



Jesus and Philosophy, Don Cupitt, London: SCM Press, 2009, pp. xv, 110, ISBN 978-0-334-04338-6. £16.99

Professor Don Cupitt, ordained priest in the Church of England in 1960, has been a Cambridge figure of some fame for much of his academic career. His commitment to a 'non-realist' Christianity and leadership of the Sea of Faith network since the 1980s places him well outside mainstream Christian orthodoxy.

This book, one of a total of forty published by Cupitt, takes the conclusions of groups such as The Jesus Seminar (this book is dedicated to Robert 'Bob' Funk) and applies them to the question of Jesus' contribution to philosophy. As such, a number of presuppositions are foundational to this short text, including the negation of classical Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and Resurrection, and of the apostolic commission to preach the Gospel to all the world. These presuppositions, derived from the work of Funk and of John Dominic Crossan, provide Cupitt with the historical-critical lens through which he interprets Holy Scripture and the figure of Christ. Accordingly, in response to Jesus' question in Matthew 16:15 and Mark 8:29: 'Who do you say that I am?' Cupitt answers directly in his preface (xii): 'Jesus, then, was originally not the Saviour, nor the Messiah, but simply a moral teacher.'

However, in this book Cupitt's interest is wider than the Christological claims of The Jesus Seminar. He begins by outlining how Western ethics went wrong, resulting in a series of dichotomies, notably between deontological ethics (relying on what Cupitt calls older, vertical, theological concepts), and an ethics of human feeling, or living 'by the heart'. (12) In *Jesus and Philosophy*, the authoritarian God of divine law and morality is pitched against the post-fourteenth century Enlightenment spirit of romantic humanitarianism, often in comic relief. Interestingly, Cupitt wants to attain a theological ethics that overcomes (or bypasses) metaphysics. However, he approaches this task without reference to such thinkers as Emmanuel Levinas or Jean-Luc Marion, who make a similar attempt but with stronger reference to a robust theological language.

Cupitt's ethics is driven by an optimism founded on the figure of Christ (as The Jesus Seminar members interpret him to be) as a non-

supernatural preacher of secular ethics who uses worldly parables to provide us with a vision of a better world. Cupitt employs the term 'Kingdom of God' in the way that William Blake uses 'Jerusalem' – a superlative image to provoke idealist action, and not a state of redemptive being promised by a personal God. This can only occur, according to Cupitt, when all morality is seen in its horizontal (and non-Divine) dimension. All ethical reflection concerns the force of human creativity in defining its own structures of behaviour and obligation. This is based on a loose Hegelian reading of culture and order. Further to this, Cupitt cites with favour Nietzsche's announcement of '[...] the arrival of moral nihilism – that is, the catastrophic end of all forms, even the most residual, of moral relativism.' (35) It is therefore up to the post-Enlightenment human being to join themselves with the rebellious and blasphemous Jesus, who shows us the new model of ethics which overcomes the old.

The performative ministry of Jesus is the revelatory action that discloses the new ethics he epitomises. Even the miracles, as accounted in both canonical and non-canonical texts, affirm this interpretation for Cupitt. These are events in which the social ethics of Jesus' reaching out physically to the sick and outcast guides us in a lived morality that overturns that of the past. Contemporary examples achieve the same thing. One used by Cupitt is that of the effect upon the British public consciousness of the famous photo of Princess Diana shaking hands with a victim of AIDS. (45)

In the chapters comprising the bulk of Cupitt's argument, his picture of Jesus is informed largely by the wisdom-sayings of the canonical Gospels along with the Gospel of Thomas and the elusive Q. For the sake of his Christology, Cupitt utilises a startlingly Whiggish account of religious history, drawing upon a kind of social Darwinism that is both natural and always directed to our good. This further highlights the strange optimism I mention above. In this progressive reading of history, Jesus represents the 'new idea' (58), standing beside those of other great thinkers such as Buddha and Nietzsche (50). Cupitt writes, 'It is the idea that the entire history of the human race reflects a long, slow transition from heterologous to autologous thinking and living.' (58) He returns to this 'heterologous' theme in his final chapters, by which the 'Kingdom-dream' (98) of Jesus

is bungled by the Church, but authenticated in the modern welfare state, which in turn 'delivers the Dream' (99) of health, education and cultural production.

Disappointingly, few references are utilised (only 58 notes appear at the close of the book). Having said that, a 'further reading' list outlines texts employed by Cupitt, including Funk, Reinhold Niebuhr, and even John Henry Cardinal Newman. Despite the scholarly relaxation that permeates his style, Cupitt's brevity in this book is rather helpful, for it enables one to gauge how a lifetime's academic research has resulted in a simplicity of philosophical outlook. In this sense, *Jesus and Philosophy* is like a short summary of Cupitt's whole intellectual attitude to the figure of Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that the book will be perplexing to those who find The Jesus Seminar anti-historical and immature with regards to the dynamic nature of faith and robust, historically-informed theological reflection. I would encourage those reading this book to have open beside it Larry Hurtado's book, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), if only to highlight how comedic are aspects of Cupitt's forays into the historical Christ and his Pauline interpretation.

Further, for all its bravado in righting a 'historic gap' (xi) of interest in the figure of Jesus as a philosopher, we are left with an image of Christ who seems more modelled after Cupitt's own interests in post-World War II ethics and Eastern philosophy, than the Christ of the Gospels. I was left imagining a Jesus in tweed on a Cambridge common, with a volume of contemporary Buddhist philosophy in hand – which is not what Cupitt was intending.

If you wish to read Cupitt's views on Jesus as a philosopher, then read this book. However, if you want to know Jesus' views on God, the world and the human condition, I suggest something like Peter Kreeft's *The Philosophy of Jesus* (Chicago: St Augustine's Press, 2007). But then again, where other than in Cupitt could we find something so entertaining as a positive comparison of Princess Diana and Jesus of Nazareth?

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