

Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and Writings of Don Cupitt

Nigel Leaves

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Reviewer: **Dr Scott Cowdell**

This is the first book by Perth-based Anglican priest Nigel Leaves, who is the Director and Dean of Studies at Wollaston College. Along with a yet-to-be-published second volume, to be called *Surfing on the Sea of Faith*, what we have here is the distillation of Dr Leaves' extensive (and definitive) PhD thesis tracing the life and thought of English theology's *enfant terrible*, Don Cupitt. The sea of faith terminology recalls a poem 'Dover Beach', by nineteenth-century liberal theologian Matthew Arnold, then commenting on the 'melancholy, long withdrawing roar' of Christian faith before the intellectual challenges of modernity. This image served Cupitt as the title of a BBC TV series in the mid-eighties on the same theme. In turn, the 'Sea of Faith (SoF) Network' has arisen in England, New Zealand and Australia as no less than a new religious movement of people who desire to explore Christian faith and practice beyond the collapse of doctrinal certainty and, indeed, faith in the objective existence of God. Don Cupitt has championed this distinctive take on what Christianity can mean, as certainly the most articulate, prolific and readable of today's small group of 'post-theistic', post-modern theologians and philosophers of religion.

Leaves is clearly an aficionado of this viewpoint, and he has traced Cupitt's breathless progress through six stages of intellectual development, up to his present exploration of how Western religion might look in the future. As a former chaplain to Archbishop Peter Carnley, Leaves can be no stranger to the cool, Cambridge-style divinity familiar to all who have read Dr Carnley's latest book, *Reflections in Glass*. Cupitt began where Carnley ends up, with a kind of negative theology that makes much of the mystery of God, seeking divine knowledge along the path of discarded God images—the only way to the real God is away from less-adequate notions of God. Cupitt followed this path to what I believe is its logical conclusion, abandoning God's objective existence in *Taking Leave of God* (1980), opting instead for a view of religious truth as essentially regulative. He then became increasingly post-modern, following Wittgenstein and late-twentieth century radical French thinkers into a view of things whereby all reality is created within language, and objective truth (both religious and philosophical) is abandoned. The religious task becomes expressionistic and celebratory, concerned with making rather than discovering meaning, and with finding religious happiness in the outpouring joy of life (we've no alternative, after all, says Cupitt, as this life is all there is). Most recently, Don has been attending to the surprisingly lively and coherent philosophy of religion discernible in everyday speech. So, for instance, Cupitt explores in a series of books the newly-minted religious quality attaching to the words 'life' and 'heaven' in their myriad uses, pondering also the range of widely acknowledged challenges to human thriving that are evoked by the use of words like 'it' and 'it all'.

Not only the intellectual but also the spiritual and emotional character of this new religious landscape is explored. And Leaves is particularly good here on the way all this connects to Cupitt personally. Don is a bit of a mystic, you see, with a most attractive non-anxious and detached quality about him. But he has struggled with all this nonetheless, bearing not only opprobrium in the Church of England (a promising career self-sabotaged...) but also the emotional cost of unlearning a whole deeply-felt imaginative world, pioneering instead a metaphysically light, essentially beliefless position that approximates Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics. Giving some access to this personal struggle provides the main interest in Leaves' autobiographical sketch of Cupitt's progress.

I know about all this, and I was approached to do this review, because I wrote my first book about Don—a piece of juvenilia attempting a critical study of Cupitt from a sympathetic (albeit disagreeing) perspective, with the title *Atheist Priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity* (London: SCM, 1988). Alarming, it has remained the standard work. Yet since the late 1980s, when I wrote, Don has gone a long way further, sometimes producing more than one new book a year, with my little piece now very out of date. So it is good to have Nigel Leaves' discussion, surpassing what I was able to do back then and bringing the record up to date. Rightly or wrongly, Dr Leaves has followed my method, tracing influences and seeking to discern turning points in Cupitt's development, all in a biographical context. I add that the extent of Leaves' respect for my modest efforts, and his unfailingly polite references to my book (even when pointing out my oversights, etc.) is a wonder to me. May I say, too, how relieved I am that the mantle of Cupitt interpretation has now been lifted from my shoulders. When Don passes into the void (he turns 70 this year), it will be Dr Leaves who is called upon to write the definitive summing up, rather than me, and for this he will be superbly qualified.

This is a book for the keen student of post-modern theology, who will find in Cupitt a major (if sometimes under-rated) player. It will also be eagerly sought-after by Cupitt's many fans worldwide. Those following new religious movements (NRMs) will be interested in the way Cupitt's work has spawned SoF, in a development I for one would not have credited fifteen years ago. The book is inevitably rather dry and detailed in its coverage of the material, and no doubt a less ploddy perspective on Cupitt's work will be available with some years of hindsight, beyond what Leaves (or I, in my book) supply. But what Leaves has done he has done very well, helping explain a figure that I am not alone in finding perennially challenging and stimulating.

See our disclaimer. In *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith*, Nigel Leaves maps the ways in which the ideas of Don Cupitt have developed, evolved, and changed--from mildly evangelical to liberal, to leading exponent of the view that there is not God out there and that we must create new religious ways of being. This book makes sense of Cupitt. For those interested in the ideas of Don Cupitt, it will be the authoritative resource for many years to come. *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life & Writings of Don Cupitt* (Paperback).

Specifications. Publisher. Writers like Cupitt make us uncomfortable: they remind us that we are often content to live with half-baked ideas of truth and not want to be disturbed with deeper ideas. My conviction is that the community of faith needs these pioneer thinkers if we are to survive, but I am grateful to Nigel Leaves for throwing a bridge out to me from the frontier territory traversed by Cupitt. We more timid travellers appreciate the help. [Read more.](#) The glimpses into the life-story of Don Cupitt set his writings in fascinating context. I highly recommend this book. [Read more.](#) The Sea of Faith Network (SoF) is an organisation with the stated aim to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation. The SoF movement started in 1984 as a response to Don Cupitt's book and television series, both titled *Sea of Faith*. Cupitt was educated in both science and theology at the University of Cambridge in the 1950s, and is a philosopher, theologian, Anglican priest, and former Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. In the book and TV series, he surveyed western thinking about