

Theological Trends

FROM THE REAL TO THE UNREAL

Religious Belief in a Sceptical World

By ANGELA TILBY

WHATEVER HAS HAPPENED TO RELIGIOUS BELIEF?

I come to this question not as a professional theologian, though my degree was in theology, but as a television producer and religious journalist. At the same time I am a reader in the Church of England, charged with preaching and teaching the faith. What is the faith that I teach and preach? The Christian faith as the Church of England has received it, revealed in the Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic creeds.

That is an answer of a kind. Yet the sceptical, media world in which I work requires a searching deconstruction of such pre-formulated replies. What is the Christian faith? In what sense has the Church of England received it? How true are the Scriptures in what they claim to reveal? What are the creeds and how can they matter? What exactly do I believe as an individual? And exactly how do I, in a society that is both secular and pluralist, believe what I claim to believe? Do I believe literally or metaphorically? Do I believe all or part? Do I have inner doubts? Am I hypocritical to claim to believe when I may be not sure?

Religious decline and its consequences

It may be a relief or an irritation to know that I can answer none of those questions directly. But my media-self and my Church-self both agree on one thing: since the 1950s there has been a decline in public confidence in the plausibility of religious belief. My media-self suspects that this is due to weakness and division in the Church; my Church-self believes that the media itself may be responsible. Whatever the cause, both selves think that beliefs do not *matter* in quite the way they once did. Beliefs are held more loosely. A high value is put on religious tolerance. Church-going is a voluntary, leisure-time activity, in competition with Sunday shopping, gardening and the health club.

This is not to say either that religion is without influence on public life or that the media are uninterested in it. Islam matters, for example, when a *fatwa* is declared against a highly-regarded author. The Church of England matters in a constitutional crisis. Catholicism matters when the Vatican makes its voice heard on population control. From the point of view of news media religious belief is significant when it interferes with life. Whether the interference is beneficial or harmful, the focus is on the interference, not the belief which led to it. What then of belief itself?

It is commonly assumed that belief is not about what is the case, but about matters of private opinion and individual conscience. Whatever religion is about, it is *not* about the universe, or reality or the way things really are.

But then, does anything tell us very much about such weighty matters any more? The problem of postmodernity is that we have lost faith in the possibility of any overarching narratives arising from universal certainties. The nearest we get to the consensus that could produce a shared story is in scientific cosmology; and even that is fraught with interpretative difficulties. Religion is driven in on itself by a lack of cultural common ground with the fragile story emerging from science. Because religious beliefs no longer seem to resonate with perceptions about the universe and the self, the tendency is to hold them more tentatively and to interpret them in prescriptive rather than descriptive ways. It is becoming commonplace to commend belief for its usefulness rather than for its truth. There has been a devastating cultural shift in the years since the war which is manifested in an increasing deafness to religious interpretations of the world.

Is television to blame?

It would be easy to assume that the modern popular press and media are responsible for this. Television in particular has a tendency to polarize argument. It cries out for revelation, exposure and human drama. It is a narrative medium in which it is hard for sophisticated religious claims to be heard or understood. It is possible that television is one of the forces which is helping to insulate nuanced religious language, closing off the possibilities of popular interpretation, and unconsciously aiding the spread of fundamentalism. (I think of fundamentalism here as the ultimate revolt against religious balance and sanity, the choice to attempt to live without ambiguity.)

However, to blame electronic media for our religious problems strikes me as superficial. Television is not an alien technology which has been dropped on us from outer space. It is something we have developed. It carries the feel and touch of our whole civilization. Television and computers are products of the technological revolution which began with the Enlightenment. What is happening to religious belief through television is an extension of the critique of belief which the Enlightenment itself began. The Enlightenment was an attempt to use the power of reason to see *through* complex phenomena and to understand them in terms both of their constituent parts and in terms of the forces which acted upon them.

Television becomes a particularly acute instrument of some important strands of Enlightenment thought simply because it is a visual medium. The penetrating, measuring eye is an Enlightenment tool. Reason works on observation to produce theory, which is then tested by observation to extend knowledge. Television, in its curiosity and relentlessness, is an extension of this way of thinking. We all recognize that television assumes a right to know and barges in regardless of sacred boundaries and unassailable mysteries. Miracles are there to be explained, mystique to be unmasked. Television has no reverence, no established codes of honour and shame. It is not the fact of electronic

mass media which has made the claims of religious believers difficult to swallow, but the media's ability to heighten and dramatize the interrogative qualities of Enlightenment thinking.

The post-war vision

Change has come upon us very quickly. The world picture of my childhood was one in which religious and Enlightenment thought were blended together in a vision of a new world order. This vision was born in the last years of the war when there was a conscious attempt in Europe and North America to reaffirm the Judaeo-Christian roots of western culture. To many of those who flocked into churches on national days of prayer the struggle of the allies was a crusade against a peculiarly virulent and cruel form of paganism.

Hitler believed that both Christianity and the age of reason had run their course, and that the Christian and humanist traditions of Europe were ripe for replacement by a new religion. Heinrich Himmler, who was described by Hitler as 'my Loyola', attempted to construct a holistic, pagan religion with its own temples, shrines and priesthood to serve the Aryan master-race. Hitler's philosophers and high priests were concerned about the purity of the earth as well as of the blood; healthy eating, healthy sexuality, healthy genes were all part of the progressive spirituality of the Third Reich. Those destined for survival and mastery would conquer. There were winter solstice ceremonies in which Himmler personally celebrated the birth of the sun-child from the ashes of Jesus Christ.

The war destroyed the demonic dream of Aryan supremacy and left Europe divided. The West struggled with its inheritance of Jewish and Christian faith and Enlightenment doubt. Beyond the Berlin wall Soviet atheism attempted to build a human world without God. In Britain Christianity appealed to many as a genuine *via media*, a bulwark against irrational and over-rational creeds. The post-war period was a good time for Christian apologetic, which was promoted through radio and print media. There were many eminent defenders of the faith. Austin Farrer, the Anglican theologian and philosopher, composed elegant essays on evil, faith and providence. Gerard Vann explored the writings of Jung to produce arguments for faith based on human psychology. C. S. Lewis broadcast the talks that became known as *Mere Christianity*. Dorothy L. Sayers wrote her famous radio plays about the life of Christ, *The man born to be king*. Leslie Weatherhead, the Methodist, broadcast his *Silver lining* on the BBC Home Service, a blend of popular psychology and religious consolation. These examples are important because they show that the mass media of the time, of which radio was the most dominant form, recognized Christianity as *belief*, and deliberately included its expressions in the schedules.

Along with all this the foundation of the Welfare State in Britain was seen by many as the social expression of Christian beliefs. One of the architects of post-war legislation was the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. The 1944 Education Act, which insisted that all schools began the day with worship and provided religious instruction, owed much to his social vision.

Christianity was seen as a combative faith, as a superior and all-embracing world-view, compatible with the best Enlightenment thinking, consonant with excellence in music and literature, and vitally necessary for the maintenance of public and private morality. It was, in today's language, an unashamedly 'realist' faith. Christianity was public truth. Teachers and broadcasters could rely on a reasonable level of general knowledge about the contents of the Scriptures, helped by the provisions of the 1944 Education Act. The post-war apologists built on a general understanding of the way in which religious truth might resonate with truths derived from empirical science. This might have been flawed, but it was accepted.

The breakdown of religious resonance

An example: by the 1960s advances in astronomy had led to the development of two rival theories of the origin of the universe. Both theories attempted to explain the curious fact that the universe was expanding. The steady-state theory suggested that the expansion was linked to a continuous process of creation and destruction. New matter was pulled into existence to counteract a steady and continuous outward movement. The big-bang theory insisted that the expansion was evidence that the universe had begun in a primeval explosion. There was a widespread assumption in the popular press that the difference between the theories was the difference between religion and atheism. The big-bang was evidence for God's existence; the steady-state theory suggested God's non-existence. It was expected that there must be some resonance between scientific and religious language.

This resonance between scientific and religious language is no longer felt. Parallels between Genesis and the big-bang are not obvious in the way they once were. In fact, the popular media now insist that we choose between the two. It is not a case of God creating *through* the big-bang, but of the creation having happened *either* through God's act *or* the big-bang. In April 1992 when the NASA satellite Cobe discovered the rippling effect of the big-bang at the furthest limits of the universe, some of the popular press and media announced the discovery as disproving God's existence. Theological purists will rightly point out that the doctrine of creation does not depend on any particular scientific theory. But at the popular level what this lack of resonance demonstrates is the erosion of common ground between science and religion. The post-war truce between religion and Enlightenment thought is over.

Religion, atheism and the collapse of national consensus

Another example. Thirty years ago religious radio and television programmes were made as though the question of God could be meaningfully debated between intelligent equals. In my teenage years I remember the formidable atheist Marghanita Laski slugging it out on television with John Robinson, the Anglican bishop of Woolwich and author of *Honest to God*. Robinson, following Paul Tillich, defined God as 'ultimate reality', and appealed to Marghanita Laski to name what for her was most ultimately real. She answered

with a flourish that for her 'There is no such thing as ultimate reality'. The encounter was dramatic and polarized, but at least it was about an agenda which both participants accepted as intelligible.

This debate could not happen now. Something has happened to the way we believe and unbelieve; the terms of the debate are no longer clear cut. Beliefs themselves are now seen as intellectual *constructs* to be analysed and explained. When Channel 4 staged its *God debate* on two Saturday evenings in the autumn of 1993, what was remarkable was the hesitancy and unease of many who purported to be God's supporters. Many found they had more in common with the former nun Karen Armstrong (who proposed the motion against God's existence) than with the orthodox Neo-Thomist Herbert McCabe. Instead of a straightforward debate between believers and unbelievers, what unfolded was a more subtle set of skirmishes as liberal Christians, Jews and agnostics parried the thrusts of scientific and religious fundamentalists. As the debate went on Fr McCabe's reasoned orthodoxy seemed less and less emotionally plausible. The beautiful structure of Thomistic argument, building on the reality of human desire and leading towards the reality of God, had lost its resonance. His was, arguably, the best constructed argument, but the least convincing.

Why? The media context is part of the story. Only the fundamentalists survive when the argument is set up for angry, non-communicative soundbites. But the real reason why Fr McCabe's argument fell on deaf ears is that Christianity is no longer expected to be rational. At the same time the rational is not expected to be human. It is assumed that the emotional and spiritual needs of human beings are tragic overflows of consciousness in a mindless, machine-like universe. They have no resonance outside ourselves. The post-war period, with its dual investment in reason and faith, now appears as a temporary blip in the relentless process of religious decline. This decline is not something which is imposed from without; it belongs to the inner experience of nearly all believers. Religious realism is sapping away from within.

The spirituality of scientific scepticism

Why? The Enlightenment itself is much attacked today. But these attacks have weakened intelligent religious belief, rather than strengthened it. I think this is because the triumphalism which was once a hallmark of Enlightenment science has given way to a rather different mood. Contemporary science is often characterized by dour honesty and commitment to self-doubt. It is not only a way of extending our knowledge, but a method of learning, even a path to spirituality. It assumes that knowledge is gained through rigorous scepticism. It is only by mistakes that we learn. Even the most fundamental scientific theory is potentially fallible. In such a discipline doubt is a virtue, faith an error. Many of our contemporaries appreciate the advantages of scientific scepticism. They find the claims of religion too grandiose for comfort. It was one thing for religion to be meaningless. One could always, with Tertullian, believe 'because it is absurd'. It is quite another to find the claims of religion set aside because they are simply too big to handle intelligently.

The Christian faith which I am licensed to preach and teach seems to require me to subvert two of the fundamental principles of contemporary spirituality, namely, a rigorous scepticism and a joyful awareness of the fallibility of all human constructs. I can, of course, claim that the content of faith is revealed in such a way that it is invulnerable to the normal critical questions that the journalist in me would naturally want to ask. But to do so would only make sense if there was a general agreement to treat the deposit of faith as an inviolable given. There is no such assent in the world in which I preach and teach and make television programmes. There may be such assent in the world of Islam, which would explain why the Qur'an cannot be subjected to the same kind of critical scholarship as biblical and conciliar texts. But the Muslim position is not the same as the Christian. In Christianity the word was made flesh, not word. Christian scholarship is implicated in the development of history and science. Through the tools of historical and doctrinal criticism it has looked both fearfully and with courage into its own sources, and is still struggling to make sense of what it finds. Biblical and doctrinal scholarship, like science, seem to eliminate the mysteries of faith, and leave us with historical and human explanations which allow no room for a divine agent.

The hall of mirrors

Alongside these problems is the baffling discovery that our world is so deeply interconnected at the subatomic level that familiar distinctions crucial to our sense of God and self have broken down. There is no longer an outside or an inside to this universe of ours. It is difficult for many people to conceive of the divine except in terms of the wholeness of things, the universe itself. An 'external' creator is perceived as a redundant construct, even a rather foolish one. In particle physics the gap between the observer and observed has all but disappeared. We perceive and are perceived in one movement and action. We cannot get out of the hall of mirrors, of which the electronic media are the most obvious cultural expression. Already we have the electronic basis of a new kind of human community, the 'net', already known as the 'mediatrix' in a forlorn echo of religious sentiment. We do not need to pray 'bind us together, Lord'. Our dilemma is that we are *already* bound together in the energy chains which bind the whole universe.

In the face of this awesome environment, the claims of revealed religion appear to many like rockets sent up into the dark: they glitter, but they are not the stars. Indeed, their glittering may be counter-productive; the frivolous surge conceals the stars' coldness.

Religion as humanly useful

The consequence is that even the faithful often suspect that religious claims cannot quite be trusted. They are somehow too immodest to resonate with the rest of our experience, in which we find truth patchily, through trial and error. It is now commonplace to assume that religion is only OK if it can be shown to be humanly useful. In order to do this it has to play down its claims to be true;

since in the hall of mirrors, in a universe with no outside, all claims to truth are suspect.

By the early 1970s the teachings of the Second Vatican Council were beginning to endorse the assumption that the chief reference of faith was to the human world. The new focus on ecumenism, on dialogue with other faiths and former enemies; the overriding concern for the dignity of the human person; the playing down of the doctrines of hell and eternal punishment; all these helped make Christianity more accessible, at least to the Catholic faithful. There was less about infallibility, more about collegiality; there was more about the Bible, less about doctrinal development. The recently promulgated dogma of the Assumption seemed a million miles away from the thought of the Council. The Blessed Virgin Mary, even heaven itself, were far from the progressive Catholic imagination. It is only in retrospect that something odd strikes one about the focus of the Council. The two most important council documents were not about God or about the core of belief but about the Church. *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* both concentrated on the Church as a thing-in-itself: what it was and what it was to do. The content of the Church's belief, its gospel and its theology, was included *within* the ecclesiastical system rather than standing before or behind it. It has become clearer and clearer since the Council that the system, rather than the content of faith, is what is in the foreground. The Church is not so much the means to an end but both means and end. Most people found this startlingly relevant, even revolutionary. They did not draw the conclusion that the *system* was coming to overshadow in importance the ineffable core of Catholic belief and worship. Critics of Vatican II may not be entirely wrong when they suggest that the Council has encouraged unbelief by cashing the promise of religion in this-worldly terms.

Virtuous atheism and the 'death of God' movement

While the Council was drawing to a close the 'death of God' theology was emerging from the United States. It was largely a phenomenon of liberal Protestantism. The death of God theology was an attempt to make a religious and human virtue of contemporary cultural atheism. The death of God, it was argued, was a liberating cultural event. The God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition was both intellectually redundant and morally superfluous. Not only did we not need God to explain the universe, but the very idea of a heavenly Father was an assault on human freedom and flourishing. The demise of the Almighty had been prophesied by Nietzsche and had come to fulfilment in the second half of the twentieth century. The death of God creed could be neatly parodied as 'There is no God, and Jesus Christ is his Son'.

The death of God theologies failed to deliver a spirituality of unbelief. But other thinkers were ready and waiting to fill the gap. A decade on from the death of God theologies the Welsh philosopher D. Z. Phillips published his seminal book *Religion without explanation*. This had a great impact on me and a number of my contemporaries. Phillips insisted that religion could have

nothing to do with philosophy or science; it did not provide explanations. Religious statements did not refer to entities or objects outside themselves. Instead, they were to be understood primarily as affirmations, feelings and aspirations. D. Z. Phillips' arguments were beautifully seductive. They relieved the pressure on apologetics to try and make sense of the world, and insisted that this was not necessary. All that mattered was fidelity. Religious affirmations were thus rendered modest and unthreatening. God existed within the language games of worshipping communities; we could say nothing more of how God related to the creation, but we should feel confident in the spiritual validity of our prayer and worship. Within prayer and worship, God could be meaningfully addressed. This drew the sting of atheism while allowing believers to abstain from the issue of how 'real' God was.

The death of God theology and its successors have made way for all kinds of transmutations of Christian faith. It was not a big step in the 1960s from religious atheism to ethical and political commitment, and from there to a re-engagement with the kind of humanistic theology that had emerged from the Second Vatican Council. But there was a price to pay for dropping other-worldliness.

Enlightenment thinkers had tried to understand the world from a position of neutrality rather than that of human centrality. Human beings, as part of nature, were to be understood *as if from somewhere else*, as the products of economic, social and psychological forces. Human beings were to be seen, in other words, as though through a lens, from a distance, as beings that had been *constructed* rather than as beings that had been created. Yet the inheritance of the Enlightenment, aided by electronic media, has revealed that we cannot sustain the illusion of objectivity. We live in a hall of mirrors. We see our faith, our tradition, our spirituality, with all the tools of the critical learning. We see *through* ourselves and recognize that we are constructed beings. But at this point the agenda of the Enlightenment subverts itself. We thought we were seeing ourselves as we really are, only to discover that we are not disinterested parties. We are doing the seeing at the same time as we are being seen. We are like the image of the snake eating its tail.

We are caught, in other words, in a narcissistic spiral, which we cannot easily get out of. The Church, in that it claimed to be the organ of universal truth, has suffered a massive blow to its corporate self-esteem. Other great institutions of the western world have suffered similar assaults. They have come too close to seeing through their own claims, and are not sure any more on what basis their authority can be established.

The problem is that children of Enlightenment thinking *see through* all sacred claims, all truths, all loyalties. We know the truths that television culture brings to us. They are ours already, even though we sometimes claim that they are imposed on us by 'the media'. If they were not already ours we would not be so vulnerable to them, so acutely hurt by what they reveal.

Two narcissistic theologies: (i) Liberation theology

Stuck in the hall of mirrors, there are those who try to construct a new basis for authority by projecting their nakedness and poverty on to others and to God. They then fall in love with the image of their own desolation. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the various theologies of liberation. One of the things which is permanently irritating about the liberation theologies is their totalitarian spirit and their hectoring, envious, judgemental tone. The theologies of liberation incorporate the Enlightenment assumption that only if God is effectively dead can man or woman, or the poor, or the animal creation be themselves. Humankind is defined over against all that God stands for. A God who is other, a God who is powerful, a God who can *do* things, is by definition an oppressive God who crushes humanity under the divine boot. The only credible God is a weak, burdened, suffering God, a God who is as vulnerable as we are. A strong, holy, immortal God is the object and agent of narcissistic envy.

But the much-loved vulnerable God, is, of course, subject to the system, created out of its own weakness and need and envy. Such a God is a mere projection of human pain, a God on whom we may justly wreak revenge. Of course it is also true to say that divine vulnerability does come very close to the rhetorical heart of Christian faith in which the glory of God is expressed in humility, power in weakness, victory through defeat. However, in the new theologies which have emerged in recent years there is neither genuine gratitude nor authentic guilt. This is because the new theologies do not allow for any meaningful transaction between God and humankind. Because God is not other there is no distance to be travelled, no reconciliation to be effected. We make peace with our God by recognizing that we are not guilty, but victims. All that happens is that we repeat the narcissistic discovery that our head is connected to our tail. We cannot be represented by anyone but ourselves, nor can we be judged. Only as victims are we viable.

It is of course true that the crucibles of poverty and deprivation in which such theologies emerged required a response. But in the liberation theologies, strategic choices in desperate circumstances came to be self-righteously portrayed as the true and only mandate of the gospel. The liberation theologies reveal the inevitable decline that sets in when the system becomes the focus of salvation and constructed humanity becomes the active agent of religious faith. They are trapped in the moment of legitimate protest; their model of God is not sufficiently dynamic for them to move on.

(ii) Conservative reaction

What about the alternative to the theologies of liberation, the more right-wing and conservative theologies which are growing in importance throughout the Church? In some ways neo-conservative reactions are the most disturbingly solipsistic of all responses to our dilemma; for the right-wing bigot covers his nakedness with designer vestments of antique authority, looks into the mirror and *likes what he sees*. Not only does he live by the system, he takes it with absolute seriousness.

The contemporary religious conservative knows only too well that God has become unreal in our lifetime, an absent mystery mediated, if at all, by competing human systems. He is not privileged with a deeper faith than the rest of us, nor is he innocent of the problems of religious belief. But where the liberation theologian acts by denial, he reacts by competitiveness. The conservative's system simply delivers more. By declaring that his system is true, he genuinely believes he has made it so. He is a magic man, a magician, with all the charisma and potential for disaster which that implies. Modern religious conservatives are obsessed with systems.

If you doubt this compare the conversion of John Henry Newman to those of present day defecting Anglicans. Newman was tormented by anxieties that were theological and spiritual. He stood in the hall of mirrors all right, and knew it. He tells us in his *Apologia* that his earliest fantasies were that 'life might be a dream, or I an Angel, and all this world a deception . . .' The fear and the faith that went into his spiritual journey went to the heart of the matter. He came to 'rest in the thought of two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator'. His struggle with the system was a struggle to rest in God. Could the historically compromised Church of England ever be a reliable vessel of divine truth? He does not write anxiously about his priesthood or the validity of his orders because, though these would need to be set aside and re-negotiated, what was really at stake for Newman was the reality of his salvation.

In contrast, today's defectors seem to have no problem with God. They never even frame their problem in terms of God at all, but in terms of validity, authenticity and tradition. They do not want to leave their Anglican past behind, but dream of mass in King's College, Cambridge; of being mirrored by being affirmed and welcomed, mirrored. They are affronted by enquiry and delay, and totally unprepared for the stripping and humiliation which Newman submitted to. There is something distasteful about these supposedly principled clergy hanging on miserably until they reach the age at which the Church of England will pay their pensions. Not only are they obsessed by the system, they know how to play it to their own advantage.

Conservatives like these like to look at themselves. Projecting their own consent to an authoritarian image of God onto others they simply assume that others consent to their authority. The dissenting Anglicans are full of narcissistic rage: intense, energetic, driven by their conviction of their own magic powers. We in the media love them, but we also know they are daft; puffed up, living in unreality. Although they believe that they have the authority of Scripture and tradition, they have no living sense of history or of the communion of saints; they can read Scripture and tradition *only* as mirrors and props for the system. They select and interpret and re-invent to avoid their own anxieties and dilemmas; but they have no insight into their part in the process. They are involved in exactly the same narcissistic negotiations as their more radical contemporaries; but whereas the radicals seek to lose themselves in the other the conservatives falsely incorporate the other into themselves.

Both conservative and radical are involved in the rewriting of religious language, and have discovered that they are free to make God in whatever set of images they like as long as they are deemed to be consonant with the way each side defines human freedom and flourishing. The rewriting of religious language has contributed to the destruction of the commonality of language. If each is heard in her own tongue, nothing can be universally understood.

God as projection

Whichever way we construe God, the God we proclaim is composed of projected aspects of ourselves. We look in the mirror and there is God. If we look with religious clothes on, we see an authoritarian God who is both repellent and fascinating to modern sensibilities. If we look with our naked selves we wonder why we need Scriptures, a priesthood, a tradition of learning, a gospel proclaimed to the world. We are already self-sufficient and divine.

I do not see any quick way out of this dilemma. Narcissism is both our sin and our opportunity. We cannot be saved until we realize how deeply we are enmeshed in illusion. My journalistic self finds contemporary Christian rhetoric, both conservative and radical, intellectually embarrassing and emotionally tacky. If we are in a universe which has no inside or outside, in which the only thing we can see is the reflection of ourselves, why do we not just get on with it? Why do we not acknowledge the hopelessness of our plight and look for some liberating distance from it, through philosophy, psychology, spiritual techniques or even humour?

Cupitt's ecstatic anti-realism

This has, I believe, been the agenda of the most important and direct prophet of non-realism, Don Cupitt, the Anglican priest and theologian. Religion, he claims, must be thoroughly of this world, sensual and non-metaphysical. We make it up, and it sustains us. But it does not reflect any essential givenness, either in the structure of the created universe or in human history. Everything is interpretation. We create ourselves *ex nihilo*, we construct 'the world to come'. Cupitt's theology is radically individualistic. It is composed in a kind of ecstatic, mono-clausal poetry which is both stimulating and surprisingly moving. He, alone among contemporary non-realist theologians, really does want to re-make the connections between the arts and the sciences, to reinvent metaphysics. He really does seem to understand where we are. And that is, without God, endlessly spinning in the vortex of our own subjectivity.

It is not surprising that Don Cupitt's position, as a prophet of non-realist faith, was worked out at a time when he was being engaged by the mass media to present a television series on religious belief. This encounter both ruined his academic career (British academics are notoriously jealous and unforgiving of those who succeed on television) and sharpened his insight into why conventional forms of belief had broken down in the West. He recognized, as no other theologian has even begun to, that a culture based on electronically mediated images receives its truths in a more fickle way than a culture dominated by

book learning. Individualism, choice, autonomy, are here to stay. Television, the glittering box full of surfaces, is a metaphor for a world in which there is no depth, only the endless shift and sway of images. Nothing is stable, nothing secure, nothing is outside the process. Nor does the process itself throw up inherent meanings. The only meanings that there are are the meanings that we make. And this is the frustration at the end of Cupitt's argument. For although he wants to reconnect our world, opening our different languages to each other, we know in the end that we are listening to the sound of one note. He is a brilliant maverick, perhaps as brilliant as Barth in his way, but his unique voice, though it will have admirers, can have no significant followers.

Cupitt's isolation is a parable of the growing incommunicability of religious faith. The insulation of religious language, the religious deafness of mass media, is paralleled by an insulation that comes from within religion and theology itself.

Hopes for self-transcendence

It is not at all clear whether a rounded, intelligent Catholic Christianity is still capable of delivering self-transcendence, of transmitting a vision of an alternative and beyond reality which is inherently attractive and plausible. I hope it can. I would not claim to see any paths out of the hall of mirrors, but there are shreds of light which I, personally, find intriguing.

One is to take the starting point for our understanding of the human from a tradition which has never quite engaged with the Enlightenment. Eastern Orthodox theology considers humanity to be 'theandric', essentially open to God. In this it differs from the tradition which has come from Augustine and even Aquinas. Orthodoxy will not speak of humans as autonomous beings at all; an orientation towards God is constitutive of what it actually means to be a human person. From this point of view the Enlightenment agenda is not wrong so much as tragically incomplete and misleading. We cannot see ourselves from a place of neutrality, because there is no such place available to us. But, more positively, we live in a world of images because we *are* images, creations, thought-dreams, body-shapes of God. As creatures we are never out of contact with the Creator. We bear the God-shaped gap: a void of knowledge in which we are both crucified to ourselves and raised to God.

I find it interesting that Pope John Paul II seems to share something like this understanding of the human person. He assumes, when he speaks and writes of the human person, that the template of humanity is Christ, and that to see human beings in any other way is to distort them. The only problem is that the Pope cannot quite make sense of *women* within this Christ-centred template. He seems to assume, though he cannot quite say so, that their humanity is of another kind. Theandric perhaps, yet not quite within the template of Christ, since, unlike men, they cannot image Christ through the ministerial priesthood. I find the Pope's argument very odd. Surely there is one Christ, one human template, one theandric entity, to which both genders conform? If women are outside the template of Christ the eloquence with which the Pope

expounds the mystery of the human person will not and cannot apply to them. However, as so often in religious matters, good minds are right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. I find the Pope's 'theandric' doctrine of the human person good enough to work with.

I also take heart from some of the ways in which contemporary scientists and philosophers are seriously revising their Enlightenment presuppositions. Many scientists now believe that our universe is peculiarly congenial to the production of mind. Indeed, although we may not speak of design or purpose, the emergence of mind is coming to seem less a chance accident and more of an inevitability. Mind is built into things.

It is of no small interest that so much of the Enlightenment thinking which theologians take for granted is now being revised; academic philosophers are finding new life in traditional theism; some agnostic physicists consider the existence of God a probability; psychologists and health care experts discuss the therapeutic benefits of spirituality, and literary scholars are describing the sacredness of the Scriptures in new and sometimes shocking ways. All this is in a different key from the certainties of the past. There is more room for irony, and modesty, and for a diversity of voices. We recognize that to affirm the validity of one cluster of beliefs is to acknowledge the validity of other and different ones. The hall of mirrors is our contemporary wilderness; it is where we meet our demons, as an evening's random television viewing will confirm. We must inhabit our wilderness, but we must not be wholly reconciled to it or make our peace with it. There may be nowhere else we can be, but we can at least be dissatisfied. In the dissatisfaction lies the possibility of hope. Narcissus demands his echo, and the role of Echo in the evolving myth of Narcissus is to listen at such depth that the one who is fixated by his own reflection eventually hears his hidden cry resounding back from the depths of another's being.

How can we speak of God today? Could God's silence be a judgement on our narcissism? God can speak to us, but God cannot merely echo us. Until we hear our own echo, freely given by one who chooses to identify with our lostness, we cannot be freely God's. We need, as never before, a mediator, a listener who is one of us, yet whose horizons go beyond us. Encouraged by the possibility of divine and human compassion we must do battle with the mirrors until they yield the secrets of our desolation.

My hunch is that God is in there with the atoms and the atheists and the cold glass of the television lens, creating, redeeming and sanctifying at the vivid heart of humanity's tragedy. God is not us, but other, and we have no names for God that can be spoken. We may be reaching a point where we can grasp the possibility that the reality of the divine life is more interesting than that allowed by either God's Church or by our human media: two systems which have tried to contain, limit, deny and finally redefine God in a succession of fractured images during the last fifty years.