

'The new world' in retrospect: Cupitt, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein

Gavin Hyman¹

Theology

2026, Vol. 129(1) 13–20

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0040571X251401156

journals.sagepub.com/home/tjx



Abstract

This article examines the relationship of Don Cupitt's thought to that of Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly as articulated in the final episode of Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* television series and in the accompanying book. It suggests that this has a significance beyond its place in the wider television series. In particular, it helps us to understand a recently articulated paradox regarding Cupitt's ambivalent influence on the later theologians of 'radical orthodoxy'. It also helps us to understand the later, quite different direction taken by Cupitt's own thought. In the wake of Cupitt's recent death, this article seeks to locate the wider significance of his thought through a snapshot of his thinking at a particular time and its relationship to other significant philosophers.

Keywords

Christian atheism, Cupitt, Nietzsche, non-realism, radical theology, *Sea of Faith*, Wittgenstein

Don Cupitt died on 18 January 2025. The previous year had marked both his ninetieth birthday and the fortieth anniversary of his BBC television series, *The Sea of Faith*. The series is now widely regarded as a landmark not only in religious television broadcasting, but in broadcasting more generally. It gave rise to an accompanying book of the same title, originally published by the BBC and later published in two subsequent editions by SCM Press. It also gave rise to the Sea of Faith network, an association of radical Christians inspired by Cupitt's ideas, both in the UK and overseas.

¹School of Global Affairs, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Corresponding author:

Gavin Hyman, School of Global Affairs, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.

Email: g.hyman@lancaster.ac.uk

In what follows, I shall look at the sixth and final episode, 'The new world', which, I suggest, has a significance beyond its place in *The Sea of Faith* series. Among other things, it may help to explain the puzzle recently articulated by Elaine Graham and Graeme Smith: namely, that although the later 'radical orthodoxy' theologians have paid tribute to Cupitt as a precursor and influence, it is 'a strange sort of pioneering role' in that the theology of radical orthodoxy was very different to his own and 'inimical to what he saw as the future of authentic postmodern religion'.¹ How might this simultaneous convergence and divergence be explained and understood? I want to suggest that Cupitt's engagement with Nietzsche and Wittgenstein in both the last episode of *The Sea of Faith* and in the accompanying book provides us with clues to understand this paradox.

The final episode of *The Sea of Faith* television series is also a culmination. In the previous episodes, Cupitt has been telling a story, not so much of the inexorable receding of the sea of faith as of a stripping away of illusions, of humanity coming to full self-consciousness, and the implications of this for a fully mature form of religious faith. The final episode brings us to our destination, it brings the story up to date, and the withdrawing tide carries us to where we are now, or at least where we were in 1984.

Each episode in the television series is structured around two key thinkers, one of criticism and one of reconstruction, and in the final episode these roles are played by Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein respectively. For Cupitt, Nietzsche's thought is undoubtedly a fire through which we must pass, but he is not a thinker with whom we can rest content. Ultimately, Nietzsche stands at the crest of a wave, as Heidegger would later say, and we now have to ride that wave and come down into waters on the other side; here, Wittgenstein will be our guide in this post-Nietzschean sea. Wittgenstein, rather than Nietzsche, is the thinker to whom the sea of faith has ultimately led us.

Nonetheless, Nietzsche's thought is in the first place indispensable. Cupitt himself had only recently discovered the full significance of Nietzsche. He is nowhere mentioned in what is often regarded as the first of Cupitt's non-realist books, *Taking Leave of God* (1980), which is predominantly a Kantian book with some Kierkegaardian flourishes. In contrast, the sequel, *The World to Come* (1982), is saturated with Nietzschean themes. In the wake of the publication of *Taking Leave of God*, Cupitt later said that he immersed himself in a study of Nietzsche, and it was this that led to his real conversion, away from humanism and towards nihilism. The story of modernity was one of the relocation of truth, values and objectivity from the divine to the human, and *Taking Leave of God* enacted this shift. But Cupitt's subsequent study of Nietzsche led him to see that the relocation of truth from the divine to the human was insufficient. Now, even the human itself had to be put into question; the human is itself a creation (not 'given' or foundational), and with that realization comes the advent of nihilism. The implications of this were worked out in *The World to Come*, and the centrality of these implications made it inevitable that Nietzsche would feature prominently in *The Sea of Faith* television series.

In episode 6, 'The new world', Nietzsche's central ideas are introduced lucidly and succinctly through the device of following Christian Doermer, actor and Nietzsche

enthusiast, who, as Cupitt explains, took small parties of people on what he called ‘philosophical excursions’ in which he recited Nietzschean texts in the Swiss landscapes in which they were composed. The television footage follows Doerner on these excursions through the Swiss mountains and villages as he declaims passages from Nietzsche, and this is interspersed with commentary from Cupitt himself. By these means, central Nietzschean themes – the death of God, the eternal recurrence, *amor fati*, the innocence of becoming – are expounded. As Cupitt himself explains regarding the death of God, about ten minutes into the episode:

Nietzsche saw himself as the paradoxical prophet of a past event. The greatest event of all had happened about a century before, but people still hadn’t heard about it; they couldn’t take in the implications of it. It meant the end of metaphysics, the end of belief in any kind of objective order or value in the world that might guide human life and support it and give it meaning. A spectre was haunting Europe – a spectre far worse than anything Karl Marx had dreamed of – the spectre of nihilism.²

The message of the episode is that we are tempted to construct all kinds of screens – doctrinal, metaphysical – to protect us against and shield us from the nihil. Yet all such protections and shields are false consolations. Rather, the nihil is something that must ultimately be passed through, a process through which we are changed and, indeed, redeemed.

At the same time, however, the implication is that we must pass through into something else on the far side. The nihil cannot of itself constitute a dwelling place. Quite why is not fully spelled out in the episode itself. There are, however, a couple of hints. The first is that going *beyond* Nietzsche is not to betray him but is, rather, an ultimate act of homage. Zarathustra is quoted towards the end of the Nietzsche segment, where he says: ‘one repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil ... Now I bid you: “Lose me, and find yourselves”.’ Nietzsche’s nihilism is fulfilled only when one has created and taken responsibility for one’s own truth. A second hint is made that Nietzsche’s nihilism is perhaps self-destructive: ‘For Nietzsche’s superman has to say Yes to meaninglessness, destruction, to chaos and alienation, even within the self. To try to say Yes to all that, for a person as passionately honest as Nietzsche, was to be forced to the edge of an abyss.’

What does it mean to emerge on the far side? Although the television episode does not explicitly ask this question, it was confronted directly in the accompanying book. Here, Cupitt says that ‘the nihilist or voluntarist must have some conception, if not of nature at large then at the very least of human nature, which he will see as making it appropriate to claim that some values are more life-enhancing than others’.³ Here is raised the prospect of some kind of post-metaphysical criterion by which post-nihilistic visions might be judged and evaluated.

For Cupitt, at this point, it was such criteria that led him to reject the *Übermensch* and to espouse a post-nihilistic form of Christian faith. There is, of course, a danger that this could be nothing more than a nostalgic pastiche of the kind decried at the very opening of the episode, another picturesque screen to protect us from the nihil. But Cupitt claims that

it need not be this, and it need not be a relapsing back into the slave morality that Nietzsche so decried. As Cupitt asks, again in the accompanying book:

Has [Nietzsche] not heard of Zen, of the Hasidim, of Eckhart? Does he not know that the Joyful Wisdom was attained and taught by religious mystics before he discovered it? ... That religious ideas ... exist not to describe God nor to constrain us but simply to liberate the spirit – all this was known once, however completely it has been forgotten since.⁴

As for how this new post-Nietzschean form of religious faith might be understood and articulated, the episode turns to the last thinker in the episode and in the series: Ludwig Wittgenstein.

It is perhaps easy to forget just how contemporary a figure Wittgenstein was at the time that *The Sea of Faith* television series was made. He had died at the age of 62, only 33 years before. Given how little was published during his lifetime, it took some time for Wittgenstein's oeuvre to appear, and he had said and written very little on religion as such. The book *Culture and Value*, which gave further hints on Wittgenstein's understanding of religion, had been published in English just four years earlier, in 1980.

In the episode, Cupitt seeks to give an account of the transition from the thought of the earlier Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* to the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Interestingly, the account he gives is strikingly similar to the one given almost 30 years later by Slavoj Žižek in his book *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism* (2012), albeit in his own distinctively Lacanian terms. According to the Lacanian 'formulae of sexuation', there are two ways of structuring totality and difference. The masculine formula posits an exception, but it is this very exception that is constitutive for, and allows for the possibility of, a unified and totalizing whole. On the other hand, the feminine formula is defined by the paradox of the 'non-all' (*pas-tout*). Here, there is no exception, no founding abjection, and for that very reason, the field is non-totalized, non-unified, 'non-All'. Žižek suggests that we should understand the shift from the early to the late Wittgenstein precisely as a shift from a masculine to a feminine structural logic in these Lacanian terms.

Although Cupitt doesn't, of course, use this Lacanian terminology, his understanding of the shift is very close. Žižek says that 'in the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, the world is comprehended as a self-enclosed, limited, bounded Whole of "facts" which precisely as such presupposes an Exception: the mystical Ineffable which functions as its Limit'.⁵ Cupitt picks up on this 'mystical Ineffable' in the episode, when he asks what Wittgenstein means by God in his early work of the *Tractatus*. Standing in the house that Wittgenstein designed for his sister, he says that the house itself gives a clue:

[A]fter a while, the geometrical tranquillity of the place begins to remind us of a mosque, a place where God is so exalted and transcendent that no image at all is possible. Can you imagine an idea of God so exalted that the sense of the presence of God and the sense of the absence of God coincide?

In Wittgenstein's later thought, of course, the mystical Ineffable is abandoned, and so too is the 'bounded Whole of "facts"' for which it is the precondition. As Žižek again presents this, the loss of one necessarily entails the loss of the other. In late Wittgenstein, he says:

[T]he problematic of the Ineffable disappears, yet for that very reason the universe is no longer comprehended as a Whole regulated by the universal conditions of language: all that remains [sic] are lateral connections between partial domains. The notion of language as a system defined by a set of universal features is replaced by the notion of language as a multitude of dispersed practices loosely interconnected by 'family resemblances'.⁶

How is God reconceived in this new setting? Later in the episode, Cupitt says:

Wittgenstein has a deep respect for the practice of morality and religion, but, like Tolstoy, he's deeply mistrustful of the theory. On the whole, he thinks of religious beliefs not as being factual, but in terms of the job they do in shaping our lives ... All we can see clearly is the way our language works in the games we play. So we can see how belief in God works and how it can shape our lives, but then we must stop at that.

So Cupitt discerns two distinct conceptions of God arising out of Wittgenstein's earlier and later thought respectively. Interestingly, these two conceptions seem to correspond to the two conceptions of theism espoused by Cupitt himself in the 1970s and 1980s successively. In the 1970s, God was the Ineffable transcendent, not to be equated with our images and doctrines; there was an emphasis on iconoclasm, the negative theology and mystical silence.⁷ In the 1980s, this Ineffable transcendent was burned away, leaving the practical conception of God within religious language as the highest religious ideal and symbol – that is, the non-realist God.⁸

In the accompanying book, Cupitt quotes Wittgenstein as saying: 'The way you use the word "God" does not show whom you mean – but, rather, what you mean. God's essence is supposed to guarantee his existence – what this really means is that what is here at issue is not the existence of something.'⁹ Cupitt uses this as evidence for his unequivocal assertion that Wittgenstein himself is 'a clear non-realist in theology'.¹⁰ As such, it might seem that Cupitt is here unequivocally ceding to Wittgenstein the last word on *The Sea of Faith* journey.

But are things that straightforward? At the time *The Sea of Faith* series was being broadcast, the implications of Wittgenstein's thought for religion were being widely explored and the results were much contested. Two books in particular were to be of lasting significance. Just eight years before, in 1976, D. Z. Phillips had published his *Religion without Explanation*, expounding a Wittgensteinian philosophical understanding of religion.¹¹ Just two years later, in 1986, Fergus Kerr would publish *Theology after Wittgenstein*.¹² The two works were very different methodologically – the first philosophical and the second theological – but they were led to converging conclusions. In particular, and *contra* Cupitt, they both resist the characterization of Wittgenstein as a non-realist. Rather, they see him as trying to overcome both realism *and* non-realism.

They claim that Wittgenstein saw them as two sides of the same metaphysical coin, where the central philosophical question is one of *representation*, and where realism and non-realism are alternative answers to the same misleading philosophical question. That is to say, both realism and non-realism assume that the primary function of language is to 'represent' an external reality; the difference between them is that the former asserts while the latter denies that such an aim is deliverable. But if 'representation' is only one (and by no means the most important or significant) function of language, then both realism and non-realism are faulty and misleading accounts of how language actually works. It would therefore be a mistake, on this view, to interpret Wittgenstein as a non-realist in theology or, indeed, in anything else.¹³

Cupitt doesn't directly address this in the episode itself. But in the accompanying book, he does provide a clue as to how to understand this disagreement. He suggests that there is a tension or ambivalence within Wittgenstein's thought itself. On the one hand, Wittgenstein may be seen as a radical reformulator of what philosophy actually is and should be, and, in this sense, he is the most radical and revolutionary of the thinkers discussed in the series. But on the other hand, this radically new conception of philosophy 'leaves everything as it is'; it seeks not to change anything, but merely to describe.¹⁴ In this sense, Cupitt says that Wittgenstein's thinking can be portrayed as 'deeply conservative'. He says:

[I]n religion, Wittgenstein can be seen as just one more nostalgic and impotent *émigré* of the sort that may be seen attending the Orthodox liturgy in the West. Such a person disdains liberal and modernizing theology and prefers to cling to what she regards as the genuine article, even though she is herself half-sceptical about it and her allegiance has become a private matter that she can no longer effectively integrate into the mainstream of her real life.¹⁵

What is interesting about these remarks is that they are strikingly similar to the criticisms that he would later make of the theologians of 'radical orthodoxy'.¹⁶ Cupitt concedes that he thinks this conservative, passive reading may well characterize a real aspect of Wittgenstein's thought. Although he doesn't directly refer to D. Z. Phillips and Fergus Kerr, the implication is that it might be *this* aspect of Wittgenstein's understanding of religion that they accurately convey. In other words, Phillips and Kerr (and the later theologians of radical orthodoxy) may indeed have given the best characterization of at least an aspect of Wittgenstein's view of religion; but, if they have, this is not a path that Cupitt himself wishes to take. This, then, may well constitute the crux of Cupitt's simultaneous convergence and divergence with radical orthodoxy, as we noted at the outset. If, as Elaine Graham and Graeme Smith have noted, radical orthodoxy proclaims both an indebtedness to *and* a divergence from Don Cupitt, we may well be able to discern this simultaneous convergence and divergence as an ambivalence *within* Wittgenstein's own thought. By emphasizing the potentially radical and revolutionary elements of Wittgenstein's philosophy, Cupitt found himself propelled *back towards* Nietzsche. In contrast, by emphasizing the descriptive and passive aspects of Wittgenstein's thought, Phillips, Kerr and the theologians of radical orthodoxy found themselves moving *away from* Nietzsche and his nihilism.

This is confirmed when, as his way of moving beyond this tension or ambivalence in Wittgenstein's thought, Cupitt concludes:

[M]y own belief is that his ideas about religion were too conservative and nostalgic. He was left with a kind of mystical inertia ... his radical humanism remained tinged by a faint but unmistakable note of religious frustration and melancholy. He did not quite succeed in bringing about the full synthesis of faith and modernity.¹⁷

In place of such passive, descriptive quietism, Cupitt sought instead the role of the active, creative, 'artist theologian'. This therefore gave a clear indication of the path Cupitt would take in later years and in many further writings beyond *The Sea of Faith*.

Statements and declarations

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

A version of this article was originally delivered at the 'Sea of Faith 40th Anniversary' conference held at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, 1–2 July 2024. I am grateful to the organizers for the invitation to speak and to participants for questions and discussion.

- 1 Elaine Graham and Graeme Smith, 'Don Cupitt: theological pioneer?', *Theology*, Vol. 127, no. 1 (2024), pp. 4–12, here p. 9.
- 2 Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (BBC-TV, 1984), episode 6. Subsequent unattributed quotations are taken directly from this episode.
- 3 Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 1994 [1984]), p. 200.
- 4 Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, pp. 216–17.
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 756.
- 6 Žižek, *Less than Nothing*.
- 7 See Don Cupitt, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God*, 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 1985 [1971]); *Crisis of Moral Authority*, 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 1985 [1972]); *The Leap of Reason*, 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 1985 [1976]). See also the essay 'The Christ of Christendom' in John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).
- 8 See Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980); *The World to Come* (London: SCM Press, 1982); *Only Human* (London: SCM Press, 1985).
- 9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 50e, quoted in Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, p. 232.

- 10 Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, p. 232.
- 11 D. Z. Phillips, *Religion without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976). A revised and enlarged version of the book was later published as *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 12 Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) [2nd edition, London: SPCK, 1997].
- 13 For more discussion of this, see Fergus Kerr, 'What's wrong with realism anyway?' in Colin Crowder (ed.), *God and Reality: essays on Christian non-realism* (London: Mowbray, 1997), pp. 128–43. See also Rowan Williams's 'Foreword' in the same volume, pp. v–ix.
- 14 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edition, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), paragraph 124, p. 49e.
- 15 Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, p. 235.
- 16 See Don Cupitt, 'My postmodern witch', *Modern Believing*, Vol. 39, no. 4 (1998), pp. 5–10.
- 17 Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, pp. 236–7.

Author biography

Gavin Hyman is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy in the School of Global Affairs, Lancaster University, Lancaster.