively to modernity, remains highly subservient and heteronymous.

b) Autonomy

Cupitt (1980:3) is persuaded that modernity is associated with the desire, the axiom, of individual autonomy, which has 'spread to both sexes. Although it is a hallmark of modernity and of modern theology, it has very deep roots, not only Renaissance roots, but in fact Biblical, *New Covenant* roots (ibid, 4) 'The law that was written on stone tablets must be changed for a law written directly in our hearts...' (ibid, 5). He is quite adamant and iconoclastic against the old objective onto-theological tradition; 'Objective religion is now a false religion...' (ibid, 5). He pushes for a radicalisation of the apophatic approach, which, later in his career, he bolstered by borrowing from Buddhism: '...God and the human individual are no longer to be thought of as two beings in apposition. (ibid.).

'What, then, is God?' Cupitt asks, and provides the answer: 'God is a unifying symbol that eloquently personifies and represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us.' (ibid, 9).

c) Disinterestedness

Cupitt is at pains to contend that the question regarding an objective ontology for God, is not of any help, is actually distracting, and therefore he pushes for a disinterested approach to religion. The religious requirement is to live authentically according to our internalised values, not because we stand under a feudal lord that we have to fear or appease. 'Religious activity must be purely disinterested and therefore cannot depend upon any external facts such as an objective God or a life after death' (Cupitt 1980:10).

Cupitt is persuaded that 'realism' and 'objectivity' sound very reassuring on many levels, but they are no longer compelling. This is the crisis. The old contentment and comfort are no longer credible. There is a baptism of fire to be faced in order to reach the post-crisis 'after'-life which, in Cupitt's view, can only be authentic as radical non-realism.

For Cupitt, the process was 'painful and protracted' as 'he had to peel away layers of metaphysical realism' (Leaves 2004:33).

4.2.4.3 Anti-realism: the last straw

Although Kant's constructivism is Copernican and precipitates the crisis, it is possible to retain a certain semi-realist agnosticism. The normal enlightening effect of Kant, however, is the loss of the loft; it lets the lights go off for metaphysical realism. The whole matter, however, is intensified in the philosophical view of anti-realism referred to *supra*. Shortly after *Taking Leave of God* (1980), Cupitt embarked on a close reading of Nietzsche in 1981. This destroyed the last vestiges of his liberalism, and he faced the *nihil* squarely. Leaves (2004:33) observes that in Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* (1984) and *Only Human* (1985), two books that 'were written as apologetics for the non-realist cause', Cupitt ' 'came out' with a vengeance, setting aside the deliberately obscurantist language and advocating a full-blown non-realism'.

In Cupitt's conclusion towards the end of *The Sea of Faith,* he summarises his two-fold position (1984:271):

- **Metaphysical Realism is no longer true.** (If it were, the tragic vision would be overcome and the comic vision would prevail).
- **Freed from nostalgia, our faith can at last become fully human.** (existential, voluntary, pure, and free from superstition).

As a result of Cupitt's work in general, and the *Sea of Faith* book and television series in particular, the Sea of Faith-Networks emerged. Their vision and mission simultaneously encapsulates and pays tribute to the seminal contribution of Don Cupitt: ***'To explore and promote religion as a wholly human creation.'*** (Cf. Sea of Faith Network website: http://www.sofn.org)

5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Theological non-Realism, although it appears to have been an amelioration of the harsh expression, Death of God, is associated with Nietzschean anti-realism and radical theology. The proposition of theological non-realism is a confession that, due to the irrevocable cultural cataclysm associated with modernity, the ontotheological view based in pre-modern epistemology is no longer a credible prospect. Non-realism, although an a-theous position, nevertheless maintains that religion is a valuable human creation, which should be retained. It should be clear that the negation of realism implies religious reform. It is, however, not the form of religion

that required reformation, but indeed the very foundation. We contend therefore, even at this early development of this appraisal, that although non-realism in its rudimentary form still offers a compromise with tradition, it nevertheless implies the need for a radical reformation, indeed, the New Reformation. The epistemology of Christianity and the ontology of religion can no longer be about a view of life as a pilgrim's progress in preparation for life after death. The Death of God was the dawning of modernity, and vice versa. It has led, and is still leading to the decline of the axial religions and to secular society. What prospects are there for a religious 'after'-life, a life after the cataclysm and beyond the crisis? First, it is necessary to take cognisance of another contextual change, a twist in the tale that is highly significant to the remaking of religion-- so-called (post)-modernism, a trajectory that influenced Cupitt's views quite markedly.

CHAPTER THREE

POSTMODERNISM AND POST-REALIST ROUTES TO A RELIGION OF THE FUTURE

1 INTRODUCTION

The primary prospect for theological non-realism, the writer contends, lies in its deconstruction and discontinuation of metaphysical, doctrinal theism. This in itself is powerful, because it effectively and radically changes the confessional polarity to its antithesis, and, although this means a switch to the negative, it is actually positive, even positivistic. It is saying much more than 'no' all the time, although, as was pointed out earlier, the time had come when saying no to blind belief was, in fact, a new statement of belief, or rather conviction. If non-realism is not merely about incredulity and saying no, how can the empty balloon of non-realism be inflated with positive religious prospects, and how might this still be 'theo"-logical?

The investigation into the 'after'-life continues by observing the influence of post-modernism on the thought and theology of Don Cupitt. What happens when Cupitt's philosophical anti-realism and theological non-realism converge with the deconstructive critique of postmodernism? What problems and prospects does it reveal about religious reform in general and a new reformation of Christianity in particular? In what sense may Cupitt be regarded as a reformer; an architect of the post-metaphysical and postmodern 'after'-life? It will become clear how the post-modern turn provided the impetus to renewal and new religious thought. This, clearly, is about the third gate-way question.

2 WORLDVIEW

For Cupitt, 'postmodernism begins theologically with the death of God and philosophically with the end of foundationalism' (Leaves 2004:39). Leaves is also persuaded that 'non-realism has naturally led Cupitt to embrace postmodernism' (2004:35). Cupitt's shift towards postmodernism was precipitated by a close reading

of Nietzsche, who may be regarded as the grandfather-figure of postmodernism. This turn represents an intensification of his philosophical *Anti-realism* and theological non-realism. In *Only human* (1985) Cupitt's postmodern turn becomes pronounced: 'Derrida replaces Kierkegaard and the book is in the style of Foucault' (ibid.).' In *The long legged fly* (1987) Cupitt works out his postmodern point of view.[1]

It goes without saying that postmodernism is still modern. It does not change the broad modern outlook, but there are important differences and this discussion focuses briefly on two general aspects of postmodernism that are quite pronounced in Cupitt's thought.

2.1 Transience and contingency

Cupitt observes that '[i]n the 1980s and 1990s the Western world, under the influence of postmodernist thought, suddenly awakened to the realisation that everything is endlessly transient and impermanent' (Leaves 2004:60). This represents a correction and a return to the basics of modern knowledge, namely to doubt, critique, perspective and motion. A form of modernism which claims absolute truth in terms of worldview is an aberration and is mythical. This perspective is usually held because of the power of reason and science. A.N. Wilson remarks, regarding the exaggeration of the potency of science, that 'science could no more explain the Universe than a clock left to itself could tell time' (1999:13). Postmodernism interrogates and deconstructs the distortion and renders it discourse.

2.2 Groundless and pointless

Cupitt observes:

> In Postmodern culture, after the end of the old metaphysics, nothing any longer has any assured and objective value, or foundation. There is no fixed order of things out there. Everything is contingent, an outsideless flux of energies-read-as-signs that just pours out unceasingly and flits away.
>
> Cupitt 1989:88

[1] Leaves (2004:2) groups *Life Lines* (1986); *The Long Legged* Fly (1987); *The New Christian Ethics* (1988) and *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (1989) together as Cupitt's third stage, under the title: *Postmodernism and Anti-realism.*

Also:

> There is no longer any 'absolute Beginning, Ground, Presence or End in the traditional metaphysical sense. So there is no anchorage whatever, in any direction. To invert the spatial metaphor, the Centre is gone.
>
> Cupitt1987:7

It is clear that, for Cupitt, postmodernism is a continuation and intensification of the metaphor for the death of God, referring in general terms to the cataclysmic cultural upheaval whereby the old metaphysical and now also rational foundational *a priori* has been dispelled.

With the loss of the lofted 'Point of View', reality is quite literally point-less. Although, it is probably more apt to describe the postmodern epistemological condition as a plurality of points, almost like the dots on a television screen that make up any number of pictures, all depending on the order and relations between the points, or the notes on the keyboard, which represent points of possibility for a seemingly endless array of melody, harmony and rhythm. As far as a single Archimedes point or God's point of view is concerned, modernity knows and postmodernism underscores: it has been lost. It was always, and is now, fiction.

3 EPISTEMOLOGY

The characterisation of postmodernism as 'incredulity toward meta-narratives' is particularly associated with the thought of Francois Lyotard (1984: xxiv). Although Cupitt does not mention Lyotard very often, he concurs with this critique, echoed in the statement, 'All the *grands récits*, the grand narratives, have passed away...' (Cupitt 1989:99). Cupitt's ideas are also informed by Foucault, Barthes and De Leuze and, of course, by Derrida.

The main epistemological problem, or problem with (traditional) epistemology, lies right at the base, that is, in the presuppositions. Typically, postmodern critique opposes *foundationalism, essentialism* and *realism* (Magnus 1999:726). For postmodernists like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, these presuppositions 'are as old as metaphysics itself', and Lyotard even contends that postmodern philosophy precedes modern philosophy (ibid.). The term *post* therefore does not refer strictly to what (chronologically) comes *after* modernity, although there is now a tendency, also detected in Cupitt's writing, to speak about

postmodernism as a period '...beginning (roughly) at the end of the 1950s...' (1986:125).[2]

3.1 The primacy of language

'A whole series of classical assumptions about language have broken down', and 'postmodernism is the cultural outcome (Cupitt1997a:83). Postmodernism asserts the primacy of the sign and symbolic world of language for all knowledge. We do not uncover meaning, either through rationalist or empiricist means, and then, in a subsequent and separate act, name what we know. Knowledge is the naming. The knowing subject stands already within the symbolic universe of signs, of words. It is, in a new postmodern sense, profoundly apt to say that 'in the beginning was the word', as it is understood that the 'beginning' is also a word inside of the symbolic universe. In language we live and move and have our being. The postmodern worldview is a 'naturalistic immanentism in which realism has been replaced by the ontological primacy of language' (Leaves 2004:40-1).

Cupitt (2000:59) draws a close and direct connection with Kant, whose 'formulation (the world is formed by the categories and concepts through which we think it) came to be replaced in due course by a new doctrine: the world is formed by the language in which we describe and interpret it. Kant called his doctrine 'transcendental idealism'. The new doctrine is liable to be called...linguistic idealism...'.

3.1.1 Critique of the reality-fact presumption

Cupitt criticises the traditionalist-modernist reality-fact perception, contending that it is based on the presumption that:

> Words open directly onto concepts; concepts are or can easily be made fully determinate, and the observer has well-defined procedures for checking whether or not a certain concept is instantiated or exemplified in reality.
>
> Cupitt1987:7

Cupitt concurs with the Derridean dictum 'language constructs reality' (Leaves 2004:41). Leaves, basing his opinion on his observations of Cupitt's postmodernism, adds: 'Words don't correspond to reality; rather they create what we see, a process

[2] For Hans Küng (1991:3) the watershed is World War II, although he acknowledges that the literary-critical watershed is later. He admits that his definition was broadened by Lyotard (1990:140n7)

that involves an evaluation of the object of perception' (ibid: 43-4). To a certain degree, of course, this is the legacy of Kant and a distinct echo of Descartes. To the extent to which anti-realist postmodernists like Cupitt doubt everything, they remain *Kantian*, and *Cartesian*, for there is a sense in which postmodernists doubt everything until they reach that which cannot be doubted, now no longer the *cogito* of the autonomous subject, but language. This, however, is nevertheless a significant difference, radically changing the complexion of understanding and interpretation. The assumption of a simple 'one-to-one correspondence between language and reality' is deemed fallacious.

3.1.2 Hard and soft facts?

The nature of knowledge has changed dramatically. The old knowledge was patriarchal, authoritative, objective, real, hard and scientific. Moderns, having replaced the 'gospel truth', God's truth, with scientific truth are similarly persuaded that what they require, and exclusively regard as truth, in all instances, is hard facts. This, in Cupitt's (1998:79) estimation, is a very masculine sort of view and he is persuaded that this is the point of the fissure in modern epistemology, where the fault-line runs between the modern and the postmodern. It is Cupitt's (ibid.) view that 'since the late seventeenth century Anglo-Saxon culture' invested heavily in a clear-cut distinction between science and art. The fault line divides hard fact, constituting the rational-literal, from soft emotional-metaphorical language.[3] The hard-fact, unemotional approach associated with science is pure fact, a picture-perfect portrayal of a slice of reality, associated with masculinity. The metaphorical is the opposite, being associated with inaccuracy, dubiousness, artiness and femininity. Cupitt (ibid.) contends in terms of the postmodern critique that this distinction is now regarded as presuppositional.

3.1.3 Science and signs

De Saussure's semiology and a hint of Dawkins' Darwinian physics shimmer through when Cupitt depicts life as a 'flux of energies-read-as-signs...'.

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[3] The vocabulary, as well as the concepts employed here depend quite heavily on a particularly lucid and impressive ten pages on the subject from Cupitt (1989:79-89). The use here of words like, 'faultline', fissure, hard and soft facts emanates from Cupitt.

> We are temporary aggregates of world-stuff. We maintain our existence for a while by reading world events as signs, expressing ourselves, and thereby also communicating with one another.
>
> Cupitt 1997a:89

In *The long legged fly* (1987), the book in which Cupitt digests the views of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Barthes and Deleuze, he employs the metaphor of a pond insect, the Water Strider, or Pond Skater, to illustrate the postmodern view of knowledge. The insect darts lightly over the surface of the pond. It has a light, surface existence. It lives on the surface of the pond and it reads the vibrations and goes after it. There is no height or depth; the vertical is negligible to this insect. Its world is the horizontal. Cupitt (ibid.) characterises this sort of horizontal and humanistic communication: 'It is light, resourceful, fast-moving and well able to survive'. It can be observed as a further intensification of the modern worldview as radically human. The loft has been lost, and so has the basement. The vertical axis in terms of knowledge is now fully surrendered to the horizontal. As was the case when modernity dawned, knowledge in the postmodern view is plain and mundane; simply human. No more, no less. It seems so simple, but when it is applied to religion and theology as Cupitt determines to do, it is extremely invasive and disruptive and begs the question of whether it is at all 'do-able'. Can religion ever be fully human?

Cupitt (2000:82), like Mark C. Taylor, draws an analogy between God and gold. Gold was once the real backing behind money, but this has been suspended, and now money 'is just a flux of relativities that shift daily' and gold has become just another commodity. Cupitt (ibid.) concludes: 'Now we admit the obvious truth that God is simply a sign, just as money is simply a sign or a flow of signs'.

3.1.4 The death of the subject

Associated with the insistence on the primacy of language in postmodernism is the resulting dispersal of the subject of epistemology. The death of God eventually deconstructs to the death of the subject and the (fully) autonomous self. This is sometimes even referred to as the death of the self.[4] The self, like everything else is a composite construct, in and within language, not a secure, prepositionless *a priori.* This represents a shift from a singularity to a plurality of constructed selves. The

[4] The theme of a Sea of Faith Network day conference held in London was 'Is There a Me?' (March 2006).

individual, rationalistic freedom of the subject as presumed in classical Cartesianism is no longer convincing to postmodernists. Nevertheless, there is no question of a regression to the heteronymous relation, which was the hallmark of the reign of metaphysical dualism.

With the death of the Subject,[5] therefore, the death of the subject follows in its wake. This entails a significant loss of (masculine) power. Knowledge loses its masculine power of 'mastering' a subject, objectifying it (Cupitt 1989:84). Knowledge is now much messier. It is participatory, open-ended conversation. Knowledge, always discourse, is now essentially dialogue, the exchanging of points of view. Leaves (2004:38) concurs with Thiselton's observation that 'in *The long legged fly* Cupitt's internalised God of non-realism vanishes with the death of the self'. Does the death of the self underscore the death of God, or, paradoxically, does it provide an opening for retrieval and return? This is a debatable point. However, what Cupitt regards as inevitable Thiselton regards as catastrophic and a preamble to 'confusion and chaos, the hallmarks of a godless age' (ibid.).

3.1.5 Outsidelessness

Because we are always and ultimately within the symbolic universe of language, from which we make all our constructions of reality, there is therefore no outside. With the postmodern turn, Cupitt has now effectively made a *rapprochement* to the thesis of the imagined *Leap of reason*, the title of his 1976 book. Then, still informed by the traditional, onto-theological paradigm, he suggested that we could 'transcend ourselves in a 'leap of reason' (1976:95). Cupitt still supposed that there was a transcendent world, although he was, as a result of his Kantian persuasion, sufficiently critical of our ability to know it.

At the time, Cupitt retold and re-visioned Plato's allegory of a man trapped in a cave. It is the story of someone who lives his whole life inside a cave or prison and has no reason to think that there is an outside. Then, the prisoner or immanent cave man begins to think about the possibility of an outside, for which, of course, he has no data. The believer makes a mental leap (the 'leap of reason') to think what cannot be demonstrated. In Plato's story, there was a chink in the wall, a glimmer of light, suggesting the prospect of an 'outside'. Cupitt's new orientation does not allow

[5] '...God is the supreme Subject for whom and in whom all things hold together...' (Cupitt 1986:124).

for that hiatus. There is most definitely no chink in the prison wall, and we do not postulate that our prisoner has any extraordinary faculties...he has no direct knowledge of "outside": only his heightened consciousness, the leap of reason' (1976:37). This is the modern worldview, but, with the intensification as a result of the postmodern perspective of a world of words, the 'leap' is lost.[6]

In terms of the subject-object relation of epistemology, it is not only the (S)ubject which has been relativised, but the object also does not seem as objectifiable as before. The knowing (mastery) of the objectified and the making-known of the (perspectival) knowing is problematic. Cupitt declares: 'Descartes and the empiricists were wrong; there isn't any infallible and incorrigible apprehension of the sheerly-given' (1989:84). Postmodernism hereby revises Descartes by maintaining his methodical doubt, even where the rationalist 'believes' it has been dispelled. Post-modern in this respect clearly means *more* modern and cannot be construed as an open invitation to return to ontotheological realism.

3.1.6 Openness and open-endedness

The birth of the modern, enlightened paradigm represents, as has been noted, a shift from above to below, a deconstruction of the vertical by a shift to the horizontal in terms of epistemology. It represents a progression away from privileged and esoteric knowledge to open-access knowing, a move from the divine to the mundane. The process of epistemological empowerment and democratisation has come into fruition in postmodernism. The old knowledge was received from a Source where knowledge was held in a sort of vault and from whence withdrawals could be made by mediation of certain privileged persons, those who had the password or the privileged PIN. Ordinary folk had to be ministered to by this priestly PIN-people.

Knowledge is no longer privileged, restricted or hidden. The World Wide Web is a good illustration of the point. Everything is out there and open. Knowledge has become universalised and globalised. Not only is it fully humanised and therefore open, but also the postmodern view, as a result of its incredulity about meta-narratives, typically resists closure, finality and ultimacy. There is no final word. No-one speaks the last word. The implication, or the application of this view for theology and religion, is significant and certainly not so simple.

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[6] This of course leads to the doorstep of nihilism in the company of Nietzsche.

3.2 Philosophical hermeneutics

This has led to embarkation on the inevitable consequence that everything is a matter of interpretation, resulting in the widening of the subject of hermeneutics. Previously, hermeneutics was limited to interpretation of Biblical texts, but now, in a development occurring in the 20th century, originating in German philosophy with an impetus from Schleiermacher and taken further by Dilthey,[7] Heidegger, and particularly Gadamer, hermeneutics was applied to all knowledge including science. Bohman (1999:378) states, 'Interpretation is part of the finite and situated character of all human knowing'. He provides a definition: "Philosophical hermeneutics" thereby criticising Cartesian foundationalism in epistemology and Enlightenment universalism in ethics, seeing science as a cultural practice and prejudices (or prejudgments) as ineliminable in all judgments' (ibid.). We construct our world, our reality through language and the interpretation of it is similarly an intra-linguistic cultural activity, amounting to a particular interpretation, based on pre-conditioned premises of departure.

Cupitt (1986:116) is in agreement with Derrida's maxim that 'there is nothing outside the text'. Cupitt (1989:79) observes, 'Postmodernism is a cultural condition in which there is not much 'reality around'. 'There is no canonical reality. Reality is rather heretical, contextual and constructed through language and, 'language is steeped in evaluations' (Leaves 2004:43). It is clear how Cupitt's philosophical anti-realism and his theological non-realism are now expressed in post-modern parlance.

3.2.1 The making of meaning

Because the death of God equals the death of (absolute) Truth and *vice versa*, it follows that there can be no truly objective meaning. Truth is always perspectival and meaning is made. It is always construed and contextual.[8] Meaning is significance derived and ascribed. There is even a sense in which we can assert that meaning is

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[7] Dilthey proposed to ground the human sciences in a universal theory of interpretation (Bohman 1999:377).

[8] Botha (1993:32) underscored the important distinction that, 'While meaning is context-bound, context is boundless' and therefore the 'framing' of the picture is crucial to construal of a text's meaning.

made up and therefore always fictional.[9] The membrane between fact and fiction becomes extremely thin.[10]

In the context of the 'meaning of life', the meaning of 'it all', Cupitt (1989:22) states : the "Meaning of It All" is something indefinitely plural, that is endlessly made and remade, celebrated and lamented *by us* in art, and not something absolutely single, selfsame, intelligible and timeless that can be known by pure rational intuition'. Cupitt reiterates that the 'death of the old metaphysical God' is the end of 'all absolute pre-established Meaning' (ibid: 14). This means two things. It means the individual has to construe meaning by going *within* (responsible, aware, free), not necessarily *with* (irresponsible, captive), the flow. Each person has to make up their own mind and make their own meaning. Jumping ahead somewhat, it means quite literally that we make up our own religion, we create our own God. '...we ourselves are the only makers of meaning and value...' (1997:89). Meaning is ascribed. We ascribe meaning to things, we appropriate it, and in a sense we also subscribe to ready-made meanings. When we go meaning-making, then, we always remain within the symbolic universes provided by language as a social, pluralistic phenomenon.

3.2.2 Myth, metaphor and story

The turn to language is also related to a turn to narrative. Our world is made up of a complex of story lines, plots and sub-plots, whereby we make and express meaning. Language is the 'foundation', and metaphor is the method whereby we create our world. 'Language may differentiate the world, but metaphor crosslinks the world's many strands, tying them together again' (Cupitt 1998:224).

Currently, because of post-modernism, there is a change of climate regarding myth, which suffered centuries of 'bad press' on account of the dominance of rationalism, empiricism and logocentrism. A long time ago, theologians reified the *muthos* by turning it into *logos*. Cupitt (1986:134) thinks that it is time to 'retrace our steps, resolving *logos* back into *muthos'.* Myth, understood as myth and not mistaken

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[9] In this regard some voices have criticised the Gadamerian direction. Hirsch (1984:202) has proposed a distinction to be drawn between meaning and 'significance'. In his conception the former was fixed, while the latter was open to change.

[10] Nietzsche is fully anarchistic, denying the existence of facts. In *Das Fröhliches Wissenschaft,* he states his view that there is no true way of seeing the world—it is all down to perspective. "What then in the last resort are the truths of mankind? They are the irrefutable errors of mankind" (Nietzsche *The Gay Science: 265,* cited in Lavrin (1971:51).

for logos, is to be welcomed. 'Myth is fluid, unsystematic and multivalent, and freely confuses God and man; but doctrine is about power...' (Cupitt 1986:137).

We humans constantly make myth. We construe, construct and compose. We construe the story of our lives and of the world around us. In the early 1990s Cupitt had a specific 'turn' to 'story', which Leaves classifies as part of Cupitt's expressionism (stage four). It is, however, necessary to see that, a decade before, at the outset of Cupitt's non-realism (stage one) he states: 'A person is a process of becoming, and a narrative is the literary form that best shows what persons are and can become' (1980:166). At this early juncture[11] Cupitt emphasises:

- Narrative: the literary form that best shows what persons are
- Persons all have life-stories
- Indeed, a person is a story
- The religious life is an inner drama
- Religious stories are myths
- Myth is the best, clearest and most effective way of communicating religious truth
- God is a myth we have to have[12]
- Belief systems are works of human art

All of this is on the last page of Cupitt's 'coming out' book (1980), in which he first introduced non-realism. It is true, however, that Cupitt did return to this theme eleven years later in *What is a story* ?(1991), developing it much further.

What is worth underlining and reiterating is that *muthos* should not be presented as *logos* and this is where awareness, consciousness and enlightenment, as well as responsibility, are required.

4 SUMMARY

In *After God: the future of religion* (1997a), categorised by Leaves (2004:3) as the penultimate book of the fourth stage, called 'expressionism', Cupitt gives an overview of his postmodernist views. It reflects an epistemological revolution resulting in the

[11] This is relative because it refers to Cupitt's Second Stage (Leaves 2004:2). It is not early in terms of his total career.
[12] It would seem that Cupitt had later on 'taken leave' of the necessity of even the non-real God.

persuasion that 'We have no access to any objective order independent of ourselves' (1997:89). It may be summarised and paraphrased as follows (1997:82-9):

- Reality is constructed through language and therefore:
    - Language is a communication of signs via the universal
    - There is no fixed order of things
    - There is only a flux of energies that pour out and flit away
    - Nothing is objective or assured
    - We should give up the idea of absolutes; there are none
    - Truth is dispersed. There is no One Great Truth[13]
    - We maintain a repertoire of small truths
    - Everything is contingent and outsideless (ibid).

- The self and the human condition
    - We are temporary aggregates of world stuff
    - *It is dispersed and has become plural:*
    - *people explore and express themselves*
    - *flipping through different forms of self-hood*
    - *Culture has become plural.*

'This is it—this is all there is' (Cupitt 1997:89).

It is noteworthy that Cupitt, after having turned to post-modernism, continues to wage war against realism embedded in the old epistemology. This is in spite of an attempt at alterity with realism reflected in *Life Lines* (1987) ten years before. His Kantian-Nietzschean epistemology has deepened with the development into deconstruction, a point that is criticised. The next chapter will return to this criticism. Nevertheless, Cupitt has adopted a platform of non-realism based in what has been called the 'four corners' of postmodernism.[14]

- The Subject: decentred, constructed; dispersed in language.
- Ethics: Contingent, constructed out of conversation.

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[13] It should be evident that the deconstruction of meta-narratives is done by means of another meta-narrative, which is part of the paradox of the 'postmodern predicament', to be discussed in Chapter Four.

[14] Although the substance is from Leaves' rendition, the form and paraphrasing have been adapted here.

- Art: anarchistic and aestheticist: no absolutes.
- Global culture emerging.

In conclusion, what could probably be perceived as: **Cupitt's philosophical Decalogue**[15] can be inserted.

1. Until about two centuries ago, human life was seen as being lived on a fixed stage, ruled by eternal norms of truth and value. (This old world-picture may nowadays be called "realism", "Platonism", or "metaphysics").
2. But now everything is contingent: that is, humanly-postulated, mediated by language and historically-evolving. There is nothing but the flux.
3. There is no eternal order of reason above us that fixes all meanings and truths and values. Language is unanchored.
4. Modern society no longer has any overarching and authoritative myth. Modern people are "homeless" and feel threatened by nihilism.
5. We no longer have any ready-made or "dogmatic" truth and we have no access to any "certainties" or "absolutes" that exist independently of us.
6. We are, and have to be, democrats and pragmatists who must go along with a current-consensus world-view.
7. Our firmest ground and starting-point is the vocabulary and world-view of ordinary language and everyday life, as expressed, for example, in such typically modern media as the novel and the newspaper.
8. The special vocabularies and world-views of science and religion should be seen as extensions of supplements built out of the life-world, and checked back against it.
9. Science furthers the purposes of life by differentiating the life-world, developing causal theories, establishing mathematical relationships and inventing technologies.
10. Religion seeks to overcome nihilism, and give value to life. In religion we seek to develop shared meanings, purposes, narratives. Religion's last concern is with eternal happiness in the face of death.

5 RELIGION AND THEOLOGY

Given the philosophical context of modernity and in particular postmodernism, how can religion in general and Christianity in particular be reformed to be a credible vehicle for the 'religious requirement'[16] of humanity? In one sense it is a salvaging operation, a restoration, and in another sense it is a rethinking, a new design. The

[15] Presented to the Sea of Faith Conference, 1998.
[16] Cupitt based this term on the Kantian 'categorical imperative'.

question is whether Christianity can be demythologised entirely, and, if so, would it be sufficient and satisfying? Would it not be a stripped bare, an anorexic Christianity, a tragic shadow of its former glorious past? What sort of faith, what sort of Christianity is required and feasible in the postmodern 'after'-life? What are the implications of postmodernism for religion, theology and the church? What sort of religion can be built on this view and how should traditional religion be reformed? Rightly, this platform, or lack thereof, poses some serious questions, expressed thus by Leaves:

> If there is no absolute Origin, no last end, and no objective reality, value, or truth, then how should people live? What kind of a world is desirable when all we are left with is beginningless, endless, and outsideless flux of conflicting human interpretations? What kind of societies can we create if there is nothing but our language and the meanings, truths, and interpretations that we have generated in using that language?
>
> Leaves 2004:7

Realising that there was some serious thinking and some serious construction and reformative work to be done, Cupitt plunged into his 'active non-realism' period. This is his fourth stage, called by Leaves 'expressionism'.[17]

There must now be a shift away from context to a focus towards content, where the third gate-way question of 'inflation' of the empty balloon of non-realism guides the research.

5.1 The role of religion and theology

It is possible to say in summary that Cupitt, broadly speaking, advocates two reformative approaches, quite diverse in nature: *Anarchism and Aestheticism.*[18] The first entails the iconoclastic conflict with authoritarian realism, and the second calls for new and authentic religious expression and creativity.

Cupitt draws inspiration from German expressionist art. Religion is not a science, but an art. With reference to doctrine and the church authority, which maintains doctrine as its power base, Cupitt is anarchistic, contending that we no longer require a policeman for religion. 'People must be free to generate their own

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[17] Leaves (2004:3) describes the period starting from 1990 as stage four of Cupitt's thought development represented in his writings and calls it Expressionism. It is comprised of 8 books and a booklet: *Creation out of Nothing* (1990); *What is a Story* (1991); *The Time Being* (1992); *Rethinking Religion* (1992) (Booklet); *After All* (1994); *The Last Philosophy* (1995); *Solar Ethics* (1995); *After God* (1997) and *Mysticism after Modernity* (1997).

[18] Both can be traced back to Nietzsche.

theories of knowledge, their own stories about the natural world and their own ideas about God. For expressionists "like us", God is made only of words' (Leaves 2004:65).

'Cupitt equates Paul Feyerabend's 'overcoming of epistemology' in philosophy with his own project of overcoming orthodoxy in theology' (ibid.).

Traditional Christianity has maintained at least three salient claims, which are now all under review:

- Privileged knowledge
- Promise of Salvation
- Promise of Life after Death.

5.1.1 From privileged knowledge to poetic theology

It should be clear by now that, according to modern knowledge, any claim to esoteric, privileged sources of knowledge is simply fallacious and untenable. Cupitt is persuaded that the language of theology and the task of religion should no longer be descriptive and prescriptive. They should not be in the business of describing real-existing, super-sensible objects and their activities (Cupitt 1980:164). Religious language has very little to describe, but should have much to express. Cupitt has become convinced and advocates that religion should give up the mission to enlighten the dark world.

Catholic theologian and philosopher David Tracy (1987:82) concurs: 'Theologians can never claim certainty, but at best, highly tentative, relative adequacy. If interpreters of religion come with any pretence to purity, they should not be listened to.' Tracy insists that all knowledge, including the 'Gospel Truth', is subject to the same 'plurality and ambiguity' that all knowledge is subject to. Religion can no longer make special claims. Cupitt concludes: 'at best it can serve to ennoble our lives' (1998:228).

In making a case for poetic theology, Cupitt refers to the ancient distinction drawn by Terrentius Varro (1998a:225), namely three kinds of theology:

- Poetical,
- Civil
- Philosophical (or Natural).

The first was mythical narratives, stories told and retold, performed. And the proper place for these was the theatre. Civil theology was the state cult, with its celebrations and feasts and its locus was the temple. Philosophical theology was about doctrine, truth and science and the proper place for this activity was the classroom and the schools. Plato was the founder of the latter. Philosophical theology soon received the highest regard and poetical theology the least. Augustine also took a rather dim view of poetical theology and wanted it all to be superseded by divinely-inspired Christian theology.

5.1.2 Religion in need of redemption

It is an ironic reversal. Christianity, so intricately associated with salvation, saving the lost world, saving souls from the world, now appears itself to be quite seriously lost and in need of redemption. It is clear from Cupitt's persuasion and point of view that:

- The world is not lost.
- Humanity is not mired in the mud of original sin.
- The death of dualism is also the death of the soul. Soul, like so much else of the old paradigm, is metaphorical.

On the basis of this damning indictment, which involves Christianity's master narrative, it requires a radical rethinking and remaking, indeed, redemption from imprisoning imagery. The route to reform starts with the root, the *radix*. Therefore, it may be concluded at this point, that the new reformation must be root-canal surgery and it might be much more than uncomfortable and full of conflict yet. It would appear, even at this stage, that a simply symbolic or metaphorical may be too benign for what seems to be required.

5.1.3 Religion to reconcile with finitude

Cupitt (1989:229) is opposed to what he calls 'the old longtermisms'. They all hail from Plato. They are one big family and all make the same 'disastrous error'. All longtermisms make the ideal world of the future too good. We have to depend on promises that 'sundry unseen powers' are 'working in a hidden way to bring the Good World closer to us' (ibid.). This vista of the future has the effect of making people

dependent on the brokers of the dream, which keeps disappointing. Cupitt is adamant that world-denial and world rejection lead to alienation and despair.

Cupitt is therefore persuaded that we need to make peace with immanentism and finitism. We are always and forever inside life and language. We cannot jump out of it, either by a leap of faith or reason, or by the door of death. He therefore coins a term, *entostasy,* to describe the healthy approach of jumping into our lives (Leaves 2004:89). It does require a novel and bold attitude, almost an *amor fati,*[19] loving one's life, 'warts and all'. This human condition is 'as good as it gets'.[20] Ironically, it takes a new kind of non-realistic, realistic faith to look life in the eye and accept it with alacrity. Cupitt is a neo-Nietzschean, postmodern, expressionist, existentialist and he is persuaded that Christianity cannot continue to delude people with the traditional life-after-death escape route. It is incredible, and poses an integrity crisis for Christianity.

5.1.4 From reinterpretation to reinvention

Cupitt's odyssey shows a gradual transition from the position of a critical liberal, convinced of the need for reinterpretation and restatement, to a religious humanist who believes that re-statement will always be an understatement and what is required instead is re-invention; creative, artistic re-imagination. 'We do not just need a reformation—we need new religious thought' (Leaves 2004:31). It is a move from having the eye on the past revelation with its hope of a future culmination, to focusing on making new religious meaning in the moment with little thought of the past and the future. It is a move from adherence to authentic expression.[21]

5.2 Post-crisis paths

It is apposite to revert back to the metro map Cupitt proposed in *Life Lines* (1986). There has been some reference to the pre-crisis, as well as the to the semi-realist stations and there can now be a brief[22] introduction to Cupitt's post-crisis, non-realist

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[19] One of Nietzsche's major tenets associated with his 'eternal recurrence' theme by which he sought to promote an attitude that could overcome nihilism.

[20] One is reminded of the brilliant motion picture with this title, starring Jack Nicholson, Helen Hunt and Greg Kinnear.

[21] Some Interesting suggestions in this regard have recently been contributed by Hunt: *Bringing God Back to Earth* (2004) and Harris: *Creating God Re-Creating Christ: Re-Imagining the Christian way in a Secular World* (1999).

[22] They are not discussed in detail because much of their content is repeated and scattered throughout Cupitt's work treated in different sections of this analysis.

positions.

5.2.1 Aesthetic Expressivism

The first form of post-crisis route or station which Cupitt introduces is actually two centuries old (1986:115). Aesthetic expressivism is the natural successor to objective symbolism. It is a thoroughgoing symbolist view that has renounced objectivity. There is a move from metaphysics to aesthetics. Cupitt plots the trajectory of aesthetic expressivism, which he regards as 'both very old and very new' (ibid:16):

- Kant contributed by the turn to phenomenology and idealism.[23]
  This suggested that we are like creative artists, world-makers...'
  (Cupitt 1986:118).
- Nietzsche intensified Kant's tentative turn to art (Cupitt 1986:119).
- The Romantic artists contributed greatly.
- Schleiermacher, in 'the first great work of aesthetic expressivism...'made no attempt to rehabilitate the kind of metaphysical realism that Kant had destroyed: instead he demythologised religion into art, or (better) rehabilitated religion as art' (ibid.).
- Jung, by 'locating the sources and the meaning of religion and art in the inner world of the psyche...'(ibid:123).

The difference between the old aesthetic expressivism is that the old remained nostalgic, animated by a sense of loss.[24] In postmodernism there is a need to get rid of the old nostalgia. The question is whether Christianity can become fully aesthetic expressivist.

5.2.2 Pure Religious Voluntarism

Pure religious voluntarism is almost the 'perfect antithesis of *aesthetic expressivism* (1986:128). The latter is a radical continuation of what Cupitt describes as the 'ancient way of affirmation', while the former is a continuation of the 'Way of Negation' (ibid.). The latter is more individualistic, while the former values the solidarity of believers. It is 'ultra conscious and individualistic' (ibid: 129). The

[23] 'This suggested that we are like creative artists, world-makers...' (Cupitt 1986:118).
[24] A.N. Wilson (1999) discusses the Romantics, the Victorians in terms of Thomas Hardy's poetic image of the 'Funeral of God'.

religious voluntarist is a 'Christian existentialist who has been schooled by Kierkegaard' (ibid:137). Faith is self-expression of the inner life-impulse. The voluntarist accepts and employs myth.

Commonalities are:

- Both are post-realist positions.
- Both use religious language and symbolism as guides to practice.

There are marked differences as well:

- Aesthetic expressivists tend to be nostalgic and quietist. They love the peace and quiet of the church.
- Religious voluntarism is more outgoing, living to overcome nihilism, living to the full.

5.2.3 Militant Religious Humanism

The introduction and promotion of the idea of religious humanism may prove to be one of Cupitt's most significant contributions. This concept has been adopted by the Sea of Faith Network (SoFN), whose mission is 'to explore and promote religion as a human creation'.[25] There is, of course, a question as to whether we are faced here with an oxymoron, with which Boulton grapples.[26] Humanism, some would contend, is per definition *a-religious,* and religion, they believe, can never be humanism in its full (secular) sense.

Cupitt (1986:151) is also cognisant of the apparent contradiction: 'Now it is often objected that militant *religious* humanism is nothing but militant humanism dressed in hyperbolical religious metaphors which add nothing of real substance.' Cupitt disagrees, contending that religious metaphors 'do real work'. We see something of the dynamic duo of anarchism and aestheticism at work in Cupitt's strategy. He seems to be using religious language to deconstruct, on the one hand, unacceptable religious heritage and, on the other, to reinforce acceptable aspects of tradition. The metaphors are driven by a humanistic ethic.

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[25] www.sofn.org.uk
[26] http://www.sofn.org.uk/conferences/religious%20humanism.htm

Cupitt correlates the positions of Bultmann and Bonnhoeffer in this vein. Bultmann was in step with Heideggerian existentialism, a commitment to authentic living of this life. Bonhoeffer 'also stayed close to Heidegger' (Cupitt 1986:149). Bultmann refused to let the cross, the death, be overcome by the resurrection and Bonhoeffer auspiciously followed a Christ who was a loser (fully human) and 'even a God who was a loser' (ibid.) in order for humanity to take full religious responsibility. Religious humanism is action-packed and on the move. It has come to rest in restlessness (ibid: 152). 'Sea of Faith' is an expression of religious humanism, although some feel it is too logocentric and not militant enough, in fact it is not militant at all. Boulton (2002:12-13) attempted to light the fire of vision with his address to the annual conference:

> This Network has a potentially visionary, liberating view of religious faith. It has taken leave of God, for God's sake, and said goodbye to notions of supernatural authority and intervention, goodbye to pie in the sky when you die, goodbye to gods and devils, ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night. It has set to replace a kingdom of God in which we are subjects with a republic of heaven in which we are free citizens. This is its story, this is its song! I only wish we could tell it, sing it, with more confidence. Ours is a liberation theology. It sets the captive free.
>
> Boulton 2002:12-3

Clearly Boulton's reference to the republic of heaven is not a reference to the metaphysical, traditional understanding, but a metaphor that comes close to the terminology of the 'after'-life coined in this thesis. It refers to religious living in full view of finitude and mortality, and indeed, it is a republic! Boulton thinks the Networks should be more political and active, but the most important proposal he pushes for is for a strong contribution to what he identifies as the dire need for 'religious literacy' (ibid.).[27]

The difference between religious humanism and non-religious humanism is clear in the view of Nicolas Walter: 'We (that is non-religious humanists) reject the whole of religion, not just the difficult bits' (ibid.). Walter proceeds by contending that religion is simply a very long mistake. Boulton contradicts this by making a case for religious humanism, stating that it is not a good assessment to maintain that religion was just one long mistake. There is much good in it and it contains much potential for good, and, consequently, 'we make(s) free with the resources of religion in its richly

[27] In his second volume, Leaves (2005) devotes more time to assessing the potential and performance of the networks than can be done in this brief rendition.

diverse forms...we know that we made it all, so we can unmake it and remake it' (ibid.) There will be a return to this subject in the subsequent section.

5.3 Discussion of selected theological subjects

During this analysis, Cupitt's rendition of a number of subjects will be selected for consideration in some detail. Non-realism has now assumed a more inflated position. Sometimes the affinity with radical theology is more pronounced, and sometimes it is quite different from the old focus.

5.3.1 God and spirituality

At the beginning of the 1980s, when Cupitt wrote *Taking leave of God*, he was, by his own admission, a thin-line theist, a semi-realist, symbolist and liberal-critical theologian who never considered dispensing with religion, and, in that sense, it has been argued here that Cupitt is not an atheist. An atheist, amongst other things, divorces all prospects of continuation with religious thought and practice after arriving at the theological and philosophical position of opposition to theism. Atheism is not non-realism, but non-religionism. Cupitt, like all radical theologians, is philosophically and theologically opposed to theism, and is therefore a-theous, or a-theistic,[28] but nevertheless sees validity in religion and sees prospects for the reformation of religion. It does not automatically follow from this perception that there is indeed a prospect for theology, unless theology is radically remade. What, indeed, are Cupitt's views on God and theo-logy as God-talk proper?[29] Cupitt (2002:2) describes the point when he arrived at the writing of *Radicals and the future of the Church* (1989): 'Along these lines I moved during the 1980s from a rather cautious and conservative non-realism about God, towards a form of "nihilism" '.

Although Cupitt never adopted the vitriolic ferocity of Nietzsche and became an 'angry atheist', his proclamations nevertheless became trenchant in order to be clear. In 1989 he stated (1989:62): 'The credibility and even the very intelligibility of God have steadily faded away. Also, the realistic philosophical theism, the metaphysical God, the super-Being out there, was made by Plato and dies with him' (ibid.). Although Cupitt is a radical theologian who accepts the death of God and what

[28] Geering (2002:54) proposes: non-theist, which in his view includes: deists, pantheists and panentheists. Funk (2002:i) refers to a-theists, averring that Christians are no longer theists.
[29] Geering (Ibid,2) defines theology etymologically as 'talk about God'.

it means, he does not often spell it out as clearly as this: 'We can't save God because God has long been dead' (1989:82).

And yet, this is not where Cupitt's rhetoric ends. In *Radicals and the future of the church*, he underlines the historical side of God: 'I believe in an historically-evolving, human and culturally established God' (1989:65). Such an awareness of the human construction of God, in Cupitt's view, brings a sense of responsibility, '...We have now become responsible for our God' (ibid.). Cupitt firmly believes we need to face it, not fake it! Of vital importance are awareness, consciousness and responsibility. We no longer have the unconscious naiveté of the traditional believer, for instance '...Augustine's own kind of unconsciousness is unfortunately not possible' (ibid.). We have seen the light; we have been enlightened and have become aware, conscious and responsible.

Referring to the neo-conservative reversion, or regression, Cupitt maintains, 'By a truly horrible paradox, it is a deliberate sin against the light in order to regain the old innocence'(ibid.). Is Cupitt saying it is a sin to continue proclaiming the traditional theism after enlightenment and deconstruction? This is a significant inversion. Previously, sin was not to believe in God. Now, sin is continuing to believe in God after the death of God. Cupitt remarks in jest, 'A seriously postmodern definition of true religion (is): religion that makes you smarter than your god,' and, 'ever since Abraham the Jews have been smarter than their God' (Cupitt 1997a:85). This may be somewhat facetious, but it nevertheless underlines the serious view that religion is cultural, human and horizontal. A conversion is required: God must be converted to humanity, not humanity converted to God. God must be brought back to earth.[30]

The view that the old metaphysical God is dead and any God-talk that remains is about a human cultural construct has serious implications for religion and theology. The most prominent is certainly that the grand soteriological narrative, which has become untenable, can be changed or ignored. The dualism has died with the metaphysical God and 'there is therefore no condemnation'.[31] This means at least two things:

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[30] Cf John Hunt's work, *Bringing God back to earth* (2004).
[31] To employ Paul's famous words to the Romans (8:1).

- Humans are no longer born under a cloud of condemnation. There is no (real) original sin.
- Humans are truly equal. There is no 'we' and 'they'.

Humans require many things, but salvation in the old mythological sense is no longer one of them. God is no longer essential for our salvation. God does not have to save us, but in the face of this cultural revolution, it is we who need to contemplate why and how we want to save God, particularly in the face of many voices contending that it is not a good idea and logically implausible. Cupitt concedes and maintains that, 'Belief *that there is* a God is not in the old way necessary to salvation; but many of us continue to find belief *in* God helpful.' (1997a:84). Just how and why that is is another question. Why, one might ask, is it not also helpful to continue believing in a flat and fixed earth, remaining in the biblical comfort zone? Is it benign to continue believing in animism, the presence of spirit beings in our world, or the ministry, and even sporadic appearances, of angels or demons?

What should be clear from this analysis is that non-realism is radical theology. It is not merely a shift to metaphor. It is not merely putting 'God' in inverted commas and carrying on as if nothing much has changed. Everything has changed, and, although non-realism holds on to the religion as a human creation, it is anarchistic and idoloclastic, even in terms of the projection or invention of God. This is naturally an intersection where many views diversify. Where Geering for instance insists on 'Christianity without God', Spong still insists on a better picture of God. Both may be regarded as committed radical reformers, though. It remains to be seen how the theological diversion pans out in terms of ecclesiology and post-Christian perspectives.

5.3.1.1 Radical kenotic theology

Cupitt clearly regards God as myth. But this is to be construed as a good prospect because, in the old situation when myths were reified and treated like the laws of the Medes and the Persians, written in stone, as it were, we were stuck with them. They were untouchable. Cupitt is persuaded that *It is possible to correct our myths* (1989:68). What we can do, is understand the myth and find out what it stood for, as Cupitt will do in a later stage. For Cupitt, postmodernism has deepened the idea of

the death of God. It is not, as some believe, a modern *rapprochement,* a cancellation of the death of God and a return to theological and religious business as usual.

As a radical theologian, Cupitt thinks along the lines of a radical kenotic theology, which accepts the incarnation in its most radical implication, namely that God has become human. God is now dispersed into humanity. God, in a word, is a word. In *Radicals and the future of the Church,* Cupitt even proposes the possibility of a Eucharistic celebration of the radical kenosis, the becoming human of God, which is a celebration of the death of God, but not in a mournful, nihilistic spirit:

> We will picture a postmodern Eucharist as a ceremonial enactment of the death and dispersal of God. God goes out into language, that is, into humanity. He passes out into multiplicity and, dying, communicates his power and creativity to us. Thus the law comes to an end and the Gospel takes its place.[32]
>
> Cupitt1989:98

Instead of a postmodern rebirth of God, Cupitt maintains the *Renaissance* spirit of a rebirth, an empowerment of humanity. Cupitt is not persuaded that God is good, not in a first naiveté, or a second. It maintains heteronomy, resists autonomy, which in Cupitt's case, as it was with Bonnhoeffer, spells human immaturity and irresponsibility. No-one can be happy and functioning well if they are not allowed to grow up and become independent of parental control. Although precarious, it is necessary.

5.3.1.2 Worship and feudalism

Cupitt therefore criticises traditional worship which still maintains and glorifies the lord-slave relation of feudalism: 'The old feudalism still dominates theology, worship, prayer and patterns of organization' (1989:97). Cupitt disagrees that it is benign, innocent and completely harmless. He reminds us that we are in a world of signs, images and icons and in a mediascape-society where icons can have immense power and do a lot of damage. Even a new 'fictional realism' can be dangerous. It is important to get the image right. Image, these days, is everything. Again, he sounds an iconoclastic note when he suggests: 'They should be purged...we must try to

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[32] Although Cupitt seems to fall silent on this Death of God-Eucharistic proposal, he later develops the dispensational suggestion further, namely that traditional Christianity has become the new Old Testament and that the 'Kingdom' has come in the form of post-Christian society and the church should recognise and make room for it. He receives considerable support in this regard from Lloyd Geering.

expel these relics of a very ugly past' (ibid.), and he reiterates his radical kenotic theology that God must be dispersed into the people (ibid.). In the review of some critical concourses in the subsequent chapter there will be a link-up with this trajectory, with the views of Daphne Hampson.

So, although Cupitt confesses that he still sometimes talks to God, it seems he is quite serious about the image we have of God. It does sound a bit confusing, however. And realistically, if God is now a human creation, it implies that all worship is now tantamount to idol worship anyway. Given the media-cratic nature of postmodern society, it is significant to observe how pervasive 'religious' worship has become in pop culture.[33] The postmodern media have no qualms about creating the most elaborate pantheon of pop idols whom the masses adore, revere and worship, bestowing honour upon them and providing them with 'gold frankincense and myrrh', fitting their opulent life-styles. It is the 'believers' and the 'worshippers' who provide for them, in gratitude for and recognition of the gifts of pleasure and entertainment that these idols provide. This merely underlines the human religious requirement and the myth-making aspect of human psychology and culture.

5.3.1.3 The mighty metaphor

Conversely and rather ambivalently, Cupitt (1989) does seem to think it is benign to picture God as metaphor and myth. He 'confesses' that he often drops back into the old type of God-consciousness:

> And why not? I actually think I love God more, now that I know God is voluntary. I still pray and love God, even though I fully acknowledge that no God actually exists. Perhaps God had to die in order to purify our love for him...I am seriously suggesting that one can still love God after the death of God.
>
> Cupitt 1997a:85

Of course, it should be understood that this God is metaphorical and not metaphysical (real). There is a big difference between the literal and the literary, between the old ontological realism and the new fictional realism. God is in a sense restored to what he was when he was invented, myth, and a poetic conjecture.[34]

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[33] It has long been recognised that the devotion to icons like Elvis Presley are religious in nature. With the realisation that all worship is idol worship, this observation takes on a new significance.

[34] Although when constructing the pre-crisis metro map stations, Cupitt contended that pure mythical 'reality' is no longer possible to moderns.

Leaves (2004:58) seems to concur, explaining, 'Whereas the realist insists on a highest Truth that must be *beyond narrative and timeless* (emphasis added), Cupitt and anti-realists bring a multiplicity of truths down to earth'. If something is not real, it is often good writing practice, although not required absolutely, to indicate the fact with the use of inverted commas suggesting the use of figurative speech. Maybe the post-realist position could be indicated by writing 'God', or even lower case, god. The important aspect in this regard is the realisation that God has become historical and therefore equivocal. God, as the author of life, has himself become authored. God, it is now realised, never was anything other than a metaphor, created by the religious subject, which is humanity as a tool-making, myth-making, story-telling clever animal.

However mighty the metaphor, metaphors are considerably less dangerous and damaging when they are consciously regarded as such. When we ask a metaphor to intervene or come to the rescue, our modern worldview remains intact. We mean symbolically that we hope for a solution to be found (by us). We do not realistically expect God to come down in power. Such realism is now borderline pathological.[35]

This aspect of non-realism is problematic in terms of its ongoing conflict potential with fundamentalists, but it is highly liberating as well, representing the clearing-up and the coming of consciousness, awareness and the responsibility associated with religious literacy.

5.3.1.4 Bounced-off consciousness

Cupitt (1997a:83), exercising free, expressionistic, voluntarism, experimentally invents a God-metaphor, the 'Eye of God', to help with transitional post-realist religious consciousness and conscience: 'To believe in God is to live ***as if*** under the eye of God, and to assess oneself and one's world as from the standpoint of eternity' (emphasis added). Of course eternity, also, does not mean what it used to mean. It is an attitude and a quality with which we approach life. Cupitt also refers to this construct as a 'bounced off' kind of consciousness (ibid).

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[35] And in all probability Theissen (1979), who, as liberal scholar, 'found' that religion was not pathological, but benign and perfectly human, would probably agree. Marx, Freud and Nietzsche wouldn't!

Cupitt (ibid.) realises the mystical quality of this proposal and acknowledges debt to Meister Eckhart, who famously said that the eye with which we view God is the same eye with which God looks at us. He also acknowledges some indebtedness to Kant, Kierkegaard and even Wittgenstein in this regard. It leads us to give up the old objective God. The relatedness to Jung, as opposed to Freud, should also be noted. In this relationship with God there are not two persons. It is a form of self-consciousness, self-talk. This retrieved view of God leads us entirely to ourselves. It is humanistic. This is a major tenet of Cupitt's preconditions. It has all become overtly human. The importance lies in the description *as if*. This indicates it is constructed, it is mundane and it is done with consciousness.

God was created in the first place to empower humans. Unfortunately the project developed into a slavery from which it is very difficult to break free. Cupitt, recognising the innate need for empowering myth-making, even in the creation of the self-image, attempts to provide a transitional, empowering and benign God-consciousness. It is however fully non-real. There is no trace of ontotheology. It is all as fictional as Father Christmas.

Cupitt has trodden on precarious terrain in borrowing the analogy of the bounced-off female consciousness for the construction of his 'bounced-off' God-consciousness. He expressed the view that women are often accustomed to seeing themselves from the male point of view. That is not particularly the case with men. Cupitt acknowledges that humanists and feminists are quite critical of his construct. They steadfastly maintain that 'it is better to throw off subjection and try to achieve a genuinely autonomous self-consciousness' (1997a:84). Nevertheless, Cupitt's point is that we can create a benign God-consciousness while it is still required. It is, however, neither pathological, as Freud seems to have suggested, nor is it necessary for human psychology, as secular humans such as Dawkins, to name but one, suggest.

5.3.1.5 The discipline of the void

The 'after'-life can only be realised by facing the crisis frankly and by going through the fire of Feuerbach, who first put forward the thesis of God as a human projection. Between the past and the future lies the metaphorical desert, comprised of wondering, wandering, fear, frustration, agony and uncertainty. We have to face the abject, the chill of nihilism, of the void. For a committed realist believer to make this

transition it is like passing through the valley of the shadow of death and god-forsakenness[36] *en route* to a new independent view. Cupitt is persuaded that we need to kick away the ladder and let go of 'all fixed points of realism' (Leaves 2004:31). As the old eternal life myth was accessible only after death, so the 'eternal' of our '*after*'*-life* can be reached only through the death of God, by facing the God-shaped void that Pascal so dreaded. In traditional theology, the New Testament started with the requirement of the *via crucis* for the 'vicar' of humanity, and so this new 'New Testament' can be reached only through death to, and of, the old system. It must again be possible to say with conviction: 'Old things have passed away, it has all become new'.[37]

What is peculiar to radical theology, and to Cupitt, is that they are prepared to let go of God, but to hold on to religion.[38] The question, however, is what sort of religion can be constructed and on what principles? There was a *eureka*-moment for Cupitt early in the 1990s when he suddenly realised that there is joy in facing the void. Facing nihilism is not tantamount to never-ending melancholy. If, in the place of God, there is no-thing, it does not have to be filled up with a surrogate. The void, instead of remaining a menacing black hole, turns into a womb out of which the joy of a new life can flow.[39] Picking up on Plato's cave and the confinement metaphor, Cupitt (Leaves 2004:53) grasped that an outsideless prison is no prison at all. We don't have to mourn the loss of the leap and the loss of the loft. It is quite simply residually platonic to think of life in nostalgic, derogatory terms.[40]

Cupitt applies his postmodern, post-realist hermeneutic to the narrative of Jesus and constructs an analogy: Like Jesus, who faced the abject, who looked into the *nihil,* went through with it and died happily, we need to embrace our finite mortality blissfully. 'Dying with Christ in the practice of religion, we go into the Nihil with him. We die before death' (Leaves 2004:54).

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[36] The cry of dereliction, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me' expresses a similar feeling, although with this crisis the feeling of guilt and remorse akin to Judas' agony is combined.
[37] Once again employing a hermeneutic of the 'after'-life to the words of Paul (2 Cor. 5:17).
[38] Leaves (2005:99) refers to the objection by realists that non-realists are 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. He concedes and quips that non-realists are quite happy to throw out the baby and keep the bathwater! He is persuaded that religion no longer requires a referent.
[39] Karen Armstrong (2004) has strikingly described her own struggle with a turning and turning again, (based on T.S.Eliot's poem *Ash-Wednesday*), as a narrow spiral staircase and an arduous climb towards the light.
[40] This is, of course, what Nietzsche was so adamant about, not tolerating any life-denying attitude. Idealists like Hegel and Marx, of course, were also persuaded about the finality and finitude of life, but they subjected it to several strong presuppositions and provisos and were, in Cupitt's parlance, guilty of long-termism. Cupitt and Nietzsche are radically short-termistic.

Cupitt (1997a:88) therefore depicts the void in positive terms, referring to it as the 'blissful void' and the 'cool sublime'.[41] He takes this 'conversion' experience a step further when he suggests that this is a good starting point for postmodern prayer. It can be used as a form of meditation; even talking to 'God'. This of course is like talking to an imagined other, or like talking to a deceased loved one. Indeed, Cupitt draws attention to the phenomenon of people talking to tombstones as if their loved one were able to hear. Of course, he avers, few modern people would agree that they are *actually* talking to the departed. Nevertheless, spending time at the grave of a loved one is undeniably a religious experience, and can be maximised for its therapeutic value: 'The discipline of the void' can be of great therapeutic value' (Cupitt 1997a:87). In more or less the same vein he refers to Kierkegaard, who said that 'the love we feel for the dead is the most purely unselfish of all our loves' (1997a:86). The (religio-psycho-therapeutic) goal is to tip the subject into empty space. It is like crossing over into sleep, into a kind of unconscious consciousness. The discipline of the void does not, however, necessarily require (traditional) religious input. It can be fully secular, a form of relaxation. Worship should be therapeutic and relaxing.[42] Although it is about spirit, it is a grounded; it is basically body.

Ironically, Cupitt reminds us, Nietzsche referred to the churches as 'graves of God' and Cupitt remarks that it clearly did not occur to Nietzsche that a century later people would go to these 'graves' to talk to God (ibid.). Cupitt says the 'marker—gravestone, altar, or whatever—makes us talk, and thereby acts as midwife of truth' (ibid.).[43]

Cupitt refers to the goal of the discipline of the void as 'the disappearance of the self into immanence, objectivity and nothingness' (ibid.). The approach he adopts is blissful embrace of the space where God once sat, emptying the self into the ineffable, which reintroduces, in a new way, the apophatic tradition Cupitt set out with in the1970s.[44] There is, of course, much in the Christian tradition and in the

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[41] Kant construed it as a victory of our own rationality, pride in our own rationality. We overcome the void through reason. Cupitt criticises that and moves past Kant in this regard. Cupitt (1997a:88) refers to the art of Barnett Newman and the philosophy of Mark C. Taylor, which boils down to the sublime not being overcome but embraced.

[42] Stephen Mitchell, expressing a panentheistic (semi-realist?) view, recently proposed that we can relax in the everywhere presence of God, like taking a bath: *God in the Bath* (2006).

[43] It is also interesting in this regard to note the new habit of placing flowers at or in the proximity of a death and the writing of cards addressed to the deceased. A prime example is the outpouring of public grief at the death of Diana, Princess of Wales.

[44] This semi-realist position is the theological basis for Cupitt's book *Christ and the hiddenness of God* (1971).

other two biblical faiths, Judaism and Islam, that can be used on the way to arriving at a view of God as nothing and to lovingly embrace the 'nothing', as Karen Armstrong has quite ably executed.[45]

The close proximity of Cupitt's non-realism and nihilism should be noted here. Unlike his mentor, Nietzsche, Cupitt has developed a religious embrace of nihilism. It is not a god-shaped void; it is just a void that is unavoidable. Emptiness can be lightening as well as enlightening. In neo-Nietzschean style Cupitt will attempt to reconstruct a religion of life. It runs close Nietzsche and the existentialists, but it also runs due east to Buddhism and the apophatic trajectories that can be detected in all three of the Abrahamic religions as well.

5.3.1.6 Non-noetic mysticism

After leaving the apophatic tradition, during which time he was a liberal theologian and a semi-realist, Cupitt returns twenty-six years later for a brief visit in *Mysticism after modernity* (1997), which, in Leaves' scheme, brings his vibrant expressionistic stage to a close. It is, however, a much more enlightened and mature account than his previous engagement with the trajectory.

'Platonic' mysticism was *noetic* (Leaves 2004:75), part of the old metaphysical epistemology, it was perceived as a special kind of knowing, of finding out. With the end of metaphysics however, this 'knowing' is no longer a compelling option. Indeed with the loss of dualism it becomes nonsensical. Cupitt therefore argues for a non-noetic, post-epistemological mysticism, a 'mysticism of secondariness' (ibid.). It is mysticism minus metaphysics, minus any notion of a primary, privileged claim. It is a meditative mysticism that is only skin-deep, but Cupitt thinks it is significant: 'Why shouldn't we just give up the idea that there's something wrong with being secondary and fleeting?' (Leaves 2004:76). It is therefore a 'shallow', secondary, but nevertheless refreshing religious mysticism that Cupitt proposes on his second visit after almost three decades of absence.

What Cupitt finds profound in the mystical tradition is the unity between the believer and the divine. The mystic, when achieving union, becomes the object of his meditation. It teaches deification in a roundabout sort of way, which is what has landed mysticism in trouble with church authorities through the ages. Cupitt thinks its time may finally have come (Leaves 2004:76).

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[45] *The history of God* (1993).

> The mystical writer tries to deconstruct the gulf between god and the individual human being in order to overcome theological realism, unite the believer with God, and produce an effect of supreme happiness and liberation. It is of course because non-realist religion is such a wonderful release from realist religion that the church fears it, and has so often persecuted the mystics. For the church has always been a disciplinary organization that aims, not to fuse the divine and the human together, but to keep them apart for the sake of social control.
>
> Cupitt 2002:4

Cupitt's postmodern deconstructive approach and sensitivity to power discourse prevalent in traditional, religious grand narratives should be evident from this citation. Here we see aspects of prayer in the 'after'-life. It is talking to an imagined other, as in a grave stone or an empty church. It is meditating within an empty church, focusing on the void and emptying oneself in the process. It is a process of rest and relaxation that is refreshing. It is a process of losing and finding that leaves the individual literally full of emptiness. It is this lightening of the load that is a good prospect. However, it must never be a lightening of responsibility. This non-realist prayer perspective provides good correctional prospect for some of the immature and irresponsible aspects associated with mediated, heteronomous realism.

5.3.1.7 Borrowing from Buddhism

Cupitt's *penchant* for the apophatic led him to be very interested in and impressed with Buddhism,[46] mainly because it is probably the template for a religion without God (Leaves 2004: 60). Enlightenment, in Buddhist terms, is not constituted by finding God, but rather the opposite. When the individual finds enlightenment, she finds herself. Dialectically this means losing oneself, because the *Dharma* of *Anatta* (no self) is central to Buddhism, and is regarded by Cupitt as probably the only true religious proposition, one which is *just true*. Buddhism's view of the self is of a constellation of energies that are passing away (Leaves 2004:114).

Although Cupitt feels comfortable borrowing from Buddhism, he cannot see himself camping there for very long. Buddhism is obviously not a modern religion, and Cupitt feels that, as it still denies 'both the truth of outsidelessness and the priority of language', (ibid: 61) it is unpalatable to him. There is also too much of an 'ethic for the retired' (ibid.). Cupitt, who regards himself as a 'semi-detached church

[46] Apart from many references in various of his works, Cupitt devotes *Emptiness and Brightness* (2001) to Buddhist dialogue as part of his 'Stage Seven' entitled by Leaves: *The Religion of the Future*. Works of this period are: *Philosophy's own Religion* (2000); *Reforming Christianity* (2001); *Emptiness and Brightness* (2001); *Is Nothing Sacred?* (2002); *Life Life* (2003) (Leaves 2004:3).

member, can at best also be a kind of semi-Buddhist, 'taking what he wants from it and raiding other traditions for his religion without God' (ibid.).

Cupitt concurs with scholars like Geering and Armstrong that the first Axial Age, during which the foundations for society was laid by the emergence of the world religions, is now (being) superseded by the Second Axial Age, which requires new religious (artistic) expression. What makes this peculiar and precarious is the perception that the new 'foundation' is precisely non-foundational. Whereas the first Axial Age was served by founders, great teachers and immortal inspirers like Mohammed, Jesus and the Buddha, this age is characterised by the absence of 'immortal' teachers. 'There is no leader (including Cupitt himself) to unveil mysteries or guide the mass of people in a spiritual direction...there are no foundations, only stories that are about everything and nothing at the same time!' (Leaves 2004:108).

Non-realism in post-modern perspective is deconstructive of the discourse embedded in the narratives, particularly the meta-narratives employed by visionaries and redeemers. It is anarchistic when it comes to strong leaders, and, like Nietzsche, is against the will to power of feigned weakness. Deconstructionism reveals the discourse in humility as well. If this is the case, it makes for a strange platform for Christianity, and particularly for the church, which depends on power-talk and controlling meta-narratives. It is also highly deconstructive of doctrine. This 'inflation' of non-realism appears menacing to the future of the church in its organised form.

5.3.2 Radical ecclesiology

This brings the analysis to an important, though difficult, aspect of religious reform, namely the relationship between the religion of radicals and the church-religion. As was the case with the radicals in the 16th century, radical agendas elicit concern, unease and turmoil. Reformations are revolutionary, bringing tumultuous times. There is no birth without pain.

5.3.2.1 Friction and fraternity

The following concerns were first articulated by Cupitt in the book in which he set out to address the practical problem of radical non-realists and their relationship to the church.[47] Cupitt was still an officiating priest[48] of the Church of England, as were

[47] The frequently-cited *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (1989) is a very important work, as it is poised at a very auspicious point, not only in Cupitt's development, but also in scholarship and society

many others who had become his 'disciples'.

Two related questions demand attention. The first is that of the radicals and their relationship to the traditional church. The second is the greater question of the prospects of radical church reform. There is no doubt that the paradigm shift in worldview leaves radicals ill at ease in the church. For them, there is the ongoing collision of two worlds. The problem, sensed and voiced by Bishop Robinson in the early 1960s, has not really disappeared, but remains, aggravated by the recent surge in evangelicalism and neo-conservatism emanating from America. On the other hand, there is evidence of impatience, even intolerance of radicals from the traditionalists, which is now exacerbated by a new postmodern 'radical' orthodoxy. This is visible in, for instance, the position of Brian Hebblethwaite, who believes radicals are merely atheists who do not belong in the church. He feels that radical ministers should be expelled from the fold:

> The Christian Church commissions its ministers to testify to the objective reality of God and to transmit the Gospel of the Incarnation. The Church is bound therefore to require of its ministers sincere faith in God.
>
> Leaves 2004:45

'How can we put up with atheists in our midst?' seems to be the question here, while that articulated by the other side is: 'How can the church function and be reformed in a postmodern era?' (Cupitt 1989:76). The problem is not posed by postmodernism alone. At the beginning of the decade, Cupitt drew attention to the change within all social institutions, which is the mark of modernity in general. The main feature is that institutions have become democratic and humanistic, that is, horizontal. The old vertical institutions, of which the monarchy and feudalism are the prime examples, have fallen into disrepute and have become obsolete. The church at root is vertical, a result of the 'marriage' to Plato. This is part of the question for radicals. Can the church, as an old institution, change radically? It is clearly struggling, and has been

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in general. The 1980s were drawing to a close and the last decade of the century was being ushered in. It is hardly a surprise to find many new directions in thought emerging and several important turns taking place. This is the time when Cupitt's anti-realism and theological non-realism, and the marriage with postmodernism came of age and he was confident enough to address practical issues of theology and church. It was 'crunch time', time for reflection. The next year Cupitt plunged himself into the creative re-invention known as his expressionism.

[48] Cupitt stopped officiating only after 1991, although he remains a communicant, even as we speak (Cupitt 2002:3).

ever since the birth of modernity. It is not only postmodernism that poses the problem, although in the radical view it is an exacerbating factor.[49]

At the time of *Radicals and the future of the Church* Cupitt was fully convinced on the one hand that radicals had a place and a future in the church, while on the other hand he thought the church as an institution could be reformed. He believed that the Christian tradition gave enough scope to make a historical case for change towards a fully non-realist actualisation.

Cupitt has never been persuaded about the prospect of creating a new and rival denomination. 'We should be content to stay', he says, although contentment is not an apt expression. Ambivalence and discontent show through when Cupitt adds a belligerent note, admonishing, 'Stay and fight' (1989:122). The mitigation of his optimism is clear in his ambiguity, only some forty pages later: 'In the medium term—perhaps a few generations ahead—we may imagine a Reformed faith' (1989:168). A reformed faith or a reformed church? These questions will be reconsidered in due course, after some root-remonstrations have been depicted in 'Reformation' style.

5.3.2.2 Rudimentary remonstrative theses

It is necessary to express what radicals deem to be radically wrong.

a) The vertical axis still dominates

Although the modern worldview is accepted as a duality, the old metaphysical worldview still tends to dominate. It remains Platonic, giving preference to other worldly Truth, the reality of the beyond dictating to this 'vale of tears'. This scenario is bolstered by doctrinal enshrinement. Both the Book and the credal dogmatic edifice erected upon it remain pre-eminent.

b) Questioning the Book base

Luther and the reformers executed a *tour de force* with their *sola scriptura* stand, whereby power was shifted from the ecclesiastical powerhouse to the people. The reformation was powered by the Book. Cupitt will obviously touch a very ancient and sensitive nerve when he seems to suggest a further empowerment, this time away from the dependence on the Book. Of course, liberal scholars, with their focus on history, have been doing this covertly for centuries. Cupitt is of the opinion that the

[49] In the Chapter Four the views of some who hold a contrary view regarding the postmodernism will be presented.

narrowly-focused Book-religion is untenable: 'People no longer live by an ancient literary work that is difficult to interpret', and he will not win many friends when he adds: 'Fundamentalists are as ignorant of the Bible as anybody else' (1989:170).

At the very least, a non-literalist hermeneutic is required. The church should simply give up its supernaturalism (Cupitt 1989:76). It seems appropriate, therefore, to conclude that, where liberal, contextualist critical methods have been practised for at least two centuries, the Bible should now be decentred from its position as the focus of the Protestant reformation and we should proceed to more trenchant criticism of its worldview, ethic and religion. In the new reformation, the Bible cannot be the centre of focus, rather the opposite. This view represents more than a mere critique or demythologisation, or a non-realist metaphorical approach. It is the elevated position of the Bible itself that should become non-real. The new reformation has therefore to undo much of what the first Reformation did. In this respect, the new reformation has been going on since the dawning of modernity.

c) The patriarchal mirror image is problematic

In spite of laudable concessions to women, the church by and large is still animated by its patriarchal structure, which runs all the way down the vertical authoritarian axis from the masculine father figure above. Cupitt gives us a reminder of the importance of image and icons in our postmodern age. It is important to get the image right. The church is the mirror image of its masculine god-image and the power vested in that image is wielded quite vehemently, even today. This marriage of power is essentially problematic.

Although God is also portrayed as the loving father, this benign image turns malignant in the deconstruction of the qualification, 'who gave his only-begotten son'. A loving father who finds it necessary and acceptable to subject his dearly beloved to inhumane and degrading torture is becoming ethically more problematic and unacceptable. People cringe at the thought. The bloody, vengeful basis of God's 'love' has been exposed. The picture is of course very old, but it has outlived its shelf life. The agapeic community should be humane through and through, it is felt. A simple non-realism in this case, will not suffice. The myth must be repudiated and refashioned.

d) The authoritarian structure remains

In spite of Jesus' subversive 'kingdom' teaching to the contrary, namely of an egalitarian society of friends, the church remains attached to its authoritarian structure, wielding considerable power over the *laos*. This is despite the power that has historically shifted dramatically to the people. Traditional ecclesiastical authority requires brokerage. It is mediated and hierarchical, whereas Jesus '...announced...the brokerless kingdom of God (Crossan 1991:422),[50] 'immediate, non-hierarchical and egalitarian' (Leaves 2004:8).

The requirement is that the church should yield its authoritarian structure. Cupitt is not even persuaded that a congregation is necessary. A congregation needs structure, authority, power and rules. This is not what he has in mind. Cupitt points to the East, where religions do not have congregations in the Western sense, but temples are places of inspiration and solace for people to visit. This is an interesting amelioration of Kierkegaardian existentialism with an Eastern flavouring.

e) Radical kenotic theology applied ecclesiologically

Cupitt seems to insist that what we have described here as his *radical kenotic theology* be applied radically to ecclesiology. Cupitt, who believes that God has dispersed himself and also accepts the dispersal of the self, is pushing for the dispersal of the church. This is where he sounds a note of scepticism and his radical ecclesiology seems to crack. He is not persuaded that the church will or could disperse itself in terms of its structure (Cupitt 1989:70). The problem is that the church seems to be inextricably entwined with power, married to it. For the same reason, Cupitt is sceptical of founding new structures, because they have to assert power to make their stand. Cupitt (1989:84) reminds us that knowledge is always about power anyway: 'Knowledge is *mastery.*' The question seems to be: To what extent can the church *yield* its power instead of *wielding* it? Will the church be willing and able to yield on its doctrinal powerhouse? Will it be willing and able to soften its God-image, thereby softening itself? Contrary conservative voices continue to call for more power from on high, with the obvious corollary of wielding it crusader-fashion on earth.

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[50] Impressive work in this regard was done by J.D.Crossan (1991) in *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant.*

The result of such questions is the radical requirement that the church should effectively abdicate from its position as a divine society (Cupitt 1989:76) and become radically and fully human, present and earthly. It is therefore not entirely certain whether the new reformation in Cupittian sense includes the church in its institutionalised form. This is particularly in the light of the following emphasis.

5.3.2.3 Basilea versus ecclesia: radical eschatology

Here we border on what might be perceived as Cupitt's radical eschatology, although he does not often depict it in those terms. Cupitt has nothing to say for and about traditional eschatology. However, what he says about kingdom and 'after history' and 'post-Christian' may be construed in eschatological terms:

> ...our postmodern age is Christian and eschatological in that *we* find ourselves living in a strange open-textured period after the end period, after history and the Law, and therefore after the death of the old Almighty One who formerly concentrated and absorbed all power into himself.
>
> Cupitt 1989:99

Illuminating in this citation is Cupitt's use of postmodern 'after' terms and also, the sense of period. Postmodernism is associated with the perception of an end of history and this, of course, in traditional theological terms is eschatological. This is when church expected to make way for the long-awaited kingdom. It is notable that because there are no metaphysics in the old sense, there can also not be any traditional *parousia.* The descent of the man from heaven is replaced by the ascent of the man from below, that is, the emergence of emancipated humanity. 'We are emancipated because we are not stuck with any ready-made destiny, indeed (as mentioned above)...all the *grands récits*, the grand narratives, have passed away...this is the real Age of Grace, after history (Cupitt 1989:99).

Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom, but, instead, we got the church. The brief of the church was always to be a bridge, an interim arrangement and the understanding was always that when the kingdom comes, the church goes. This is more or less the train of thought Cupitt started to express in the1990s. As his non-realism inflated and his vision accrued, it seems that he lost more and more faith in the prospect of institutional reform. This was exacerbated (or enriched) by a new trajectory appearing at the time, namely, the sense that general culture of post-Christian society had absorbed and now owned much of what had formerly been

important values located in ecclesiastical Christianity.[51] It is possible to relate this important new insight back to the trajectory of radical kenosis: 'God has brought history to an end by dying, by giving himself to us, by returning his power of defining reality into *us*' (Cupitt 1989:99).

In *After all: religion without alienation* (1994), Cupitt begins to speak of post-Christianity, and, four years later, a decade after *Radicals* (1989), he explains: 'Why are we beginning to use the term 'post-Christianity? Because we are now settling down into our new postmodern condition' (1998:218). Was Cupitt now getting ready to 'take leave' of the church? The fact is that he remains a member of the Church of England, even to the present moment, which is rather puzzling. Anthony Freeman (2007:17) writes, in a review of *The old creed and the new*, about Cupitt's palpable ambivalence on the issue. The one moment Cupitt soars with the eagles in solar bliss, far removed from ecclesiastical anchorage and the next moment he assumes continued allegiance to the ecclesiastical institution. 'What I do see in it is evidence of his unwillingness to disown either his Christian past or his Christian allegiance', Freeman concludes (ibid.).[52]

Although still ambivalent, it seems that Cupitt is not comfortable reconciling non-realism, postmodernism and institutionalised Christianity. How can postmodernism be interpreted in terms of post-Christianity? Does it mean post-institutional? 'The main idea is that we now need to move beyond the ecclesiastical version of Christianity that we have known hitherto' (2002:3). Cupitt substantiates this by listing the problems under discussion here:

- the strong authority structure
- the disciplinary system
- the lingering supernatural doctrine
- the extant orientation towards life after death and/or the Second Coming of Christ.

'In all these respects, it is now historically obsolete (ibid.). (Emphasis added)

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[51] Geering (2004:16-17;49-51) makes a strong case that secular modernity is Christianity's child and that it is a responsibility of both Christianity and secular society to honour the relationship. God and Christian values have become secularised. He agrees with Cupitt on the radical incarnation: the humanisation of God.

[52] We have already noted that Cupitt regards himself as a semi-detached church member and a semi-Buddhist. This aspect of Cupitt is what can be called his 'not quite' trait.

In the mid-1990s (1994), Cupitt began to speak about the end of the sacerdotal, other worldly, extraordinary, supernatural Christianity and proclaims the arrival of a religion fully at home in this world, at home with ordinariness. He contends that 'organised religion—that is *alienated* religion—seems no longer to be needed' (1994:5). So it would appear that inflated post-modern, active, expressionistic non-realism leaves little scope for Christianity in its traditional, and particularly its structural form, at least as far as Cupitt is concerned.

This seems to free him to let the church be, and allows him to arrive (1994) at a *rapprochement* regarding his earlier position, defended in *Radicals* (1989):

> It was too paradoxical of me to suggest that the church should move out of her old and now decaying world-picture, and learn instead to live by a non-realist interpretation of her faith...ecclesiastical Christianity is realistic by definition. Talk about the end of realism is in effect talk about the end of ecclesiastical Christianity and the arrival of post-Christianity. One would scarcely expect church leaders to be enthusiastic about that.
>
> Cupitt 1994:10

In *Reforming Christianity* (2001a), Cupitt's anarchistic antagonism against the ecclesiastical form of Christianity is even more pronounced, although it does not eradicate the ambivalence:

> We do not propose church reform, holding it to be impossible for two reasons: the first is that the internal power structure and the group dynamics of the church combine to ensure that the Church will always successfully resist reform to the bitter end... And the second reason why there cannot be a liberal reformation is that the intellectual breakdown of theology has now gone so far that there is no prospect of liberal theology being once again able to set out an intellectually respectable core syllabus or religious belief.
>
> Cupitt 2001a:79-80.

So it would seem that Cupitt has lost faith, not only in the church as an institution, but what is even more serious, in his own non-realism as a viable prospect for church reform. Is it the case that Cupitt has lost enthusiasm for the protracted and acrimonious defense of the position, or is it that the position itself is no longer convincing? Also, is it the case that ecclesiastical Christianity cannot be reformed along non-realist lines, or that the traditional version of ecclesiastical Christianity cannot be reformed because of the staunch defense of its orthodox custodians? Why does Cupitt not consider the possibility of a new denomination? If the problem lies with inflexible leaders, surely the route of the former Protestant reformation could be repeated? In that instance, the old institution could not fathom the formation of the

new, and, without the unwavering tenacity of the reformers, Protestantism would never have been born. This line of questioning will be taken up again in due course.

It seems, therefore, that Cupitt is persuaded that the church is in bondage to the old sacerdotal system and cannot be reformed, at least not from the *radix,* as radically as Cupitt proposes. He develops his alternative vision of a 'kingdom' religion with the general criteria of (1994:11):

- grown-up
- open-air
- free-moving.

Nevertheless, as indicated above, the ambivalence and ambiguity linger on, evident in statements like: '...the Church is still the necessary theatre; partly because the church is still the best public space or theatre in which to proclaim and test out new initiatives in lifestyle and spirituality; and partly because the church, despite itself, still carries deeply buried in its memory the necessary concepts for explaining and interpreting Kingdom religion' (2001a:85).

The subject of reform will be considered later, but there should now be a cursory but necessary glance at the matter of ethics and morality. What prospects and problems does non-realism entail in this context? Clearly, the question is that, should the Bible base be relativised, would this not lead to ethical chaos?[53]

5.3.3 Ethics and morality

Cupitt is a consistent non-realist, also in terms of ethics. There is no metaphysical revealed ethics. It is contingent, mythical, horizontal, made-up and therefore 'only human'. '... [I]t is, all of it, purely contingent. None of it is objectively sacrosanct. We made it all' (Cupitt 1989:65).

5.3.3.1 Morality is made-up

The Nietzschean reference should be clear. Modern Western society, existentialist philosophy and postmodernism are extensively influenced by Nietzsche, who is as anarchistic in terms of ethics as he is in terms of knowledge and meaning. There is

[53] Leaves has devoted much space and care to this topic (2005:13-72).

no moral order. The cosmos contains no moral order. There is no purpose or design. We invented them, as well as our ways of making sense of it all. Cupitt, also neo-Nietzschean in ethics, contends: 'We have got to put in the ethics' (Leaves 2004:114). 'Morality has to be continually reinvented and projected like art' (ibid.). It is not imported from an objective plain, from a loft. It is mundane, 'human, all too human' (ibid).[54]

5.3.3.2 Solar living and solar ethics

Cupitt employs the metaphor of the sun to construct his solar (kingdom), expressionistic lifestyle. The sun lives by dying brilliantly. The thermonuclear burning that is the sun's life is dying identically (1998:230). There is a union between 'vitality and mortality' (ibid.). Cupitt proposes that his 'solar ethics' brings 'death forward into life, thereby making the Good immediately accessible' (ibid.).

This, Cupitt contends, is where his 'solar ethics' departs from existentialism. In the latter, authentic freedom establishes and realises the self, but the former is losing oneself in life, total immersion into the stream of life, expending ourselves brilliantly and happily. It is not about finding one's real self, but finding real life in our loss.

Nietzsche in *The Anti-Christ* (1988) speaks favourably about Jesus as a teacher of a solar ethic,[55] whose death was a solar death (Cupitt 1998:230). Cupitt agrees with Nietzsche, and continues in radical theological vein when he says, 'Solar believers venerate a Jesus who went freely into death and stays dead' (ibid: 231). The overcoming of death, the triumphant Christology, which led to divine authority and a top-down morality, is unacceptable. Here we see that it is not only a case of non-realism in ethics, but indeed a new-ethic in action.

After Christology, and after the death of God, death is now dead. It has lost its significance as a door to eternal life. This has, in fact, been moved back into history, as the death of God. Traditional Christology, although it claims the triumph over death and access to eternal life beyond death's door, has done the collateral damage of rendering this life a mere shadow of the life to come, a pilgrimage and a

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[54] An obvious allusion to the title of Nietzsche's 1879 work *Menschlich, Alzumenschlich,* about his disillusionment with Wagner.

[55] In Nietzsche's language, Paul taught slave morality, while Jesus had taught master morality (Jackson 2001:68).

preamble at best.[56] This is not so much about non-realist interpretation, as it is about a postmodern ethical deconstruction of the Christological-soteriological narrative.

Regarding morality, personal ethics, Cupitt avers: 'The best way to "justify morality" is to give up the whole way of thinking that needs to look for some extrinsic justification of morality' (Cupitt 1989:231). The problem is that we can no longer 'look back, look up, or look forward' (ibid). This is in harmony with the loss of the loft and Cupitt's postmodern mantra of outsidelessness; life has no outside. We therefore learn life by plunging into it. Cupitt (1989:68) draws a correlation between aesthetics, ethics and religious devotion to life. A religious life is a dedicated life, dedicated to living. The emphasis on emancipation, autonomy and maturity seems evident. If it is not existentialism, it is, however, a very close relative.

5.3.3.3 Ethics, the engine of reform

Radically and controversially, Cupitt portrayed the new ethics now evident in secular modern culture as a means of deconstructing ecclesiastical ethics that is forever lagging behind because of the doctrinal drag. Cupitt sees this as part of the 'stay and fight' policy advocated in *Radicals and the future of the Church* (1989). He depicts ethics as 'our Trojan horse' (1989:127): 'The task of the critical theologian and moralist is to put up a redevelopment proposal, *a scheme for reform* (emphasis added) (ibid: 68). Cupitt believes the new ethic, which is open, public and connected with the media, which wields considerable power, is a powerful tool for eroding the old doctrinal power base: 'The new ethic to which the church is committed must in time erode away and destroy her old theology.' (ibid:131).

The optimism for reform is clear. A critical question might be that, if what we have described as doctrinal drag, coupled with authoritarian orthodoxy is formidable, why not simply get up and go? Why not select a different concourse and take off on a different route? There are a few on offer, but the option suggested here is one that seems a subject strangely taboo to Cupitt, namely, a new church. 'Stay and fight' is certainly a valiant choice for some, but if modernity and postmodernity are the epitome of freedom of choice, why can the church not be re-imagined and re-formed far away from the wreckage of its old frame. If it is about empowerment and democracy and even about mediascape, why should the new church not compete for

[56] 'Only one life. It will soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last,' - the sentiment of a pietistic wall plaque the present author remembers from his youth.

a 'place in the sun'? This way, it would provide an option, another choice, to individuals making the precarious ascent up the spiral staircase. This line of criticism will be examined in due course, but first some more Cupittian ground must be covered and some more 'inflation' observed.

5.4 Biotheology: ordinary profundity

At the turn of the century and the millennium, Cupitt intensified his postmodern emphasis on the primacy of language. The trajectory of *secondariness* is followed by a turn to *ordinariness*. He develops a simple, open philosophy (theology?) for a religion of ordinary life.[57] Cupitt develops a rather revolutionary method of doing theology by collecting theological-religious data from ordinary speech, organising and interpreting it (exegetically) and articulating it (homiletically). Cupitt collected more than 150 ordinary 'life' idioms, for instance, 'Life's good; 'Life's been good to me'; 'No-one is bigger than Life'; 'Life is sacred'; 'Believe in Life'; 'Saying yes to life' (Nietzsche).

The madness in the method represents Cupitt's growing persuasion that religion had already been absorbed or subsumed into general Western culture, in the process of which it has become demythologised, as it is apparent from the idioms of everyday language: 'I tried to show that ordinary language is already the best radical theologian' (2002:4). Instead of preaching the non-realist gospel, Cupitt detects its privatisation and secularisation in data gleaned from, and representative of, general culture. It is revealing, he finds, that the demythologising is in a fairly developed stage. Instead of viewing this as *secularisation* Cupitt proposes that it is the opposite, namely the *sacralisation* of Life (Leaves2004:92).

Cupitt takes his cue from Wittgenstein regarding the philosophy of language. The later Wittgenstein became persuaded that philosophy should be centred in ordinary speech; making the public his text and 'reading' them. It is philosophical hermeneutics, epistemology and theology from below. It is not prescriptive, but, in this particular instance, descriptive (Leaves 2004:68).[58]

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[57] Leaves (2004:3) groups the three 'ordinary speech-life' books *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (1999); *The Meaning of it All in Everyday Speech* (1999); and *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech* (2000) as Stage Six entitled: Ordinary Language. However, *Life, Life* (2003), which Leaves places at the end of Stage Seven under the title *The Religion of the Future* seems, in terms of content, not chronology, to belong to the previous stage.

[58] This use of the term, 'descriptive', differs from the application referred to *supra*. The former applies to esoteric knowledge based in metaphysics and myth, while the latter is merely the theological mirroring of demythologised ordinary speech.

Because God is dispersed in language, the theologian should change the orientation from always looking back in the book of the past, to looking around in the book of the people where revelation resides. There is, in a sense, a return to the mythical period before the revelation became a book, when it was composed and performed. Instead of listening to the Spirit, the theologian should listen to the *Zeitgeist.* Leaves believes this novel 'empirical method' of doing theology 'may have far-reaching implications (Leaves 2004:92).

Cupitt coined the term bionomous 'to describe the religious objectification of life' (Leaves 2004:93). The term is a deliberate allusion to Tillich's term 'theonomous' to describe the believer's union with God. With the term 'bionomous', Cupitt shifts the emphasis to the union with 'Life', of which the basis is simply biological life. Cupitt is neo-Darwinian and regards humans as clever animals, *homo sapiens.* He wants people to say a 'religious 'Yes' to biological life and their own mortality' (Leaves 2004:94).

> When I say then, that in the last generation or two we have (on the evidence of the idioms that have come into ordinary language) been moving over to a religion of life, I mean not only that we are taking life more seriously, acknowledging its outsidelessness, its endless variety, and its proper claims; I mean also that we increasingly reject the sort of religious ideology that affects to disparage 'the world', 'nature', and 'life'--and indeed purports to transcend them. We seek a religion *of* life that gives life its due and does not pretend that there is anything outside life
>
> Cupitt 2003:22

Although the emphasis may be novel at the dawn of the millennium, Cupitt has been alluding to and experimenting with the idea of a religion of life, ordinary, contingent, transient, finite, life for decades. The idea has now come to fruition. For instance, in *Radicals* (1989), he had already delineated the idea, drawing some demarcation around it regarding the prospect of a nature religion, or a worship of nature:

> I am not advocating a nature religion that worships or celebrates biological life itself. But I am advocating a religion of life in the sense of a spiritual discipline that enables us to accept and say yes to our life as it is, baseless, brief, pointless and utterly contingent, and yet in its very nihility beautiful, ethically-demanding, solemn and final.
>
> Cupitt 1989:143

Cupitt is calling for a light-weight religion that recognises humanity's maturity and does not always weigh people them down, keeping them subservient, dependent children. The indebtedness to Nietzsche, even to Freud, can be detected.

In his life-philosophy Cupitt comes very close to equating or substituting God with life and vice versa. Both, however, are to be viewed in non-realist perspective. They are figures of speech, and because everything is within language, they do not refer to anything in reality out-there. Cupitt is at pains to show how the meanings of God and life have become interchangeable in common culture. He points, for instance (2003:6), to the idioms 'have faith in life', 'we should not tempt life'...'nobody is bigger than life'. To balance the scenario, however, Cupitt points to instances in which life and God are not interchangeable. God, for instance, is thought to be pristine and perfect, while life is 'baggy and shapeless, and includes all the opposites--bliss and wretchedness, comedy and tragedy...'(ibid.). Cupitt points out that when we say yes to life, it is the whole package, warts and all, but when we say yes to God, there is the expectation of selection and dualism; this, not that. Cupitt also stresses the non-realist base by reiterating that life is not a being. 'Life is just the goings on of things in the human life world.' In *The way to happiness* (2005:53), Cupitt encapsulates: 'the return of everything into ordinariness in the late-modern world is in many ways a great blessing. We are delivered from the illusions of metaphysical and supernatural belief, and are able to say a wholehearted Yes to life, just as it is.' This, depicted as ordinary profundity, a simply religiosity scattered into general postmodern culture, is for Cupitt what the coming of the Kingdom was all about.

5.5 Globalism and the religion of the future

Cupitt's views have always given preference to the existential. His Nietzschean persuasion has been noted here, and for a long time Kierkegaard's influence was strong. Spong emphasises the church, Karen Armstrong, inter-religious understanding and Geering, the world. All these post-realists, however, are in some way animated by the plight of the planet and humanity in global perspective. It was Geering's influence in particular that drew Cupitt to focus more on a world perspective (Leaves 2005:145).

5.5.1 Anthropomonism and the world-wide view

We have observed that non-realism is a radical adoption of the modern paradigm that takes leave of metaphysics. This in turn entails an emphasis on the humanity.

Anthropomonism[59] is another term Cupitt developed to emphasise his focus on humanity. It is all human. All of religion, including God, is human. We made it all up. 'The Sabbath was made for man'. It is by us and for us. The term is a deliberate 'reformist' attempt to counter Karl Barth's term 'Christocentric', which became a dogma in reformed theology. Cupitt quite literally wants to shift the attention away from the *Christos* to anthropos. He is in complete agreement with Westar and the Jesus Seminar in terms of Christology and, based on Funk's theses, they seem to concur about the anthropic view of theology. In radical perspective it means: God is human. When we are talking about religion and value, it is all immanent. It is all inside, there is no outside. Of course, this is humanism, and as has been indicated, Cupitt and Sea of Faith are quite comfortable with the term. They endeavour to be religious humanists, which means they are humanists who concern themselves with the sort of subjects and concerns that traditional religion concerned itself with, and remain in conversation with traditional religion.

It might seem odd, then, to pair anthropomonism with a theme like globalisation, but this is not really the case. Cupitt recognises the emergence of a world culture. He observes (1997:121) that all around the world virtually the same syllabus, mathematics, science and technology, amongst other things, are taught in schools. Transport and telecommunication, open markets and global commodities are unifying the world in a way that politics or any other persuasion could never do. Ironically, nationalists are now associated with conservatism and fear, which is the fear of oblivion. Cupitt (ibid: 122) remarks in jest that God and Mammon have now traded places. God is now regional and Mammon is universal and wants peace, stability, health and education.

The question is, can there be a world religion and on what basis? What is certain is that it cannot be on the basis of discrimination so the old religious exclusivism, which divides people into 'we' and 'they', is obviously undesirable. In modern perspective, in spite of the notion of multi-culturalism, we are all the same. We are human. We are humanity. We are neither angels nor demons, and the gods have gone. A world religion must express a collective consciousness, solidarity. Cupitt is aware that former ideas along these lines did not live up to expectations and

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[59] Cupitt uses the term in *The Revelation of Being* (1998), although Leaves (2004:89) observes that Cupitt first used it in *Only Human* (1985).

were abandoned.[60] All the great religions have chosen the path of separation rather than syncretism (ibid.).

Cupitt is of the opinion that religions survive as fundamentalisms because of the hiatus, the absence of a global philosophy. Plurality and multiculturalism seem to be the order of the day. Cupitt (1997a:123) refers to the three thousand new religious movements that have emerged in recent times and about one thousand new age groups. Hundreds of little sects seem to be flourishing. Cupitt (1997:124) engages with this and says that, although he has attempted to supply principles that could be the foundation for a world religion of the future, he is ambivalent, questioning himself:

> Have I made the same mistake...Have I been trying to describe a priori the shape of a future world of faith, when on my own antirealist premises the future surely has to be more and more of the sort of formless anarchy that we are already seeing?
>
> Cupitt 1997a:124

Cupitt then reiterates his persistent pluralist approach in spite of his propensity to supply principles. The *laissez-faire* attitude should prevail: 'Let a hundred flowers bloom. Why shouldn't there be anarchy?' Cupitt takes a leaf out of the book of art, where there are many genres and where there is aesthetic anarchy, all constituting the spectrum of human creativity. There can be no attempt to 'mop up' the whole art scene and 'impose law and order on it' (ibid.). There is no place for police.

Cupitt censures himself, allowing the plethora of new religious groups a place in the sun:

> If their beliefs work out well for them, then their beliefs are true for them; and since there is no independent Truth out there, and all of us are entirely free to build our worlds in the ways that seem best to us, we have no basis for calling other people's worlds irrational.
>
> Cupitt 1997:123

Cupitt continues, however, with the vista of religious reform. He believes that a religion of the future will be sustained by a naturalistic, this-worldly, ecologically-sensitive philosophy of life. He thinks the old idea of a journey, a preparation for death, is dying. He firmly believes in what he describes as 'solar living', that saying yes to this life (the 'after'-life), will be prominent in a future scenario. He believes that

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[60] He refers to the idea of a perennial philosophy (Hocking, Aldous Huxley and Toynbee)

environmental ethics and spirituality will converge even more (ibid: 127). The quest for redemption and world-building will become more or less the same thing (ibid). His emphasis on solar ethics coalesces with an emphasis on eco-humanism, which is an expression of religious devotion to life and its precariously balanced fundamentals.

Cupitt (ibid.) sees both a long-term and a short-term scenario: 'In the long term, then, we want religion to become a unifying expressive activity through which we can simultaneously get ourselves together and build our common world.' In the short term, Cupitt believes that people will continue to practise their own religion, but in this regard he insists on his mission: 'on a *strictly* non-realistic or consistently demythologised basis' (ibid.)

Two emphases have emerged: the focus on humanity (anthropomonism) and our home, the precarious planet and the precious life it sustains. In Cupitt's view, religion is human and only human, even when we speak about the vexing questions of life. Religion should (at last) be at home in this world.

> The cheerful acknowledgement that our religion is only a human fiction exalts human beings, by suggesting that we too might be able to tell such stories, and live lives like that. Dogmatic religions seeks closure and enclosure, whereas the poetical theology is wide open to endlessly-varied reinterpretation and re-enactment.
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> Cupitt 1998:227

5.6 Summary

This review of Cupitt's approach to religion and theology has shown that there are two opposing actions at work. There is the anarchistic, remonstrative aspect complemented by the aesthetic. The former is severely icono-, or idoloclastic, while the latter is creative. The former may be regarded as deconstructionist, the latter as reconstructionist. It may be noted that both of these attitudes and actions are typical of reformers, a distinct reminder of the protestant reformation. It can be concluded that non-realism is integral to the New Reformation. It is radical. The route to reform starts directly at the root. In conclusion, a brief recapitulation is stated:

FROM NON-REALISM TO NEW REFORMATION

FORM	**REFORM**
Anarchism regarding:	***Aestheticism*** regarding:
Privileged knowledge	Ordinary knowledge
Vertical dimension	Horizontal dimension
Miracle and wonder	Wonders of nature/science
God	Life
Bible one unitary source	Bible decentred: plurality
Bible-based ethics	Solar ethics
Christocentrism	Historical Jesus/ Anthropocentrism
Post death life	Yes to Life: solar living
Longtermism	Short-term focus
Mediated religion	Immediate religious expression
Adherence to doctrine	License to create
Authority/ Orthodoxy	Anarchy/ freedom of expression
Church	Culture ('kingdom)
We--they eclecticism	Egalitarian equality
Redemption from sin	Redemption from superstition
Pure Christianity	Post-Christian plurality: borrow from Buddhism
Prayer, the vertical affair	Non-noetic mystical meditation, discipline of the Void
Death as door to life	Death full stop

6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has completed the contextualisation of theological non-realism in terms of postmodernism. It has included the deconstruction of realism and also, the ways in which Don Cupitt inflated non-realism into aesthetic religious expressionism. There is also the question of reformation. Before proceeding to conclusions, however, it is essential to introduce the fourth gate-way question and look at critique and counterpoint positions by means of which Cupitt's position can be interrogated.

CHAPTER FOUR

CRITICAL CONVERSATION

ENGAGING WITH CUPITT AND HIS CRITICS

1 INTRODUCTION

Although this chapter presents a selection of the critique of Cupitt's earlier platform, as well as of his later work, it can not claim to be comprehensive in terms of all of the critiques. The aim of the chapter is to engage in critical conversation with Cupitt, his main critics and their counter-positions, among which so-called critical realism is foremost. A further aim of this chapter is to show that, in spite of the perceived difference and distance between Cupitt as non-realist and others who claim to be realists, there is much similarity, proximity and correspondence among them. The differences can sometimes be reduced to nomenclature reflecting social alignment. Many of those who maintain realism in terms of God are non-realist in many other aspects of their work. It is a further aim of this chapter, as in the preceding chapters, to lay the foundation for the question concerning the reformative value and validity of non-realism.

2 CUPITTIAN NON-REALISM CRITICISED

2.1 Method, mission and manipulation

It has been alleged (Cowdell 1988:58) that Cupitt's methodology is fluid and inconsistent, giving rise to the indictment that '[h]is aim appears to be, not the securing of any particular position, but rather simply the pursuit of his vision of the spiritual and the moral world'. Cupitt's work is not a systematic dissertation, but rather a series of 'works in progress', incorporating many currents that do not quite belong together. Nigel Leaves' (2004:1) analysis acknowledges this feature when he describes Cupitt's work as a 'flowing project', even maintaining that Cupitt's 'methodology is deliberately deviant' (ibid: 111). The continental turn in the mid-1980s suited Cupitt rather well, and enabled him to claim that his methodology was not idiosyncratic, but was symptomatic of postmodernism. He maintains, 'Truth is in the movement' (1988: ixff). Cupitt, in response, indicts his critics for 'linguistic

scientism', thinking in terms of attacking or defending formalised and stable positions. Meanings simply 'don't stay still for long enough' (ibid, x). This matter will be considered in more detail *infra* in relation to hermeneutical framework.

2.1.1 Uncritical manipulative rhetoric

Because of Cupitt's perceived 'on-the-move' methodology, he is regarded as being rather uncritical, as he does not seem to engage critically with either current critics or eminent historical figures. He is perceived to assert, rather than argue, and to place his views where they are unassailable and apparently above scrutiny. Thiselton (1995:96,109) maintains that he is frequently 'haunted by the ghost of generalization'. Cowdell criticises this methodology as the 'luxurious position of the last man at the End of the World':

> placing oneself outside beyond the reach of falsifiability—a danger that should put any scientifically-minded scholar on his guard. One can never be too critical, and if Cupitt is convinced that he has the critical game sewn up, he must then begin to ask meta-critical questions in order to deconstruct his own biases, not least of which is his quasi-positivistic limiting of the range of admissible evidence for theological reflection.
>
> Cowdell 1988:58

Two aspects of Cupitt's allegedly uncritical methodology and style are *subjective selection* of historical figures as well as an alleged *misappropriation* of the ideas of eminent thinkers.

2.1.1.1 Subjective selection

Instead of opting to listen almost exclusively to the Parisians, Cupitt could have gained a great deal by listening more to eminent mainstream theologians like Bultmann, Tillich, Rahner or Pannenberg (cf. Cowdell 1988:57). These theologians could have been equally 'disruptive of traditional theism' (Cowdell 1988:57), but they could also have prevented Cupitt from completely losing his way. The advantage, in Cowdell's estimation, of these scholars is that they:

a) maintain an agenda orientated to the Biblical tradition

b) all seek a creative reformulation of Christian faith.

Aligning himself with these scholars could have done much for Cupitt's credibility.

From this assessment, it is clear that Cupitt lost credibility, but could have maintained it had he aligned himself with the right names and used more genial

language. The crucial factors seem to be *association* (corporation) and *expression* (the language). Cupitt, according to Cowdell (ibid.), is the odd one out amongst the aforementioned modern systematicians. They have all (wisely) maintained some vestige or semblance of realism. It is clear that Cowdell perceives Cupitt's main mistake to be his arrival at full-blown non-realism, and his 'coming out'. Cupitt crossed a fine, but very important line by taking leave of God. The offence, it seems, is not so much about veracity as about propriety, as far as ecclesiastical politics and sensibilities are concerned. Cowdell does not see, and therefore does not acknowledge, the operation of a theological, traditional, even doctrinal preconditioning, in his own stance and that of his fellow critics. They do not seem to acknowledge that they operate under the umbrella of a controlling meta-narrative.

In spite of this deconstruction, it should, however, be conceded that to a certain extent Cowdell is right. Cupitt could have gained considerable credibility had he aligned himself more closely with the leading lights of liberal theology, especially the prominent systematicians. But would the result or the reaction have been very different? Lloyd Geering, amongst others, presented completely different arguments and language, and was reviled as a heretic in another part of the world.[1] Spong, indeed, retained the vital vestige of realism and is much closer to the Christian tradition. He has nevertheless received harsh assessments from notable defenders of (traditional) faith, like Alistair McGrath, for instance.

2.1.1.2 Misappropriation of historical figures

Thiselton (1985:161) expresses the view, held by a number of critics, that Cupitt misappropriates and misinterprets the opinions of influential figures like Pascal, Kierkegaard, Jung, Schleiermacher and Schweitzer. They are presented as the heroes of non-realism, as if they had all supported non-realism. It is, on the other hand, argued that it is possible to interpret them differently.[2]

Runzo (1993a: xiv), opposed to non-realism as he is, concedes that 'the epistemological movement represented by Kant and those who followed him flowered into non-realism' that was particularly associated with the names of Feuerbach and Nietzsche. This is an elegant way of describing what Cupitt has

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[1] Cf. Geering's autobiography *Wrestling with God, the story of my life* (2006).

[2] (Cf. 'What are we to think of Don Cupitt?' in *Preaching through the Christian year 10, Mowbray 1985:161, cited in Cowdell p 56:n3).*

attempted to show by appropriating influential historical figures as representatives of non-realism. It was a position in the process of being born; from seminal, influential thinkers, 'it flowered' into non-realism. It may be conceded that, if Cupitt contended that Pascal and others were fully-fledged and conscious non-realists, it was an anachronistically erroneous impression to create. On the other hand, it may be contended that many of these sign-post figures used by Cupitt were no longer theological realists in the traditional sense. But is this not what Cupitt, if read more positively, argued in *The sea of faith* (1984)? Is it not, at the least, a mild case of misreading Cupitt on the part of his detractors?

Perhaps it is a matter of distinguishing between fine shades of grey. But Cowdell believes Cupitt does not do that. As far as realism is concerned, he does not distinguish the fine shade of what Macquarrie calls 'existential-ontological realism'.[3] Cowdell is critical of Cupitt for not engaging with such views. They are all relegated to the area of realism and rejected. Cowdell is consequently convinced that Cupitt's blind spot does not allow him to give credibility to a nuanced, critical realism. Further, Cupitt does not engage and contend with the 'giants of twentieth century theology', which would have resulted in more nuanced views. Not all realisms are the same. Cupitt, following Feuerbach, in the opinions of both Thiselton and Freud, does, indeed, in *The sea of faith* (1984), present figures like Kant, Kierkegaard and others in such a way that they 'appear partners who would support his own enterprise' (ibid: 57).

In the same vein, but in greater detail, Thiselton (1995:94) criticises Cupitt's use of several eminent thinkers like Plato, Tillich, Bultmann and Schleiermacher. For Tillich, God is beyond heteronomy and hegemony, while, for Cupitt, God represents these terms. Plato's cave is still contingent, while with Cupitt it is closed (ibid: 95). For Thiselton, Tillich can still be regarded as a critical realist, but Cupitt creates the impression that he can be read as a non-realist. For Cupitt, God spells heteronomy and full internalisation is required, while Thiselton argues that, for Tillich, God is beyond heteronomy; still perceived as an ineffable, but (potentially) objective reality. God is *simultaneously* above, within and beyond. With Tillich, there remains a sliver of reality, while Cupitt has reality and embraced fiction. Thiselton is quite content to settle for Tillich's more dialectical contention 'While God

[3] (cf. Cowdell 1988:57, n. 5 referring to Macquarrie in *Principles of Christian Theology 1966).*

is not a 'person' in the anthropomorphic sense of the term, but is nevertheless 'not less than a person' (ibid). Thiselton attempts to show that, despite Tillich's rather radical views about God, he remains within Christian tradition and God is still 'something' to relate to. When it comes to Cupitt, though, the fully internalised God cannot really be related to, while in his model based on the idea of autonomy the relation is lost. Again, Cupitt gives away too much.

Paradoxically, Cowdell (1988:62) detects 'a lingering metaphysics' in Cupitt relating to an expression of a 'God beyond God'. The view of this analysis corresponds rather well with the depictions of God by Tillich and Bonnhoeffer. Cowdell (ibid: 63) even seems to suggest that Cupitt is not in all respects a non-realist, asking, 'What sort of crypto-realist is Cupitt?' Cupitt, it seems, is being criticised for not coming out more radically and owning up to his acquired atheism. Cupitt and his non-realism are perceived as not only devious, but also fraudulent.

Thiselton (1995:95) expresses the opinion, although he does not actually substantiate it, that Cupitt and his Sea of Faith follower Freeman import a certain *functionalism* into 'theories of truth in the humanities and in theology'. Moving on to Bultmann, Thiselton argues that, in Cupitt's use of this theologian, he weaves together three different strands: he extends Bultmann's hermeneutics to 'expressive or instrumental interpretation'. He then allies this with his view of God as a human projection, an opinion gleaned from Feuerbach, Kant and Freud, and finally attempts to ascribe a privileged position to the notion of autonomy, which is akin to Buddhism. Weaving these three together Cupitt merges hermeneutics with truth claims about the nature of reality. Space does not allow for a full discussion here, but it must be asked whether Thiselton really believes that Bultmann remained a realist in the traditional sense, and whether the appellation non-realist applies to him in any way at all. Further, while Cupitt used Bultmann's ideas, in the writer's opinion he never contended that Bultmann was a fully-fledged non-realist or even a radical theologian in the specific sense of the term.

When it comes to Cupitt's use of Schleiermacher, Thiselton (1995:95) does not mince his language. After a 'soft-sell' through Robinson, Schleiermacher is placed in Cupitt's 'shop window'. Thiselton points to Cupitt's neglect of the new appreciation of Schleiermacher, wherein 'virtually all contemporary Schleiermacher specialists' doubt the veracity of earlier translations and understanding of Schleiermacher. According to this new understanding, Schleiermacher is re-

interpreted as wanting to convey 'a sense of being utterly dependent' on God' (Thiselton 1995:95). Thiselton (ibid: 96) is happy to report that the latest understanding of Schleiermacher is that all the pronouncements that appear to 'equate the deity' with what is 'immediately present in the feeling' are from the early *Speeches*, which the later Schleiermacher 'consciously modified in a more "orthodox" direction'. This discovery is clearly heartening to the liberal fraternity.

Schleiermacher, it would now appear, did not go as far as Cupitt implies that he did. Schleiermacher, reviled in his time, can now be revered by realists. Both Tillich and the undeniably contentious and controversial Bultmann are amiable, because they can still be construed as theological realists of sorts. In this way, Thiselton has redeemed these eminent names for the liberal cause of critical realism, saving them from the odious position of non-realism or theological a/theism, or a-theology.

Thiselton is probably correct in showing that, while Cupitt uses historical figures, he could have engaged more deeply. But would it have made a vast difference to the outcome? Although it may be accepted that Schleiermacher moderated his earlier position, there nevertheless remains room for the interpretation that Schleiermacher is a significant figure in what this thesis has termed 'the road to non-realism'. It must be said, however, that it would have been more critically sound for Cupitt to have at least indicated the period and the ongoing debate. But then it should also be remembered that Cupitt did not write academic dissertations, but was engaging with a wider intellectual audience. The publication format, the length and the target audience should also be kept in mind. Cupitt should be credited with popularising many of the issues that would otherwise have remained in the obscure, hallowed halls of academe and clergy.

White (1994:224, citing Hick) summarises a general feeling among Cupittian critics that, apart from whether Cupitt is right or wrong, he certainly should not claim that his message represents the great spiritual traditions, 'for it proposes such a reversal of their faith, from a cosmic optimism to a cosmic pessimism, as to offer a radically different vision'.

The greatest difference of opinion on the reading of history is whether it is actually the inevitable road to non-realism or whether the story of history should be read or even named differently. Where Cupitt sees the retreating sea of faith, expressed in Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach* and mentioned earlier,

Hebblethwaite sees an ocean of Truth and the complete opposite. Hebblethwaite (1993b:210-1) maintains that 'the last two hundred years do not by any means present us with a single cultural trend, leading inexorably to an extreme anti-realism'. He thinks the task of critical realists is to resort more robustly to 'metaphysical arguments, together with critical reflection' on alleged divine revelation. The net result is that Hebblethwaite seeks to reaffirm apologetically that 'Christianity is committed to objective theism in the metaphysical as well as the religious sense'.

In contrast, Cupitt (1993b:149), responding specifically to Hebblethwaite, is adamant in his insistence on a current, dominant worldview that has emanated from the long and arduous birth of modernity. It is the 'cultural-linguistic totality' wherein our whole life is lived 'that has no outside'. It is decidedly non-metaphysical, although it is characterised by a fictional, narratological aspect. Cupitt believes that Christianity should recognise this new reality and adapt to it. He finds it hard to understand why people like Hebblethwaite 'should wish the Christian Church to cut herself off from what is happening, and to die from the top' (ibid). Cupitt (ibid.) believes 'that will be the result, if she must remain forever locked into the mentality of dogmatic realism that passed away at the end of the eighteenth century.' Hebblethwaite (1993b:210-1) insists that the non-realist option, as presented by Cupitt, is full of inconsistencies, inadequacies and weaknesses and, 'all this will 'surely send us back to theological realism as the only possible way of making sense of revelation, religion, value and rationality, and of a world containing all these things' (ibid.).

Is it Hebblethwaite's overt apologetics that predisposes his hermeneutics, the interpretation of history in particular, or is it Cupitt's progressive religious philosophy that predisposes his insistence on radical religious reform? In practical terms, both believe Christianity is in mortal danger, one for selling out, and the other for not buying the remedy for its survival.

2.1.1.3 Rhetoric

Cupitt's conversation is experienced as rhetoric (Hebblethwaite, cited in Thiselton, 1995:109) and as the rhetoric of power (Cowdell 1988:64, referring to Rowan Williams 1984). The rhetoric is perceived to be 'not true', in the context of 'fair-minded scholarship' (Cowdell 1988:64). Cupitt is portrayed as malicious and mischievous in contrast to 'fair-minded' scholars, amongst whose number Brian

Hebblethwaite counts himself. Thiselton, concurring, defines fair-minded scholarship as showing the complexity by introducing different voices, which, it is argued, Cupitt regularly neglects. Cupitt is criticised for parodying his opposition instead of engaging with those who hold with critical realism (Davis 1993:56-9). Cupitt also makes a 'vulgar caricature of traditional theism' (Kerr 1981: 206). His anti-theistic views are perceived to be the rhetoric of power asserting its freedom even over God, who lamentably becomes a puppet (cf. Rowan Williams 1984:13ff). For Hampson (1999:131-2), Cupitt is too 'secularist', too 'iconoclastic' and a 'trifle arrogant'. However, there is a touch of irony in Hampson's (cf. 1996:283-4) opinion that Cupitt is too iconoclastic, while she herself would like to dispense with the church and its controlling myth, in comparison with Cupitt and company, who are not inclined to do so. Thiselton (2002:58) criticises Cupitt's promotion of deceit in *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (1988), contending that Cupitt's style had changed from argument to rhetoric based in his 'post-modern re-appraisal of reason'. He concludes:

> Most of Cupitt's writings are, in effect and loosely, works of philosophy of religion. However, they presuppose a view of reason found more frequently in critical theory than in most university departments of philosophy. They appear to promote pluralism; but in practice promote a single voice, even if that one voice is "always on the move".
>
> Thiselton 2002:58

2.1.2 Hermeneutics and framework

Related to, and implied in these observations is the serious indictment that Cupitt does not ground his ideas in rigorous hermeneutical theory. Writing fifteen years after *Taking Leave of God* (1980), Thiselton observes that 'for the first time in his writings, [Cupitt] spends three pages explicitly on hermeneutics' (1995:96). He contends that Cupitt 'tends to operate with a less subtle polarity between "cognitive-objective" and "expressive-subjective", a contrast that Thiselton regards as 'disastrously inadequate' (ibid.).

2.1.2.1 Modernism: constructivism and nominalism

Cupitt's thoroughgoing nominalism and his presentation of Kantian idealism as the road leading inexorably to anti-realism and theological non-realism has been severely criticised. It has been demonstrated in this analysis that Cupitt is deeply

indebted to Kant and the Enlightenment. Kant's Copernican revolution rather than Cupitt himself is criticised by several of Cupitt's interlocutors:

> It is by no means clear that if we can no longer suppose that propositions picture the world we have no alternative but to suppose that propositions are our imposition or projection on a radically unintelligible and unresponsive world.
>
> Kerr 1981: 21

Cowdell (1988:61) claims that 'a genuine act of faith is called for to believe that nothing exists outside of the mind', while Maurice Wiles (cited by Cowdell 1988:61) regards Cupitt's thoroughgoing constructivism as 'impossible to argue with'. Cowdell concurs with Wiles' milder stance, favouring critical realism over anti-realist non-realism.

Brian Hebblethwaite, probably Cupitt's most ardent and consistent critic over the years, maintains, in terms of the epistemological basis, that constructivism is not the inevitable and only route. He acknowledges that the collapse of metaphysical realism through Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, to list but a few significant names, resulted in purely human options, such as anti-realist, expressivist versions of Christianity, as Cupitt indeed has put forward. However, Hebblethwaite (cf.1993a:146ff), for instance, contends that Kantian transcendentalism and Descartes' solipsistic system, as well as Locke's notion that ideas were the immediate objects, are not only detrimental to theology, but are also epistemologically erroneous and it is quite possible to avoid them altogether. Hebblethwaite, responding to Cupitt's *Sea of faith* (1984) by publishing *The Ocean of truth* (1988), acknowledges that Kant is pivotal however, 'there is no need to set out on the Kantian constructivist path where our knowledge of the external world is concerned':

> There are good reasons for rejecting Kant's Copernican revolution, for refusing to set out on the path that turns the human subject into the sole source of what reality is to be for us. There simply is no need to be so sceptical about our capacity to achieve objective knowledge, not only about man [sic] but about the world and about God as well. For it is entirely reasonable to hold that the world as it is in itself is accessible to human perception and knowledge...
>
> Hebblethwaite 1988: 84

This study contends that Hebblethwaite's attacks on Cupitt might well be animated by onto-theological presuppositions resulting in a sophisticated defence of ecclesiastical doctrine and its authority. This is evident in the critique of the citation. What are Hebblethwaite's 'good reasons' for rejecting Kantian constructivism? The

answer seems quite simply to be 'common sense' (which Kant must have lacked) and an unwavering trust in the veracity of revelation as substantiated in the Bible and traditional doctrine. Hebblethwaite continues confidently:

> ...[I]t is also reasonable, if not so certain, to hold that God gives himself to be known by us for what he is in himself. It follows that only in relation to a given world and a self-revealing God does man learn who and what he is. The starting point for rejection of Kant's theology is common sense...'.
>
> Hebblethwaite 1988: 80

Does Hebblethwaite not consider that the statement 'God gives himself to be known by us, for what he is in himself' is steeped in human imagination and construction? Is it possible for it to be scientifically reasonable if it is so reliant on an arbitrary quality like divine revelation? It is not self-evident without human creative interpretation. Further, this view is not one of common sense; it is inculcated and cultural, not natural, but nurtured. Where do expressions like 'a self-revealing God' come from? Such expressions are not written in the stars, even though we might conceive poetically, and believe, that the stars are the handiwork of God. To claim that the 'starting point for rejection of Kant's theology is common sense' is, as has been pointed out, a dismal reflection on Kant and all who hold his Copernican revolution to be seminal. To be sure, the Kantian Copernican revolution is not the result of common sense, nor was the astronomical Copernican revolution. To the contrary, it is acquired knowledge that leads to enlightenment if reflected upon if it is not summarily dismissed on the basis of what appears to be right based on common sense. The earth still seems flat, but is that the basis for a compelling argument for its veracity?

Again, the underlying problem evident in Hebblethwaite's reasoning is that Cupitt is suspected of having sold out to an atheism to which he does not want to confess. Cupitt 'unquestioningly embraces atheist philosophy and translates the heart of Christianity into a completely atheistic form' (Hebblethwaite 1993a:147). Hebblethwaite contends that the 'Christian' philosopher really has no business to be holding onto the coat-tails of atheism, as it has expressed itself since Nietzsche in ever more bizarre and self-destructive philosophical forms' (ibid.). If Cupitt could be accused of holding onto the coat-tails of idealists and anti-realists, what, one might ask, is Hebblethwaite holding onto? Hebblethwaite seems to reveal his 'mission' statement: 'Christian' philosophy is to show that 'only theism makes sense of modern science and the human subject' (ibid: 148). One supposes that

Hebblethwaite should be able to see that he, too, is holding on to coat-tails, those of Christian traditional doctrine steeped in dualistic metaphysics. One is forces to ask whether this is 'fair-minded' scholarship or politics.

White (1994:222), in his stringent criticism of Cupitt and constructivism, concurs with Hebblethwaite's appeal to 'common sense', broadening it to the opaque reference: 'many minds'. This enables him to conclude, '...the world about us consists of things and kinds of things that are what they are prior to and quite apart from any observation and thought, and are discovered to be what they are by learned and self-correcting use of fallible human faculties...'.This is not entirely dubious, and certainly appeals to the strength-in-numbers argument. No matter how many minds agree, they are frequently wrong. Would physics, for instance, be affected by 'many minds' contending that the earth was flat, or that the Ptolemaic worldview was common sense? Much of what has become the common sense of the modern world remains unacceptable to theologians indebted to literalistic realism.

2.1.2.2 Postmodernism: deconstructionalism and perspectivism

When Cupitt's Kantian constructivism develops through Nietzsche into post-modern linguistic deconstructionalism, his ardent critics are even less persuaded. In spite of the above accusation that Cupitt is reluctant to engage with scholars, there has indeed been quite a lively interaction between Cupitt and Hebblethwaite. Both participated in Joseph Runzo's 1993 seminar. Cupitt (1993b:149) responded to Hebblethwaite's paper by intimating that it was always 'enjoyable' as it was 'vigorous', asking, 'But where has he been these past thirty years?' Cupitt insists that even his school science teacher in the 1950s maintained that 'all observations are theory dependent'. Cupitt contends that it dawned on many observers that 'traditional Anglo-Saxon first-facts-and-then-interpretations realist epistemology' had to go and that 'interpretation reaches all the way down'. He further maintains that 'there is no starting-point anywhere which is not already an interpretation and that there can be no final interpretation which silences everyone and terminates enquiry (ibid.). If all our knowledge, even our scientific knowledge, consists of interpretations and constructions set within the sign-world of language, there can be no real, non-construed transcendent reality, at least, nothing we can ascertain by any means other than human perception and conception. Cupitt (ibid.) concludes:

> We see now that we are always *in medias res*, in secondariness. The philosopher can no longer pretend to be a shaman of Reason who has journeyed to a higher world and has learned extra-historical Truths. Our whole life is lived within a *contingent* cultural-linguistic totality that slowly shifts over the course of time, and that has no outside.
>
> Cupitt 1993b:149

Daphne Hampson, although highly critical of Christian theology, even more so of the church, regarding herself as post-Christian, nevertheless disagrees vehemently and vociferously with Cupitt on this point. Hampson (1999b:132) finds Cupitt's non-realism too stark, 'jarring' and sometimes even 'preposterous'. 'To suggest of the scientific world that interpretation goes "all the way down" is ridiculous'. She thinks it is 'a bluff and it should be called' (ibid.). Regarding the notion of intra-linguistic outsidelessness, Hampson (1999:97) is also unconvinced. To say that 'all there is, is language' is 'superficial and patently untrue'.

Graham Ward (cited in Leaves 2004:68) views Cupitt as a 'monist' and regards this as running counter to postmodernism's (Derridean) axiom of *"différence"*, the recognition of alterity and the prospect of a penumbra of little and equal interpretations and narratives. In spite of Cupitt's overt and extensive use of postmodern parlance and views, Ward regards Cupitt's postmodernism as deficient, or insufficient, because it simply continues modernity. Cupitt seems to treat postmodernism as the apotheosis of modernity (cf. G. Ward 2001:3).

Catherine Pickstock (2004:67), one of the main movers in radical orthodoxy, differs from her former teacher Cupitt, although she expresses appreciation for Cupitt's contribution, particularly regarding 'a very early engagement with the themes of French thought now dubbed postmodern'. She also notes Cupitt's 'significant role in British Death of God theology', observing Cupitt's pressing to the 'extreme the implications of Biblical criticism of kenosis in Christology' (ibid.). In spite of Cupitt's engagement with continental hermeneutical philosophy, which should improve plurality, Pickstock observes that he nevertheless serves to 'confound those wishing to hold on to orthodoxy'. For Pickstock this is not atypical of postmodernism, which she regards as 'an advanced stage of Enlightenment modernism' anyway.

> In both the logical and cultural spheres, therefore, the truly radical move lies not in the shift from modernism to postmodernism (which is, after all, a relatively minor development) but rather in the overcoming of both through a recovery of theology itself.
>
> Pickstock 2004:10

If Cupitt's position appears paradoxical, it might well be because of the innate paradox existing in postmodernism. Hyman (2001:1) describes postmodernism with a series of paradoxes, which poses a predicament. Postmodernism is typically ambiguous, unclosed, unfinished. It is not conducive to forming a system, but is rather an ongoing critique of all systems. It represents a series of 'endings', but simultaneously represents new beginnings. In terms of philosophical theology:

> With the death of God comes the end of "Beginnings" as well as the end of "Ends", everything is now a "superabundant virtual present". Nothing is hidden and nothing is to come, everything is present. This is the strange new world of postmodernity.
> Hyman 2001:1

Hyman (ibid: 3) refers to, and concurs with Loughlin, who describes Cupitt and Mark C. Taylor's postmodernism as 'textualist but finally nihilist', which Hyman truncates to 'nihilist textualism'. In terms of this position, the end is permanently postponed or deferred. There is no fixed beginning or end. Life is a soap opera, no longer a novel (cf. Hyman 2001:141). Hyman (ibid: 25) observes: 'Like Lyotard, Cupitt embraces a metanarrative that proclaims the end of metanarratives, and this may be viewed as another instance of Cupitt's "enjoyable and ambiguous dance between affirmation and negation".'

Davis (cf. 1993:56-9) is unpersuaded by the whole enterprise, contending that it is a 'self-stultifying' argument (ibid: 58). If there is no grand, overarching truth, Davis wants to know whether this is, in fact, the new grand, overarching truth. He points out critically that this 'truth' is no truth at all, merely someone's opinion. Davis' onto-theological stance is evident from these remarks. The question should be asked however, whether we have anything more, particularly when it comes to theology, than people's elevated, sacralised opinion. The blood-stained history of theology and doctrine should surely be informative and persuasive in this regard. Davis clearly works with a model whereby reliable, divine knowledge enters our mundane realm in a pristine state. Davis, however, is right to point to this anomaly in postmodern perspectivism and to question the hidden truth in the claim that there is no truth in the proposition. It is indeed a predicament, but it is one with which Cupitt has certainly wrestled.

Although Hyman (2001: 64) describes postmodernism in terms of paradox, mitigating some of the sharp criticisms levelled at Cupitt, he is, nevertheless, also persuaded that Cupitt's postmodernism is deficient. Cupitt's

framework is not conducive to alterity and conversation, because it forces an impasse and a stark choice. In Hyman's estimation, the remedy is to develop and complete Cupitt's inadequate postmodernism in an 'accomplished postmodernism' (ibid.). Cupitt seems to be stuck in a realist/non-realist rut as far as critical conversation is concerned, persistently viewing the opposition as realists or "realists in disguise" (Hyman ibid: 5).

Cowdell (1988:60), in a slightly different context, criticises Cupitt for not giving credence to critical realism or semi-realism. What is not non-realism is simply realism. Cowdell seems to plead for more attention to the *via media* that has left traditional theistic-realism, but is not positivistic. Cowdell intimates that Cupitt, in his rejection of 'liberalism', forecloses and closes communication on what he refers to as 'meaningful God-talk'. Cowdell sees two polar opposites: 'naïve realism' and 'Cupitt's constructivist voluntarism'. In rejecting liberalism, Cupitt closes the conversation that constitutes, it is contended, the lack of postmodern alterity, or *difference* alluded to earlier.

2.1.2.3 Fusion or confusion?

In spite of the many criticisms of Cupitt's following, on the one hand, Kant's constructivism and, on the other hand, continental linguistic post-modernism, there are significant voices that criticise Cupitt for maintaining a fusion of both frameworks. Thiselton is adamant that it is the Kantian road leading to Nietzsche, Freud and even Marx, or the road of Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida. 'One cannot be committed to both programmes simultaneously', Thiselton (1995:107) maintains. He accuses, if not so much Cupitt, then at least 'many who have followed him with respect' (ibid.), and who 'still try to hold together two incompatible sets of themes' (ibid.).

The particular focus of Thiselton's criticism in this regard is the status of the subject. In the Cartesian-Kantian framework, now often referred to as foundationalism by its critics, the self is an active, largely independent, even heroic, agent. In postmodernism, the self is diminished, having been dispersed into language. Although Cupitt has diminished his emphasis on the autonomous, modern self and the full internalisation of God as spiritual symbol, he seems, despite his rhetoric, to continue emphasising the self. In *The Old creed and the new* (2006), twenty-six years after *Taking leave of God* (1980), Cupitt expresses his adjustment to autonomy with a new and closely related concept, autology: 'Acting autologously

is like acting autonomously' (2006:83). Cupitt says this is 'a recent coinage...best understood as a variant of 'autonomy'. The change is indeed very subtle. In spite of the change in the status of the subject, Cupitt still views the enemy as indirect, mythical/metaphysical and therefore heterological thinking. He still wants the religious subject to think and act autologously, even though this means engaging life's flux with reckless and newly-defined 'religious' abandon.

Thiselton (1995:107) criticises Cupitt's 'questionable stance' by implying that Cupitt erroneously combines the heroic, autonomous, modern subject and the decentred postmodern self, but it is worth noting that his criticism pertains almost exclusively to *The world to come*, published in 1982, thus ante-dating Cupitt's postmodern turn, which occurred somewhat later. This is puzzling, as Thiselton, unlike many other of Cupitt's critics, displays a reasonably good awareness of the different phases of Cupitt's development. However, Thiselton's criticism is noteworthy.

2.2 Miscellaneous critical aspects

In addition to the preceding discussion centring on methodology, framework, academic integrity, mission and style, certain other prominent and significant points against Cupitt's thought deserve some attention here. They are not presented in chronological order in terms of the different phases of Cupitt's development, and there is a real risk that some of these points are no longer valid. Certainly, Cupitt, based on his constant reinvention of his language, has moved away from the terminology if not from the substance.

2.2.1 Spirituality, the essence of religion

Cupitt has been criticised for moving away from doctrine, or (revealed) truth, as it is perceived, and making individual spirituality the essence of religion. S. T. Davis (cf.1993:56-9) is unconvinced, remarking that, if that be the case, even atheists can be religious. He denies that spirituality is the essence of Christian faith. Davis (ibid: 58) argues that he cannot understand how Cupitt, given his views, can simply continue practising religion. He clearly regards non-realism as (mere) atheism and states: 'If spirituality ...is the goal and heart of religion, then, obviously, one can be a non-realist or even an atheist and still be religious' (ibid.). Davis states his persuasion to the contrary: 'The essence of Christian faith is not a kind of spirituality

to which God is logically and causally and teleologically dispensable. It rather concerns a call from God that we respond appropriately to the love of God as it is revealed pre-eminently in Christ'. His realism based in traditional doctrine and expressed as theism, rises triumphantly when he concludes: 'So God, (by which I mean a being whose existence is independent of anybody's views about God) is essential to Christian faith.' Davis sums up the situation quite accurately when he concludes:

> Those who believe that we created God but there is still value in being religious will be atheists. Those who believe that we created God but there is still value in being religious will follow a path like the one Cupitt has laid down. Those who believe that God created us and that our highest duty as human beings is to glorify God will be religious realists who will strive to live lives of worship and service.
>
> S. T. Davis 1993:58

It is clear, however, that Davis, speaking for the position of realism and theism, contends that the church is about timeless, revealed truth, preserved and held sacred by believing and faithful patrons and that non-realists are non-believers and therefore atheists. Their religion, or practised spirituality, is no longer Christianity but some aberration or new faithless, godless religion. Cupitt's 'taking leave of God' and Geering's, 'Christianity without God' are simply a contradiction in terms (ibid.).

These points raised by Davis are closely related to the often-voiced critique of voluntarism.

2.2.2 Voluntaristic spirituality and ethics

Rowan Williams (1984:13), in his very influential article about 'not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt', is not convinced that spirituality would be a main significant beneficiary of Cupitt's vision. Indeed, he disagrees fundamentally and sharply, complaining about Cupitt's Feuerbachian diminution of human spirituality. He states his 'most fundamental difficulty', which is Cupitt's rhetoric of power, even over God: 'If we are to avoid seeing ourselves as puppets of the divine will, it seems, God must become the tool of the finite will. This boils down to solipsism (the self is the only thing known to exist), which in his view is simply spiritual narcissism, this is to say, 'if it is argued that there are not goals beyond the self' or, 'if there are finally no moral goals outside the self or the will' (ibid.).

Although Cupitt has been accused of misappropriating the ideas of such figures as Pascal, Descartes and Kierkegaard, it is rather ironic that he is also

accused of voluntarism, widely associated with Pascal, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Foley (1999:964) defines voluntarism as 'any philosophical view that makes our ability to control the phenomena in question an essential part of the correct understanding of those phenomena'.

Realists insist that religion, based in revelation, is vertical in nature, but has a wide-ranging horizontal aspect. It purports to be universal and, by and large, exclusive. Even critical realists find it difficult to move away from the universal appeal. They want to base their views on the 'is-ness' (cf. White 1994:223), that is, the ontology of things. White (ibid: 224) also holds that Cupitt espouses voluntarism in religion and criticises it as elitist, attainable only by sophisticated, intellectual individuals and not by the general populace. His assessment is dark and dire: 'Not being able to ascend to this intellectual level, they are all doomed to die in a state of unenlightened, unfulfilment or non-salvation' (ibid.).

It should be questioned, however, whether the accusation that Cupitt is a voluntarist is entirely applicable, particularly with respect to his more recent 'turns'. Cupitt contends that for a number of years he has been listening closely to the voice of general, (post)-modern culture. It is popular, general and certainly not a prescription from or for an intellectual elite.

> Remember that I have for years been arguing that N [the new creed] is not just a product of eccentric avant-garde thinking: something very close to it is already firmly entrenched in the picturesque idioms of everyday speech. N is what we actually believe, if we would but listen to the idioms that we ourselves are already using. The idioms already say to us: "your task is to live your own life in your own distinctive way, loving life and living it to its fullest"...and we should learn to rejoice in our own new condition of "empty" spiritual freedom...Thus, in religious thought at least, the leading edge of the avant-garde coincides with what ordinary language says...
>
> Cupitt 2006:4

A certain ambiguity in Cupitt's argument should be kept in mind in any discussion on Cupitt's alleged voluntarism. Is it still voluntarism when the individual, the new non-real religionist, is called upon to listen attentively to the pervading postmodern culture with the clear implication of conforming to it? Cupitt is calling non-realists to dispense with any vestige of the heteronomous old creed, expressed in the Apostle's Creed, and to reform by conforming to the contemporary post-modern, post-Christian, Kingdom post-Christianity, as expressed in the new creed. The ambiguity is in combining autology with cultural conformity. Is this not a new form of

heteronomy, even a new metaphysics? Although Cupitt's thought requires a certain intellectual and cultural literacy, it can no longer rightly be regarded as elitist and eclectic, as White (1994:224) and Woodhead (cf. discussion *infra*) have suggested.

2.2.3 Solipsism and perspectivism

On this basis, the indictment of solipsism by Rowan Williams in his above-mentioned influential article should also be reviewed. Thiselton's critique on Cupitt's maintenance of the Cartesian self, in spite of his avowed espousal of post-modernism's decentred self, should still be considered in this regard. Indeed, it is true that Cupitt still proclaims solarity and solar ethics, the existentialistic authentic living of one's life. For instance, he condones the attitude, 'when people say: "All I want now is to get back to living my own ordinary life", they really mean it...' (2006:4). If it is the expression of a culturally-conditioned approach to life, it is not, strictly speaking, the espousal of solipsism in the traditional understanding of the term. Cupitt's Kingdom congregation is broader and more diffuse than the traditional church congregation, and it would seem that the charge of solipsism is not entirely correct and no longer valid, if it ever has been. This said, it is also the case that Cupitt's new creed, drawn from current culture, sounds very self-ish, with its view of 'true religion' as individuals finding their own voice and owning their own lives (cf. The New Creed, appendix 3). These thoughts are closely related to the theme of heteronomy and autonomy.

2.2.3.1 Heteronomy, autonomy and autology

Fergus Kerr (1981:206) is representative of the chorus of voices from the realist ranks criticising Cupitt's concept of heteronomy and his emphasis on autonomy. He maintains that Cupitt paints the picture of heteronomy too negatively when he says that 'a modern person must not surrender the apex of his self-consciousness to a god'. Heteronomy seems almost immoral, while autonomy is always good and desirable. Kerr (ibid. 209) argues that heteronomy can be experienced in a positive way, as, for instance, in the case of a paraplegic who finds (heteronomous) resignation to the situation of disability liberating. 'It is one thing to cave in and capitulate in dishonourable submission, it is another thing altogether to accept the inevitable without repining.' Kerr concedes that it is a good thing to think for oneself and make up one's own mind, but it is the perceived libertarianism and voluntarism

that he rejects and warns against. Further, Kerr contends, in education one has to submit in order to learn, hence his question, 'Is it the same as making one's own rules?' (ibid.). He refers here to Iris Murdoch's stringent criticism of Kant and the so-called 'Kantian man-god' (ibid. 210). The basis of Murdoch's critique pertaining to Cupitt is the notion that the will is the creator of value. Cowdell (1988:59) concurs with Kerr that 'it simply cannot be maintained that all external limitations are stifling and immoral. One can consent to them freely, thus preserving autonomy and even enhancing one's scope for creativity'.

Hebblethwaite (1993a:139) once again contends that Cupitt's views in this regard are tantamount to a misappropriation or misapprehension; Freudian, or simply 'a wild generalisation'. Defending 'a religion of grace, worship and discipleship is not necessarily experienced in those inadequate ways' (ibid.). He contends that 'anti-realist faith fails to do justice to religious experience' (ibid.).

There are two factors to be considered here. It seems that both parties, in adamantly rejecting each other, may have over-stated their case. Of course, situations like a crippling illness or the learning situation in education require relationships, which may be perceived as evidence of good heteronomy. Cupitt himself, his readings and relationships with influential historical figures, cannot be regarded as fully autonomous. He did not really invent, or come up with what he promotes. It is the result of a dynamic process of reading, engagement and internalisation. Cupitt has been influenced by a number of outstanding historical figures, no less than Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, and more recently Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida. Even more recently he has been influenced by the dynamics of the linguistic flow within contemporary culture.

Also, it is not primarily about autonomy in relation to community and culture, but rather to dualistic metaphysics and particularly the idea of subservience to an ultimate Sovereign. Primarily it is the subservient, feudalistic spirituality that Cupitt has remonstrated against in the process possibly widening the scope of the concept of heteronomy too far. It should be remembered that it is theological and therefore metaphysical heteronomy that Cupitt (following Nietzsche) opposes so fervently. Cupitt advocates religion becoming normal in modern terms and not to maintain the para-normal originating from metaphysical dualism. It is this heteronomy that Cupitt would like to replace by empowering people to think for themselves and act freely, not without society and culture, but free from

metaphysically imposed categories. Of course, those who defend the realism of the metaphysical basis of Christianity do not regard the relationship with God in negative terms, so this heteronomy is not deplorable, rather desirable. It must also be said that faith, in the interaction with the modern world, has, in real terms, become far less heteronomous than it was in pre-modern or pre-Enlightenment times.

The most sensitive question is probably whether faith in God empowers or disempowers people, truly liberates or enslaves. The answer will undoubtedly have to be guarded and somewhat ambivalent. Generalisation in this instance, as in most others, may be misleading. Nietzsche's experience of faith was certainly negative, seeing that, in his view, it promoted the slave mentality and morality. In the light of the surprisingly violent history of the 20th century, and particularly the horror of the Holocaust, it is quite understandable why many distrust the promotion of a master mentality. On the other hand, as Cupitt has shown, ordinary speech is permeated with idioms, aphorisms and speech-acts that represent the desire of common, contemporary culture to live freely and authentically. It is quite evident in these linguistic utterances that God has 'faded out', or is certainly receding like the tide at Dover Beach in Arnold's poem. Cupitt (2006:27) contends that, in the new creed, God is 'unmentioned', unlike in the old creed, which had been constructed around the triune God. Describing contemporary culture, Cupitt says, 'God has disappeared, faded away, died, or whatever' (ibid.). Cupitt is not primarily campaigning for this to happen, but, like all radical theologians, he is describing what has happened and in his view, is still happening. This is, of course, where defenders of the faith reach for their weapons. They do not want to describe culture. They still want to prescribe, or at least be free to hold on to the prescription in principle, that God knows best. God has, or is, the answer to society's problems. They refuse to see God as a problem, as Cupitt and neo-Nietzschean death-of-God, radical theologians do.

2.2.3.2 Disinterestedness

White (cf. 1994:220) attacks Cupitt's concept of disinterestedness in terms of spirituality as if it pertained to a lack of interest. White argues that, because God is interested in our world and in us, we should reciprocate by displaying a 'hunger and thirst' after a glimpse of this God, this 'pearl of infinite value' (ibid, citing K. Ward). 'Disinterestedness is not only an illogical response to our world, but also radically unfaithful to the character of Jesus himself' (ibid.). White appears to think that

disinterestedness promotes a lackadaisical, meaningless meandering through the maze of life. It is commonplace, however, that a disinterested approach is closely associated with a non-metaphysical, even scientific, approach and does not in the least mean being uninterested or despondent. On the contrary, the scientist who dedicates his or her life to a task is extremely interested in the subject, although the scientific approach requires a disinterested approach in the sense of having no vested interest needing apologetic defence. Cupitt has attempted to show that disinterested spirituality or morality does not mean the end of a religious approach to life. Although he has changed his language and no longer uses the term 'disinterestedness', the substance remains. Recently, he reiterated that '...we must strive to free ourselves from all ideas of an objectively existing infinite concentration of sacred authority and power...religious thought needs to start learning to function autologously...' (Cupitt 2006:12, 83). The substance of disinterestedness, combined with autonomy/autology, is noticeable and noteworthy.

Gavin Hyman (2004:41) does not contend with Cupitt, but with modernity, regarding disinterestedness as an 'idol' of modernity. Linking up with Meister Eckart's famous dictum, 'man's [*sic*] last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God', (from which, of course, Cupitt derived his title *Taking Leave of God*) (1980). Hyman observes,

> God must be sacrificed, in effect, for the sake of the higher god of disinterestedness, an impulse, of course, that reaches its apotheosis in Kant. Thus, God, like other subjects, becomes a prop or a part of the supporting cast, playing a secondary role in a drama in which cultivation of the disinterested subject takes centre stage. If this is the case, then the traditional relationship between God and the self has been reversed. For the self has now become foundational and God is secondary.
>
> Hyman 2004:41

Hyman places this in an extremely emotive context: insolent, atheistic rejection of God. It takes on a different hue if one arrives at the persuasion that the concept 'God' was created in and by culture, by human hands, as it were. Even the notion of God as Creator, according to this presupposition, is no more than a cultural, linguistic, philosophical construct. God was never anything more than a revered character in the human story. This is Kantian, part of the epistemological Copernican revolution, and has become pervasive in modern society, which has, by and large, marginalised or 'taken leave of God'. It is not because of insolence or recalcitrance (these would constitute theological value judgements) but because society has become

enlightened about ancient and medieval myths. What Cupitt is contending and promoting is religious literacy and liberty.

Hyman (cf. 2004:35-51) has recently referred to 'the idol of disinterestedness', while Rowan Williams (1984:11), seminal to much Cupittian criticism, has also indicted this aspect of disinterestedness as 'ultimate narcissism'. He contends: 'If *disinterestedness* is itself the goal, if there are not goals beyond the self, how do we distinguish this from an ultimate narcissism...?'(ibid.).

The term 'disinterestedness' has not been very helpful in terms of religious spirituality, as there has been strong reaction against it, perhaps for this very reason. Cupitt no longer uses the term, although he does not seem to have moved away significantly from its substance.

Geering motivates his advocacy of taking final leave of theism by continuing 'along on the path to freedom on which it [Christianity] set forth'. There is no reference to disinterestedness, although it may be argued that the substance as expression of a modern worldview is present in this motivation. There is no sense of superseding God. The modernist perspective of God, who fades out, or has died, however, is prevalent in this approach. Even if the subject, free or dispersed, takes the place of God, it is not apt to theologise by asserting that God has been superseded by modern culture. God is simply losing credibility and fading out. Geering (2002:48), concluding a much shorter history of God than Karen Armstrong's, concludes: 'What we can be sure of, after this sketch of the history of God, is that all our talk of God is human talk. We humans invented it. In that sense we made the gods. And just as the first Axial Period brought 'the death of the gods', so the advent of modernity can be referred to as the beginning of the second Axial Period. It is the era in which people are now speaking of the 'death of God'.

Naturally, realists do not buy into this scenario. Their (traditional) idea of God is under siege and they rise to defend it. Non-realists do not do this. They defend the modern worldview and insist that religion be reformed. Atheists, on the other hand, regard religion as beyond the pale, unable to reform. Realists, determined to maintain dualism and its innate discrimination, insist that it is the world that needs theological or spiritual remaking, thereby continuing the view, so conducive to xenophobia of 'saved' and 'unsaved' sinners and saints.

2.2.3.3 The religious requirement

Cowdell (1988:63) concurs with the criticism of the idea of the religious requirement advocated by Keith Ward, in particular, as a 'demand made by nobody upon everybody'. Ward, and Cowdell in his wake, are unconvinced that the 'laundering of God' (ibid.) into internalised spirituality necessarily makes a real difference. How does this internalisation into the religious subject suddenly turn the theistic 'ogre into an acceptable religious image'?

It is, in the view of this study, incorrect to conceive of non-realism in terms of an internalised 'image' of God. John Robinson, following Tillich, was concerned with changing the anthropomorphic 'picture' of God, attempting to make God bigger, more diffuse, less personal, as it were. Cupitt's vision is a much more distinct departure and, if this was not quite clear in *Taking Leave of God* (1980), it certainly became crystal clear in the further development of the non-realist platform. It is evident that, for Cupitt, it is not about a better 'image'. The change is more radical than that. If it were about an image, then Keith Ward, Cowdell and the critics are correct in questioning whether the internalised image really much different from the internalisation of Jesus, the Holy Spirit or God, that has always been associated with Christianity. Cupitt is a radical theologian. His thought leads to, and builds on the paradigmatic shift of the death of God, the consequences of which pervade his thought through the different periods and influences until he arrives at the post-Christian position he maintains today. Looking back, and in terms of the distinction between the old creed (O) and the new creed (N), he states:

> I have over the past forty years moved inch by inch from O to N, from a broadly traditional Western Christian faith, the religious 'post-Christianity', or 'Empty radical humanism' of today. Sometimes I think of N as a postmodern version of religious existentialism: sometimes I borrow a phrase from Nietzsche and call it 'active nihilism', a form of religion in which nothing at all is believed and everything has to be lived-out. And sometimes I think of my solar religion as the Kingdom religion that Christianity always hoped to become.
>
> Cupitt 2006:8

Cupitt's reference, in this very recent publication, to 'inch by inch' is interesting; it refers to the protracted and arduous process of change that spans his entire *oeuvre*. The same goes for his references to Nietzsche and to emptiness and humanism. Cupitt's religious requirement is not driven by or directed towards a god, either outside or inside. The internalisation of the God-symbol is not an expression of some form of theism. In that respect it is apt to view Cupitt's non-realism as a-theistic.

Cupitt's radicalism is, however, not essential to the position of non-realism, as it pertained also to Cupitt's early period of passive non-realism, when God is internalised as a fictional symbol. This should be balanced with the apophatic tradition, which is averse to making any images whatsoever of God, because all images are regarded as odious and idolatrous.

However, it is also not a 'demand made by nobody'. The demand to approach life with religious dedication is human. It is natural; it is part of the nature of being human, just as burning brightly and expending energy and light are an essential aspect of the sun's brilliant death. The fear that humans will go to the bad if God goes is not entirely defensible. On the contrary, Richard Dawkins (2006:227), aiming to raise 'atheist pride', contends that atheism makes people better: 'It seems to me to require a low self-regard to think that, should belief in God suddenly vanish from the world, we would all become callous and selfish hedonists, with no kindness, no charity, no generosity, nothing that would deserve the name of goodness.' Dawkins and others also claim convincingly that much of the misery and animosity in the world is due to religion as 'a divisive force' (ibid: 259).

Humans would remain exactly the same, that is, neither all bad nor all good, but possessing the potential for both. Non-realism's contention that religion is a wholly human creation must be kept in mind. Whatever is good or bad in religion, we have created. Non-realism, however, allows the freedom for what is bad or less than good to be viewed as a (mere) human creation, and can therefore be changed. Theism, based on the metaphysical paradigm, makes change very difficult indeed, because it is perceived to be divine, cast in stone, as it were. The realists, it might be argued, are animated by fear and their hidden discourse probably signifies fear of losing a position of power. Certainly the claim to esoteric, super-natural knowledge and the continued claim to privileged knowledge may be rightfully assessed as 'a reliance on authority' (Theissen 1979:10). Non-realism that shuns doctrinal authoritarian power empowers people, although it poses a real threat to entrenched authority and is therefore regarded as detrimental and dangerous.

Leaves (cf. 2005:13-47) has shown that Cupitt's views on religion can be divided into several phases, starting from the idea of the religious requirement. Although Cupitt became more reticent about the original idea of the religious requirement, he has not really repudiated it. Cupitt still maintains, and always has, that religion is required and that it is normal and human. This distinguishes him

sharply from the atheist position of, for instance, Richard Dawkins, who argues that religion is undesirable and is no longer required.

Karen Armstrong (1999:457) seems, for the most part, to concur with Cupitt's religious requirement. In the closing paragraph of her monumental *The History of God*, she contends that 'human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning'. Humans create meaning. Humans create religion, because they want to and because they are human. But humanly-created religion is transient, as Armstrong also clearly shows in her comprehensive 'history' of God. When Cupitt speaks of emptiness, this is not the same as the emptiness to which Armstrong refers. The context is different. Cupitt's emptiness is not void of meaning, void of value. It is void of the historical, mythological, metaphysical, vertical dualism that was the bastion of religion until the advent of modernity. It is this 'fullness' that fundamentalists do not want emptied out. For Cupitt, traditional religion has become too empty, too light-weight. The emptiness Cupitt espouses is akin to the emptiness of Buddhism, which is experienced by its practitioners as meaning-full emptiness.

Cowdell (1988:64) contends that religious voluntarism could lead to bizarre religious practices. It should be borne in mind, however, that organised religious practices have, in reality, led to terrible actions, and they still do. Having a traditional, organised religion, as opposed to a voluntaristic, private spirituality is no guarantee that religion will be safer and more responsible. There is religious pathology in social as well as individual religious experience and expression. But that does not make either of them pathological *per se*. Religion as a human creation should therefore come under ordinary human scrutiny, like any organisation or practice in society.

Kerr (1981:210) does not think 'existentialist doctrines of pure will' are a good alternative to the traditional model. On the other hand, there is much to fear from totalitarianism and authoritarianism. He opts for a kind of *via media* between 'dropped from heaven' and 'welled-up from within'. Significantly, though, he does not seem to consider the option of 'composed in culture'. Kerr (ibid: 212) criticises Cupitt for being 'determined to keep operating with the doctrine that what is not "objective" must always be "subjective", just as what is not "from above" must necessarily be "welling up within us".' This is not an entirely fair assessment. Cupitt certainly does

not maintain that all religion wells up solely from the individual subject. It does, however, well up from humanity and society.

Cupitt has moved on, and so, it seems, has Kerr. In his tribute to Cupitt in the Festschrift (edited by G. Hyman), a certain *rapprochement* and reconciliation are evident, even though differences remain. Reading Aquinas 'in Derrida's wake', Kerr (2004:920), emphasises what may be viewed as the non-realist, or at least apophatic aspect of Thomist thought:

> All along the line, Aquinas was passionately concerned to stop the Christians of his day from thinking of God as one more item in the world, as a substance with properties...Many who believe in God, and perhaps most who reject the very idea, are inclined to picture God as an item in the world, the supreme Being, the *summum ens*...it is very hard to think otherwise. To say that "God is not [even] in the category of substance" (*Deus non est genere etiam substantiae)* as Aquinas does...
>
> Kerr 2004: 92-3

Kerr (ibid: 98) pays tribute to Cupitt as one who changed the philosophy of religion for many, including himself, by introducing such figures as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze into the debate. Kerr and many others who regard themselves in some way as realists and 'hold fast' to God instead of 'taking leave' are no longer realists in the naïve sense of the word. They adopt a position somewhere between the latter and non-realism, and Cupitt is criticised for not acknowledging critical realists as being distinct from naïve realists.

2.2.4 Subjectivism and post-Christianity

Where Cupitt has earlier been criticised for subjectivising, Linda Woodhead (2004:173-84) referring to the new religious movements, has ironically recently criticised Cupitt for being out of touch and falling short in terms of subjectivist spirituality. On the one hand, Cupitt contends that it is entirely up to the individual to decide their own spirituality and to construct their own God, as it were. On the other hand, this voluntaristic turn is balanced by democratisation, evidenced in his social and literary method of detecting and interpreting ordinary language idioms. By this, Cupitt is able to say that theology and religious values have already been dispersed and demythologised in general post-Christian Western culture. Woodhead observes that Cupitt preaches this democratised theology, or philosophy of life to the individual, thereby making it normative.

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF THEOLOGICAL NON-REALISM

by

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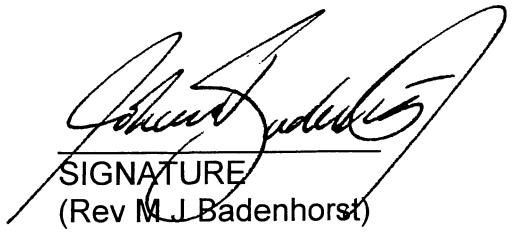
I declare that A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF THEOLOGICAL NON-REALISM is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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SUMMARY

This study in philosophical-theology investigates the problems and prospects of theological non-realism, as proposed and developed by the Cambridge philosopher of religion Don Cupitt. After contextualising non-realism within the worldview, epistemology and theology of pre-modernity, modernity and postmodernity, the study appraises the prospects of non-realism as a new philosophical and theological default position for Christianity and how it relates to what has been referred to as the New Reformation. The study hypothesises and contends that, although radical in orientation and multifarious in prospect, it is a viable and valid basis for Christian reformation. After contextualising, considering some religious and theological content, as well as critique and contrapuntal positions, the study delineates theoretical and practical reformatory options. By and large concurring with Cupitt, the study also deviates from him, particularly with respect to the prospect of ecclesiastical post-Christianity. Although this is not a study in practical theology, this study nevertheless aims to move the debate about the New Reformation forward by proposing non-realism as a basis for a new Church.

Key Terms

Philosophical theology
Philosophy of religion: realism, anti-realism
Nihilism: religious prospects
Theological non-realism
Modernity and postmodernism: theological aspects
Postmodern theology
Don Cupitt, appraisal of
Religious Humanism
Christian doctrines
Christianity: New Reformation.

CURRICULUM VITAE

MARTHINUS JOHANNES BADENHORST was ordained as a minister of religion in the Dutch Reformed Church in Bloukrans, Colenso (KZN) in March 1978, after having been awarded the degrees, Bachelor of Arts (BA) (Hebrew and Philosophy) by the University of Stellenbosch, Bachelor of Divinity (BD) by the University of Pretoria as well as a Post Graduate Diploma in Theology (Dip. Theol) by the same university. After serving in various ministry capacities, including as senior producer of religious programmes for SABC TV, he enrolled as a doctoral student in New Testament at UNISA, as a result of growing interest in Jewish-Christian relations. After two years he passed the doctoral examination with distinction and embarked on research, particularly on the Judaic matrix of early Christianity as well as various aspects of the scholarly Jewish-Christian Dialogue. He paid special attention to the contribution of the later Paul van Buren. As his research deepened, matters relating to the philosophy of religion loomed large, as a result of which he was afforded the option of changing from New Testament to Religious Studies based on a new research proposal. The last three years most of his research was done at the University of Cambridge, focusing on the work of the contemporary radical theologian and Cambridge philosopher of religion, Don Cupitt.

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PREFACE

When I strode onto the splendid, sprawling campus of the University of South Africa and found my way in near-miraculous fashion to the offices of the Faculty of Theology on a June day in the final year of the twentieth century, I was wrestling with a few vexing questions. Now, after seven long, lean years, I am content that I have been able to find the answers, although many more questions, even more vexing in nature, have taken their place. What I have found, therefore, is that research is not about entering the rest after conquering a few giants and then celebrating the security of certitude, even, perhaps especially, if the field of study is theology. Amongst other things, it is about the three c's: consultation, critique and conversation, which translate into reading, reflecting and the arduous activity of writing. If there is one more thing I have gleaned from the lean years, it is that the days of the *answer* are over. This is question time. Every arrival is a new departure, every end, a new beginning.

In particular, it was the perplexing cluster of questions on ancient and modern Jewish-Christian relations that precipitated my progress towards the present study. It led me to a series of fissures between Church and Synagogue, Old Testament and Torah, New Testament and Early Jewish-Christian literature, the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith, to name but a few. While the writings of Neusner, Sanders, Dunn, Crossan, Borg, Charlesworth, Vermes and others were extremely insightful and challenging, I had a rather protracted engagement with Paul van Buren. While I appreciated his new post-critical Jewish-Christian position, I remained intrigued also by his earlier radical theology. This eventually led to a reading of the 'radicals', particularly John Robinson and the so-called Honest-to God debate. It was a short step from there to Don Cupitt, whom I had first encountered in the Myth of God Incarnate debate.

Although I had proceeded quite far with a study of Christology and Christian supersessionism, pertaining in particular to the debate surrounding anti-Semitism in the Fourth Gospel, I welcomed the opportunity to change from New Testament studies to Religious Studies. It afforded me the opportunity to engage with Cupitt, and philosophical theology, particularly Cupitt's proposal and development of theological non-realism, and its implications for some of the great questions of

theology like christology and ecclesiology. Credit for my progress in this must go to Professor Pieter Botha for perceptively sensing this development and proposing the switch. He helped to clear away all the administrative impediments, no doubt with the able assistance of Professor Pieter Craffert. But he was also prepared to remain my supervisor and to see me through.

Don Cupitt is a fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and, in spite of the fact that I have, over the course of the last three years, worked at Cambridge, availing myself of the resources of the University Library, as well as the pleasant environment of the library of the Divinity School and, in spite of the fact that I have been a member of Sea of Faith (UK) since 2004 and also a member of the Cambridge local group, I have not met Don personally. In justification of this seeming paradox, I submit that I resolved to read most of his work before troubling the prolific writer with my trivialities. More seriously, I did not want to run the risk of being either enthralled or disappointed by the man while I immersed myself in his life's work and words. With the completion of this study, including some criticism of his work, I am looking forward to the privilege of meeting this extraordinarily gifted and rather neglected thinker and writer.

A number of people contributed to my reaching this milestone, for which, and to whom I am sincerely grateful. I have mentioned my promoter, Professor Pieter Botha. He was instrumental in providing a reading list for my doctoral examination that was both challenging and conducive to personal enlightenment and preparation for further research. Further, he arranged for me to work as a tutor at the University of South Africa for two academic years, during which time I not only gained invaluable experience, but also made a few friends, one of whom was Professor Maretha Jacobs, whom I thank, not only for the many challenging conversations, but also for assisting me in various valuable ways. I also fondly remember the late Professor Johan Engelbrecht, a kind man who facilitated my enrolment and who allocated me to Professor Pieter Botha. Also, the late Professor Richard Lemmer is fondly remembered for his friendship and support. A special word of thanks goes to my editor, Dr. Karen Batley for the innumerable alterations and improvements to my text.

My family has been a bastion of support, particularly my long-suffering spouse, who not only (literally) suffered along with me and was always the first and the last to hear about my discoveries or disappointments, but has been our main provider over

the last three years. The achievement of becoming a social worker in England, and recently also being promoted to Senior Practitioner within the short space of three years, is an exceptional achievement. To have achieved this, after an absence of two decades from the profession, as well as the fact that she is not British-trained, while English had never been her strong point, matches any achievement this study might represent. Our three children and their spouses contributed in many ways, from providing a roof over our heads, to wheels when required to just being true to form, the sheer pride and joy they have always been. Without them, this journey would have been impossible. A special word of thanks to my mother, for her unwavering love and support, financial and otherwise, and for her constant prayers. I also remember fondly and with gratitude the support and affection of my late father.

I conclude with a dedication to Alexander Charles Lyell. He was, of course, the famous geologist who made a vital contribution to Charles Darwin, by calibrating, as it were, his natural clock to geological time and fervently encouraging him to publish his thesis. The rest is history. I was also privileged to receive vital impetus from Alexander Charles Lyell. He is our first grand child, born a month after we arrived in England. During the course of the last three years, he has learned to walk and talk and laugh and sing and it is his undiluted exuberance and unbridled love for life that often served as an instant antidote against gloom and doom during the dark, lonely days of reading and writing, while having to contend with the loss of the glorious African sunshine, the new country and most precarious and painful of all, my philosophical and theological paradigm shift.

I therefore dedicate this thesis to all my family, past, present and future.

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CHAPTER ONE

THEOLOGICAL REALISM AND NON-REALISM

THE CUPITT CONTROVERSY

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Stage

In philosophical terms, religion has always been about epistemology and ontology, and Christianity is no different. It is about knowing and being and the relationship between the two. When the current world religions came into being, during what is now referred to as the Axial Period (800-200 BCE),[1] they assumed the great responsibility of providing answers to primordial questions and showing how they related to a rewarding life. Amidst the brevity and brutality of life in antiquity, religion pointed the way to life beyond this life. True life lay beyond this shadow of existence. The answer to the riddle of life lay high up in the sky, beyond the blue dome, in the place called heaven, in many respects the headquarters for all principalities and powers.

This scenario has collapsed irretrievably in the new world, referred to simply as the *now* world, modernity. The old has passed away, and all has become new. For five hundred years now, Christianity has been watching the new world emerge around its cloister walls. The modern world no longer functions on the Biblical-Christian worldview. It no longer comes to the church to receive knowledge. Modernity is based on human, scientific knowledge, and what might be referred to as a clearing-up has taken place. The misty-murky clouds have cleared giving way to the clarity of day. Humanity has come of age. But where does that leave the old religions that hail from such a different time and place? What about their role of providing answers and giving direction? What is the way forward? What does the

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[1] Lloyd Geering (2002:41). Leaves (2005:1) (no reference) credits Karl Jaspers with this description. During this period, the pagan gods were dramatically superseded by a more sophisticated monotheism.

future hold for the traditional religions, now that their claim to know both the future and the One who holds it sounds like a faint echo from the past?

What if Christianity were to fully acknowledge the new knowledge? Would it still have a place, a role as a religion? Modern intellectuals like Richard Dawkins do not think so. Of course, the champions of orthodoxy like Alister McGrath and Brian Hebblethwaite staunchly defend the veracity of theological propositions. For the members of the Dawkins camp, religion goes bankrupt with the advent of the death of God. No real God means there is no role for religion, the God-business. The defenders tend to deny the crisis, claiming that those who know about the demise of God know 'an awful lot' (Greenfield 2006:29). If it cannot be proven, they choose to heed Pascal's wager and carry on, business as usual. It is ironic, though, that the most ardent fundamentalists avail themselves of the most modern equipment to get their message across. Although they modernise in all other aspects, they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge that their knowledge-base has become obsolete and therefore untenable.

Some traditionalists welcome the new postmodern situation. They read it as an escape route back to the pre-modern pastures. It is contended here that although postmodernism removes a certain distortion of modernity, it cannot be treated as a card trick whereby the implications of the dawning of modernity is cancelled. Even when 'magic', 'wonder' and mysticism become new, compelling options, the inverted commas indicating irony remain.

The overriding question, therefore, concerns religion after metaphysics, that is, religion, particularly Christianity, in the (post)-modern world. Christianity, particularly in its protestant form, is a confessional community confessing certain beliefs. Could Christianity be converted to confess the paradigm-shift of modernity, re-invent its master narratives and return to this world? Could this new a-theistic confession, Christianity without God, ever become a reality, and would this constitute the New Reformation, the radical transformation or would this spell the final demise of Christianity and the death of the Church? This is the context of the debate about theological realism and non-realism. It is about the credibility and the integrity of Christianity as broker of truth.

1.2 The Scene

The debate about theological realism and non-realism both is and is not the Cupitt controversy. Of course, the debate is much wider than the views of one philosopher of religion from the University of Cambridge. Cupitt (Greenfield 2006:1) himself has always pointed to the dim past, referring back at least to the English deists of' the late 17th century. Certainly, the time of the great *Aufklärung*, (1770-1845) can be considered the prime time for the precipitation of the debate and the ensuing controversy. In his famous monograph, *The sea of faith* (1984)[2], a review of the receding tide of faith, Cupitt probed into the recesses of modern history.

This important work was by no means a dispassionate review of the history of modernity. Cupitt intended to make it clear that the problem and the proposed solution were far from recent innovations and to demonstrate at least that the issues involved were old ones. Early moderns like Pascal and Spinoza had grappled with them. It has been observed that Cupitt used the opportunity to 'preach his non-realist gospel' (Leaves 2004:33). Cupitt has been accused of misrepresenting history. This may be the case, but it is significant that the criticism comes from defenders of theological realism and orthodox Christianity.

Although the issues are old, there is a sense in which the theological realism versus non-realism debate has become a Cupittian controversy. Certainly, Cupitt has been regarded as a highly controversial thinker in Britain and abroad and theological non-realism has become synonymous with his opinions. Many critical thinkers have been described by various different names, but in terms of the realism/non-realism debate, as it became associated with Cupitt in particular, they have wrestled with the same problem, incurring, like Jacob, the inevitable injuries.

And this is the point. It can all be reduced to a struggle with *someone* or *something*. It is vivid and awesome, but when morning comes, as Jacob realised, it is difficult in the clear light of day to say what it was all about. Long before the dawn of modernity, it was already difficult for rational people to be adamant about the Other. Apart from being a critical, liberal scholar, Cupitt was also substantially influenced by the apophatic, mystical tradition, the *via negativa*, which regards it as improper to describe or portray the numinous. Karen Armstrong (cf. 1999:242-95) has convincingly demonstrated that all three of the Abrahamic faiths, in spite of having

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[2] The Sea of Faith was broadcast as a six-part, one-hour BBC TV documentary, accompanied by a book with the same title.

rather recently developed virulent fundamentalisms, have strong apophatic traditions. Although this does not represent fully-fledged non-realism, it is definitely not realism, as this study will show. Strictly speaking many non-realist positions are those of semi-real, or thin-line theists, and their differences, it will be argued, may not amount to much more than nomenclature and some 'political' positioning.

Cupitt is a pivotal figure in a very wide and important debate, one with very deep roots in the story of modernity. This debate can only be ignored by Christians or the church at their own peril. It will be contended, during the course of this appraisal, that theological non-realism is very significant and well-worth digesting, although it is obviously a sophisticated position, difficult to acquire, assimilate and maintain. Non-realism represents and refers to a crisis. It is about passing through the fire. Some have already passed through the fire; others did not experience it as such, so they should not find it difficult to adopt theological non-realism, because they have already become non-real without realising it. This can occur easily, because of the pervasiveness and power of the relevant worldview paradigms. For Christians encountering non-realism in a direct way, without any preparation or orientation regarding the relevant context, it might sound like atheism garnished and presented as a valid theological and religious position. It might sound devious and malicious, and there is no doubt that, with the ever-ready assistance of fundamentalists, they can be 'saved' from heresy. Many critical intellectual people, ex-patriots from the Church, are in exile,[3] because of ecclesiastical 'management's' insistence on maintaining a worldview that has become incredible. It seems ironic to enlightened critics that, although the Church insists on being believed, it continues, unperturbed, to present its faith in a way that has become quite unbelievable to modern people. And this is part of the question. Is it merely the presentation of the faith, the 'packaging' and 'marketing' that is archaic, or is it, in fact, the very product, the substance, that has become incredible? Cupitt and others are persuaded of the latter option. Cupitt, having progressed from a critical liberal position to radical theology and beyond, delivers the damning indictment that because of the church's persistence in upholding an obsolete, redundant, worldview, Christianity has *de facto* become a false religion (Cupitt 1980:3).

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[3] This description originating with the late Bishop John Robinson and used by his 'successor', Bishop John Shelby Spong will be referred to later.

How did Cupitt arrive at this position? What does it mean for the reformation prospects for Christianity, and indeed for Cupitt's proposals for reform? What then of the new reformation? Is Christianity as a faith, or just the ecclesiastical form of it, beyond the pale? What is post-metaphysical Christianity? What, in fact, is post-Christianity, and what is the so-called, 'religion of the future' that Cupitt and others have begun talking about? What is non-realism's theology, christology, ecclesiology and eschatology in traditional theological terms? These are some of the questions that come into the equation.

2 MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE: RESOURCES AND TRAJECTORIES

Because of the limited scope of this dissertation, this section is not intended to be an exhaustive literary review covering the entire debate. Also, it is not a complete review of the entire Cupittian corpus, a task recently undertaken laudably by Nigel Leaves.

2.1 Primary source: the Cupittian corpus

Don Cupitt is the proverbial prolific writer, with a publishing career that commenced in 1961, with his first published article in *Theology,*[4] and extends to 2006, with the publication of *The new creed and the old*, and he is still writing. His first piece of substantial research and writing was on the work of the 19th century philosopher Henry L. Mansel.[5]

Cupitt's first monograph, *Christ and the hiddenness of God,* appeared in 1971. This was followed by another eight over the course of the rest of the decade. *Christ and the hiddenness of God* reveals two trajectories that are important for the understanding of the early Cupitt. Although Cupitt had begun to think critically about the lofty position of Christian orthodoxy and the role of doctrine, prompted by his reading of Mansel, he nevertheless remained well within the confines of orthodoxy. He was a critical liberal scholar, and this is the first trajectory, namely the historical-critical, liberal project. He pointed to Jesus as a concrete role model, a trajectory that stood him in good stead twenty-five years later, when he became closely aligned with

[4] 'What do we mean by 'The Church'?' *Theology, 64:* 1961:275-81.
[5] 'Mansel's 'Theory of Regulative Truth', *Journal of Theological Studies, (*18); 1967:104-26.

the Westar Institute[6] and published *Reforming Christianity* (2001). Here he emphasised the importance of the historical Jesus for 'kingdom' Christianity. It was also during the 1970s that 'tele-don', as he was called in jest, first appeared on television. The subject was 'Who was Jesus?'

A second trajectory is the apophatic tradition. 'Immersed in the apophatic tradition he declared that one could never achieve total knowledge of God. Therefore one must refer to that reality only analogically through the work and person of Jesus' (Leaves 2004:22). Leaves (ibid.) observes that many of the themes of Cupitt's later thesis were already apparent in Cupitt's first monograph. As a result of these two trajectories, Cupitt's theism, the prime picture of theological realism, was already quite thin, as he availed himself of tell-tale metaphors like the void, silence, abyss and a shoreless sea (ibid.).

Hyman (2004:5) remarks that, although Cupitt's first book was hailed by many as the work of a, 'talented reformulator of orthodox doctrine', it was nevertheless clear over the course of the decade that 'his orthodoxy was becoming increasingly suspect'. There was still a very arduous ascent, or a very deep sinking away, all depending on which side of the debate under discussion one stands, before Cupitt could declare in exasperation that 'orthodox' is a 'thought that gives me a headache' (2001a:78).

A significant milestone affecting Cupitt's career is his association with 'the myth of God incarnate' debate (1977), the project edited by the renowned philosopher of religion, John Hick, in which seven British academics wrote chapters relating to the 'mythical' quality of Christology. This was, in other words, a sort of non-realist approach to Christology. The furore it evoked was almost as substantial as the 'honest to God' debate associated with the publication of Bishop John Robinson's book, *Honest to God* (1963).

The most important milestone for the purpose under review, however, was undoubtedly Cupitt's 'coming out' book with the evocative title *Taking Leave of God* (1980). This book, with which Cupitt opened 'Orwell's' auspicious decade, was in many ways a watershed. The works of the 1970s 'brought him to the attention of an academic audience', but from this point onwards Cupitt's notoriety widened and he became 'something of a household name' (Hyman 2004:6). Looking back, Cupitt

[6] The academy founded by Bob Funk that is responsible for the Jesus Seminar. Polebridge Press, the publishing company associated with Westar, had just recently become Cupitt's publisher.

stoically, and with a touch of satire, commented: 'When *Taking leave of God* appeared there was a hell of a row and I realised that it had finished my career as an academic and in the Church' (Leaves 2004:27). Hyman (ibid.) comments that this book gave rise to 'a flurry of replies and responses', articles and books, even evoking mention in the popular press.

Cupitt (2002:1) explains his intention: 'I planned to keep the practical and religious use of the idea of God, whilst dispensing with the old metaphysical God out there who orders and unifies the world and knows everything as it really is.' During that time, his philosophy of religion was in close harmony with the theological ideas of Tillich and Bultmann. His non-realism 'didn't actually change the doctrines very much at all. I just translated them into rules of life, as Wittgenstein had said one should do' (Cupitt: 2002:3).

In 1984, Cupitt presented the six BBC documentary programmes entitled *The sea of faith*, while the book with the same title appeared alongside. The 'sea of faith' is a metaphor taken from Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach':

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Matthew Arnold[7]

The Victorian poet laments the loss of faith experienced on a grand scale, almost like global climate change. This sea-view permeates Cupitt's writings.[8] He is fully persuaded that we are still in a global cultural change, a second Axial Period, in which the continental drift, or glacial slippage of culture, is occurring ominously,

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[7] Paul, H. W. 1902. *Matthew Arnold.*

[8] Although the metaphor becomes a major theme in Cupitt's writings after the broadcast of the BBC documentary series *The Sea of Faith* and the accompanying book, in 1984, it is significant to note that this theme had already been used by N. Lash for his inaugural lecture at Cambridge University in 1978, as suggested by his wife (1978:21). Lash's theme is also significant: 'Doing theology on Dover Beach.' This, he argued, is the kind of critical theology that must take place after Auschwitz, a theology that does not have to provide certitude, but pursues a path of critical enquiry (ibid.). Lash engages with the likes of Maurice Wiles, Macquarrie, Ninian Smart, Paul van Buren and others.

slowly, but surely. Cupitt is persuaded, and remains so throughout his many works, that the old religions, originating from the Axial Age, are in terminal decline.

It may be noted that Cupitt never gives any statistical figures, and never refers to any sociological studies to substantiate this view. He treats it as a commonplace, a melancholic melody reminiscent of the Romantic era. It is quite easy to supply statistics and figures to back it up, because the church attendance figures, to name just one factor, in the United Kingdom, Cupitt's front yard, are very low indeed, which seems to corroborate the despondency. On the other hand, it must be recognised that the predicted 'twilight of the gods', the evaporation of faith by the end of the twentieth century, did not occur.

Also in the year 1984, Cupitt read the book by his American counterpart Mark C. Taylor, which seems to have made a great impression on him,[9] leading him to look more deeply into the emerging continental deconstructionist criticism and the talk of postmodernism. The way for the new continental turn had been gloriously prepared by Cupitt's thorough study of Nietzsche in the early 1980s, which resulted in the 'Nietzschean' book *The World to come* (1982). In this important work, Cupitt contends that nihilism, the void, is unavoidable. He had also been persuaded that the liberal approach to reformation was never going to be enough. This led to the notion that reformation must be radical. He declares: 'We do not just need reformation—we need new religious thought' (Leaves 2004:31).[10] Cupitt (2002:1) narrates the effect on his thought: '...[I]n the following years [the eighties] my non-realism spread from God to become a general philosophical position, and everything began to shift and crumble.' The Nietzschean, anti-realist trajectory is a very important one for appreciation of the 'Cupittian' controversy. *Only human* (1985) represents the postmodern turn, where Cupitt begins to introduce Derrida into his thinking. Leaves (2004:35) believes Derrida replaced Kierkegaard as a significant figure in Cupitt's philosophical firmament. He also comments that the book is written in the style of Foucault. *Life lines* (1986) is also representative of Cupitt's postmodern turn. In the book he presents a 'metro Map of the Spirit', where he delineates the different realist and non-realist positions or stations, or routes of the spiritual journey. There is a crisis in terms of which there are pre-crisis and post-crisis positions. The trajectory of

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[9] The title of this work: *Erring: a postmodern a/theology*. This event is reported by Hyman (2004:9), who also adopted the description a/theology for Cupitt's thought. Cf. Chapter Four *infra*.

[10] This is from a personal letter to Leaves.

the crisis will be encountered quite frequently during the journey of this analysis. *The long-legged fly* (1987) is also a deliberate post-modern work. We will also experience the recurrent appearance of the excellent metaphor of the light-treading insect that lives a precarious life on the surface of the pond. The trajectory of horizontalism that deconstructs the old verticalism is integral to Cupitt's thesis and to this analysis. Cupitt (2002:3) indicated that significant changes occurred when he moved into 'all-out postmodernism'. He wanted to rethink religion as self-expression, or expressionism. He also felt the latitude to 'drastically reinterpret tradition'.

Radicals and the future of the church (1989) was the first book after the first Sea of Faith conference, organised by a growing number of critics (positive), clerics and countryman who had been affected by Cupitt's thought and who felt it necessary to set up some sort of forum. The question that was beginning to burn was whether radicals, as non-realists are also called, could remain in the church, and, if they did, what was their role? Cupitt's views on the future of the church and the prospect of radical reformation came into perspective. It is interesting to note the continuity, but also the progress between Cupitt's two 'church' books, *Reforming Christianity* (2001a) appearing twelve years after *Radicals*. It is the contention of this study that Cupitt's major pre-occupation, the undertone of all his thought, is reformation and that Cupitt can aptly be described as a 'New Reformer'. An important trajectory featuring quite strongly in *Radicals* is Cupitt's anti-realist/non-realist views on ethics and the role he believes ethics plays and can play in the reformation of Christianity. His concept of solar ethics plays a very important part in his 'system'.[11]

Cupitt (2002:2) intimates that it was art that came to his aid. He had always appreciated the movement from realism to impressionism and, contemplating this shift in art, he began to realise the powerful thought that 'what we made, we can remake' (ibid.). The realisation of the loss of realism, and the realisation that religion is only human is not the end, but could, in fact, be a new beginning. If religion was wholly and only human, that was not the death of religion. It was only the death of a dated view. If we made religion, in the same way that we made all art, then we could optimistically start remaking it.

In *Solar ethics* (1995a), Cupitt developed the metaphor of the sun. The sun's life is its dying and in doing so it gives life. People's lives could resemble the

[11] The word is used cautiously, because Cupitt's thought in many ways deliberately defies the idea of a system. Part of the criticism of Cupitt is the constant revision and regular turns.

sun, expending and expressing themselves brilliantly without reserve or regret. This is also based in the Nietzschean criterion of 'life affirming' or 'life denying' attitudes and actions. Thenceforth his reconstructionist thought was never again without the sun. It is an important trajectory whereby non-realism becomes active and creative, transcending traditional, liberal demythologising.

The previous year (1994) had seen the publication of *After all: religion without alienation*. This work is significant as part of Cupitt's emphasis on, and development of, his expressivism, or expressionism. It is also significant that Cupitt's concept of post-Christianity began to appear at this juncture, a trajectory that would play a very important role in the rest of his corpus. He developed the emphasis on 'kingdom' in contrast with the church. Kingdom was proclaimed and expected, but what we are stuck with is the church, which has actually usurped the kingdom. Cupitt's historical Jesus views were now updated and he relied quite strongly on the Jewish Jesus portrait by Geza Vermes, in combination with his affinity with Albert Schweitzer, employed as one of the significant figures of the Sea of Faith-project, a decade earlier

His postmodernism now pronounced, Cupitt produced another 'after' book, entitled *After God: the future of religion* (1997a). This work was probably the peak of Cupitt's active non-realism, the attempt to inflate the flat balloon of non-realism's negation of religious realism. The book reiterated the main themes of his expressionism, solar living, ecstatic immanence, aestheticism and anti-realism (Leaves 2004:74). As Cupitt attempts to state the 'bottom line', which is particularly difficult given the post-modern *penchant* to resist all meta-narratives, he nevertheless makes clear what it is 'all' about. It is not about preservation of the old religions, but, in keeping with his 'kingdom' view, it is about moving closer to the global view of a religious view that allows people to live their lives beautifully and happily, while caring for others and the planetary place we call home. The new religion should no longer divide people into a 'we' and a 'they'.

In the same year (1997b), in *Mysticism after modernity,* he revisited his engagement with the apophatic tradition three decades before. The trajectory of mysticism is never very far from sight in Cupitt's corpus. What role this persuasion plays in terms of post-Christian prayer will be indicated in due course.

Cupitt also engaged with Heidegger, which led to the publication of two works published in the same year (1998), which gave rise to a more pronounced

view on life and be-ing. Cupitt argued that 'just as Heidegger tried to overcome the distinction between the eternal realm (being) and the temporal realm (becoming) by saying that only this world of be-ing (coming to be) existed, so we too must concentrate on how to live in this world of temporality (be-ing)' (Leaves 2004:7).

The attempt at bottom-lining without closing the postmodern openness is reflected in Cupitt's turn to ordinary speech, an integral aspect of his vision of democratising religion. As the century and millennium draw to a close, Cupitt's philosophical-theological-religious views also emptied-out (or overflowed) into ordinariness, simplicity and openness, as is evident in the trilogy of 'everyday speech' books, *The new religion of life in everyday speech* (1999), *The meaning of it all in everyday speech* (1999) and *Kingdom come in everyday speech* (2000). It became clear that all of Cupitt's philosophical persuasions were coming together in a simple and universal religion of everyday life. These little 'life' books contain very important trajectories that constitute, as it will be proposed in this thesis, a new a/theology. The fact that *Reforming Christianity* (2001a) was preceded by the 'life' trilogy and *Philosophy's own religion* (2000b), gives it particular significance. What are the prospects for a non-realist, new reformation on the threshold of the third millennium of Christianity? Where in the world is the faith heading? 'Empty-ing out' or 'running on empty' are good working metaphors for the description of Cupitt's last stand. Paradoxically it is also the filling up, overflowing or in older parlance, 'coming of age'. The trilogy was followed by *Emptiness and brightness* (2001). Leaves encapsulates:

> Unlike radical orthodoxy[12], which reinforces the distinctions between God and man, master and servants, light and darkness, nihilism promotes a world in which everything is on the same level and everything is open and explicit. This is the anti-realist, nihilist, Kingdom vision of postmodern secularism and early Christianity.
>
> Leaves 2004:107

Cupitt's bottom-line emphasis on Life is further expressed in another Polebridge book, entitled simply *Life, life* (2003). It contains short chapters that can be read almost as a 'thought for the day'. Although they are very simple, they represent the summit, even the *summa* of a very long and arduous climb, and they relate to a long, retrospective view of the story of modernity, now extending over five hundred years. It is one man's view of life, but this man is a very significant voice in an important

[12] This critical alternative to non-realism will be considered in Chapter Four.

debate. This leads on to *The way to happiness* (2005), which sounds almost banal in its simplicity, but as is always the case with Cupitt, the philosophical undertow is strong and this little work, written in a novel narrative style without any table of contents or chapters, contains, in fact, Cupitt's ideas on a new theory of religion. Poignant to the present quest, is Cupitt's conclusion: 'I have brought religion very close to culture. And, conversely, I have brought culture very close to religion' (2005:77).

2.2 Secondary sources

Cupitt attracted quite substantial attention, as well as stringent criticism, particularly after *Taking leave* (1980). Keith Ward's *Holding fast to God* (1982) assisted his upward mobility in academia and church, while *Taking leave* was the beginning of Cupitt's decline as far as those institutions were concerned. Brian Hebblethwaite's *Ocean of Truth* (1988) was a deliberate and comprehensive critical reaction to Cupitt's *The sea of faith* (1984), since when Hebblethwaite has remained steadfast in his criticism of Cupitt, regularly devoting writings to Cupitt, with the latter corresponding in kind. Between Cupitt's 'Sea' and Hebblethwaite's 'Ocean' lies a desert of discontent.

Prior to Leaves' study, there were two attempts at comprehensive analysis of Cupitt's corpus. Scott Cowdell's analysis, *Atheist priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity* (1988) saw the light in the same year as Hebblethwaite's *Ocean*, and although it represents a significant development in Cupittian criticism (Leaves (2004:10) regards it as a standard textbook), it is severely dated with respect to Cupitt's virulent output since the middle-1980s, and Leaves (ibid.) quite correctly contends that 'an enormous shift' occurred in Cupitt's thinking, as well as in the *Zeitgeist* and world events in general. Cupitt (2004:vii) points out that Cowdell introduced the methodology of reconstructing the development of Cupitt's thought, which Leaves adopts and refines. Although what he says is not a 'refutation', Cowdell nevertheless defends the critical realist position which , in final analysis, is not much different from the course taken by Hebblethwaite. Stephen Ross White's analysis, *Don Cupitt and the future of Christian doctrine* (1994), although an updated analysis, nevertheless firmly stands on the realist side of the controversy, defending Christian orthodoxy.

Indicative of the perception that the realist-non-realist debate has become the Cupittian controversy is the fact that Cupitt's name is now more readily found in theological/philosophical dictionaries under the rubric of realism/non-realism or anti-realism, as in the *Oxford companion to Christian thought* (2000). The article is authored by William P. Alston, who, in his appraisal of Cupitt's anti-realism, only mentions the solitary aspect of autonomy as a hallmark of modernity. In dismissing it as an insufficient argument against 'traditional attitudes to God', he is able to dispense with Cupitt as well. It is rather alarming to see that only *Taking Leave* of God (1980) appears in Alston's bibliography. Up to circa 2000, the time of the publication of the above *Oxford Companion*, Cupitt had published no less than twenty books explaining and expanding his position. No wonder Alston is persuaded that realism should remain Christianity's 'default' position (2000:595).

Colin Crowder did slightly better in his article on Cupitt in the same resource (2000:147), citing two quite representative works, *sea of faith* (1994)[13] and *After All: religion without alienationl* (1994). Apart from dismissing Cupitt's non-realism as more of a thought-provoking, 'polemical, playful...infuriating...fascinating', yet unconvincing position, he nevertheless gives a succinct, if small, overview of Cupitt and the Cupittian controversy.

2.2.1 Nigel Leaves

Nigel Leaves' twin works, *Odyssey on the sea of faith* (2004) and *Surfing on the sea of faith* (2005)[14] are of prime importance to Cupitt studies. They are comprehensive and thorough, encompassing all of Cupitt's books up to 2001. After making extensive use of them as an invaluable resource, the writer agrees with Lloyd Geering's appraisal that it 'is of such a quality that it may be regarded as definitive'.[15] Cupitt (2004:ix-x) endorses them as 'the best attempt so far to trace the development of the main themes of my thinking...'.

Where Cupitt acknowledges several 'stages' in his work, and some reviewers[16] indicate 'three successive stages of theological development', Leaves (2004:2) has delineated seven stages:

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[13] Reprint of 1984.
[14] The two books are supported by extensive research for what Cupitt, in the foreword of *Odyssey* described as an 'enormous Ph.D. dissertation'.
[15] Comment on the cover of *Odyssey* (2004).
[16] http://www.faithnet.org.uk/Theology/cupitt.htm.

Stage 1: (1971-1979) The negative theology

Christ and the hiddenness of God (1971)

Crisis of moral authority (1972)

The leap of reason (1976)

The worlds of science and religion (1976)

Who was Jesus? (1977)

Explorations in theology (1979)

The nature of man (1979)

The debate about Christ (1979)

Jesus and the gospel of God (1979)

Stage 2: (1980-1985) Non-realism: "Coming Out"

Taking leave of God (1980)

The world to come (1982)

The sea of faith (1984)

Only human (1985)

Stage 3: (1986-1989) Postmodernism and anti-realism

Life lines (1986)

The long-legged fly (1987)

The new Christian ethics (1988)

Radicals and the future of the church (1989)

Stage 4: (1990-1997) Expressionism

Creation out of nothing (1990)

What is a story? (1991)

The time being (1992)

Rethinking religion (1992)

After all: religion without alienation (1994)

The last philosophy

Solar ethics (1995)

After God: the future of religion (1997)

Mysticism after modernity (1997)

Stage 5: (1998) The turn to being

The religion of being (1998)

The revelation of being (1998)

Stage 6: (1999-2000) Ordinary language

The new religion of life in everyday speech (1999)

The meaning of it all in everyday speech (1999)

Kingdom come in everyday speech (2000)

Stage 7: (2000 onwards) The religion of the future

Philosophy's own religion (2000)

Reforming Christianity (2001)

Emptiness and brightness (2001)

Is nothing sacred? (2002)

Life life (2003)

Not included in Leaves' analysis:

The way to happiness (2005)

The old creed and the new (2006)

Leaves (2004:1) uses this scheme to narrate the flow of Cupitt's thought, emphasising that Cupitt's work is a 'flowing project' 'that is always changing'; that Cupitt is always reinventing and rethinking (2005:156); and that trying to conclude on Cupitt is like attempting to draw the landscape from a moving train.[17]

2.2.2 Colin Crowder

It was Crowder's review of Cowdell's Cupittian analysis that prompted Leaves' project. Crowder, in his review of *Atheist Priest,* called for a 'substantial critique...that would have to consider the implications of a radically anthropocentric constructivism' (cited in Leaves 2004:11). *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism* (1997) is a good resource, providing 'a symposium of views (both for and against) non-realism' (ibid, 11) and setting the debate in a context wider than merely a Cupittian

[17] Cupitt used this simile regarding his perspective of the difficulty of devising a philosophical system in the current postmodern climate (Leaves 2004:115).

controversy, although Cupitt's influence is nevertheless palpable and pervasive throughout the debate.

2.2.3 Joseph Runzo

Is God Real? (1993), edited by Runzo, is based on another, slightly earlier but relevant symposium that addressed the salient aspects of the debate. This remains a very good resource and it has been extensively consulted in this study, particularly in Chapter Four where this study engages with the main contenders of the debate. Runzo brings together contending, diverse views from across the spectrum of the realist-non-realist debate and contributors are often given an opportunity to respond directly to opponents' papers. Significant contributors *inter alia* are Don Cupitt, Brian Hebblethwaite, John Hick, D. Z. Phillips and Joseph Runzo.

2.2.4 Gavin Hyman and the festschrift

Gavin Hyman is the editor of *New directions in philosophical theology* (2004), a Festschrift of *essays in honour of Don Cupitt,* comprising contributions by ten former colleagues and students of Cupitt. All of them pay tribute in some way to him, before indicating points of divergence, which they feel represent 'new directions in philosophical theology. Cupitt is praised for breaking ground and for being bold when it comes to experimentation, thereby for blazing trails for new directions in philosophical theology.

Gavin Hyman has made a considerable contribution with his laudable attempt (2001)[18] to bring Cupitt and Milbank, the two polarised positions within the postmodern approach to the controversy, into dialogue. In Chapter Four, both the radical orthodoxy camp of Milbank, as well as the middle road advocated by Hyman, will be considered.

There seems to be some doubt as to whether Cupitt's 'nihilist textualism' (Hyman 2001:3), in spite of its overtly Nietzschean persuasion and Cupitt's postmodern claims, can really be regarded as postmodern theology at all.[19] Indicative of such a view is the glaring omission of Cupitt from *The Cambridge companion to postmodern theology* (2003), edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Cupitt is not even

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[18] *The predicament of Postmodern Theology, Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism* (2001).

[19] It could even be questioned whether theology is *überhaupt* possible in postmodern perspective. The road to the return of theology is by no means unequivocal.

mentioned in the index, although this is not the case with his American counterpart, Mark C. Taylor. John Milbank and even Rowan Williams receive ample attention as valid expressions of post-modern theology in spite of their overt orthodoxy. This is testimony to the current state of theology and to the collapse of the liberal consensus (Hyman 2004:1).

2.2.5 Trevor Greenfield

Trevor Greenfield gives Cupitt and non-realism pride of place in his *Introduction to radical theology: the death and resurrection of God* (2006), for which Cupitt furnished a foreword. Greenfield's book is significant as a counterpoint to the impression created in mainstream publications, under the sway of orthodoxy that radical theology was a flippant fad that burst onto the scene in the silly sixties and died a sudden death due to the innate implausibility of its preposterous propositions. This is more or less the impression given in, for instance, Alister McGrath's *The twilight of atheism: the rise and fall of disbelief in the modern world* (2004). What is even more astounding is that Cupitt is not even mentioned in the dismissal of radical theology. John Robinson is mentioned and, of course, Thomas Altizer, who is brusquely brushed aside before the author assaults the wayward Bishop Spong (ibid: 163), whom he depicts as someone who is not favourably accepted even in his own diocese. It is strange that McGrath does not apply this criterion to Jesus himself. Nevertheless, there is no mention of Cupitt and the reader is left with the impression that the death of God theology has met the same fate it claimed for the Almighty.

Greenfield (2006) redresses this imbalance and shows that radical theology was not a flash in the pan, but is an old and prevalent persuasion involving serious issues. The issues he identifies and focuses on are: 'Christology and Jesus, Ethics and Worldview and his proposal of radical theology as the new wisdom literature. He concludes with some new directions in radical theology. Cupitt (2006:3), referring to himself as 'a "traditional" Death-of-God radical', believes Greenfield's book addresses 'very great questions' that call for careful consideration.

2.2.6 John Shelby Spong

For Greenfield, non-realism is intimately related to radical theology, and, although Cupitt identifies with the description, the term is more applicable to Bishop John Shelby Spong, the (retired) Episcopalian who has strongly followed in the footsteps

of Bishop John Robinson. Although Spong and Cupitt differ, as will be pointed out at various points of the dissertation, Spong is significant, particularly in terms of his avowed conviction to bring about radical change of Christianity as a faith, but also in terms of its institution, the church. Furthermore, Spong may be regarded as the foremost new reformer, who has actually, in Lutheran fashion, posted his twelve theses. Although Spong is therefore undoubtedly a vociferous radical theologian, his theology is different from Cupitt's, and this is due to a difference in philosophical under-girding. Although the two are not identical, what Spong says should be read in conjunction with Cupitt and vice versa.

2.2.7 Lloyd Geering

This is also the case with Geering. Although there appear to be influences of one on the views of the other, Geering has become, like Cupitt, fully non-real. In terms of the new reformation, Geering's focus is more global than ecclesiastical and in this sense he seems to have influenced Cupitt's later thought. Geering comes from a somewhat different background to that of Cupitt and Spong, but, despite differences, it is useful to read Geering along with Cupitt.

3 FRAMING THE QUESTION / QUESTIONING THE FRAME

3.1 Questioning the frame

The underlying problem relating to realism and non-realism is the governing and opposing frameworks that serve as paradigms governing the epistemology, theology, hermeneutics and religious expression. When Christendom was in place, the Christian paradigm dominated and dictated. With the dawning of modernity, it was the rupture of the consensus prevalent under Christendom that precipitated the new contentious and conflicting situation. Since the rise of modern liberal theology, a consensus developed among critical academic scholars that the modern paradigm could not be ignored, but had to be discounted in all theological work, although there was more or less consensus on the view that a compromise between the two competing frameworks had to be sought. It could not be conceived that the Christian paradigm could be declared obsolete and redundant. Even in the most liberal approach, this was regarded as a bridge too far.

Recently the consensus and compromise has been ruptured and Hyman credits Cupitt, particularly in the British context, with noticing and contributing significantly to the new contentious situation.

> It would not be an exaggeration to say that in the British context, he was the theologian who effectively inaugurated the subsidence of the liberal consensus within theology and ushered in the new more contested era in theology that we are experiencing today.
>
> Hyman 2004:3

Hyman (ibid.) is persuaded that it is by and large a question of framework and presuppositions. The liberal consensus operated solely on the Kantian Enlightenment framework and sought to bridge the chasm between religion and secularism, offering a fusion of the two (Greenfield 2006:21). Hyman (2004:1) attempts to pinpoint the 'liberal compromise', mentioning characteristics like the alignment of theology to 'post-Kantian' philosophy, revision or restatement of traditional theology in accordance with contemporary culture, and engagement in apologetics to justify theology's legitimacy, an attempt to show how theology 'represents' reality. With the advent of postmodernism, the framework shifted and the former consensus crumbled.

Cupitt (2006:4) also refers to what he regards as the misplaced optimism, lasting for a century or more, that the critical methods could render a sufficient revision to make Christianity modern and yet somehow retain a semblance of orthodoxy. He believes the 'critical style of thinking' was underestimated by moderate reformers, its implications were 'much more revolutionary' than it first appeared. The overall religious landscape has now changed. Neo-conservatives and evangelicals are in command and Cupitt laments the prospect that an 'academic theological liberal' like Rowan Williams seems forced by Evangelicals to tow the line (ibid: 3).

Zooming out a little and surveying the broad religious landscape, it is possible to perceive a triangular contest, with the traditional faiths holding some of their ground against their polar opposite of secular humanism, the one tending to remain fully theist and the other tending to be fully atheist. The third contestant comprises the new religious movements and new spiritualities which, together with their unlikely partner, fundamentalism, seem to represent the contemporary resurgence of faith and religious practice. Cupitt does not fit into any of these positions.

The mature Cupitt inclines towards the position of positively appraising secular post-modern culture as 'Christianity-become-kingdom'. Greenfield (2006:26) observes, 'For two generations theologians have spoken of religionless Christianity. Now it is coming into being. The lifestyle of the West in the twenty-first century is Christian, regardless of individual beliefs. Western culture is inherently Christian'. Paradoxically, atheism is the new Christianity of the West. Not only is this paradoxical, but also ambiguous, because Cupitt and non-realist radicals retain religion and want to form and reform it. They acknowledge that culture, having subsumed Christianity, now informs religion. Religion, in this sense, is not only an expression of 'Christian culture', but also an individual self-expression. Religion in this sense has become entirely humanistic, even as God has (radically) become human.

Theology has become a contentious terrain (Hyman 2004:1) and 'a community of contested discourses' (Macintyre).[20] To some it indicates the impossibility of theology and part of the presupposition is to indicate what sort of theological definition is adhered to. Further, methodology has become highly framework-sensitive. Postmodernism has made it precarious to 'name the present' (Tracy 1994) and postmodern theology is no exception. Cupitt (2001:78) refers to Right-post-Modernists, 'provocative neo-traditionalists' who, 'affirm standard Latin theology'. Leaves contends that in their treatment the postmodern becomes pre-modern. Cupitt (2001:78) refers to Left-postmodernists, including himself, who 'accept the metaphysical truth of nihilism and accept that theological statements cannot be understood realistically'.

In spite of the noise, Hyman (2004:2) concludes that the new 'situation has been immensely exhilarating and exciting and has served to revitalise the field'.

3.2 Framing the question

What then, are the prospects for a non-realist approach to theology and religion? This study attempts to demarcate by supplying a framework and indicating the areas of investigation.

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[20] Cited by Hyman (2004:2)

3.2.1 A negative position

It is evident that the primary prospect of theological non-realism as a negative position lies in its being the antithesis of theological realism. For this reason, the first line of enquiry is to determine what theological realism is and what is wrong with it.

3.2.2 Philosophical foundation

It should also be evident that there is a particular relationship between the theological and the philosophical aspects, the philosophy underlining, or under-girding the theology, indicating the need for a philosophical enquiry. This entails a look at epistemology and ontology, specifically classical metaphysics and how it relates to Christian theism, that is, theological realism.

3.2.3 Worldview

Very closely related to the questions about the theory of knowledge is the question of worldview. The problem at hand is mainly about conflicting worldviews, the Christian and the modern/postmodern.

3.2.4 Religion

Part of the framing of the question is how the worldview, philosophy and theology translate into belief, ethics and worship. Although the nature of this study is philosophical theology, it nevertheless keeps practical application in view, in much the same way as practical theology keeps the underlying philosophical aspects on which practice rests, in view.

3.2.5 Reformation

It will be contended that the proposal of non-realism is innately and radically reformative. The nature and objective of the reformation is not clear at first glance, and therefore it constitutes another line of enquiry. If non-realism is part of the new reformation, what is its relationship and role? What does it imply in terms of the, individual, social and global aspect?

3.2.6 Problem statement

The study is a critical appraisal of (Cupittian) theological non-realism, particularly with regard to the prospects and problems associated with a radical reformation of Christianity. A hypothesis is posited to serve as a general guideline: non-realism as the core of a new theology of life, is a valid and valuable basis for the new reformation of Christianity. Five questions, serving as gate-ways that open into fields of related questions guide the investigation. These questions pertain to context, content, criticism and conclusion:

1. What are theological realism and non-realism?
2. What is the road to non-realism?
3. How did Don Cupitt 'inflate' non-realism?
4. What are the main criticisms and contending positions?
5. What are the prospects for a radical (root) reformation?

3.3 Envisaged conclusion and contribution

Although the study by and large endorses Cupitt's influence, while also taking note of the contending and alternative positions, the study inclines towards a non-realist ecclesiastical integrity which constitutes a clear parting of the ways with Cupitt and most other significant voices. Although a practical proposal will be made in this regard, it will also be shown that the road ahead in terms of religious reform is multifarious, opening into a sort of delta with many co-existing and equal paths leading into a non-apocalyptic, non-eschatological future. The study departs from the death of God premise and the *a priori* that religion is a wholly human creation.[21] Although this is a study in philosophical theology, the practical and pragmatic implications are also considered. As practical theology cannot function without keeping underlying philosophy in mind, philosophical theology should also keep the practical implications in mind, thereby engaging in conversation across the theological spectrum.

[21] The latter is part of the vision statement of the Sea of Faith Network (UK).

The thesis aims to make a distinctive contribution to the current non-realist and particularly Cupittian debate by:

- a concise delineation of the historical and philosophical context of non-realism by tracking the trajectories of Don Cupitt's development to philosophical anti-realism and theological non-realism. (Chapter Two and first part of Chapter Three).
- providing an interpretation of the theological and religious implications of this development. (Second part of Chapter Three).
- entering the critical conversation with Cupitt and by considering some contending alternatives. (Chapter four).
- uniquely setting the non-realist question in the particular context of the New Reformation. (Chapter five).
- interrogating Cupitt's ambivalent anti-ecclesiastical attitude and by proposing a new non-realist ecclesiastical course. (Chapter five).

By contending strongly for the New Reformation prospects of non-realism, particularly in a new ecclesiastical *modus*, the author hopes to move the debate to a different level. Non-realism and the philosophy of the church is combined in a unique way. It is not however a complete and prescriptive model, but rather the proposal of a new angle to the debate.

CHAPTER TWO

MODERNITY AND THE ROAD TO THEOLOGICAL NON-REALISM

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about context, the road to theological non-realism. The journey leads along the landscape sculpted by the glacial slippage due to the cultural climate change, that is modernity. The methodology is to keep an eye on worldview in general and epistemology in particular and then move on to theology, taking a historical look at the reaction to the crisis posed by modernity. Don Cupitt is contracted tour guide, while a side-glance is cast at his own odyssey[1], how he came to and handled the crisis. The chapter commences with a look at the 'marriage made in heaven' between metaphysical epistemology and theological realism, after which Cupitt's explanation of the diverse pre-crisis, realist stations on his metro map are briefly considered, before the focus is turned towards the divorce, dawning of modernity and the clearing-up (Aufklärung) associated with it. The struggle of theology with the modern paradigm, as well as the advent of Radical Theology is also briefly reviewed, before the focus is turned to Don Cupitt and his 'coming out' with the proposal of theological non-realism in 1980.

2. METAPHYSICAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL REALISM

2.1 Classical Metaphysics and Western Civilization

A. N. Whitehead has described the history of Western thought as 'footnotes to Plato' (Cupitt 1997a:62). It is so interconnected with the Western way of thinking that it may never be fully exorcised, as prominent anti-metaphysical thinkers like Kant, Wittgenstein and Derrida have all suspected (ibid.)

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[1] 'Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and Writings of Don Cupitt' (2004), is the title of Nigel Leaves' review of Cupitt's oeuvre.

The term 'metaphysics' literally means 'after', or 'beyond', physics or nature. Plato (427-347 BCE)[2] regarded the world of sensual objects as contingent. There is a gulf between the world of the sensual and the world of timeless essence, that is, the world of ideas, of which the sensual objects are mere shadows. These timeless ideas exist independently of mind. They 'exist as real entities and as originals for empirical objects' (Delius *et al* 2005:12). This is the essence of Platonic dualism. The world of sense knowledge is knowledge of shadows. Our temporal, mortal existence on earth is depicted graphically by Plato's famous cave allegory, introduced in his dialogue, *The Republic.* People are chained up for life in a cave where they see on the wall shadows of things on the outside. They are not able to see the things, only the shadows cast by the things. Because of their restricted view, the inmates regard the shadows as real, 'However, the things themselves are mere images of an ideal existence...' (ibid.).

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who studied under Plato for twenty years, founded his own Academy in Athens when he became critical of his former teacher. In particular, he criticised the unbridgeable gap between the ideas and the world of experience, between the essence and the actual object' (ibid, 15). Aiming to focus on natural philosophy and on the physical, he moved the speculation on ontology, cosmology and philosophical theology to fourteen books that came 'after' his *Physics,* and they have become known as metaphysics.[3] This was an arrangement of subjects ranging from the sensory perceptible to the supra-sensory. In terms of Aristotle's understanding, however, it is ironic, because he 'defined metaphysics as the science of first causes', and therefore these subjects actually belong at the beginning of his system (ibid, 114). 'Metaphysics, is the general theory of wisdom or the "original philosophy" , the basic theory of the first causes and principles of being and of thinking' (ibid,15).

Aristotle is famous for postulating a first cause or prime mover. A being was thought to exist who is the cause of all other beings, although his being is not caused by anything. He is the unmoved mover. It is interesting that 'while Aristotle

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[2] The view of Plato, presented in this paragraph follows the conventional perception. It should be acknowledged, however, that there is a reappraisal of Plato extant, associated with the work of scholars like G. Fine, who differ markedly from the traditional perception, largely following Aristotle's criticism of Plato. For a review of Fine's work and critical discussion of the debate, cf. J. Van Eck (2005:304—7). Also, Fine, G, *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays,* XII—447. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[3] Greek: *ta meta ta physika* (Delius *et al* 2005:114)

calls this entity "God", it did not create the world, nor does it guide the world now, or take any part in it' (ibid.).

2.2 Metaphysical Realism: Onto-Theology

Classical Greek metaphysics is also referred to as onto-theology.[4] Ontology is about being and the question about the highest being is theology. Because Heidegger believed Western thought to be pervaded by and founded in these two questions about how things are, he describes the whole of the Western metaphysical tradition as onto-theological (Thompson 2005:13).[5] Christian theology became established within an epistemology of direct correspondence between thought and being. Cupitt describes the old, pre-Cartesian, pre-crisis way of thinking with reference to Aristotle:

> You began with Being—and Being made itself understood by you. As Aristotle[6] puts it, only in God is there fully autonomous thinking. For the rest of us thought is not autonomous, but rather is evoked by its object. Human thought was not separated from Being, because to be thinking at all was already to be participating in the universal intelligibility of Being in all beings, the immanent Logos.
>
> Cupitt 1986:5

Knowledge in the old system before Descartes typically started with ontology. It started with the object of the subject-object relation. Descartes, we shall see in due course, is the watershed, where a shift from ontology to epistemology occurred, specifically to the thinking subject.

Butchvarov (1999:562) defines metaphysical realism as:

i) The contention that there are real (spatio-temporal) objects
ii) They have an independent objective existence apart from our experience or knowledge.
iii) They can interrelate apart from our knowledge or language.

Cupitt (1986:222) distinguishes medieval realism from modern realism. In Antiquity and medieval times, realism was the 'belief in the real existence of universals (the Platonic forms), apart from the individuals which exemplify them...In

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[4] Thompson (2005:7 n.1) ascribes the term as a neologism, to Kant. Although, 'The term was popularised by Heidegger as a catch-phrase for the failings of the metaphysical tradition in philosophy' (Wrathall 2003:1-2) Cf. also Vanhoozer (2003:21-2). It is very interesting to note that Feuerbach already used it. (1841:38).

[5] Ameriks (2000b:258) applies this indictment also to German Idealism in particular and philosophy in general: '...an alienating effort to carry out theology by other means.'

[6] Cupitt does not provide a reference.

modern times 'realism' is more often used to mean belief in the reality of the external world'.

2.3 Idealism and Anti-Realism

In contrast, *Anti-realism,* a term introduced by Nietzsche (Cupitt 1987:222) and now widely used, rejects the propositions mentioned above. A position that 'merely denies the existence of material things' is usually referred to as 'idealism' (Butchvarov 1999:562).[7] Idealists maintain that the world-order is not gleaned from an independent, intrinsic order but is constituted and imposed by the mind of the observer.[8] *Anti-realism* is a stronger form of Idealism and may also be regarded as (Nietzschean) perspectivism (Cupitt 1986:223).

2.4 Theological Realism

Cupitt defines theological realism:

> The theory that religious objects such as God and spirits are distinct, objectively-existing quasi-personal beings independent of the believer's consciousness, and experienced as sources of energy, or powers. Religious beliefs are therefore understood as describing or at least as referring to objective beings, states of affairs and supernaturally-caused occurrences; and the truth of such beliefs is seen as lying in their correspondence with what is the case.
>
> Cupit 1997a:223-4.

2.4.1 Platonic dualism and embryonic Christianity

Metaphysics in general and Platonic dualism in particular was pervasive in the Hellenistic world in which the evangelists composed their gospel narratives and it is particularly prevalent in Paul's writings, regarded by many as the architect of Christianity. It was also strong in the Apostolic and Nicean Fathers and from there pervaded Western consciousness. Truth is essentially from outside and enters this world through revelation as special knowledge. Privileged agents or brokers faithfully receive this special knowledge, whereby they are able to glimpse what is true. The mind has to be regenerated, set free from captivity, before it is able to comprehend

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[7] Cf. for instance a discussion of the dialogues of George Berkeley (1685—1753), in Rader, M 1980:168-192.

[8] It should be noted that the meaning of Idealism is rather more complex and still open to discussion, as Ameriks (2000a:8) contends. It could denote that 'matter, *or* the external world , is not independently real, *or* at least that it cannot be known, *or* known with certainty, as real.' Ameriks proposes the use of more specific terms like 'immaterialism', or 'skepticism'. For a nuanced discussion on Idealism and anti-Realism, as well as the traditional cold reception of it in the 'analytical' British-American tradition, cf. Ameriks, K, 2000a, pages 7-10.

the things of the mind of God. This world is a shadowy world of captivity, but one day the redeemed will be free and enter the teleological destination, heaven, the home of God.

Metaphysics therefore, as we have shown (§ 2.2 above, is onto-theology. By the same token, traditional Christian theology is metaphysical in terms of worldview in general, and epistemology and ontology in particular.

2.4.2 Theism and related terms

The traditional onto-theological literalist view of God, in the Western tradition of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is referred to in philosophy and theology as theism (Thompson 2003:111). John Haldane (2003:17), a Christian philosopher and apologist, describes theism as the belief in a single, all-knowing, all-good, all-present and all-powerful, eternally existing God who created and sustains the universe.[9] It is the view of an objective,[10] real existence of God as the Supreme Being, for which faith, biblical faith, is required. God is the infinite, spiritual, personal, *ex nihilo* creator of the world, who is the sovereign monarch of the universe. He is regarded as male, a loving father who is able to enter into personal relationships with human individuals. Bishop Robinson described theism:

> Theism...understands by this supreme Person, a self-existent subject of infinite goodness and power, who enters into a relationship with us comparable with that of one human personality with another. The theist is concerned to argue the existence of such a Being as the creator and most sufficient explanation of the world as we know it. Without a person 'out there' the skies would be empty, the heavens as brass, and the world without hope or compassion.
>
> Robinson 1963:46

Dawkins (2006:18) adds: '...intervenes in the world by performing miracles; frets about good and bad deeds, and knows when we do them (or even *think* of doing them.)' Basically, it is the view of the Bible, taken literally.[11] Belief in the existence of such a God is theism and the conviction that no such God exists has become known as a-theism. The view that there is no conclusive evidence to decide whether God

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[9] The debate (2003) between John Haldane, defending theism, and Ninian Smart, rejecting theism, is informative in this regard. Also the feud between Dawkins and McGrath.

[10] 'Objective' in this regard can mean two things: i) Can be proven, and ii) Existing independently of mind.

[11] Alston (2000:595) contends that 'realism is the "default" position for Christian thought, the position to take in the absence of sufficient reasons against it'.

exists or not has become known as agnosticism, a term invented by T.H. Huxley to describe his own position of indecision (Kennedy 1999:215).

An identification of God with the physical universe is referred to as pantheism, a term coined by J. Toland (1705) (Delius *et al* 2005:115) and usually associated with the rationalist thought of Spinoza. A modification attributed (Geering 2002:54) to K. C. F. Krause (1781-1832) is called panentheism.[12] It describes the idea that God is not simply identified with nature, but everything is nevertheless regarded as being *in* God. Theism emphasising transcendence was regarded as unconvincing and pantheism which emphasised immanence was regarded as too crude (ibid, 54-5). The idea of an external designer God who created the world, but is not immanent within it, is referred to as deism and it was the favoured position of Enlightenment thinkers. This is usually what modern physicists[13] have in mind when they refer to God. Dawkins (2006:18) is decidedly under-whelmed: 'Pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism'.[14]

2.4.3 A prevailing perspective

In spite of the Enlightenment and the dawning of the secular modern world, to which we will turn shortly, theism and its Platonic roots are still prevalent, and, as we have seen in the case of Haldane and others, is staunchly defended. Cupitt (1997a:58) relates how his thoughts were provoked by a remark made by a colleague at Cambridge regarding the death of a fellow colleague: 'Well, he knows now, doesn't he?', Cupitt viewed this as a sort of window into the residual, but nevertheless pervasive worldview with which Christian faith is associated. Cupitt drew up a summary of the most important aspects implied in the remark—(adapted and paraphrased):

- Truth is not made by us, but revealed and received
- Truth exists out there somewhere, objectively
- The answer to the riddle of life evades us and awaits us after death
- The ready-made answers to all our questions are theoretically, accessible
- There is an onto-theological unity between thought and being

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[12] This position has won great support in the modern period by noteworthy names like Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, John Robinson and Moltmann (Geering 2002:55).
[13] Geering (2002:54) refers to Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Fred Hoyle and Paul Davies.
[14] In his treatment of these theistic terms, Dawkins does not refer to *panentheism.*

- Our life is a pilgrimage and death is the door to life eternal
- Death then, is the moment of truth
- Each person's life is, as it were, a scripted story

On the view that our life is a sort of pilgrim's progress to the moment of truth, Cupitt (1997:59) distinguishes a number of binary contrasts typical to this paradigm: we move from:

i) relative to absolute
ii) time to eternity
iii) transient to constant or permanent
iv) sensuous to intelligible Being
v) mediated to unmediated

In all of these cases the second is superior to the first and governs the first to affect it.

2.4.4 Various forms of theological realism

Don Cupitt devoted an entire monograph, 'Life Lines' (1986), to the various different theological positions, ranging from fully realist to non-realist, varying in terms of their philosophical foundation, drawing up (1986:3) a 'metro map of the spirit'. He contends that 'every station on the map or stage in the religious life represents a more or less coherent and autonomous religious philosophy' (ibid.). Cupitt's metro map of the spirit refers to stages of the religious life which an individual could journey through, while at the same time it roughly reflects the history of ideas of humanity. The Crisis is the period of transition between realism and non-realism. In the history of ideas it refers to 'the great period of theological crisis (1780-1845)' (Cupitt 1986:13). The journey represents in the history of ideas what Cupitt (ibid, 14) views as a 'long process of demythologizing'. In a certain sense, the process can be seen as a journey from myths to maths to metaphor. Cupitt (ibid.) describes the (painful) process as one of 'progressive gain, by progressive loss. He thinks the truth lies, not in a single station, but in the journey. Cupitt distinguishes five different kinds of theological or religious realism: the pre-crisis stations: Mythical, Doctrinal, Metaphysical or Ladder Realism, Designer Realism and Obedientiary Realism. The writer presents a very brief summary of each.

2.4.4.1 Mythical realism

Mythical realism (Cupitt 1986:26) is not a live option. Although myth is still with us, mythical realism hails from a distant past. It corresponds to a stage in society's development which has long been left behind. It refers to tribal, agrarian society, the pre-doctrinal period of innocence. In the development of an individual it corresponds to the dreamy time of early adolescence. It is a time of pure, unadulterated symbol and story. These vivid pictures, these myths, are just simply accepted without scrutiny. It is 'pre-theoretical and unconscious realism' (1986:54). It is naiveté. It is 'traditional society that lives within its stories'. Cupitt describes it as beautiful and innocent, confessing that he feels the most nostalgia for this kind of concept. But, it was irretrievably lost, long ago (1986:79).[15]

2.4.4.2 Doctrinal realism

This form of realism is partnered by power and authority. It is 'religion as credal [sic] belief' (Cupitt 1986:35). The young person enters the stage in which rules and personal values are developed. Adolescence is very often the time when the heavenly father is being replaced in importance by the earthly parent (ibid, 42) Cupitt uses the apt analogy of a surfboarder, 'swept forward ...on the mighty tide of the divine will.' It has the sense of 'an intensely enhanced sense of life' (ibid.) The individual who accepts the credal rationalism and accepts the doctrines as the truth feels secure, but at the same time realism becomes an instrument of power in the hands of an authority that demands submission.[16] The price for this is that any competing rationality is viewed as a potential threat to the neat and cosy security and must therefore be invalidated. Religion in this credal, authoritarian aspect functions as a fortress on a hill that has to be protected from the menacing world. The price for doctrinal security is submission.[17]

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[15] This was by no means Cupitt's last word on this subject. His revisions will be considered in a subsequent chapter. His point at this juncture is historical, but nevertheless still valid.

[16] Cupitt's religious faith during his high school years, owing to the influence of Darwinism, was what he describes as *Designer Realism* akin to Deism, which made God and religion distant (2002:2). He was 'converted' at Cambridge, even though he was still studying Biology at the time. What he was taught at Cambridge, still 'rather extrinsic' (1986:92), Cupitt regards as *Doctrinal Realism.*

[17] This is what Bower (2005:54), as a modern rationalist, regards as so detrimental. Christianity, by its insistence on submission, causes the 'closing of the mind', hence the title of his work: *Open minds, closed minds and Christianity.*

2.4.4.3 Metaphysical or Ladder Realism

In Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, *Doctrinal Realism* is blended with, and mitigated by, mystical realism, which Cupitt believes gives the soul room to move (1986:79). It pays lip service to the dogma and authority of its host, the ecclesiastical institution, heavily invested in, and bolstered by *Doctrinal Realism*. At the heart of 'ladder', or Metaphysical Realism, lies the *via negativa*, the Apophatic tradition. This tradition is very diffuse, maintaining that the best that can be asserted about the divine is what it is not. God is the ineffable. The view is so diffuse that Cupitt thinks it can hardly be called realism at all (ibid.).

2.4.4.4 Designer Realism

Realising that science will eventually threaten religion's credibility, religion withdraws. This is the natural theology of the scientific age. Realism decreases as scientific knowledge grows. This position is associated with *Deism* and the ontological argument from design. It is the 'simplest and most popular form of realistic theism' (Cupitt 1986:69). Although God is anthropomorphic (ibid, 55), the great architect of the cosmos, he is nevertheless dispatched to the periphery. He does not interfere with his own laws. The world works like clockwork, like a machine. This is the theological position of Newton, who maintained that God was the architect and he was a mere student of His works (ibid, 65).

2.4.4.5 Obedientiary Realism

This is 'a rather dreary name' he invented, Cupitt (1986:69) says, to describe a theological realist view, which wields power and calls for obedience: protestant realism. A salient difference between *Designer Realism* and *Obedientiary Realism* is that, in the former, God borrows his goodness from the good cosmic order, while, in the latter, nature is corrupt and in need of redemption. God must first condemn and then redeem (1986:77). Cupitt observes that, where *Designer Realism* tended to be rather 'weightless', this particularly Protestant form of realism is 'weighty' and, in his view, often becomes psychologically unendurable (1986:80).[18] The associated pictures are vivid and real: God, the Devil, Heaven, Hell, Sin and Judgement. God is

[18] At university, Cupitt (2002:2) relates, he was converted to evangelicalism and this *Obedentiary Realism*. However, the prevailing powerful influence of science and empiricism, (he was still studying Biology at the time), made him feel uneasy with the 'dualistic and intellectually estranged outlook'.

a vivid, enthroned feudal Lord standing over and against the human 'slave' or 'child'. God's sovereignty is posited at the expense of human autonomy. God's will is to be sought, not the will of the believer. God has a plan, not only for this world and the total cosmos, but for each individual. Juristic condemnation and redemption are prominent and consequently, also, are the importance of personal conversion and a life of obedience. The language of heteronomy is pronounced: 'man [*sic*] is a dumb beast and unable to do what is right; stands in need of a new inner creation through conversion, a change of heart' (1997:71). Everything that occurs is meaningful in terms of God's will, design and plan. Although the plan is hardly ever completely clear, it has to be sought after diligently. The human condition is like being in a traffic jam. You cannot go forward, back or anywhere. You cannot save yourself; you cannot achieve anything. You need redemption from above to get you out of the jam (Ibid, 74). Salvationist religion helps the believer to escape from the harshness of this vale of tears. The believer constantly needs to reject their old life and live the new spiritual and supernatural life (Cupitt 1986:76). Cupitt avers that, although the conversion experience is ecstatic, it usually lasts only a short while and then the condemnation and the pessimism about the naturally depraved human condition in the form of an awareness of sin and guilt returns. The Bible plays an important role in this scenario. During the Gutenberg[19] event, the Bible became a 'portable oracle' (ibid, 71). God's revealed will was now available to each individual. Through the Protestant Reformation, the Bible became an essential and insuperable source of knowledge and guidance for every believer.

Although the epistemology is metaphysical and the imagery vividly mythical, the Protestant revolution was part of the *Age of Reason* and *early Enlightenment,* and it nevertheless represented a democratisation of religion that empowered the individual and diminished the power of the authoritarian, ecclesiastical authority. With these distinctions Cupitt attempted to show that theological realism was not only pervasive and powerful, but also diverse, and still prevalent and potent in spite of the crisis of modernity. The distinctions are encased, however, in Cupitt's newfound postmodernism, which emphasises plurality of perspective.

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[19] Hastings (2000:443) remarks, 'Modernity started just as printing, 'modernity's supreme tool', was being invented.'

2.4.5 Summary

The match between Theological Realism and Metaphysical Dualism, if not a match made in heaven, is nevertheless quite heavenly-minded. It is a vertical affair, which determines and dominates the mundane, the human and the horizontal. God is real, and he is capital T-truth. The crisis of modernity and postmodernism, which the writer now considers, is a radical revolution, which turns the T upside down. In fact, it turns the world upside down, in contrast with the Christian metaphysical worldview.

3 MODERNITY AND THE CRISIS

3.1 A cultural cataclysm

The crisis of modernity that the writer will attempt to describe has become known as The Death of God. It is a shorthand description of a very large and complex event in the history of Western civilization. Cupitt describes the Death of God as a 'complex cultural event' (1989:158). It is an 'extraordinary cultural upheaval' (ibid.), radically revolutionary and, in Cupitt's (1997:79) view, apparently extant: 'The last few millennia are going up in smoke'. Five to seven millennia of agricultural civilization have just ended. During this time, humanity was guided by laws emanating from a sacred centre. Cupitt (1997a:124-5) is persuaded that the centre has been lost. This implies that 'there is no unifying principle, no transcendent focus around which everything converges, no coping-stone that holds everything together (ibid.) Geering (2002:48) refers to this major event as the Second Axial Period. When the first occurred, most of the major world faiths were born. It was the advent of the death of the gods in favour of the more enlightened monotheism. Cupitt and Geering concur that we are in a similar crucible in which humanity has once again become enlightened and the result is the Death of God, or at least the final nail in the coffin of theism.

3.1.1 Historical overview

The difference between modernity and the medieval period it superseded is like the difference day and night. It is no wonder that modernity is often described in terms of daybreak, the appearance of light after night; the 'dawn of modernity' (Delius *et al* 2005:26). The modern era is associated with the coming of the light that of course casts a shadow over the medieval period. Although it is probably not correct to view

the middle ages as too dark, the contrast is nevertheless striking when we take a retrospective view of the developments of humanity over the last five hundred years.[20]

A symbolic date for the start of the medieval period, in terms of philosophy, is 529 CE, when Plato's academy was closed by the Emperor Justinian. It is significant that in the same year the Order of St Benedict was founded (Delius *et al* 2005:20). 'The beginning of the middle ages also marks the beginning of the spread of Christianity in Europe'. This period of approximately a millennium ends with the beginning of the Renaissance at the end of the fifteenth century. The vantage point for the retrospective view from which the beginning of the Renaissance and the end of the middle ages could be seen was during the eighteenth century (Ibid.). At this point of the Enlightenment, people became aware that they had been living in a different epoch for three hundred years (ibid.).

Over the thousand years of Christendom, there existed hegemony of onto-theological knowledge. We are moving towards the crisis of modernity, depicted graphically as the Death of God, and indeed, from the beginning of the dawn of modernity, 'God' was in trouble. This means that the old Truth, the old system of knowledge, the old points of reference and departure, the old science and epistemology were being challenged. The harmony between heaven and earth and the match made in heaven between metaphysics and realist theology were being ruptured.

3.2 The modern worldview

Cupitt (1980:17) identifies four aspects that mark the change from the old world to the new: *Cosmology; Epistemology; Social Institutions* and the *Self.* The writer will make use of these insights in the following brief review of the birth of the modern world and what it entails.

3.2.1 Pre-modern cosmology

The 'house' of the old worldview was a pretty, enchanted, rather haunted sort of place. It was full of myth, mystery, magic and wonder. 'Omens, portents and occult

[20] The designations of the periods, like Medieval, Renaissance, Modern Era, are modern and reflect the retrospective view from Modernity. The designations of time and epoch during the medieval period were different and based in the marriage of philosophy and theology (Delius et al 2005:26).

forces' were part of the existing order' (Cupitt 1980:17). An individual had to make sure that they were properly harmoniously aligned with the plethora of perceived supernatural forces. However, with the dawn of the modern world, 'we have experienced the disenchantment of the world. For us the world is what the sciences of nature have shown it to be—morally and religiously neutral and without magic' (Cupitt 1980:17-8). Magic is now a sleight of hand, an optical illusion. When people see things and hear voices, we regard it as either paranormal or pathological.[21]

The medieval map[22] of the world is a narrative of the story and identity of the world seen from the lofty, metaphysical, mythical point of view. The earth is a flat disk with the history of the world embedded in the map. The centre of the world is Jerusalem. The whole map is superimposed over the crucified body of Christ with his head, feet and hands indicating North, South, East and West.

Cupitt (1984:38) reads the medieval worldview in the architecture of churches. The church building of Christendom is an image of Christ's body and of the cosmos. Approaching the church and approaching the sanctuary through the various sections of the church tells the story of the pilgrim's progress towards heaven, holiness and the throne of God. Space and time are organised on a religious basis.

The medieval universe was saturated with meaning. Everything was in some way connected with the throne of God and the triumph of Christ. Cupitt indicates that this view is not purely Christian, but has its roots in Greek philosophy and cosmology. Again, it hails from 'Plato, his pupil Eudoxus, Aristotle and Ptolemy' (Cupitt 1984:39). In the Ptolemaic cosmology, the earth was situated at the centre of the universe and was fixed. Planets and stars were in motion 'powered from above, motive energy descending from God through his angels...' (Ibid.) Within the earth was the underworld, or Hell, with descending steps to Satan, the opposite pole of God. The universe was full of meaning and story. 'It was like a sacred text, full of signs and hidden meanings that called for interpretation...' and, of course, the interpreter was not a scientist but a wise man of God, a theologian who had the privilege of a 'sneak-peek' into the infinite mysteries of God. This worldview made the church, the purveyor of divine knowledge, extremely powerful (Cupitt 1984:42).

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[21] The former refers to what cannot be proven by normal means, and the latter is treatable as mental illness.

[22] For instance the Ebstorf Map, circa 1238 (Delius *et al* 2005:24)

3.2.2 Copernican cosmology and the crisis

Between the times of Copernicus and Newton, cosmology changed dramatically and had a profound impact on the general worldview. Indeed, this is aptly referred to as the Copernican revolution. The new view of the heliocentric world was literally an earth-moving thought. Instead of being flat, and fixed on its pillars by God, the earth became a moving sphere rotating around the sun and spinning around its own axis. It set the heads of all who were steeped in pre-Copernican cosmology spinning. The church authority felt the quake quite distinctly when one of its staunch members, Galileo Galilei, confirmed the theory of Copernicus.

Cupitt (1984:48) contends that Galileo's confidence in the new cosmology 'put many religious ideas on the spot' and the church authority swung into awesome action, defending the Christian paradigm, which was now being threatened by the new scientific one. Galileo, under pressure, and also because he was a good catholic, compromised by contending that God had actually written two books, the book of nature and the Bible. There could not be disharmony between the two. The book of nature was written in the language of mathematics and the book of Scripture was written in religious language. After severe ecclesiastical pressure, Galileo recanted. Cupitt sums up the importance of the Galileo event:

> ...it is clear in retrospect that the revolution in cosmology whose success Galileo ensured was to have enormous social implications, because from now on great institutions like kingship, religion and the moral order could no longer claim the sort of cosmic backing that they had always had in previous societies. In the long run people would begin to perceive authority and order as coming up from below rather than from a higher world above...
>
> Cupitt1984:46

From Copernicus and Galileo, the trajectory runs through Bacon, the father of the empirical method, until it reaches 'its first great peak in Newton' (Cupitt 1984:133) and the full acknowledgment by the scientific community of the mechanistic nature of the natural world. The world was a large natural machine that operated on the basis of fixed laws. If God was in the picture, it was as a designer who did not interfere with the laws of nature. The old world of the gods, miracles and wonders had all but collapsed.

3.2.3 Darwinian biology and the crisis

The rupture caused by the Copernican crisis in the first half of the modern era was matched in importance and impact by the theory of, and meticulous empirical

analysis into the origin of species and the evolution of animal life, by the English biologist Charles Darwin.

Darwin was a rather traditional, conservative believer, although during, and as a result of his work, his faith waned. It was through the diligent and meticulous study of the natural, biological world that Darwin arrived at the theory of the evolution of species through natural selection. In due course, this earth-shattering theory caused one of the last vestiges of the philosophical proofs for the existence of God, namely the argument from design, to collapse.[23] Did God and natural causes work together to create the animal world? Did God design and nature refine? Cupitt observes that Darwin was one of the greatest pioneers in showing that the best explanation is the natural one, not the supernatural or metaphysical. Cupitt (2002:1) encapsulates Darwin's insight. Cupitt (ibid.) contends: 'Just time and chance and the natural process of things, over sufficient time[24], can give rise to astonishingly complex and self-maintaining objects such as the housefly on the wall...': Philosophers usually do not like to admit that a mere scientific theory could be of such enormous intellectual importance; but the fact is that Darwinism has probably been the chief influence in bringing about the Death of God and the end of metaphysics. Cupitt adds a biographical note:

> In my own case, the conflict in my thinking between Platonism and Darwinism was eventually resolved after thirty years, when I first put forward in 1980 the non-realist doctrine of God, and then in subsequent books extended non-realism through my philosophy generally.
>
> Cupitt 2002:1

It seems, then, that as Plato was a towering figure in the old vertical knowledge, Darwin may be regarded as a towering figure in the change to the horizontal.

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[23] The teleological argument from design had long been used and was given new impetus by the work of the Rev. William Paley, 'Natural theology—or evidences of the existence and attributes of the Deity collected from the appearances of nature (1802). Paley is famous for his watch and Watchmaker analogy—if one picked up a watch and analysed its intricate design, if followed causally that there had to be a designer. The same applied to creation. Darwin's work showed that his argument did not apply to the origin of species. Species originated through mutation over long periods of time. Dawkins' 'The Blind Watchmaker' (1986) is a meticulous critique of Paley's 'watch' simile and a staunch defence of Darwinism.

[24] It is on the issue of time that the geologist Charles Lyell had such a significant influence on Darwin. The former was accustomed to thinking in geological time and was observing the astonishing geophysical results that occurred at a very slow rate, in geological time. Adding some noughts to Darwin's thinking provided a vital contribution to the success of Darwin's observations.

3.2.4 Social institutions

The cultural revolution that is modernity has also brought an important change in social institutions. In the pre-modern era, social institutions were 'thought of as divinely ordained' (Cupitt 1980:19). In modernity they have become products of history and humanity. They are not revealed and received and set in stone, but can be modified and changed. Social institutions are not received from God, but are conceived by humans for the service of humanity and they can and need to be reformed. The vertical to horizontal shift observed above is also apparent in terms of social institutions, politics and government. There is a move away from theocracy or the recognition of the divine right of kings to democracy, the absolute right of the people. There is much more to say on this subject, but the case of modernity and the monarchy is of prime importance.

3.2.4.1 Modernity and the monarchy

Nowhere is the move of power clearer than in the events surrounding the monarchy, particularly in England and France. In England, in 1649, the King was not only dethroned, but also decapitated, and when the institution was allowed to return eleven years later, it was by the grace of the people and parliament; no longer by the grace of God. In France, the king (1792) and queen (1793) were sent to the guillotine and the whole system of divine right was cancelled as a result of the French Revolution (1789). The British monarch is now a constitutional figure, a symbol of the state, representative of the people, and is no longer regarded as the representative of God on earth. It may be said that this was a shift towards non-realism. Monarchy has become a metaphor.

3.2.5 The story of history

The dawning of modernity ushered in a different view of history and of historiography. Historical sense may be regarded as a hallmark of modernity. In pre-modern times history was shrouded in myth, but, as modernity developed, religion lost its grip on history, and myth was dispelled. The present was most often assessed in terms of the link with the sacred past, in terms of Confucius or the Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad. As the modern worldview progressed, the legitimising link with the past became tenuous until it was finally severed.

Breisach (1983:371) refers to a historiographical revolution, 'The Age of Anthropocentric Histioriography', that occurred between 1300 and 1700 and challenged the very link between religion and historiography. In the 1690s Christopher Cellarius suggested the division of *Ancient*, *Medieval* and *Modern*, a division which is still popular. In doing so he 'expelled the Christian story from its central place' (ibid, 378).

Texts and contexts of the past became the objects of critical enquiry. Even the Bible would become subject to historical sense, historical enquiry and modern historiography. The more history became the human story rather than God's story, God himself became a problematic figure in terms of historiography. How was God a figure in history? How was He an active agent in history? In the eighteenth century, history was still viewed as God's education for humanity (ibid, 379). By the 19th century, God no longer governed from 'outside', but was becoming immanent as an *Urgrund* or as a dynamic spiritual principle (ibid.) All of history according to the working of this principle was really *Heilsgeschichte*.

In the influential philosophy of Hegel the complex relationship of creator and creation in time was transformed into the self-realisation of the all-encompassing Idea (pure thought). There was a dialectical process, a journey towards a t*elos*, 'God' and humanity's self-realisation.

Another modernist view of history is that of Auguste Comte, the father of modern social science, who coined the term *sociology*. (Easton 1970:828; Delius *et al* 2005:94). Comte proposed a three-stage interpretation of history:

- Theological
- Metaphysical
- Positive

The latter is viewed as the fulfilment of history, a culmination where no absolutes and essences are recognised, only laws governing relationships between phenomena (cf. Easton 1970:828).

3.2.6 Summary and reflection

The modern worldview based in scientific knowledge instead of metaphysical, ontotheological knowledge is a radical and irrevocable paradigm shift.[25] The shift is quite simply 'from the old sacred, highly-wrought, finite cosmos to the new 'meaningless', boundless mechanical universe' (Cupitt 1980:17), from the magical to the mechanical. Secularisation is, in a sense, a process of 'disenchantment' (ibid.), although it is not all loss. What we have lost in mystery, we have gained in science and much more. In a certain sense, the world has become wonderful by becoming wonder-less. Science contributed to the disenchantment, making the world wonder-less in the sense of the loss of miracles, but, on the other hand, science has succeeded in showing the natural world in all its awe-inspiring splendour, which continues to evoke wonder, even in ardent atheists like Richard Dawkins.[26] Woodruff (2002:136) remarks, regarding the scientific revolution, that '...nature, which had been the shadow became reality and that which had been reality, the soul, receded to shadow'.

3.3 Epistemological enlightenment

The study has reviewed briefly how scientific knowledge became modern and how it strained and strove until it became fully released from pre-determining constraints. This freedom undoubtedly contributed significantly to the string of scientific revolutions, resulting in technological advance over a spectrum ranging from movable type to the internet and from internal combustion to Concord, space travel and the like. The focus now shifts to philosophy and the dramatic epistemological emancipation from its pre-modern moorings.

As epistemological reflection progressed, the fundamental question that came into focus was about the status of sense-based data. What is the relation between sensual perception and thinking? Thompson says:

> The fundamental issue here is whether our knowledge originates in, and is therefore dependent upon, the data we receive through our senses, or whether, (since we know that all such sense data are fallible), the only true certainties are those that come from

[25] The term was coined by Thomas Kuhn, renowned historian of science (Barzun 2001:760) and it refers to frameworks that are regarded as evident and by which we measure judgments. Kuhn showed conclusively that scientific knowledge made 'jumps', instead of being a smooth evolution. This is akin to the sudden shifts of the earth's tectonic plates.

[26] Dawkins (2006:11-19) acknowledges this, particularly with reference to the quasi-religious remarks made by eminent scientists like Einstein, Sagan, Hawking and himself. We no longer require myth and metaphysics to evoke awe. Science does it better, is Dawkins' point of view.

> our own minds—from the way in which we think and organize our experience, from the principles of reason and logic:
>
> Thompson 2003:13-4.

From this basic problem two schools emerge:

- Empiricism—all knowledge starts with the senses
- Rationalism—all knowledge starts with the mind' (ibid.).

The philosophical basis changed dramatically in the birth of modernity. It can in generally be referred to as an understanding, and *Aufklärung*,[27] which refers to a major breakthrough in terms of human self-understanding in relation to the world. It is a breakthrough in knowledge and the philosophy of knowledge.

3.3.1 Cartesianism and the crisis

In many ways Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is foundational to Enlightenment epistemology. He represents the watershed between metaphysical thinking and 'pure',[28] rational, thinking.

3.3.1.1 Contribution

In Descartes' famous book on method (1637),[29] he introduced a rational system of methodical doubting, thereby contributing immensely to the character of modern knowledge as critical thinking and as systematic doubting. *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) became the first principle of philosophy: the doubting subject. Descartes set the agenda for modern epistemology. The modern subject became incredulous of everything, not only of onto-theology, but all preconceived ideas. It put the thinking, doubting, enquiring, rational subject in command. Cupitt observes:

> Rene Descartes introduced a new way of thinking in which the individual human mind was to become increasingly conscious of itself as an autonomous centre of constructive thinking activity, like Aristotle's God. It is fully present to itself and thinks itself before it knows of any independent reality to think about.
>
> Cupitt 1986:6

Knowledge now became subject-centred, mind-centred, rather than object-centred (ibid.)

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[27] *Iluminismo* (Italian); *Siecle des Lumines* (French).
[28] 'Pure', (Rein) in the Kantian sense is 'speculative or theoretical' Reason (Cupitt 2006:135).
[29] 'Discourse on the method of rightly conducting the reason and searching for truth in the sciences' (1637).

Barzun (2001:201) observes that the modern method of rational reasoning inherited from Descartes is to take a problem and break it up into as many parts as possible, to deal with each part separately and then to reassemble the parts and make sure that none are left out. Cartesian reasoning starts from the rational *a priori,* a clear distinct indubitable abstract free point, assumed to be true.

The pre-modern self was highly heteronomous owing to the metaphysical dualism. The self was a slave to the master Mind, and was never to question. The self always had to be aware and beware of the ominous Presence looming over its head. It was thought, in a manner of speaking, that the sky would fall if people questioned the Ultimate. Although Descartes was a Christian, as all Europeans during Christendom were advised to be, he contributed greatly to the emancipation of the mind, the self and the individual, which became one of the hallmarks of modernity.

3.3.1.2 Faith matters

a) Descartes and the Divine

Even though Descartes put the rational subject almost in the position of God, able to think for itself in a sovereign way, he nevertheless contended that it was 'the radiant power of God that helped reason to discover truth' (Delius *et al* 2005:113). In this respect, although he was a significant figure in the age of reason, he was only a foundational figure in terms of the enlightenment that shone forth later, particularly in the figure of Emmanuel Kant. Although Descartes strove for the divorce with metaphysics, he nevertheless retained one foot in the old epistemological paradigm.

b) Pascal's problem

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) was a contemporary of Descartes, a good scientist, but also a pious man with a deep-seated faith who sensed the crisis of modernity on a very private and personal level. Pascal is famous, particularly among critics of the Enlightenment and also among evangelical believers as a scientist,[30] a rationalist[31]

[30] Pascal was a prodigy, publishing his 'first work, on the conic sections at seventeen' (Cupitt 1984:49). His famous work on the principles of the barometer is only one of many scientific and technological contributions.

[31] Not only was Pascal 'highly cerebral' but also 'puritanical and liable to depression' (ibid.)

who did not lose his simple faith.[32] His saying representing his struggle between reason and faith, 'the heart has its reasons that the reason does not know', is well known. 'The void in your heart is one that only God can fill' (Cupitt 1984:50). Where the conflict in Galileo's case was with the authority and censure of the church, the conflict raged famously and furiously *within* Pascal, who was, on the one hand, a brilliant mathematician with a great mind, but was, on the other, a sensitive and pious, even pietistic person. The conflict was between reason and revelation, between the human mind and God's mind, between what we need to figure out and what we need to accept by faith as something that God has to figure out.

Cupitt delineates the difference between Descartes and Pascal. The former 'took the human mind out of the world of nature in order to exempt it from natural law and enable it to observe nature from outside, from the theoretical viewpoint of a pure scientist (1984:50). This 'alienation of the mind from the world, which Descartes finds so desirable from the point of view of doing physics, is terrifying to Pascal from the religious point of view' (ibid.). Pascal finds the disinterestedness, the objectivity, the distinction between faith and reason, difficult. Descartes did not have a problem with it. For Pascal it became a massive crisis of faith and a massive emotional crisis. Pascal, the sensitive soul and the sensitive believer, finds Descartes' dispassionate, cool science unpalatable, even revolting. Pascal is worried about the implication of reason, science, and the scientific revolution on his relationship with God.

Cupitt (ibid: 52) sees in Pascal the rudiments of 'pietism, methodism and evangelicalism' seeking the true, personal God, the God of the inner religious life. The retreating God of the philosophers and of reason and science precipitated this flight into the soul. God was distant and difficult and doubtful, but the personally revealed God undercuts the widening distance caused by emerging modernity. In Pascal and the comparison with Descartes, the epistemological crisis and the growing crisis of realist faith can be witnessed. It is possible to see the advance of the Death of God, the Enlightenment of Reason, and the divorce from metaphysics and the rigours associated with a realist faith, invested in metaphysics.

At this point the contention of theological realism versus theological non-realism becomes more prominent. 'To use terminology which I have recently been

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[32] Barzun (2001:219), critical of rationalism and scientism, commends the fact that Pascal gave place to reason, but also to 'the heart'.

trying to introduce, Pascal, in religion, is a realist who thinks that there exist special religious objects corresponding to religious ideas, or is he a non-realist?' (Cupitt 1984:54). Is Pascal's position fright and flight, or is it acceptance of theological propositions as symbolic? Pascal lived in the heat of the cataclysmic upheaval. Modernity was in the birth canal, experiencing the trauma. God was not dead yet. Cupitt observes the appearance of a stark choice at this juncture, the *either, or*, the claim of either religious realism which demands faith in an objective (though distant) God, or the claim of religious seriousness and an 'authentic Christian faith'.

c) Spinoza's solution

Where Pascal's solution was the warmth of pietism, Spinoza's was the width of pantheism, not that Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677); the Spanish Jew from the Hague was not in need of warmth after being excommunicated from the Great Synagogue for heresy. In Judaism, this means being ostracised from the community and declared dead, forfeiting all social contact. In spite of this awful fate, Spinoza, a supporter of the epistemology of Descartes,[33] became the first intellectual in Europe to live as a modern person 'successfully beyond the reach of established religion' (Armstrong 2001:22).[34] For a person living in 17th century Europe this was indeed remarkable. Spinoza was years ahead of his time, a Jew contributing to the Enlightenment two centuries before the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, commenced.[35] Spinoza's ideas, 'although prohibited by both Catholics and Protestants' (Rader: 1980:90), was nevertheless used by scholars and had a profound effect on the study of the Bible and theology. Spinoza's solutions for the question of God and the world were one. God was fully revealed in nature and studying nature was, in fact, studying God. God and nature are identical. This means that there is no reality-God beyond nature, but there was also the implication that nature was God. Spinoza 'explained all ideas of divine intervention as products of pre-scientific ways of thinking, and was led to an outlook that was both profoundly mystical and also thoroughly rationalist and naturalistic' (Cupitt 1984:15).

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[33] He wrote an exposition on Descartes in 1633, forty years prior to his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). The latter work resulted in the offer of professorship at Heidelberg on the condition that he did not 'disturb the established religion', which he declined (Cf. Rader, M. 1980:. 90).

[34] Karen Armstrong (2001:22) believes Spinoza was a 'genius', a 'genuinely independent man' who 'could sustain the inevitable loneliness it entailed'. Armstrong herself had gone through a similar trauma and had persevered splendidly (Cf. her two autobiographies: *Through the Narrow Gate* (1981) and *The Spiral Staircase* (2004).

[35] Moses Mendelsohn is usually regarded as the first Enlightenment Jew (Schoeps 1963:105).

So, where Pascal internalised, Spinoza externalised. For Pascal, the crisis went underground and for Spinoza the crisis was all but solved, giving up the vestiges of dualism. When we are involved with nature and fully scientifically, critically engaged, we are actually keeping ourselves busy with God. Spinoza maintained that all 'ideas of divine intervention' or miracles were merely pre-scientific ways of thinking (Cupitt 1984:15). Spinoza's solution was also mystical, but at the same time rationalistic and naturalistic. There was no tension. He was a Naturalistic thinker who denied any moral order (Cupitt 1984:204).

Much later, the man who so vociferously announced and furthered the Death of God, Friedrich Nietzsche, found much in common with Spinoza's thought, particularly with radical, rational, naturalistic mysticism, Cupitt cites Nietzsche's advice, which, with respect to Spinoza, was 'to look upon the world as upon a god.' (1984:204

3.3.2 Kantian constructivism and the crisis

A. N. Wilson (1999:36) expresses the opinion, probably a consensus among intellectuals over a broad spectrum, that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the most influential modern philosopher, an unlikely[36] pioneer of 'the greatest revolution in modern philosophy' (Wood 2006:11).[37] Indeed, Kant is regarded as the 'founder of modern critical philosophy and pioneer of German *Idealism'* (Delius *et al*: 2005:118) and the most important contributor to the *Aufklärung.*[38] Other leading lights of this epistemological watershed were Wolf, Lessing and Hegel in Germany, Diderot, Montesquieu and Rousseau in France, and Locke, Berkeley and Hume in the British Isles (David Hume was a Scottish).

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[36] He [came] from a family of 'devout Pietists' (Wood 2006:11). His family were poor and he was 'an unsalaried, marginal academic—well into middle age' (ibid, 17).

[37] His greatness may be measured by the fact that he is regarded as the one philosopher since Plato and Aristotle 'whom all subsequent philosophers are assumed to have read.' (Roberts 1988:9).

[38] It should be noted that there are several different forms of Idealism. In Beiser's (2000:18) view it is indicative of the crisis of the Enlightenment (as opposed to the crisis *caused* by the Enlightenment, as it is narrated in this thesis, following Cupitt's guidance. Beiser (ibid.) distinguishes between *transcendental idealism* (Kant), *ethical idealism* (Fichte) and *absolute idealism* (Schelling and Hegel), (ibid, 31).On the other hand, it should be noted that some scholars view Kant's philosophy precisely as a reaction, even a refutation of idealism as much as a reaction to empiricism. (Cf. the discussion in Bird, 2006, p. 8).

3.3.2.1 The Copernican revolution

Before the Enlightenment, the epistemological consensus was that concepts must conform to the world of things. There is order in reality and we need to read it carefully. When it is done successfully, from the position of various epistemological presuppositions, our mental picture reflects the world accurately. The mind 'mirrors' the world, it was thought. (Cupitt 1984:138).[39]

Emmanuel Kant is turned this upside down, or inverted it. It is our mind that creates order and superimposes a picture on the world. After superimposing the template on the world, we are able to 'read' it as a reflection of 'reality'. It is the world that mirrors the mind. We pour, as it were, the 'world' into the mould of our mind. And because it depends on the position of the viewer, it is relative and not absolute.

> As far as Kant was concerned, no part of the object world could be readily attributed to 'things out there'...Even the most basic level of experience, for Kant, involves the possibility of rational judgement; and even the simplest of rational judgements involves presuppositions...In other words, according to Kant, there really is nothing in 'experience' which we can safely attribute to 'out there'.
>
> Roberts, J. 1988:31

Kant's revolutionary thesis, therefore, is that objectivity is not something in the world, but is conferred upon the world by the perceiving mind. Because of the similarity with the revolution wrought by Copernicus, Kant called his discovery a Copernican revolution in epistemology and it has since become known as such.

We cannot have any possibility of what lies beyond human experience. It is epistemologically irrelevant. Some implications of this 'constructivist' view are:

- There is no objective world
- We make, construct, the world
- Truth with a capital T collapses
- Knowledge based on experience, not revelation—not receiving, but finding out and forming and constructing.

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[39] It is interesting to note in this regard the 'post-modern' quality of Cupitt's assessment of Kant, even before his post-modern turn: 'To put it brutally, there *is* no ready-ordered objective reality any more: there is only the flux of becoming, and the continuing ever-changing human attempt to imagine and impose order. And before his turn to Wittgenstein? : 'We have to *make* sense; *we* have to turn chaos into cosmos.' (1984:188).

- The Copernican revolution places the sun in the centre. Kant places the subject in the centre. Knowledge is human, not divine; made up, not sent down.

Kant made a distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*. The first refers to reality beyond the reach of the human situational epistemology. This would be God's view, how things are apart from being perceived, how they are in themselves. The latter refers to the knowledge on the epistemological level, based on what humans can perceive, objectify. This is knowledge of how things are in the world, the world of phenomena. Because of the Kantian destruction of the Archimedes–type fixed point, knowledge is always partial, contingent, conversational and extant (on-going). The Copernican revolution is revolutionary and heralds the dissipation of 'dogmatic metaphysics' (Cupitt 1984:153) and is the root cause of the evocative later depiction: The Death of God.

The ultimate questions and the relationship between reality and perception are just given up as a dead project. It is the end (the death) of onto-theology. In spite of this paradigmatic shift, Cupitt (1984:188) remarks, however, that 'like the realists, the Kantians still saw the world in terms of Aristotle, Euclid and Newton'.

3.3.2.2 Kant and the crisis

Kant's epistemological position made him agnostic in terms of the 'real' world. The God's-eye view, or what God might think, is epistemologically not thinkable. By the same token, God cannot be part of empirical experience (Cupitt 1984:138). Cupitt observes, therefore, that radical European anthropocentricism first appeared with Kant (1984:155). The trajectory of anthropocentrism, humanism, is of course at least two centuries older, but with Kant it intensifies significantly, 'a man-centred look of a new kind' (Cupitt 1984:135). It was Kant who depicted the Enlightenment as 'Man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity', encapsulated by his famous slogan '*Sapere audi*—think for yourself' (Delius *et al* 2005:113; Wood: 2006:21). Clements (1987:10) concurs, pointing out that for Kant the Enlightenment was a 'decisive step towards the emancipation of man [sic] from the 'tutelage' of mediaeval times'. This is where we find the beginning of the trajectory which led to the depiction of humanity as 'come of age', no longer immature (ibid.)

Kant did not become an atheist. He sought and found room for God through the door of ethics, based on his categorical imperative. Cupitt (1984:145) observes poignantly that Kant remained a 'tough old ultra-protestant' and the ultimate questions remained alive'. The realists said that the principles of those thinkers were 'objectively valid, and therefore compulsory, whereas the Kantians said that they were subjectively necessary as conditions for knowledge—and therefore also compulsory' (ibid.). Although Kant sought space for God, his epistemological revolution dealt a mortal blow to the medieval proofs for the existence of God. The net result was simply: God's existence became 'contingent rather than necessary' (Greenfield 2006:35). Cupitt summarises and concludes:

> Kant had been a metaphysical agnostic who had argued that our knowledge cannot be extended beyond the limits of possible experience, so that the existence of God as transcendent Creator cannot be proved by theoretical reason. God should rather be interpreted as a guiding ideal, not given in experience but instead functioning as the ultimate focus and goal of our intellectual and moral life.
>
> Cupitt 1984:230

3.3.3 Feuerbachian fire

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), born three months after the death of Immanuel Kant, was a child of the *Aufklärung* and probably the most important figure of left-wing Hegelianism (Delius *et al* 2005:117). If Kant intensified the anthropocentric trajectory of early modernity, Feuerbach's individualised view tipped philosophy and theology over into full-scale anthropology (ibid, 85; Robinson 1963:50). Although Feuerbach, who studied under Hegel, wrote a critique[40] of his famous teacher, his most famous work was on the philosophy of religion in a work entitled *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), in which he proposed and defended the thesis that God was a human projection. He drew a sharp distinction between what he regarded as false and true theological propositions. His idealistic, anthropological projection theory constituted the basis of true theological propositions, while the old metaphysical propositions were no longer true.

Feuerbach's position was simple and to the point. Religion, owing to the marriage with metaphysical realism, results in an 'ideology of the unsensuous person, who squanders on heaven his earthly energies and capacity for happiness' (Delius *et al* 2005:83). Feuerbach's position can therefore also be described as

[40] 'The Critique of Hegelian Philosophy' (1839).

'anthropological materialism'(ibid.). Feuerbach (cf.Surber 1999:306) may be seen as 'pivotal in the intellectual history of the nineteenth century in several respects...' He, it can be summarised:

- revived, in a new form, the original Kantian project of philosophical critique
- his method of 'transformatory criticism' (of Hegel) was adopted by Marx (The inversion of Hegel's view: The individual is a function of the Absolute).
- philosophy was ultimately an extension of theology and theology was (merely) religious consciousness systematised.

It should be clear already from the above that Feuerbach's influence on the young Hegelians like Freud and Marx and, through them, on many other minds in modern intellectual history, is enormous. Friedrich Engels encapsulates the enthusiasm with which Feuerbach was received by intellectual idealists in the 1840s: 'We immediately became Feuerbachians' (in Roberts 1988:184; Delius *et al* 2005:85). Of course what was a spark of sensuous life to these philosophers was the spark of the Feuerbachian fire[41] to theologians and thinking Christians. Fundamentalists of all periods, however, have managed quite well to ignore Feuerbach altogether and ignorance is the reason for their bliss.

Robinson and the radicals, however, did not and could not evade the Feuerbachian flame and neither does Cupitt. Although he was not given a separate slot in *The Sea of Faith* (1984) list of luminaries, Feuerbach's influence is recognised by Cupitt in his discussion of several other figures, while, in Cupitt's development of religion as a human creation, which became the vision of the Sea of Faith Networks, the influence of Feuerbach is unmistakable.

3.3.4 Nietzsche and the Crisis

Of all the philosophical 'stars' there is probably none more stellar than Friedrich Nietzsche. He is as controversial as he is famous and his influence is now enormous, although this was not the case in his own time.[42]

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[41] The phrase, 'the fire of Feuerbach' was expressed by P.J.J. Botha in conversation with the author.
[42] There was a cold reception of his work during most of his lifetime. (Lavrin 1971:107) observes that George Brandes, Danish historian and literary critic, was the first to give a course of lectures on Nietzsche at Copenhagen University. (No date supplied).

3.3.4.1 Aspects of his thought

Although Nietzsche may be regarded as a philosopher, in the sense of a reflective thinker, he was much more and his influence can be detected in the post-modern worldview in general, as well as in numerous modern disciplines like Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, History, Literary and Art Criticism, in particular. Many people today live according to the principles of Nietzsche, without ever realising it. Cupitt (1995b:141) comments on Nietzsche: 'Such gifts, such catastrophe. By sheer determination Nietzsche made himself into perhaps the greatest human being and writer of modern times...'

In Nietzsche's early period he concentrated on art. He regarded Plato and Socrates as the enemies of Greek tragedy (Lavrin 1971:96) because they introduced rationalism as the redeemer of the people and they took the focus away from this life and focused it on an ideal and future world, thereby robbing humanity of living and enjoying life to the full. Nietzsche saw the role of art as an essential comfort, which was replaced by reason. Tragedy was no longer required, because reason came to the rescue to remove the fear of death.

A brief summary of Nietzsche's mature thought follows:

- **Will to Power.** This is the basic drive of all humanity, individual and corporate and even of the universe as a whole. It is the need and desire for power. It will be coated and presented in all sorts of disguises, but it is nevertheless always operative. Even the weak use their weakness and meekness as a *will to power.*
- **Perspectivism.** There is no true way of seeing the world. The best we have is perspective. Anti-realism and Nihilism are usually associated with Nietzsche's perspectivism.
- **Language.** All knowledge is always expressed in language and language is tainted and coated with perspectives and preconditions. Our attachment to our language is so strong that we could not readily do without the fictions it describes (Lavrin 1971:59). This is true of all language, even the language of Physics.
- **Master/Slave Morality.** Society, by and large, has produced a slave morality. People are trained to be sheep and to keep quiet. Religion is the main culprit

in this regard, training people to be subservient. Nietzsche believes the master morality is that of the *Übermensch*, who will not succumb to the sheep-slave morality. *Ressentiment* is what the slave feels toward the master and, through a clever and covert ploy, gets the master to acquiesce to his pitiful moral code, thereby gaining the upper hand through guile.

- **Eternal Recurrence.** Nietzsche develops this idea that, given enough time, what has been will be again. He asks, then, whether one is prepared to live one's live over and over again. This serves as a test. If the answer is negative, it is a clear indication that life is not embraced, but that there is still a yearning for an idealistic, metaphysical 'heaven', which is denial of life. Nietzsche's formula for greatness (from *Ecce Homo*) is *that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity.*

3.3.4.2 The Death of God

There are two aspects to be considered. First there is the indicative. Nietzsche interpreted and proclaimed an extant state of affairs in the history of Western civilisation, which could be described as the Death of God. It comprises the whole divorce of metaphysics, the rise and independence of scientific knowledge, the collapse of pre-modern epistemology in the Enlightenment. Cupitt (1984:207) observes, 'the apocalyptic crisis in European Culture that Nietzsche calls the death of God had begun long before. He did not think of himself as bringing it about'. Nietzsche, as a preacher of the modern state of affairs, announced what was already the case. His 'madman' searches what he does not expect to find. His lantern is comical, because of the brightness of day. It is no longer night by the time the madman starts asking his question.

Secondly, for Nietzsche there is also an imperative involved in the Death of God. Not only is it the case, but also required. The 'killers' whom the madman indicts are to continue. In terms of religion and morality, God is not desirable and must be resisted. The death of God epistemologically must be continued and completed theologically.

> The death of God is more than a simply dogmatic atheism...Rather, it means the final loss of belief in any external reality at all that might guide and sustain human life, including even an ordered objective world: it means nihilism.
>
> Cupitt 1984:208

Lavrin assesses Nietzsche's predisposition:

> He did not want to know how far such and such a religion was true, but whether it was valuable or harmful form the standpoint of an ascending type of life, And no sooner had he noticed its emphasis on the 'beyond' at the expense of our earthly existence than he rejected it as being of no value at all. The same applies to the problem of God. Even had he been sure that God existed, the invalid Nietzsche would not have accepted Him unless god first produced credentials to the effect that He was not hostile to life, that is, to our 'biological' life this side of the grave.
>
> Lavrin 1971:65

Cupitt (1984:211) contends that Nietzsche could not fathom that religion could ever be reformed and, in Cupitt's terms, that means growing up and becoming fully non-realist, embracing nihilism, instead of being dissolved by it. He comments on Nietzsche: '...[H]e could not see that it might eventually lead to religion's becoming at last fully self-conscious and regaining the Joyful Wisdom'.

3.3.5 Summary and reflection

Woodruff (2002:141) sums up the paradigm shift associated with modern Enlightenment (paraphrased and adapted). There is a clear shift of emphasis from:

- Sacred to secular
- Religious to Rational
- Divine to Human.

The end of metaphysics quite simply means the end of absolute knowledge (Cupitt 2001:11). All knowledge is human and perspectival, conversational and, therefore, must be open-ended.

4 THEOLOGY AND THE STRUGGLE: THE ROOTS OF RADICAL THEOLOGY

In the preface to Greenfield's *Introduction to radical theology*, Cupitt (2006a:1) expresses the view that the roots of radical theology run deep in the soil of modernity and extend back at least as far as the 17th century Deists. He stresses, however, the seminal role of Kant and Hegel, whom he regards as the founders of modern philosophy. He also expresses the view that Schleiermacher is the father of liberal theology (ibid.) The account of radical theology in the 20th century will be taken up in

due course, but first it is essential to see theological modernism in general as the context and trajectory for its narrative.

4.1 Modernism and Liberal Protestantism

The modernising movement in Catholicism is usually referred to as modernism, while in Protestantism it is called Liberal Protestantism (Ward 2000:442). The prominent Catholic names are Alfred Loisy, who was eventually excommunicated because he rejected Christian theism,[43] and George Tyrrell, who 'upheld 'the right of each age to adjust the historico-philosophical expression of Christianity to contemporary certainties (Wikipedia).[44] Karl Rahner and Hans Küng are included.[45] The Catholic modernists were concerned with keeping and making Catholicism relevant in modern society.

There is quite understandably substantial friction and discord among Modernists (Catholic) and Liberal Protestants,[46] but there are also wide areas of agreement. The most important point of concurrence is on the view that Christianity is contextual and historical. By the same token it is necessary to keep up with historical changes and remain relevant within the broader picture of culture (Ward 2000:442). There is also agreement on the move towards immanentism, away from transcendence (ibid.).

4.1.1 Liberal Protestantism

The discussion focuses on Liberal Protestantism for this brief contextualisation of radical theology. Reardon (1968:9) indicates that it is not an easy matter to define Liberal Protestantism. How is 'liberal' to be defined? Reardon (ibid.) refers to J Réville who made a distinction between mere Protestant Liberalism and Liberal Protestantism'. Reardon nevertheless arrives at a definition:

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[43] Professor Loisy incurred the rancour of Popes Leo XIII and Pius X, and was dismissed as Professor in 1893. His books were condemned and he was excommunicated in 1908 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Loisy).

[44] Father Tyrell (1861-1909) was expelled from the Jesuits and suspended from the sacraments. Although he received 'extreme unction on his deathbed', he was nevertheless denied burial in a Catholic cemetery. A priest who was present at the funeral made a sign over the grave and was suspended for this action (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Tyrell).

[45] Although Professor Kung had to leave the Catholic Faculty and is not allowed to teach Catholic theology, he remained at the University of Tübingen.

[46] As for instance in Harnack's condemnation of Catholicism as obscurantist, and Loisy's 1903 work, offered to the public as an apologia for Catholicism and by the same token a refutation of Liberal Protestantism (Ward 2000:442).